"So magnanimous. But I guess that's to be expected of the 'Golden Girl.'" He grinned at her and started to walk away. "Oh, Mathilda wants those notes on the Welsh Green egg this afternoon if you can."

"Of course. Thank you, Aiden." Hermione watched him leave, scowling.

He knew she hated the terms "Golden Girl" and "Golden Trio" and that is why he used them so often. When she interviewed at the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures two months ago, she had submitted her resume under a false name. When Mathilda Grimblehawk saw Hermione Granger walk into her office, she flipped her tea over all the papers on her desk and asked Hermione if there was anything she could do for her. Hermione insisted that she be given no partial treatment simply because she was a war heroine, and insisted on starting at an entry level position and working her way up through the Ministry. Even though the Office for House-Elf Relocation was her main goal, she had been assigned into the Beast division of the Department. Hermione was determined to move within departments and up the ladder based on merits and talents alone, not on her fame.

Ron had done the exact opposite, flaunting his status in articles for the Prophet. About a month after the Battle of Hogwarts Rita Skeeter asked him what he'd like to do next, and when he said he wanted to play Quidditch for the best team to have him, the offers poured in for weeks. He'd been gone for almost a year in Ireland, coming by only once a month or so to visit. He never brought home any of the girls he'd been dating, but Hermione had seen them pictured together. Molly Weasley was blind to all this, of course, insisting that Hermione should join Arthur and her for a visit to Ireland. A year ago, when Hermione was headed back to Hogwarts for her "eighth year" and Ron was headed to Ireland, she told him they should take this time apart and keep their options open. She didn't mean *that* open.

Harry had fallen somewhere in the middle. No stranger to fame and Rita Skeeter's probing articles, he was almost comfortable as the center of the wizarding world. He had gladly accepted a position as an Auror last summer, despite not having taken his N.E.W.T. exams. His only saving grace was Ginny, who didn't much care for the spotlight. Hermione and Ginny had gotten close after sharing dorms for their last year of Hogwarts, as Hermione had been the only Gryffindor "eighth year" girl to come back to school. They'd rented a flat after Molly had promptly forbid Ginny and Harry from moving in together upon Ginny's graduation. Ginny generally spent the evenings and nights at Harry's, but Hermione got to see her often enough.

Hermione looked at the clock. Quarter 'til noon. She needed to retrieve her wand, but she didn't want a chance encounter with any of the Wizengamot as they dismissed for lunch. Or worse than that: a chance encounter with the prisoner as he was moved for the lunch break.

Hermione shivered at the memory of his condescending glare as she left the courtroom. It was right that nothing had changed, she had to remind herself. Why would he look at her any other way?

Ginny had labeled him Hermione's Charity Case, but Hermione knew that Ginny was wiser than that. She was very kind to not push the issue, but from the careful way that Harry treated her this morning, she assumed Ginny had told him something.

"So you have a soft spot for Draco Malfoy," Ginny had told her one day last spring in their dorm rooms at Hogwarts. Ginny had shrugged. "So what?"

"I do not have a soft spot for him," Hermione had blushed.

"Fine," Ginny said. "You have a debilitating infatuation with him."

"Ginny!" Hermione had closed her book and turned to face the ginger. "That's wildly … inappropriate and inaccurate."

Ginny leveled a stare at her. "Listen up, Granger," Ginny said, a favorite phrase of hers. "Here's what I know. Today's Daily Prophet had two featured articles. One about my brother and his triumph against the Bulgarians, accompanied by a very *informative* picture of Ron and a blonde at the post-game celebration, and another article about the setting of Draco Malfoy's hearing date. Guess which article you read five times."

Hermione grinned triumphantly. "Ginny, why would I *want* to read about Ron and his new girlfriend? *Or* about Ron and Quidditch? Sounds like two topics I want nothing to do with."

"But you do want to know everything about Malfoy's trial and his charges?"

"I – I think… I mean it's more interesting than Quidditch and blonde dim-wits, that's for certain."

Ginny smiled at her as if she still didn't believe her. "Okay. I get it."

She'd dropped the subject that evening, but every time she could, she'd bring up Malfoy. She'd leave Prophet clippings on Hermione's breakfast plate in the mornings. She'd play devil's advocate whenever groups discussed the Malfoy family. She would never join the hushed gossip in the halls, and she always quit her teasing when it looked like Hermione could take no more.

One night last April, with the four-poster curtains drawn closed and the sounds of the other girls falling off to sleep, Hermione heard Ginny's voice whisper over to her.

"How long have you been working on your Charity Case, Hermione?"

Hermione's voice caught in her throat but she still was able to respond, "Since 3rd year."

There was silence. And then she heard Ginny turn over to go to sleep. She had wanted to whisper to her that it was nothing and she needn't be worried about her. She had wanted Ginny to turn over and ask her every question that she didn't have the answer to. But more that this she had wanted Ginny to drop it and never speak of it again.

The sound of Mathilda's heels clacking against the floor brought Hermione back to her cubicle. Mathilda didn't need sensible heels. She could walk very easily in outrageous heels. Hermione had two seconds to act busy before Mathilda walked past her.

"Hermione! Taxing day so far?"

Hermione turned to see Mathilda towering over her, giving her a bright smile.

"Definitely, yes." Hermione smiled.

Mathilda nodded. "Well, don't skip lunch again. Make sure to take your breaks when they're due."

"Thank you, yes. And I will have those notes on the Common Welsh Green egg by three."

"Oh, by the end of the day is fine." She waved the air and smiled, turning to go.

Hermione turned back to her desk. She inked her quill and began to finish her notes on the egg found in Knockturn Alley last week. She reached for her wand to summon the report, and huffed when she remembered she still needed to go downstairs.

She ran into Harry at the Level 4 lifts. Her anxiety spiked. He never came to her floor.

"There you are," he said.

"What's wrong?" She asked.

"Nothing," he said, taken aback. "I thought I was going to meet you for lunch?"

Hermione remembered now. "Oh, yes. I'm sorry, I forgot. I actually need to – to run an errand. Can we go tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow is Saturday."

Hermione closed her eyes and pressed her temples. "Right. Sorry."

"What errand do you need to run?" Harry asked. Hermione hesitated.

"I… I left my wand downstairs." She pursed her lips and looked away.

"Oh," Harry said. "That's rather odd of you." He laughed.

"I know. I'm mortified."

"I'll come with you."

"Oh, Harry, you don't have to spend your entire lunch running around the Ministry with me."

Harry shrugged and called for the lift. "What else am I going to do? Besides, the café is on the way!" He smiled brightly at her. "You can finally try the croissants I've been raving about."

Hermione smiled and followed him into the lift. They chatted about work and Hermione found herself thanking Merlin for Harry. She, of course, had done this many times over the past eight years, but as the lift filled with wizards and witches from other departments who openly stared at Harry Potter sharing a lift with them, he continued to speak only to her, completely oblivious to his effect on the world around him.

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Two

Hermione got all the way back to her desk without breathing. At least it felt that way. The logical part of her brain – her whole brain – knew that she must have been breathing the whole time, but she was gasping by the time she'd reached Level 4.

She sat at her desk for several minutes, waiting for her blood to slow, and it wasn't until then that she'd realized she left her wand downstairs. She closed her eyes and pushed on her temples. How idiotic.

"Granger."

Hermione released her temples to see her coworker, Aiden O'Connor, standing at the corner of her cubicle, eating a banana. What a foul thing to do.

"You had your Wizengamot thing this morning, yeah?" He raised his eyebrows at her. "How'd it go? Is the git getting the Kiss?" He smiled at her.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Actually, Aiden, I volunteered to testify on his behalf."

The banana stopped halfway to his mouth. His jaw went slack for a moment. "Is that right? Apologies. I thought the two of you didn't get on."

Aiden was one year behind her at Hogwarts. He was also in Gryffindor, so she assumed he had seen enough of Malfoy's and her interactions over the years to support that idea.

"We didn't. It just – It was the right thing to do. Not every mistake deserves a life sentence in Azkaban."

Aiden's eyebrows lifted and the corners of his mouth turned downwards. She assumed this meant "Meh! You're right!" but she couldn't be sure because the smell of banana was engulfing her.

"Thank you to the honored members of the Wizengamot for letting me speak." Hermione released the railings in front of her, letting blood flow to her fingers for the first time in ten minutes. As she turned to leave she couldn't help herself. She glanced at him again.

The slightly amused smirk was gone. He was glaring at her. Examining her like she was a flobberworm found under his shoe. Like she hadn't just tried to save his life. Hermione found her breath and continued out of the room, blood pounding.

Her ridiculous heels clicked against the stones as she made her way out, passing the door guard, continuing to the lifts and ignoring him as he called after her to give her back her wand.

Harry led the way down the hall toward the Oak doors she'd come flying through not an hour ago. She was mortified to knock just to speak with the round man who had her wand, but Harry must have sensed this because he did it for her. Hermione sighed.

The man poked his head out. "Oh Miss Granger! I was looking for you!"

"Er, yes I'm sorry I was in a bit of a rush —"

"I have your wand!"

"I—yes I know. I'm here to retrieve it from you."

"Wonderful!" he squeaked. He stepped through the door and let it close to a crack behind him. Hermione could hear the murmuring of the Wizengamot and a lazy drawl she would recognize for the rest of her life.

He conjured a form for her to sign, allowing him to release her wand to him. Once signed, he produced her wand from his robes pocket. She felt complete again.

He piped in things like "have a nice day" and "be sure to hang onto that!", but Hermione was listening to the clamoring that had started behind him. Voices rising and arguing. One that sounded like the grey-haired man was yelling for peace. The door clicked shut behind the round man and there was silence. Hermione stared at the doors, willing them to crack open.

"You ready?" Harry's voice shocked her. She had forgotten about him.

"Yes, absolutely," she croaked. "Lunch?"

They turned to walk down the long corridor just as the lifts were arriving.

Even from twenty meters away, Hermione could recognize Narcissa Malfoy's long, white form. Her shoes clicked as she exited the lifts in short staccato rhythms. Her robes were pristine and white, draping her figure perfectly. The odd look about her as if she'd smelled something foul had been replaced since the final battle with simple arrogance, less identified than before. She looked the perfect picture of a freed woman.

"Mrs. Malfoy," Harry said as they got closer, extending his hand. "Good afternoon."

"Mr. Potter." Her voice was like honey, but even more surprising was the smile she graced him with, as if they were old friends. Hermione had to remind herself that Harry had spoken at her own trial last summer, assisting to clear her charges. "I heard you testified today. I can't thank you enough."

"Actually," Harry said. He smoothed his hair down. "Hermione really convinced me to elaborate on my previous statements. She testified today too." Harry turned to face her, but Hermione was frozen in place as Narcissa Malfoy turned her blue eyes on her. She blinked, as if seeing her for the first time.

"Miss Granger." Narcissa extended her hand. "I almost didn't recognize you." Hermione couldn't understand why. She hadn't changed a bit. "I thank you deeply for speaking today."

Hermione's arm moved on its own and suddenly she was clasping hands with Narcissa Malfoy.

"Not at all Mrs. Malfoy. It - it was the right thing to do," she said. "He was very brave during the war."

Narcissa's eyes roved over her face and in that moment Hermione knew that she had failed at her attempt at nonchalance. Narcissa Malfoy knew. It was not Legilimency. But she knew. Narcissa released her hand.

"Yes, it was a trying time for the full family." She sighed and looked toward the doors. "Well, they are letting me have lunch with Draco today. I would offer for you to join us, but I'm sure they wouldn't allow that."

Hermione's blood pressure skyrocketed at the thought of having lunch with Harry, Draco, and Narcissa Malfoy. What would the four of them even discuss?

Harry jumped in. "Of course. It was nice to see you Mrs. Malfoy."

"You as well Mr. Potter. And Miss Granger," Narcissa said, turning her eyes on her, searching for something in her face again. "Do keep in touch."

Hermione's tongue was too dry to respond, so she simply smiled and nodded. Keep in touch?

She watched Narcissa glide away. Harry had to tug at her arm to get her to walk with him to the lifts. She felt foggy.

"'He was very brave in the war?'" Harry raised an eyebrow at her. She could see the smile lifting his cheeks.

"Shut up." Hermione blushed and Harry laughed.

And with that final dot at the end of the sentence, she heard tuttering from the stands, an indignant gasp from the corner, and a chuckle to her right. She knew that chuckle. She'd heard it growing up. She couldn't stop herself in that moment. She looked at him.

He was pale. Unusually pale. His hair hadn't been cut, and if she thought about it, his hair had been long at the battle, curling behind his ears. Now it was growing to the nape of his neck, shaggy, and less pristinely blonde than usual. His eyes drilled into hers. He was leaning back against the bars of the cage. No chair or stool were provided for the accused in the cage, but instead of standing and grasping the bars like so many had before him, he leaned back, crossing his legs and arms. Waiting to be entertained. And she had entertained him. Her heart beat faster and her cheeks warmed.

"Miss Granger." Hermione regained her focus on the blonde Molly Weasley. "After years of prejudice and 'schoolyard bullying,' as you say. After being tortured by his aunt on his drawing room floor, do you feel you are best suited to speak on behalf of his character?"

Hermione glanced at all the faces staring at her, except for one. The redhead wore a smug grin.

"You're right," Hermione said. "Those aspects don't qualify me. What qualifies me is that I am human and I see room for forgiveness. I am Hermione Granger, war heroine, brightest witch of our age, and one-third of your Golden Trio. And these facts alone should exclude me from being questioned about my qualifications, just as I assume Harry Potter's qualifications were not questioned."

The room went still. She had never been more arrogant in her life, she realized, but her blood pressure was rising.

"And as Hermione Granger, I request that the actions of a 17-year-old wizard, raised in a blood purity household, whose parents, family, and friends all supported the Dark Lord, and whose life was being threatened daily, be excused of his actions." Hermione tried to stop herself but couldn't. "Draco Malfoy did not kill Albus Dumbledore. He did not kill anyone. So, I do not see why he is being tried in full Wizengamot as if he is a murderer and a staunch supporter of the Dark Lord. Just because his name is Malfoy does not mean you can place the sins of the war on his shoulders."

The redhead pursed her lips and looked away. The blonde Molly Weasley gave the floor a sheepish smile. The gray-haired man in the front stood.

"Miss Granger," he said, "Thank you for coming in today. We will examine your testimony and the testimony of others." He had kind eyes, but Hermione still felt like she'd overstayed her welcome.

Harry Potter, I believe that Voldemort would have been summoned, and Harry Potter would have died that night, thus ending the Second Wizarding War. By choosing not to identify Harry Potter, Draco Malfoy saved us all."

A silence fell over the wide room. Hermione wondered if maybe she should go on.

"Miss Granger," a redheaded woman in the second row called to her. "You say Draco Malfoy *chose* not to identify Mr. Potter. What grounds do you have on that?"

Hermione furrowed her brows before proceeding. "Like I said, he was presented with Harry Potter and said he could not identify him –"

"Did you not place a Stinging Jinx on Mr. Potter?" The redhead cut her off. "For the direct purpose of making him unidentifiable?"

Hermione could feel heat rising in her cheeks. "Even if Malfoy could not identify Harry Potter, a schoolmate that he'd known for more than six years, he could see that the person's companions were Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger. He did not positively identify either of us."

"Do you think Mr. Malfoy would be able to identify yourself and Mr. Weasley?" A gray-haired man in the front asked.

"Yes. We went to school with him for six years as well." Hermione thought her answer might have been a bit swotty….

"Did you have a relationship with Mr. Malfoy at Hogwarts?" The redhead.

Her cheeks burned at the insinuation that was probably not an insinuation at all. She responded, "We were classmates."

"You were not friends, though?" The redhead prodded.

"No."

"In fact," the redhead continued, "was he not somewhat antagonistic to you at school, due to your blood status?"

Hermione almost snorted, but guessed that it would not help the situation. "'Somewhat,' I suppose. But I hardly think schoolyard bullying should be examined in this sort of situation."

"What do you think should be examined, Miss Granger?" A blonde woman from the fourth row asked. She smiled with a warmth that reminded Hermione of Molly Weasley.

"I think his character should be examined. I believe his mother, Narcissa Malfoy, was given a full pardon a year ago due to her 'assistance with the Battle of Hogwarts.' I believe I have just presented a moment that his assistance was necessary. I think I could give you several other citations and moments where his actions spoke not of a Death Eater, but of a son and a child. I think Mr. Malfoy's crimes should be expunged and a full pardon given."

Friday, August 27, 1999

They're murmuring again. Trying to keep their voices low so the prisoner can't hear. But the prisoner is fifteen feet away, and they are failing.

I wish they would take me out of the room if they need to discuss. Bring me back to the small room I was in this morning. But, of course, they let me stand in this cage in the middle of them. On display.

I pick a spot four feet in front of me and maintain my gaze. I don't want to look at them and I don't want to fall asleep. I feel a yawn.

"Mr. Malfoy. Your next witness is here. Are you ready to proceed?"

I almost smile. Do I have a choice?

I nod my head, interested to see what "witnesses" I have.

And Harry Fucking Potter walks in. He looks over at me and has the audacity to grimace, like he pities me. What a joke.

They question him about the night Dumbledore died. No one has ever told me that Potter was there the whole time. Something about a cave, and flying back, and then me appearing on the Astronomy Tower.

I know this story already so I close my eyes.

"And then I saw him lower his wand."

My eyes open. Potter is already looking at me, and I hold in a sneer as it would probably not help my case. His eyes are glistening. Is he going to fucking cry?

"I saw Draco Malfoy lower his wand when Albus Dumbledore offered him protection. I believe that he would have taken the offer if the Death Eaters had not entered the Astronomy Tower at that very moment."

"Mr. Potter, the night that Albus Dumbledore was murdered is already on file from the testimony you gave for Severus Snape. We cannot reopen that night."

"And what if I have new information? Information to help the accused."

"You have already told us that Draco Malfoy failed to kill Albus Dumbledore" – I wince – "and we have that in the file."

A redhead. "Do you have more information for us, Mr. Potter?"

I watch as Potter stumbles over his words, trying to find a pathway back to his noble intentions. He starts talking about the night the Snatchers got him. He looks at me once, quickly, and I'm happy to note that I'm already glaring back in confusion.

What could he possibly have to say about that night? I think of his bubbling skin, the scar bulging out, distorting the stupid lines of it. My father bringing me down to look at him. And his disturbing green eyes looking back at me.

Of course it was Harry Potter. Anyone with half a brain would know.

"—And he refused to identify me," Potter says.

A laugh bursts from my throat. A scoff. I guess that's one way of looking at it.

Potter turns to look me. And the slight horror on his face is worth it. I smile at him. Like I just caught the Snitch.

"Mr. Potter," the redhead asks. "I have several questions about Dolores Umbridge, and Mr. Malfoy's actions under her reign at Hogwarts."

I sigh. I settle myself in my cage. I lean back against the bars and cross my ankles and my arms, and let them condemn me.

The sound of Potter's voice blends into the background. And I wait for a shift in the air. After ten minutes or so, I feel him dismissed.

"Mr. Malfoy." A grey-haired man. "This is your opportunity to comment on the testimony provided. Do you have a comment?"

I lift a brow.

The grey-haired man rubs the bridge of his nose. I've exasperated him. Ten points to me.

"Mr. Malfoy, may I remind you that you are facing up to eighty years in Azkaban. If you have a comment or a clarification to make after a witness has testified, you are encouraged to do so if you think it will help your case."

Nothing will keep me out of Azkaban, you dolts. You've already decided. If the testimony of Harry Potter himself won't help me, they'll need to dig up Dumbledore.

Hermione nodded her head, smoothed out her robes, and began her very sensible walk to the doors. She nervously pushed her hair back behind her ears, something she never did. So she pulled it back over her ears. As she reached the small man he smiled at her and began the speech that she had heard at least four times over the past eighteen months for different trials she had been summoned for. *No contact with the accused. Confiscation of wand. Wandless magic subject to imprisonment.* Her eyes flittered over his shoulder, past the door that he held open, but all she could see at this angle was the rows of purple robes. She handed over her wand to him, and he escorted her in.

Even though she had been in the Wizengamot dungeons several times since, it still surprised her to not feel the cold of the Dementors that she expected ever since their Ministry break-in last year. The Dementors had been excused of their service after the fall of Voldemort. No, she felt a different kind of cold.

She rounded the entrance and did her best not to look in the direction of the cage she knew would be fifteen feet to her right. She stepped up to the small platform and placed her hands on the rail in front of her.

"State your name." A voice rang from somewhere in the sea of purple.

"Hermione Jean Granger." She felt, more than heard, a movement to her right. It was him. She focused on the grey-haired individuals in purple.

"Hermione Jean Granger. You are here of your own free will. You have not been summoned in defense of the accused. Is this correct?"

Her breath caught in her throat. "Yes. That is correct."

Another voice from the purple: "You are here to offer information that you hope will assist the Wizengamot in determining the sentencing of Draco Lucius Malfoy. Is that correct?"

"Yes." Her voice was softer than before. She would need to start breathing soon, she supposed.

"Please proceed Miss Granger."

Breathing in, gripping the railing, she let the practiced story flow through her.

"On March 30, 1998, Harry Potter, Ronald Weasley and I were caught by Snatchers and taken to Malfoy Manor. I was able to cast a Stinging Jinx on Harry Potter just before capture, in the hopes that his face would be unrecognizable. No enchantments were placed on Ron Weasley or myself.

"We were taken to Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy." Hermione's hands tightened on the rails. "They wanted to be sure they had Harry Potter before contacting Voldemort." She heard a small intake of breath, no doubt from some purple robe who still would not say the name out loud. "Mrs. Malfoy called for her son, a schoolmate of Harry Potter's, to identify him. Draco Malfoy refused to make a positive identification, thereby buying us time to escape. If he had identified

"He's not making it easy on them, I don't think."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, he doesn't.… He doesn't seem like he's fighting it very hard. He looks bored almost."

Hermione looked back to the doors behind Harry, nodding.

"And he looks…" Harry stopped himself. "I guess you'll see."

Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She *would* see. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

"I'll be here for you when you come out."

Hermione looked at Harry again. "Oh, Harry, no. You've done enough. I know you have to get back upstairs."

"Are you sure?" And there he was again, searching for something.

"Yes, absolutely." She pasted a smile on her face and squeezed his arm. "I'll come find you upstairs when I'm done. Maybe we can go to lunch?"

"That would be great." He smiled at her.

Harry turned and began the long walk back to the lifts. Hermione called after him, "Harry!" He turned to her. "Thank you," she said. "I know you were… hesitant –"

"No, you were right, Hermione," he said. "It's the right thing to do." He turned and continued.

Hermione listened to his footsteps retreat down the hall. A different echo than his trainers used to make. Hermione smiled, thinking of the change. Dragon leather dress shoes were expected in certain situations she supposed, namely a Wizengamot trial, but she'd seen Harry wear these and other fancier shoes more and more often. That could be expected from The-Boy-Who-Lived-and-Died-and-Lived-Again, as Rita Skeeter so artfully, and concisely, named Harry in her articles. The requests for his public appearances were increasing, and his celebrity was doing anything but *de*creasing. He attended galas, organized remembrances for past Order members, opened orphanages for those children who had lost their families. Hermione had her own fair share of galas and public events, but she was only requested if Harry could attend, and sometimes only if Ron could round out the trio, which was made more difficult these days while Ron was off playing Quidditch for the Irish.

The oak door opened. A small, round man squeezed out. He would have reminded her of Umbridge if he hadn't been smiling at her. An odd thing to do during a trial.

"Miss Hermione Granger?" He made a little show of looking around the empty hallway before his eyes landed on her. "Miss Granger, they are ready for you."

"Got it." My voice is scratchy, but the insolence is at least in place. Several purple robes roll their eyes.

"Shall we proceed then, Mr. Malfoy."

"Go for it."

A blonde woman sighs, and looks at me with pity. I hate her for it.

The grey-haired man asks the short, portly wizard at the door to bring in the next witness.

Another one? Really? I keep my ankles crossed, my arms folded, and I lean my head back on the bars, closing my eyes.

"State your name."

"Hermione Jean Granger."

My eyes snap open. My left foot touches down on the solid ground, uncrossing my ankles in case I fall over.

I look at her. Taupe colored robes, ugly grey shoes. Neutral tones all around. She looks like she's trying to play the role of Ministry dreg. Which, last I heard, she is.

"Hermione Jean Granger. You are here of your own free will. You have not been summoned in defense of the accused. Is this correct?"

I'm holding my breath. Waiting for her.

"Yes, that is correct."

She's gripping the railing of the testimony platform, and she's looking straight ahead. She launches into a speech – much more rehearsed than Potter's – about some night last March, and it's not until too late that I realize it's that night.

And she still hasn't looked at me.

As usual.

As always.

I tear my eyes off of her and glance at the purple robes. The blonde woman that pitied me, catches my eye. I turn away and resume my position. Ankles crossed, arms folded. I don't remember letting my arms drop.

I concentrate on building the walls I haven't needed for months. I'm rusty. The only Occlumency one needs in Azkaban is to hide thoughts from *oneself.*

The melody of her voice cuts through me and I try not to listen, only hearing snippets of "buying us time" and "choosing not to identify Harry Potter."

I start from the basics.

A pile of bricks in front of me. Red, and common. I lay a simple line before my feet. A hand tool moves quickly to fill the holes with the sticky paste.

The Wizengamot begins asking her questions. She hasn't rehearsed this. I'm not listening to her words but to her tones and tempos. It sounds like when Severus used to grill her until she slipped.

A second layer of red bricks on top of the first. And slowly there is a wall forming, building up from nothing. A third layer, mortar squeezing between brick.

"Did you have a relationship with Mr. Malfoy at Hogwarts?"

I grind my teeth together, and concentrate on the nothing I'm feeling.

"We were classmates."

I build the fourth line of bricks, getting sloppier, hurrying to get to the fifth row, and the sixth.

I picture her in my mind, and suddenly the wall is built up to her navel. She stares at me in my imagination, asking me what I'm doing.

Bricks to her neck.

I hear my mother's name from her lips and it pauses me. I turn to look at her in real life. She grips the railing and she's flushed.

"—due to her 'assistance with the Battle of Hogwarts.' I believe I have just presented a moment that his assistance was necessary. I think I could give you several other citations and moments where his actions spoke not of a Death Eater, but of a son and a child. I think Mr. Malfoy's crimes should be expunged and a full pardon given."

And I laugh when I realize that I am the "Mr. Malfoy" in this case, and Hermione Granger has chosen me to rescue.

A full pardon. Like the house elves. I'm a pet project for her.

She turns to look at me, and her eyes are wide and terrified. And I hear the bricks crumble and crash to the floor.

Terrified. Of me?

Or *for* me. Imagining a life in Azkaban for me. Terrified. And pitying me.

She turns back to the older people in purple, and I watch her as she fights for me. For no reason whatsoever except that she pities me.

"—What qualifies me is that I am human and I see room for forgiveness –"

And she's forgiven me.

Well, who asked her to.

I watch as the heat rises in her as she talks back, her face pink and her hands squeezing like they want to be around someone's neck. And she's magnificent, and it's bringing forward everything I've tried not to remember. She looks exactly as I remembered her. And my bricks are scattered at my feet.

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter One

Hermione regretted her choice of shoes now. She'd picked "sensible heels," as Ginny would call them. "Sensible" only meant that they were not too high as to topple her. And that they were ugly. She realized this when she discovered that her shoes matched perfectly with the stale, dusty floors of the underground Ministry halls.

"Hermione."

She looked up from her shoes to see Harry walking toward her.

"Harry. How was it? Did they – Do you think —?"

"It's hard to tell." He pushed his hair away from his forehead, looking down the hall at the oaken doors he came from. "They have a lot of evidence, obviously. They asked a lot of questions about fifth year and Umbridge, but I tried to give them the details about – about –"

Harry stuttered, and Hermione watched his eyes glaze as he looked away from her. It had only been a year and a half, so she understood his hesitance.

"Malfoy Manor," she finished for him.

"Yeah." Harry swallowed, and Hermione saw him holding Dobby on the beach as if it were yesterday. "But they wouldn't let me say much," he continued. "They had my testimony about the night Dumbledore died –" Harry blinked again, almost a twitch she realized "—but I tried to amend it to include *him* more. They wouldn't let me. Said it was already 'in the file.'"

Hermione nodded, looking behind him at the double doors. She could feel her heartbeat in her ears.

"He's in there," Harry said.

Hermione snapped her eyes to his green ones. Harry's drilled into hers, searching for… something.

"Right. I mean, of course he is. It's his trial." She held her breath.

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

"Draco Malfoy did not kill Albus Dumbledore. He did not kill anyone. So, I do not see why he is being tried in full Wizengamot as if he is a murderer and a staunch supporter of the Dark Lord. Just because his name is Malfoy does not mean you can place the sins of the war on his shoulders."

There is silence. The Wizengamot is still.

And she thinks she's got me pegged.

I've kept myself from thinking of her for over a year. Cancelled my subscription to the *Prophet* months ago. Kept her in her box, and she had to come storming in here, reinserting herself. I expected to rot away in peace, but she had to ruin my plans.

A familiar burning inside my gut fires up, where I can't tell if I would like more to kiss her or to kill her. Like a candle's flame being pushed either direction by the wind.

I feel the Wizengamot shift. They thank her for her testimony.

She turns to look at me, and I know I'm glaring daggers at her. *The Merciful Hermione Granger.* Protector of the downtrodden.

And in a moment, she loses all confidence. She loses the heat and the passion, and she blinks at me like I've drained her. I expect her to glare back. Maybe toss a "You're welcome, Malfoy" in my direction.

But she looks like she regrets glancing at me. Looks terrified.

She steps down off the witness stand, and exits, her ugly grey shoes clicking away.

This is now the last time I'll see her? Terrified and cautious? And pitying me.

A memory of her smiling, clutching onto Potter and holding hands with Weasley. Tired and happy and victorious after the Final Battle, as I looked on from the Slytherin table with my mother. *That* was what I had.

And now this.

"Mr. Malfoy. Would you like to comment on the testimony provided?"

Something's off about her. Something doesn't make sense. And I'm about to head to Azkaban for twenty to eighty years.

"This will be your last opportunity to address the court today. We will ask questions after lunch, and then on Monday we will reconvene to take your closing statements and discuss your verdict."

Why was she here? What did she want? Was I just a house elf to her?

I hear them call my name one more time, several crotchety women getting antsy.

One thought presses on me, pushes through my throat and down into my chest.

I have to get out.

~*~

Friday, August 27, 1999 - later

It takes an hour to convince them of my value to the Ministry in the ongoing investigations of dark objects and Death Eaters. I suggest a probationary period, for as long as they'd like, but they aren't satisfied. Finally, the redhead suggests that I provide memories as testimony. They *love* that idea.

I struggle to find a way around it as I piece together a list of everything I would never want another soul to see. All the memories that live in a different part of my mind. The memories that skill and training helped me bury.

Finally, they are in agreement. Memories of anything significant in upcoming trials and investigations, three months of probation at the Ministry – working directly with Potter, I assume – and appearances at court dates for any Death Eaters still on trial.

They look at me, waiting for my acceptance. Like it's easy. I'm just about to accept when the redhead says, "And of course, I would like March 30, 1998 included in your provided memories."

A murmuring of "here, here!" and "it will only help you, dear." I click my jaw shut, and think of a fireplace and a scream. I scratch my temple and ask, "Who will have access to these memories?" I imagine Harry Potter snacking on popcorn while he cozies up to his Pensieve with his Weasley bird.

"The Wizengamot."

"*And* the Auror's Office?" I ask.

"The Wizengamot exclusively," the blonde says. She's watching me closely. Seeing right through me.

I nod. I hate this. I consider the twenty years my father received. I'd be thirty-nine then. I remember the plans I made in my first few months of Azkaban, how I dreamed of starting a company possibly, or just escaping to France to run the vineyards.

And then her terrified eyes, pale and stale, like her clothing. Like everything else about her. And I need to find out what happened.

"I accept."

~*~

Thursday, December 7, 1995

Double Potions with the Gryffindors used to be my absolute favorite thing. I loved watching Potter and Weasley fumble their way through the easiest recipes, and when Severus would mock them, or ignore her hand in the air – ah, that was golden.

It's become an impolite torture now.

I dreamt of her last night. It wasn't the first time and it won't be the last, I know, but it makes these double classes unbearable.

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The Right Thing To Do All The Wrong Things

First published in 2017. Completed in 2019

Part 1 & 2 of Rights and Wrongs

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

TYPESET BY SENNA SLYTHERIN 2024
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Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

S. SLYTHERIN
BINDING

Snape watches me closely throughout the lesson, and I do everything in my power to keep my eyes off of her. He calls on me once, and I quickly recover and provide him an answer. It may be wrong. His gaze stays with me as her hand shoots up to ask a question, and I blink – more of a twitch – to keep my eyes on the front of the room.

"Miss Granger."

"But wouldn't the fluxweed mix too rapidly? Shouldn't it be added slowly?"

I feel the muscles in my jaw clench. She's right. And I would give anything to get her back, but I have no idea what potion we're even talking about. And then I think of how I'd like to correct her. With her arms stuck down on the desk, and her skirt pulled up.

I shake my head.

And suddenly I'm imagining her correcting *me*. Teaching me, with her thighs on either side of mine and her hands on my shoulders, bouncing as she tells me the proper way to mix the fluxweed.

"Miss Granger." Snape's voice snaps me back to the present. "I didn't ask for corrections."

I hear Crabbe laugh lightly on my right. And I train my eyes on the chalkboard, shifting in my chair, and ignoring the discomfort in my trousers.

I don't need to look at her to know that her cheeks are pink. And with any luck, she's biting her lip to keep from biting back at him. I don't need to let my eyes drift in her direction to know she is scribbling furiously, handwriting messy and inconsistent. It doesn't matter. She'll go over her notes again later and rewrite them, making them legible and detailed.

I swallow, and begin taking my own notes.

Twenty minutes later, and I guess the class is over.

"Dismissed. Mr. Malfoy, please stay."

I stare down at my potions book, feeling my classmates' eyes as they pack up around me. I sit. Still and patient. A movement from the corner pulls my eyes and *of course* it's her. For no reason, whatsoever.

She looks away as soon as our eyes meet, and continues packing up her things, the second to last person out the door.

"Draco." He's used my given name, so I know that whatever Severus has to say, it will be nothing about school. "Why are you distracted?"

I bite my tongue, and look up at him. He looks down his nose at me.

"O.W.L.s coming up," I say. "Lots of things in my head. And I'm a Prefect now. Lots of responsibilities."

He examines me. I decide to stay quiet until spoken to.

"I would suggest," he says, "sorting out these… responsibilities sooner than later, Draco." His eyes flicker to the door. He waves a hand and it locks. He waves his hand again and I feel

the hum of a silencing charm. I let out a slow breath, and he says, “It won’t do to be *distracted.* Times like these call for concentration.”

I blink up at him, and wonder why this moment required a silencing charm. He’s staring directly into my eyes, like I’m supposed to understand something. He doesn’t look like he’s going to say anything more, so I stand, gathering my books.

“Of course, Severus.”

“You are going home for Christmas this year, yes?”

I look up at him, potions book halfway into my bag. “Yes, that’s the plan.”

“I’m sure you’re aware that you may have… visitors at the holidays.” His voice lilts at the end, and now I know why he’s silenced the room. “Possibly even house guests.”

I shiver at the idea of Lord Voldemort slithering through the Manor.

“I’m not sure I was aware, no.” I swallow. “Thank you for telling me.” I stand still, unsure if we are finished.

“You may even have the opportunity to meet a few relatives. On your mother’s side. If not by Christmas, then shortly after, I’m sure.” His eyes are black and diving into mine.

Aunt Bellatrix? But she’s in Azkaban. A breakout?

He’s telling me top secret plans. He’s looking into me, pouring information into my mind and I don’t know what he wants from me.

“That will be a happy reunion, I’m sure,” I try. Maybe he’s testing me.

“I encourage you to concentrate. When meeting new people, Draco.”

Concentrate. “Of course. Thank you, Severus.”

“Your *distractions*… could be very dangerous,” he says. He steps closer to me. “For you, and for Miss Granger.”

Cold seizes my chest. I feel the skin on my face buzzing, tightening. My eyes are open and trained on him.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

He sighs. He drags his eyes across my face, my neck and shoulders, and back up to my eyes.

“That will never work on him, Draco. Or your Aunt. Or even your father –”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about –”

“Are you *in* a relationship with her, or are you just imagining one?”

I step into him, and my face heats. “I. Have. No idea. What. You are talking about.” I clip my words, hissing them into his face. I’m almost as tall as him now.

He frowns, and looks to the side. He moves away from me, back to the front of the room.

I’m seeing red as I shove my quill and ink into my bag.

“You have all the makings of a great Occlumens, Draco. When you are cornered, your mind blanks. You tend towards self-preservation. Most would start thinking of consequences or of

their loved ones, but your mind focuses on the task at hand." His back is to me. "It will be quite easy for you to learn."

"I don't need Occlumency," I hiss. "I have nothing to hide from the Dark Lord." I throw my bag on my shoulder. "Do you make it a habit of reading your students' minds?"

"I didn't have to delve into you at all, Draco. You were screaming it at me," he says. I snort in response. "You will need to control your emotions and your thoughts. I can help you—"

"I don't need help. I don't need you." I stomp to the door, pulling my wand to unlock it.

"If the Dark Lord finds out –"

I spin. "He won't find out!" And I feel my breath leave me. I've admitted it out loud. He doesn't look smug about it. He looks devastated. I squeeze my hand around my wand. I try to relax my face, and scoff. "It's just sex. It's just fantasy." I shrug. "I'm fifteen."

He looks into me. "Then I suggest you find a more… suitable outlet."

I swallow. He waves his hand and releases his spells on the room. I pull the door open and run.

"DRACO MALFOY: A FREED MAN"

by Rita Skeeter

How does a Death Eater possibly redeem himself? In the wake of the Second Wizarding War, Draco Malfoy was asked this exact question. After over a year in Azkaban, awaiting trial like the other captured Death Eaters, Draco Malfoy's trial began this past Wednesday August 25, ending two days later.

It is unknown what the conditions of his release are. Is he to be kept under house arrest? Did he have to provide valuable information to the Wizengamot on other Death Eaters? Were his family assets seized in war reparations?

Stick with this reporter, and you will know all soon enough.

Hermione rolled her eyes and bit into her toast. She had skimmed the beginning of the article a moment before and was just now re-reading it. She had jumped through it, landing on things like "Harry Potter and war heroine Hermione Granger testifying on his behalf."

She was quite surprised at how factual the article was, given its author. The picture they chose of Draco was from after the trial she assumed, because his hair had been given a wash. It was almost as if he had stood for a photoshoot.

Normally, any photo or article that involved Draco Malfoy was stuck to her ceiling in the morning, but Ginny usually slept quite late on the weekends. She had been recruited for the Holyhead Harpies on their second string and had practice early mornings Monday through Friday, so she took her rest when she could.

Hermione had not at all expected there to be news a day after the trial, so when she had grabbed the *Prophet* to tuck into her bag, she had spent several precious minutes scanning. Hermione checked the clock. She was almost late for her weekend job at Cornerstone Bookshop, a quaint little store in Diagon Alley. She worked from ten in the morning until six in

the evening on Saturdays and Sundays, a part of her life that Harry, Ron, and Ginny didn't quite understand.

"Why do you want to work on the weekends?" Ron had asked when he was visiting for Harry's birthday in July. "When will you sleep or have a social life?"

"Not all of us need to sleep until two in the afternoon, Ronald," was her response.

Besides, Hermione soon realized upon graduating Hogwarts that she *had* no social life. The first months of living with Ginny felt just like the dorms, but she slowly felt out of place at times when Harry would join them. She found that she couldn't just replace one Weasley with another. She'd always felt left out of Ron and Harry's dynamic, but she knew she was necessary, wanted. There were always going to be times in Ginny and Harry's relationship where Hermione was not necessary.

By mid-June she had applied for a few positions to keep her busy on the weekends, seeing as she had no homework to do on Saturday nights anymore. Morty, the owner of Cornerstone Books, interviewed her like a normal human, instead of the "Golden Girl," so she was immediately endeared to him.

Hermione folded up the newspaper, grabbed her jacket and headed out the door to the local apparition point. She could re-read while the shop was slow, which it usually was.

She apparated into Diagon Alley near Florean Fortescue's at 9:25AM on the dot, like she did every Saturday. A bulb went off to her right, like it did every Saturday. A voice called "Miss Granger! Over here! What are you doing this weekend?" like it did every Saturday.

Hermione had turned and smiled and responded for the first month, thinking it rather odd that the answer "Oh, nothing really. Just working and reading" was worth a follow up interview the next weekend. In August she'd stopped responding, and just turned and smiled. Now she did not even turn.

She passed the familiar store fronts and came to the corner of Diagon Alley and Horizont Alley. She released the enchantments that Morty had placed the previous evening and opened up. It was a tiny store, but thousands of books were crammed in. It didn't get nearly as busy as Flourish and Blotts, but Hermione liked the quiet. She had half an hour of organizing, bookkeeping, and sorting before the first customers arrived.

Hermione opened the *Prophet* on the counter and started pulling the shop's financial ledger out from the cabinet below. She placed the most recent letter from Australia next to the paper, intending to respond to her "penpal" Monica Wilkins today. Hopefully she could squeeze in how much she would love a visit to Australia, and maybe she could see them while she was there, without sounding too forced.

Hermione combed through the article several times, looking for more information. Was he already released? Would he be staying at the Manor with Narcissa? Any news of Lucius?

The Malfoys and other accused Death Eaters had been rounded up last summer about a month after the Final Battle. Once the Ministry had gotten its legs and Kingsley had been appointed as Minister, the hunt began. All suspected Death Eaters were tossed into Azkaban to await trial. Harry, Ron and Hermione had all given a full week's long testimony to the Wizengamot last summer to help identify and rank the accused in order of most dangerous. Harry had fought for Narcissa Malfoy to be given trial immediately, as he could provide evidence of her innocence and aid during the Battle of Hogwarts. Hermione found his vehemence for Narcissa's safety strange, but she guessed she couldn't really comment on how odd it was to move heaven and earth to save a Malfoy.

Unfortunately, the Wizengamot members with an axe to grind against the Malfoy family decided to take Narcissa Malfoy's release as a defeat, and quickly brought Lucius Malfoy to trial. He was sentenced for twenty years, but was already negotiating for his time to be cut in half. Draco on the other hand had awaited trial for over a year, as a punishment. Many of the Wizengamot had worked closely with Dumbledore while he was Chief Warlock, and felt that Draco should be responsible for his actions.

Hermione jumped when the front door opened for the first customer at five minutes past ten. The shop remained quiet throughout the morning until around midday when Ginny flew into Cornerstone like a tornado.

"Ya know, I leave articles for you every morning," she yelled from the doorway, hands on her hips. Hermione winced at the sound.

"Yes?" Hermione said, at a normal level of voice.

Ginny must have realized how inappropriate her volume was, because she looked around and ran up the two steps to the main landing. She flattened her hands on the counter in front of Hermione.

"I leave articles for you every morning. *Interesting* articles. And then today the *most interesting* article in the past few months has disappeared by the time I wake up."

Hermione smiled and tossed the paper to Ginny.

"Oh, I've already seen it!" She shoved the paper back towards Hermione. "I heard all about it at Harry's."

"Well, I'm sorry, Ginny." Hermione put the financial ledger away. "I thought you might have already read it."

"If I'd seen it, it would have been floating above your head on the ceiling for when you woke up. Because that's the kind of friend I am."

Hermione laughed. Ginny loved to play the fiery redhead even when she wasn't actually angry. Harry had a hard time telling the moments apart.

"Yes, you are an excellent friend, Ginny."

"And because I'm such an excellent friend, I raced down here to tell you what the paper didn't."

Hermione's hands stopped flipping through the mail. Ginny had a smug look on her face.

"Yes?" Hermione said. She was very still.

"Harry had a Floo call this morning." Ginny smiled and lowered her voice. "Malfoy goes to work for the Ministry in two weeks."

Hermione's eyes widened. She stepped into Ginny and looked at the stacks to the left to see if there were any eavesdropping customers.

"As what? What department?"

"As an informant. In the Auror Department."

"An informant?" Hermione's eyebrows were at her hairline. "You mean—?"

"This is not public knowledge, Granger," Ginny said. "But apparently, it was his idea." Ginny grabbed a mint from the bowl on the counter and began unwrapping it. "Right before they went to lunch yesterday, Draco asked to take the floor and suggested that he be released on a probation, claiming that he could be 'essential' in assisting the Auror Department round up the remaining Death Eaters and locating dark objects, hidden passageways, all of that."

Hermione just stared at her. Ginny smirked back.

"You did it, Hermione."

Hermione straightened.

"I-I did nothing," she said. "It sounds like he negotiated his case perfectly fine – "

"Yes, but *after* you came in on your white unicorn. The 'Golden Girl' must be listened to!" Ginny pounded her fist on the counter with theatrics that reminded her of a pair of twin redheads.

Hermione rolled her eyes and grabbed several slips of reserved requests for her to pull off the shelves and file behind the counter. She headed to the small alcove of shelves to the left of the entrance and Ginny followed.

"So," Ginny said. "You didn't tell me how it went yesterday at the trial. Do you think he'll be sending you a thank you card or will he be dropping by in person?"

"Neither, I'm sure." Hermione pulled a tome off the bottom shelf and heaved it into her arms. "He was not at all thrilled to see me."

"It must be difficult to see you again, I'm sure." Ginny sang. Hermione knew what was coming next. "After all the last time he saw you was… you know…"

Ginny always played this game. She let her sentences fade away when talking about Draco so that Hermione could correct her or fill in the gaps. It was her way of digging for information.

"The last time he saw me was probably the Final Battle, Ginny," Hermione said. She walked a circle around Ginny to get to the stacks behind her.

"Oh, right, right," Ginny said. "But then before that was the… you know…."

"The Room of Requirement battle, you mean?" Hermione smirked at her, not playing her game.

"Of course. But I'm talking about the last meaningful conversation you had. Which was…"

"Oh *that* meaningful conversation. You must mean second year on the Quidditch pitch when he called me a Mudblood," Hermione said with a neutral face. She summoned the bookcase ladder.

"Yes, as sentimental as that time was, I'm sure there were meaningful conversations after that, like…"

"When I slapped him in third year?"

"Right, and then…?"

"When he spread lies about me and Harry for Rita Skeeter to publish?"

"Foreplay." Ginny waved her hand away. Hermione chuckled and began climbing the ladder to get to the top shelf. Ginny continued, "I'm talking about that meaningful conversation you had a little later, maybe sixth year? When was it?"

"You must mean the conversation we had about how to fix a vanishing cabinet, yes?" Hermione smiled down at her from the second rung. Ginny frowned up at her. "We haven't *had* a meaningful conversation, Gin."

"Then maybe I'm getting it confused with… you know…"

"When he let Death Eaters into the castle?" Hermione realized that she wasn't entirely sure they were alone in the shop, and she should probably keep her voice to a minimum level while playing this game. She looked down to see Ginny scrunching her face at her.

"Merlin, Granger. *Why* do you love him?" Ginny stopped playing for a moment and shook her head. Hermione's blood pounded at the "L" word. Ginny continued, "Alright, so maybe I'm trying to remember that one story you told me… you know…"

"And which story is that Ginny?" Hermione reached the top shelf and found the place empty where the book should be. She frowned.

"The story about… let's see… the last clandestine meeting you had?"

Hermione laughed. "Oh, the *clandestine* meeting. Of course." Hermione stepped down one rung to see if the book was misplaced on the shelf below.

"You know, one of the many steamy nights between the two of you," Ginny said from the ground.

"None of those are coming to mind, really. Can you be more specific, Gin?"

"Maybe I'm thinking of the last time he kissed you? When was that again?"

The book wasn't misplaced there either. It wasn't on yesterday's ledger, so she knew it was still in the shop. Hermione placed her hands on her hips and searched the rows. She thought maybe it had a grey spine.

"Oh, the last time he kissed me. Let me conjure that memory. Please hold." Hermione responded, eyes not leaving the stacks.

"Or was it the *first* time he kissed you? Maybe that's the story I'm thinking of…"

Hermione looked down at Ginny. Her face was bright and open, waiting. Somehow Hermione had missed the moment a few questions back when Ginny had stopped teasing and started actually asking her. She was honestly looking for an answer to one of her idiotic questions. How strange that she assumed…

"Ginny," Hermione said. She descended a few rungs of the ladder. "He doesn't…. I mean," Hermione cleared her throat. "We didn't have a relationship. There were no clandestine meetings. I thought you knew."

Ginny searched her eyes. "And there was no snogging after classes either, then?"

"There was no snogging, period." Hermione stepped off the ladder. "We didn't… he didn't have any sort of feelings for me.

"You don't necessarily need to have feelings for someone to toss them into a broom closet after hours and snog them senseless." Ginny wiggled her brows.

"Snogging in a broom closet? Seriously, Ginny. Who does that?"

Ginny laughed. "Hermione! Everyone did!"

Hermione blushed. She felt very stupid, which was her least favorite feeling in the world. "Well, not everyone, I guess." Hermione turned away from her to move the ladder down to another column to look for that book.

"Hermione, I'm sorry." Ginny followed her. "I didn't mean to laugh at you."

"You know very well that no one has ever shoved me into a broom closet." Hermione stabilized the ladder. Ginny was the only person Hermione ever got to talk about relationships and sex with. Or, more accurately, her lack of both.

"Not even Draco Malfoy." Ginny said, almost asking.

"Not even Draco Malfoy." Hermione confirmed. She started climbing. "I'm sorry I can't give you more interesting information."

"I just wish I could understand why you like him." Ginny's voice seemed so small from the ground.

Hermione spotted a grey spine several columns away, but she couldn't even revel in that victory.

"Me too," she said.

"I was hoping you could help me retrieve a Gerby Ganfried novel? I believe it is on a top shelf."

Hermione closed her eyes. Gerby Ganfried was a fiction writer. And fiction books were generally found in the fiction section, to her left. And Cornerstone Books had a charm placed on it to prevent summoning books, to help ward off theft. She pasted on a grin.

Hermione led the way into the fiction section, averting her eyes from the chair in the corner. She conjured a rolling ladder to reach the top shelf that held the "G" authors, and she thanked Merlin that she chose to wear Muggle jeans today instead of a skirt.

"Which Ganfried novel were you thinking of?" Hermione began to climb the ladder.

"Dear, would you mind reading the titles to me?"

Hermione took a breath. She usually loved helping customers, chatting with them about their selections and giving opinions. She would never have found this woman as frustrating if Draco Malfoy wasn't fifteen feet from her, possibly watching her.

"We have *Gertrude and Gwen and the Gargantuan Grindylow*. And then *Yaris, Yeigh, and the Yellow Yarn* —"

"Oh, the *Yellow Yarn Doll*! Oh, what a lovely book!" the old woman said.

"Would you like me to pull it down for you?" Hermione turned over her shoulder to address the woman, but her gaze landed on Draco. He was smiling down at his book, laughing at her. She felt hot.

"Oh, no, dear. I've already read it. Can you read me the other titles?"

Hermione read the rest of the shelf to her. Then she read the first half of the shelf again. Eventually the woman - Beatrice, Hermione soon learned, as she had supplied that information while telling her about her entire childhood - asked her to pull down seven different copies so she could read the backs of them. She charmed the books to hover as she pulled them from the shelf, but Hermione still had to twist to reach the last three, and she could feel her shirt lift from the waistband of her jeans as she reached for each book. She hoped her midriff wasn't showing, and she hoped Draco's attention was refocused on his book.

"Oh, thank you so much dear!" Beatrice squeaked as Hermione descended the last rung of the ladder. She turned to find Draco's chair empty, and felt even more annoyed with Beatrice that she had ruined her final Draco-watching minutes of his visit.

She prepared a side table and chair for Beatrice to sit and peruse the books, and returned to the register. Hermione sighed in relief to find that there wasn't a line forming in her absence. The shop was usually very calm and not very busy, but there were times that Hermione needed to call Morty down from his flat upstairs to help. She turned around to put the ledgers away and when she faced the register counter again she found Draco leaning against it. Her blood pounded in her ears.

"Malfoy." She greeted him. She smoothed down her shirt. "Did you end up liking the new Lance Gainsworth series?" The regret hit her instantaneously. How would she know what book he was reading earlier unless she'd been watching him?

It seemed the same thought crossed his mind as his eyebrow gave the slightest twitch upwards and a glint appeared in his eyes. He pulled the Gainsworth book he was reading earlier from below her sight line and tossed it on the counter.

"I'm not sure yet," he said, staring at the book. "But I thought I might as well purchase it, since I've already dog-eared the pages."

Hermione's hands paused halfway to taking the book. Her eyes snapped up to his. Dog-earing pages was the foulest thing one could possibly—

"Relax, Granger." He smirked at her. He was joking. Relief flooded into her veins like oxygen. She puffed a small laugh and tried to hide her smile. She pulled the ledger back onto the desk and began writing his receipt, billing the purchase to the family account. There were only three seconds of silence before she couldn't stand it any longer and delved into small talk.

"I haven't been able to start this series yet, but I absolutely loved his *Undesirable* series," she said without looking up at him.

"Really. What did you like about it?"

She met his eyes. He was looking at her like he had at Hogwarts, the faint edge of a smirk and the hint of an insult in his eyes.

"Well," she began, pushing the hair away from her face. "I appreciate his style. Each novel from the perspective of a different Undesirable, circling around the same moments until they finally coalesce into clarity –"

"I would argue that telling the same story over and over again is tedious," he said. "You get nowhere if you are only stuck on one moment."

He was staring directly into her eyes, waiting for her response. She felt like she was missing something.

"I… I disagree." She shook her head to clear it. "It isn't the same moment because you are getting the scene from seven different angles, and learning something new every time it is revisited." She could hear Lavender Brown's voice in her ear, something about agreeing with everything a boy says…

"I found it terribly dull." Draco shifted his weight, making him taller if possible. "The storylines were stale, the characters were unimaginative, and I couldn't connect with that dolt of an Auror running around, mucking up everything…"

While he spoke, Hermione opened her mouth, and closed it. Opened it again and made a small squeaking sound. He was decimating everything she loved about that series.

"I suppose he was a bit, er…underwritten," Hermione lied.

"For being the only character to appear in all seven books, I found that he was remarkably uninteresting," Draco said. His voice was so lazy and dispassionate. "The Auror had no outside family or friends, so what are we supposed to get from seven novels where he's always two steps behind the Undesirables the entire time –"

"Exactly!" She squawked. "That's what makes good drama, Malfoy! The Auror can't be omniscient, or there would be no story!"

"That's the other thing," he continued as if she hadn't spoken. "Why seven novels? Can't it be condensed at all? What about a trilogy? Or even better – one novel with seven perspectives, if you even need them all –"

"One novel!! Fit all of that information into one novel –??"

"If you could call it 'information' –"

"Well, Malfoy, you must have liked something about it if you read all seven books and –"

"I didn't. I read two of them."

Hermione gasped, eyes wide. He reached for a mint from the dish on the counter. He started to twist it between his fingers while watching her.

"You only read two! How can you even comment on the series then! The first two are almost juvenile in comparison to the third and fourth –"

"Oh, no," he said. "I read the first and the last."

Hermione gaped at him. She had always assumed he was intelligent due to his marks in school. In fact, when reaching for reasons why they would get on so well, one of the clearest reasons was their shared love of knowledge and always being right. She felt betrayed somehow.

"I… I don't even know how to respond to that." She shook her head at the counter. She finished the receipt, jabbing the quill into the ink pot, and grabbed a bag to stuff his book into. She ignored his eyes and the way his fingers played with the unwrapped mint.

"It's just an opinion, Granger." He sounded quite pleased with himself.

"Well, it's the wrong opinion," she mumbled. He laughed. Under other circumstances the sound of it would have sent electricity running through her veins.

She held the bag out to him, willing him to take it and leave.

"Ya know, Granger," he said. He leaned forward on the counter, laying his forearms flat and clasping his hands, like he was coming down to her level. "You may have just reminded me why I loathe this Grainsword so much –"

"Gainsworth," she corrected, clenching her fist around the bag.

"—Maybe I don't want the new book after all." His eyes flitted back and forth between her eyes, something glinting in them.

She'd had enough. She shoved the bag into his chest and pressed it there as she hissed, "You will take this damn book, Malfoy, and you will read it, and you will *love* it. And when you are

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Five

Hermione had been crossing T's and dotting I's in the ledger book for the past hour. Literally. She was combing through the financials trying to keep busy and trying to have a good reason for not filing books.

Because he came back.

Draco Malfoy was sitting in the lounge area of the fiction section, thumbing through a copy of the first book in a series that Hermione had heard only wonderful things about. She had yet to pick it up herself, but from the twenty minutes that Draco had spent on it, she could guess that it was brilliant.

He had entered the shop while she was at the register with a customer, and proceeded directly to the stacks to her left. She was grateful that he saved her from any awkward waving or chipper "good morning" banter by ignoring her completely, but now she was trying desperately to not notice him there. She could see the top of his head from in between the 4th and 5th shelves, and could see his hands turning pages from in between the shelves below that.

She had tried turning her back to him, so she wouldn't have to wave hello from across the store, or worse - be caught staring. But she soon found that not keeping an eye on him was worse. He could sneak up on her then.

His long fingers turned a page. She sighed. His hair fell into his eyes again and she saw his hand push it back.

"Miss?"

Hermione snapped her eyes to the register. A small elderly woman stood at the counter. How had she snuck up on her?

"Yes? What can I help you with?" Hermione smiled.

picture of the three of them graces the cover. They began their testimonies of their glorified camping trip that day. Within a week my mother was out of prison and I suppose I owe Potter a thank you for that.

I place the June 12 paper to the side. I find another picture of the Golden Trio on the cover of the June 26 *Prophet*. I remember this one. Weasley said he wanted to be a Quidditch star, like the leech that he is, and Potter said he'd work for the Ministry.

She wanted to go back to Hogwarts. Just as I had suspected she would, but it frustrated me just the same. The same thought strikes me as when I read this paper in Azkaban a little over a year ago: How could she go back to that place after everything? Why wouldn't she want to move forward? She didn't need her N.E.W.T.s or her final year. There's not a person in the wizarding world who would have denied her anything.

I toss that paper on top of the other one. I delve through the rest of June, noting things that are now of interest to me, like Cuthbert Mockridge's retirement. A year ago, it was a glance through the pages, looking for any mention of my trial date. I laugh now at how optimistic I was.

I finish with the *Daily Prophets* from June 1998. The ones I set aside, I use a quick severing charm with my wand, and before I can second guess myself, I have cut the articles out.

I go to my closet, to the dresser in the back, and I crouch to open the bottom drawer. I find it just as I left it. A shoe box and extra blankets. I pop the top of the shoe box, and find her face staring at me from the *Prophet* clippings from years ago. On top is Skeeter's piece about her dating Krum and Potter at the same time from fourth year. I don't remember why it was on top. She's hugging Potter in the champion's tent, turning as the camera catches them, eyes wide and scared. Just like last week at my trial.

I place the new clippings from the June papers inside the box, close the top, shut the dresser drawer, and turn off the light in the closet.

Mippy brings in the July papers.

I don't sleep.

done you will pick up the second book of the *Undesirable* series and you will read that, and then the third, and then the fourth and so on until you have read enough to make *intelligent* remarks about them."

She sucked in her first breath and stared him down, her chest heaving. His eyes drifted over her entire face before his lips stretched into a smirk.

"There she is," he whispered. Hermione blinked. He stood up straight, taking the bag from where she still had it pressed into his chest. "Thought we lost you, Granger."

A blush spread up her jaw, warming her face. She searched him for an answer for the last five minutes, but only watched him pop the mint in his mouth, lift a brow at her, and turn to walk out.

"I know why it's named Cornerstone," I cut her off. Has she hit her head? "Why are you working here and not Flourish and Blotts? I would have thought you'd love to help the first years pick up their text books and buy their parchment. Host monthly Gilderoy Lockheart fan club meetings."

She's looking at me with wide eyes like I've just said something marvelous, and I can't for the life of me remember what we're talking about.

"I suppose I like Cornerstone because it's more out of the way. Less likely to be recognized here." She looks away, blushing. And I can't even comprehend what it must be like for her now that the war is over and she is a household name. She knows now what it was like for me.

"I used to come here during the summers for the same reasons." My eyes wander to the perch Morty would let me sit at. Where I could watch her…

"I never saw you here."

I look back at her, and it almost looks like she would have wanted to.

"That was sort of the point, wasn't it?"

She nods at me, and I guess that's goodbye. I take in her face one last time, in case I don't get another chance, and tilt my head at her.

How idiotic. I should have said goodbye or waved. I shake my head and sigh as I exit, wondering if she's already disappeared behind the stacks.

I take the south side of Diagon Alley, and I pop into the *Daily Prophet* main office. I ask the woman at the front for a copy of every paper printed since June of last year. Her eyes bulge out of her head, and I tell her to have them delivered to Malfoy Manor, at their earliest convenience.

I get home and I toss the book next to my mother on her couch in the library.

"Did you see Morty?"

"No, he wasn't there."

"Oh. Did you run into anyone else interesting?"

I stop on my way out the door, turning to see her lifted brow from this side of her book.

"Hermione Granger works there," I say, watching her.

"Oh?" She's still. An excellent tell of hers.

"But, you already knew that."

She lowers the book and blinks at me. "Did I?"

I shake my head at her and head upstairs. Mippy appears an hour later, carrying *Daily Prophets* from June 1998. I tell her there will be more coming, and she squeaks, disappearing.

I start with June 5, 1998. There is a brief mention of my birthday, but it is eaten by the news of the Nott, Goyle, and Parkinson arrests the day before. I toss it away. There was an evening paper on June 5, detailing the arrest of the Malfoy family earlier that day. I flip through, trying to re-acclimate myself to society. I continue looking through each day until finally on June 12, a

"I thought you worked for the Ministry."

She spins. Her eyes grow wide at the sight of me, and I see her breath catch in her throat.

Terrified. Of me.

I frown. Her eyes wander over me, and I feel warm as she examines me. I raise a brow, waiting for her answer.

"No," she says. "I mean – I mean yes, I do, but not on the weekends." She stares at me. "On the weekends I work here."

Her voice is tight, startled and cautious. Her eyes bright and breathing shallow. I look away before I concentrate on the rise and fall of her chest any longer.

"Obviously," I try, condescending. "But why?"

She opens her mouth to answer and no sound comes out. Her tongue is pink. Her eyes dance over my face and I want her to scowl at me. I want her to call me a Death Eater and tell me to get out. I want her to be familiar.

Then suddenly: "It's a bookstore. I like books."

I feel the air leave me before I can decide if it is a laugh or a sneer or a chuckle. "I remember." I turn my eyes away from her, trying to dismiss her. "I'm picking up a book."

She jumps. Like she's been shocked. "Yes, of course!" The sound is abrupt and it shakes me from whatever trance she has me under. "Did you have it reserved?"

I see her move immediately to the Ms, and I say, "It's under Black." She looks at me quickly, and the feeling of shame washes over me, the feeling I associate with *Malfoy.* "It's my mother's order."

I watch her calculate that information. She pulls the book and smiles. She begins speaking, something about goblins, but I watch her teeth, and her lips, and the light in her eyes, and I find myself jealous of the book in her hands, the book she smiles at. I feel dizzy and just before she looks up at me, the ghost of her smile on her cheeks, I remember what I'm missing. A barricade. I throw up a wall, hasty, grey stones. Something I should have had in place from the moment she popped out of the stacks, but she surprised me. Her eyes land on me and I'm hidden behind the stones.

"Your mother has excellent taste in books."

"I'll be sure to let her know." I feel my face relaxing.

She's handing me the bag and we're done. The business has concluded. But I want to stay.

"Why Cornerstone?" I take the bag from her.

She opens her mouth again and no sound comes out. And I revel in making her speechless for the second time today.

"I believe it's because it's located at the corner of Diagon Alley and Hor—"

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Three

Wednesday, January 19, 1994

There's a handy spell Blaise taught me last year. *Oculus Dolus*. It's a trick that makes it seem like your eyes are concentrated on one thing to an observer, but really you can be looking anywhere you want.

Blaise likes to use this to nod off in Transfiguration without letting McGonagall know. He also claims he's used it to convince Daphne Greengrass to go skinny-dipping with him in the lake, telling her "I won't look as you disrobe," but I'm still trying to verify this story with Pansy.

I've found all sorts of uses for it over the past year, the most recent of which is figuring out why Hermione Granger is glaring at me.

I surprise myself by admitting that I've done nothing to deserve this. She's been glaring at me all week, starting in the library on Saturday. I assumed she was upset that I arrived first to take her favorite ta– *my* favorite table.

But then she was glaring in History of Magic two days ago. I pulled out the book I'd checked out of the library, having devoured it over the weekend and now on my second read, and when I saw her icy eyes from across the room, I sent her a sneer. I thought perhaps she was upset that I was ignoring Professor Binns by reading a novel in class – not that it's any of her bloody business – but then yesterday I had it back in the library.

The bint had snatched up our favorite – *my* favorite table – so it couldn't have been about that. But then she glared at me while I minded my own business, re-reading a few pages of this new book I'm quite enjoying.

When I'd seen her eyeing me yesterday, I'd cast *Oculus Dolus*. To her eye, I was reading the book, but actually I spent the afternoon examining her, trying to figure out what her issue was with me.

Besides the normal issues, of course.

I'd turn a page every now and then, and she'd huff.

I'm at the Slytherin table in the Great Hall now, and I'm trying to start the book from the beginning. Pansy is next to me, chattering to Tracey Davis, and I can feel her bloody eyes on me again.

Oculus Dolus.

She's glaring across the whole Great Hall, and I'm surprised to see Potter and Weasel aren't with her. Finnigan asks her a question and then she turns back to glare at me.

I try to concentrate on this story again. I re-read the part where the Evil Queen transfigures her stepson into a dog. It makes me laugh again.

"What are you reading, Draco?" Pansy coos. She drapes herself across my arm and I shake her off.

"It's a book. Ever heard of one?"

Pansy frowns at me, and I stand, grabbing my things and heading out into the Entrance Hall. Out of the corner of my eye I see her, standing to follow.

She's on my last nerve and I turn to hide behind a statue as she pops through the doors, looking in the direction of the Slytherin dorms.

I pull my wand and step out. "Why are you watching me, Granger?"

She spins around and her eyes land on the book under my arm.

"Are you done with that book?" She places her hands on her hips in that annoying way.

I look down at the book. "What?"

"You really shouldn't read books that aren't even yours at the dining table. If you spilled even the smallest drop of coffee on the pages, Madam Pince wouldn't let you hear the end of it." She looks away. "Trust me."

What nonsense is this?

"Well, it's a good thing I don't drink coffee," I say. I dismiss her, walking away.

"Are you done with it or not?" She calls after me.

Merlin, can she keep it down? I'd hate for anyone to think we're having an actual conversation.

"What's it to you, Mudblood?" I smile and continue walking. I'm confused that I don't hear an indignant gasp, or a wail of self-pity. I did say "Mudblood," didn't I?

"You're only allowed to check a book out for a maximum of two weeks!"

I turn and snap at her. "Then you can get it in two weeks!" I smile. "Unless I check it back out again!"

She huffs and marches back to the Great Hall.

Merlin, I hate her!

The next day Skeeter publishes an article about my calendar. A beautiful schedule created by Skeeter herself, detailing my day-to-day life. I actually try to follow it. Whoever's schedule this is, he sounds like a very interesting person.

I leave the Manor for the first time that day. I get a haircut. Skeeter's schedule says I spend time at Florean Fortescue's for lunch every day, so I decide to pop in to grab a sandwich.

Entering Diagon Alley that day is a big mistake. It is August 31. The last day of supply shopping before the Hogwarts Express leaves on September 1. The streets are overcrowded, the storefronts packed, and I am too recognizable.

My chest seizes and won't let me breathe as parents pull their children away from me, and Slytherin fourth years try to send me a wave before their friends tug their arms.

I Apparate home. A failed mission.

But at least Skeeter prints on Wednesday that I had been in Diagon Alley, helping the young Slytherins pick up their robes.

When Mother asks me to head back to Diagon Alley that Saturday, I refuse.

"Draco, this book has been on hold for almost a week. I really need to pick it up."

"Then pick it up. Why do I have go?"

"I have a terrible headache, Draco," she says, pressing her knuckles to her forehead like some damsel in distress. This should have been my first clue. "Besides, it's Cornerstone. I know Morty would love to see you." She turns away, her voice drifting. "Maybe you could spend time there like you used to?"

I roll my eyes and head out on her errand. Diagon Alley is considerably less crowded, but still a weekend bunch, so I have to dodge the casual strollers, and weave through the day-trippers. Seeing Cornerstone again after quite a few years is like breathing fresh air. The store on the corner with the door at an odd angle.

I panic for a moment, wondering what Morty thinks of me, but I realize he still does business with my mother, so he must not feel too strongly about the Malfoy family. Or at least the Malfoys that go by Black.

I pull the door open, relieved to find no crowds. There never were crowds here. It was delightful to people-watch and daydream when I was younger, watching from a perch that Morty let me climb to as classmates wandered in, or hiding from my parents when they came to collect me. Or waiting for her to come in to browse –

I clear my head as I step up the two steps to the counter, trying to rid myself of the memories of watching her choose books.

And like a spell, she emerges from the stacks to the right. I stop, standing on one foot as the other is mid-step. She flutters to the counter, and my eyes widen when she steps behind it, suddenly pulling receipts from a drawer, like she works here. Like she belongs.

Waking up in my own bed is strange. I can't sleep on the mattress for the first night – too soft, too many pillows – so I take the covers down to the floor and sleep next to my bed. Mippy finds me there the next morning, causing a huge scene.

I can't find the stairs for a long time either. Heading down to breakfast with mother in the mornings is mentally taxing.

I spend a bit of time flying. I find old brooms and try flying around for a few hours the first days. My muscles have atrophied in Azkaban.

I'm offending Mippy with my appetite. The little thing is so excited to cook for two that she goes completely mental the first week. She makes five course meals for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Mother is able to take small bits of each and thank the elf, but I can't eat more than soup and bread. The sweets and the spices make me sick.

Skeeter visits on Monday. My mother sets us up in the library, hovering over the tea cart. She wants to talk about my social life. I laugh. I have none.

"What about Blaise?" Mother says. "Does he know you were released? I could get in contact with his mother?"

"And set up a playdate?" I shoot at her. She glares back at me and turns back to fixing Skeeter's tea. "He's in Italy still."

Skeeter sits forward, almost falling off her seat. "To see you out with old chums from Hogwarts – especially those who were not as heavily involved in the Final Battle as others – will do wonders for you, dear." She taps her chin. "What about Miss Parkinson?"

I watch my mother's eyes turn to me, deferring to me. I think of the stack of letters, postcards, pictures that Pansy sent me over the past year. They were thrown out upon leaving my cell, unanswered.

"I'm not sure where Pansy and I stand."

"Well, all the better to find out then!" Skeeter grins and her quill jots notes behind her head. I frown, and glare at it. "Speaking of beautiful, single women," Skeeter coos, "when can we see you out on the town!" She takes me in with greedy eyes.

"Out on the town?"

"Courting, dear!" She giggles, and the sound is obnoxious. "You're… what? Twenty-five?"

"Nineteen."

"Even better!" Her eyes gleam. "The world wants to know what the Malfoy heir does in his free time! Who he's seeing, how *many* he's seeing." She nods at me, secretively. "*You,* Draco Malfoy, are a commodity. And we need to present you as such to the world."

"I'm an ex-Death Eater, with no friends and no purpose," I hiss at her.

"Only if you allow yourself to be." She winks at me.

I look down at the green and gold book in my hands. All of this was over a damn book? She's lost *hours* of her time by glaring at me for the past week because I had this book?

I flip open the cover and look at the library checkout page. I find her name six times. *Six times!*

Leave it to Granger to get riled up about a bloody book.

~*~

Tuesday, September 7, 1999

Katya Viktor was a scrap of a thing the last time I visited Bulgaria.

Of course, I was nine, so I was also quite unimpressive. She was twelve and ignored me completely as our fathers toasted each other's accomplishments.

Over the years, I've seen her modeling Quidditch equipment that I knew she didn't use, playing hostess for Bulgarian Ministers she wasn't old enough to vote for, and wearing diamond necklaces in Witch Weekly that she was paid to wear.

When she walks into the pub, hair swishing behind her and heads turning to follow her, it's difficult to remember that twelve-year-old stick at all.

Her eyes land on me and she smiles.

"Draco!" She pulls me close and she kisses my cheek. I don't remember the last time a girl's lips touched my skin. "You look well!"

And I know she means "—for someone just released from Azkaban," and I'm so grateful she's been raised with such class.

She orders a drink and I watch her float onto the high stool. Once her eyes have released the bartender from his trance, she turns to me and her face is warm, her eyes are bright and her teeth are wide.

She looks too similar to her. This is a mistake.

Katya asks me about my mother, laughs politely at the right moments, tells me about her mother's recent charity work, and suddenly she gives me my opening.

"And things are the same with my father. He's invited the Undersecretary to the Bulgarian Minister to dinner next week… since he is newly divorced." She takes a sip from her glass and rolls her eyes.

"And what does Andrei have to say about that?"

The perpetual smile melts off her face, and I immediately regret the way it came out. I watch her throat move as she swallows. She sets her glass down.

"How do you know Andrei?" She lifts her brow at me.

"I don't. I've recently been catching up on the gossip columns of the *Daily Prophet* and other papers, and I saw the pictures of the two of you from last year. I did some digging –"

"What do you want, Draco?" Her eyes are firm, her mouth set.

A chill runs through me. She thinks I'm blackmailing her. No better than my father in her eyes.

I look at the bar top. "I'm sorry. That wasn't what I meant."

"What *did* you mean?" Her voice isn't warm anymore. Good for her.

I look up at her and try again. "What I meant to say was, 'It must be difficult for you to pretend not to have Andrei. Difficult for both of you.' And I meant to say, 'Please feel free to speak plainly about him to me.'"

She examines me. I try to let her in, not build up a wall. Try not to ruin this.

"And this is why you wrote to me, asking to catch up? To offer to be my confidante." She swirls her glass on the bar.

"No, not exactly," I say. "But I think we can help each other. If you're in need of help."

She tilts her head at me. "How?"

"You need a pure-blood boyfriend," I say, and I feel a smirk tug at my lips. "And, according to my press agent, I need a desirable social life."

She narrows her eyes at me. "A 'desirable social life,' you say?" She smirks back at me, and I can already tell this is a match made in heaven. "You have Draco Malfoy's looks and wealth. I see no reason why you shouldn't have a *very* desirable social life."

"I'm readjusting still," I say. I swallow and look away. "From Azkaban." It's incredibly difficult to be this open with another person. "I won't be looking for a wife for quite some time, and I think very few girls would understand that. Especially the girls of the blood status and class that I will be allowed to pick from."

I wait, hoping she understands me. I feel weak. I feel too exposed.

"There is someone you want, but cannot have."

My eyes snap to her. I open my mouth to deny it. And nothing comes out.

Her eyes are kind. Like she understands me. I struggle to find the words to tell her that our situations are not similar. She has Andrei, and I…

"What is your plan? For your 'desirable social life,' Draco Malfoy." She sips from her glass and sends me a friendly wink. My silence has conned her into saying yes somehow, and I feel dirty about it.

"Just dinner dates, photographed in the *Prophet.* Casual, and non-exclusive. For three months. After that we can go our separate ways."

"What happens after three months?" she asks.

"My probation at the Ministry will end. I may move out of the country, change my last name to Black." The last part is a joke, but it's still something I'm considering.

"Hm." She tilts her head at me.

"What?"

I look to my mother and she raises a brow at Father, before sipping from her teacup.

"Do you really think so?" I ask, greedy. "That's unfair! She's so irritating! She jumps up and down like she has to use the loo every time a professor asks a question. She's constantly scribbling notes – and her handwriting is just awful – and she tosses completely useless information out at all times, even though you didn't ask for it." I pick up my juice glass, but have another thought before I can sip. "*And* she spends all her time in the library at *my* favorite table! Every time I go in there, she's sitting there, reading *Hogwarts, A History* or some other mundane book, and I'm just so sick of her!"

I cross my arms and frown at my plate. Father turns a page in the newspaper, but Mother is watching me.

"What does Miss Granger look like? Is she of a pretty sort?" she says, bringing the teacup to her lips. I scowl at her and I see Father turn down the pages of his newspaper to eye her.

"No! She's hideous! She's got this great mane of ugly brown hair – I'm surprised she can even *see* half the time – and she's never dressed appropriately. And don't even get me started on her teeth—!"

"Oh, what a shame for her," Mother says, straightening the tablecloth. "So, she has no redeeming qualities at all then?" She lifts her eyes to me, and I feel my father shift next to me.

"Not a one!" I scoff.

"Narcissa," Father says, and it sounds like a warning, but I didn't hear the cause. "He's eleven."

"And?" she says. "I was eleven the first time someone called me a 'hideous excuse for a Black' in the Great Hall."

"Yes, but I was thirteen," Father says, frowning.

"You scoundrel." Mother winks at him.

"What are you talking about?" I look between them both. "Mother, you're prettier than both your sisters combined."

"Yes, your father knows it now, and he knew it then, too." Mother flips her hair over her shoulder, smiling at her husband. I'm about to heave in disgust when Father speaks.

"Draco, have you gotten to know Miss Parkinson? Or the Greengrass girl?"

I shrug, picking up my fork again. "Yeah, they're okay. They're bloody stupid."

"What a pity all girls can't be as bright as Hermione Granger," Mother says. She sips from her teacup and watches me.

"Yeah, I guess…" I trail off and frown at my eggs.

~*~

Saturday, August 28, 1999

She nods at me and smiles. She lets me go to bed. I climb the staircase, almost getting lost along the way. I finally find my bedroom, but only after I pass the room next to it. I move quickly past it, to keep myself from looking inside.

~*~

Monday, December 23, 1991

"And they just let him on the team!" I slap my hands down on the table. "The Hogwarts guidelines say that first years aren't even allowed brooms, but McGonagall just *hands* him one, clearly playing favorites, Father."

"Yes, Draco, you told me in your letters." He sips his morning tea.

"And isn't it strictly against the rules for a first year to be on the team?" I say. "I've been looking into it in the library but I haven't seen it referenced."

"I believe," Mother says, "that first years may try out, but that they may only use school brooms to do so." She pats the corner of her mouth with her napkin.

"How is *that* fair! Father, there must be something you can do about this, truly."

"Don't worry, Draco. You'll be on the team next year, and you'll be able to best Potter without resorting to rule breaking." He flips the *Prophet* pages. "How are your classes? Do you expect good marks?"

"Yes, Father." I pick at my toast. "I'm top in Potions, and very highly ranked in all other classes."

"How highly?" His eyes are now off the paper, looking at me with interest for the first time.

"Second, I believe," I say, lifting a haughty brow like he taught me.

"Excellent, Draco," Mother says.

"And who is in first?" he asks, his mouth twisting.

I narrow my eyes at the table, tugging at the napkin in my lap. I growl, "Hermione Granger."

"Granger," Mother says, looking at Father with squinted eyes. "I don't know the Grangers, do you?"

"Is she related to Hector Dagworth-Granger, the potioneer?" Father asks.

I scoff and say, "Merlin, no. She's a Mudblood."

"Draco," Mother coos. "You can't use that word at school."

"Well, I'm not at school, am I?" I glare at her.

"Watch your tone," Father says. I pout, and stab at the remains of my breakfast. "A Muggle-born girl at the top of her class? Is she a Ravenclaw?"

"Gryffindor," I sneer. "Best friends with Harry Potter."

"Ah." Father shakes his head. "That explains it. Everyone at that bloody school has gone soft for Potter and Dumbledore. I'm sure she's not actually receiving better marks than you, Draco. They are boosting her scores."

"Your father is in Azkaban for the foreseeable future, Draco. I *wish* I was that lucky." She smiles lightly, and I stare at her. "It would mean that my path is my own." She places her hand on my knee and I almost jump at the contact. "You are the last Malfoy. Which means the name is yours to do with as you please."

I stare into her eyes, questioning.

"If you don't like the Malfoy name," she says, "change it. Don't run from it."

The words I've been tossing around in my daydreams flash before my eyes. *Black Consulting Firm. Malfoy-Black Consultation Group.*

Malfoy Consulting Group.

I swallow. And let my eyes drift over her shoulder, thinking.

"Now," she says, bringing me back. "Thursday evening?" She pulls a calendar book from her purse. "There's a restaurant just down the street. I say we meet at the Apparition point and walk over. Let the *Prophet* photographer know to be ready at 7:30." She looks up at me and grins.

"Thank you, Katya."

She finishes her drink. "And don't forget to let your girlfriend know about this arrangement. I'd be happy to meet her in private so she feels more comfortable."

I feel ice in my veins. "I… That won't be necessary. She's not…" I take a breath and Katya is looking at me. I feel as if I can be honest with her, since we are about to deceive the entire world. "She doesn't want me."

Her eyes take me in, and I'm happy to find there's no pity there. "How is that possible?" She gives a little laugh.

I down my firewhisky, feeling it burn as it licks my throat. I click the glass down against the bar. "Because she knows me."

~*~

Saturday, September 11, 1999

I think she would benefit from *Oculus Dolus*. And I'm quite surprised she's never learned it. It makes me wonder where Blaise found this spell.

I came to Cornerstone about an hour ago, and somehow, I managed to pass her without any awkward hellos. I browsed the fiction titles for a bit, until I finally found the first book of Lance Gainsworth new series. I had no idea he was writing a new series. But I guess that's what I missed in Azkaban.

I'm in an armchair, flipping through it, finding the same prose style and phrasing that I fell in love with from his *Undesirable* series. I'm four chapters in, and she's been staring at me since page two.

I'm only aware of this due to my friend *Oculus Dolus.*

She's watching me read, and a *déjà vu* falls over me. She follows my fingers as they turn pages. She turns away and pretends to write in her ledger book. She looks back at me.

It's a testament to his writing that I cannot decide what holds my interest more: her strange behavior or Lance Gainsworth's new novel.

I clamp down on any foolishness that passes through my mind every time her lips part when I turn a page. Any chill that rustles through me when she blinks and blushes and turns her face away.

She's bewildering to me.

And perhaps I shouldn't come to Cornerstone again.

A hag shuffles past me. She eyes me and I lift a brow at her, then forget that this hag can only see me staring at this book.

When I look back at the front counter, she is helping an older woman, moving into the fiction section. She's pulling a rolling ladder and all I can see is her denims. Jeans, they call them. They pull across her backside as she climbs the ladder. She looks down at the woman to read the titles aloud and her melody floats through the room.

I watch as she almost rolls her eyes at the older woman. I smile and she turns to me. I look down at the book before I remember she can't see where my eyes are.

I look back up as she presses her lips together, turning red. She starts pulling books from the shelves, the older woman telling her life story.

She climbs another rung and I watch her legs in the denim. Her hips. She's reaching for books at the end of the shelf, and her ribs are stretching and I watch the shapes her torso makes, and I wonder if I could make it to her on time if she fell. I take in her flimsy top – t-shirt, they call it – and how it clings to her sides when suddenly the cotton lifts as she leans and I can see her skin. The tops of her hips. The slope of her sides. It's only two inches or so, but it's the parts of her I've never seen.

I tear my eyes from her. I shake the image of standing behind her on the ladder, pressing my fingertips to that skin.

I shouldn't have come back.

I stand, releasing the *Oculus Dolus* spell, and I slip out of the fiction stacks, feeling the fever crawl up my chest.

I'm halfway out the door when I realize I'm holding the Gainsworth book. I turn and she's coming back to the counter, facing away, looking at that ledger book again.

I climb the few steps back to the counter, like she's pulling me back and once I get to the register, my eyes flip to her hips. She's pulled her shirt down again.

Good.

"For the *Prophet*, darling!" Rita takes my elbow and leads me to a side room where a photographer is set up. "We couldn't have you seen leaving the Ministry today with that Azkaban grime on you. No, we'll need to take a few photos here, and a few of you and your mother leaving."

I frown at her. "Are you my press agent?"

She giggles and bats my arm, and I assume that's my answer. She dries my hair with her wand, and I let her set it just so, feeling awkward about having someone's hands on me.

I think my mother has been the only person to touch me in fifteen months. Just hugs on her monthly visits. Or the guards gripping my elbows as they led me around.

Skeeter directs me to stare into the camera and the light blinds me as her photographer jumps around.

After a short lunch, I am brought back to the courtroom, and vials are placed before me. I am handed my wand, and I hardly recognize it. I wonder if it will even still respond to me. Doesn't it belong to Potter now?

As it slides into my hand, it hums, and at least it recognizes me.

I spend the rest of the afternoon digging through my mind and tugging at memories like weeds. I have to label each wisp of silver as it drops into a vial, and discuss the significance of each memory with the Wizengamot. It takes hours.

My mother is waiting for me when I am done. I am taken to Azkaban to clean out my cell, and then I am released into my mother's custody. They take pictures as I leave.

As we're leaving, I think of my father, somewhere in that castle. While my mother has visited me once a month since her release, I've never once been allowed to see my father while I was in Azkaban, and as I leave the fortress behind, I hope I can leave him behind as well.

Mother and I arrive back at home. Just as I left it. Only now it is just Mippy who greets us. And I wonder what I'm supposed to do with all this space. I wonder how Mother can bear it.

We're in the entrance hall, near the fireplaces, and Mother asks me what I'd like to do.

"Sleep, I guess?"

"Are you hungry?"

I'm about to answer her when I see that the doors to the drawing room are pulled closed. She follows my eyes as I swallow.

"I don't much like that room anymore," she says. "Or the dining hall. I take my meals in the east wing now."

I blink, trying to block out the image of Professor Burbage's body hitting the dining table.

"Let's renovate it. Both of them."

Father stands, and we follow him out of the dining room and into the entry hall. We stand in a straight line, facing the front doors. I feel Father turn to me.

"Be strong, Draco. This isn't forever."

"You don't know that," I say.

"You don't have to answer any questions until a member of the Wizengamot is available. Remember that," he says, straightening his sleeves. "If you need me, you will need to write to me—"

"What would I possibly need from *you*," I hiss at him.

I feel his eyes on me as I keep mine trained on the front doors. My mother clutches my hand as the doors explode open, and about twenty Aurors storm through it. Our wands fly from our pockets – not *my* wand, still my mother's – and a spell kicks my knees out so I fall on them. I raise my hands in the air, as my parents do the same.

They are yelling things, and I'm trying to follow direction. I see my father dealt with first. Restraints placed on him, and he is taken out. Then my mother. That is harder to watch.

Then it's my turn, and a young Auror, barely twenty-five, restrains me. I might recognize him from Hogwarts. As he hauls me to my feet, his fist pops into my stomach so quickly I don't even know what happened. My air disappears and I fold over, seeing lights.

He drags me forward, and tugs my head up to his face, fist in my hair, and sour breath against my nose.

"Happy Birthday, Malfoy."

~*~

Friday, August 27, 1999 - later

Someone must have informed my mother that I was being released. She was to meet me for lunch before the trial reconvened in the afternoon, but when the guards escort me to a holding area, she is there, grinning like a loon.

She throws her arms around me, and I'm ashamed at my appearance. Greasy and unkempt. She whispers loving words to me and my eyes drift to see Rita Skeeter there too.

"Oh, how handsome you are Draco!" Her eyes dance over me. "But we'll have to clean you up a bit first."

There's a shower down the hall, and my mother gives me soap and shampoo. The ones I would use at home. I'm curious as to how she knew to bring them. The showers in the bowels of the Ministry are nicer than the ones at Azkaban, and I'm finished in five minutes, still unused to the idea of endless time. Time that belongs to me again.

When I return to the room in a fresh set of robes – new robes, bought just for me – I finally ask Rita what she's doing here.

Just before she turns around I assume a casual, leaning position. Like we're friends. Like we're familiar.

I watch as her breath catches.

"Malfoy." She tugs at her shirt again, and I wonder if she knows. "Did you end up liking the new Lance Gainsworth series?"

The little minx. I toss the book on the counter. And her eyes are bright and there's pink on her cheeks and I want to talk to her.

"I'm not sure yet," I say. "But I thought I might as well purchase it, since I've already dog-eared the pages."

Her body stills, and she looks up to me like I've just killed her favorite headmaster.

Books. Hermione Granger and books.

I smile. "Relax, Granger."

Her cheeks start to smile. A small laugh. She looks away.

Look at me.

"I haven't been able to start this series yet, but I absolutely loved his *Undesirable* series," she says. Her eyes still looking down at the book at the ledger as she writes.

Look at me.

Hermione Granger and books.

"Really. What did you like about it?" I say. I feel my focus narrowing down on her, my vision blurring around her frame. I lean forward on the counter.

She looks up at me. And there's something in her expression as her eyes land on me.

"Well." She drags her fingers through her hair, but she looks away from me. "I appreciate his style." She tries to look back at me and her eyes move away. She can stare across rooms at me, but she won't meet my eyes?

She's describing the *Undesirable* series, looking down at the counter. Like the courtroom. Like Hogwarts.

"I would argue that telling the same story over and over again is tedious," I stop her. "You get nowhere if you are only stuck on one moment."

I have no time to dwell on my hypocrisy, before she's meeting my eyes again.

"I… I disagree." Her eyes blink at me. "It isn't the same moment because you are getting the scene from seven different angles, and learning something new every time it is revisited."

I channel Pansy's voice: "I found it terribly dull. The storylines were stale, the characters were unimaginative, and I couldn't connect with that dolt of an Auror running around, mucking up everything…"

I trail off and check in with her. She's offended. She opens her mouth to speak and stops. She's going to snap.

"I suppose he was a bit, er…underwritten."

… What? What's wrong with her? Fight me.

Now it's time to channel Blaise: "For being the only character to appear in all seven books, I found that he was remarkably uninteresting." I lean lazily, and try to remember Blaise's major complaints. "The Auror had no outside family or friends, so what are we supposed to get from seven novels where he's always two steps behind the Undesirables the entire time –"

"Exactly! That's what makes good drama, Malfoy! The Auror can't be omniscient, or there would be no story!"

Her volume rises, and her eyes brighten.

Come out to play, Granger.

"That's the other thing," I complain. What was it Skeeter said in her review in the *Prophet?* "Why seven novels? Can't it be condensed at all? What about a trilogy? Or even better – one novel with seven perspectives, if you even need them all –"

"One novel!! Fit all of that information into one novel –??"

"If you could call it 'information' –"

"Well, Malfoy, you must have liked something about it if you read all seven books and –"

"I didn't. I read two of them."

She gasps, very melodramatic, and I need to do something with my hands to keep from laughing. I pluck a mint from the bowl on the counter and twist the wrapper between my fingers. I let my eyes rest on her face.

"You only read two! How can you even comment on the series then! The first two are almost juvenile in comparison to the third and fourth –"

"Oh, no," I say. "I read the first and the last."

I watch as her mouth drops open. Her lips are pink. She stutters.

"I… I don't even know how to respond to that." She looks away. Disappointed. And it reminds me of Hogwarts – the way she used to scold the boys.

She's moving quickly, like she wants me out. I twist the mint around, trying to make obnoxious noises.

"It's just an opinion, Granger," I try.

"Well, it's the wrong one."

I laugh before I can stop myself. She's holding the bag out to me. Business is over. But I didn't come here for business.

I lean down onto the counter until I'm eye level with her. Look at me.

"Ya know, Granger," I say, "you may have just reminded me why I loathe this Grainsword so much –"

"Gainsworth." And I know she's just at her tipping point.

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Two

Friday, June 5, 1998

It's my favorites for breakfast. Pumpkin pastries, ordered special from someplace where pumpkins are in season. My favorite jams and scones. Eggs, beans, sausages.

And it all tastes like ash.

Father reads the paper, eyes unmoving. Mother stands to pace the room, teacup and saucer in hand. I stare at the pumpkin biscuit on my plate.

The Notts were taken yesterday. And the Goyles. Pansy's father. Pansy was probably taken in for questioning, but I know they won't find any Unforgivables from her wand inspection. She'll be released quickly.

"Why did they wait?" Mother whispers. "Why haven't they taken us yet?"

"To see if we would run," Father replies, and turns the page.

I wish we had. Years back. I wish I'd been sent to Durmstrang like Father wanted.

"Remember," he says, "you may ask for a member of the Wizengamot present while you are questioned." He lifts his teacup. "The Auror's Office must abide by your request. I highly recommend –"

"Thank you, Lucius," Mother says, eyes trained out the window. "But I'm quite done with your 'recommendations.'"

A *crack.*

Hix, one of the grounds elves pops into the room.

"Master Malfoy," he squeaks, eyes wide. "They are here."

Father closes his paper. Mother finishes her tea, and grabs up her napkin, pressing the cloth to her lips.

I stare at my breakfast, and wonder if I will ever see this much food again.

"Maybe I don't want the new book after all."

And her eyes ignite, her lips spit at me, her skin is on fire. She shoves the bag into my chest with the same strength I felt against my cheek all those years ago. I don't even listen to her words as she scolds me, condescends me. I watch her face and listen to her tone. And she's glorious. And intoxicating. And just as I've always wanted her.

She's done. She sucks in air, and the sound rattles me. I'm grateful for the counter between us. It keeps me from doing something incredibly stupid.

"There she is." It floats out of me like a prayer. She blinks, expecting me to hiss at her. I take the bag held against my chest, hoping to find her skin as it slides out of her grasp. I know I'm smirking at her, my eyes telling her too much, but I can't stop myself when I say, "Thought we lost you, Granger."

Her eyes wide and searching. Her cheeks bloom red. And I wonder if this is flirting. I wonder if she recognizes it. If I do.

I lift a brow at her questioning gaze. I push the mint between my lips, hoping it will bring her eyes to my mouth, and I leave before I ruin it. Before I do too much.

I swing the bag on my way out, and force myself not to look back at her. The sunlight splashes my face and as I squint against it, I try not to focus on how wrong that was. How stupid to let her get under my skin.

How will I ever get her back in her box now that she's out.

~*~

Sunday, January 7, 1996

I knock on the stone door. It's colder down here than in the Slytherin common room, and I pull my scarf around my neck.

"Yes?"

I push the door open to find Severus standing at a cauldron, sprinkling in lacewing flies.

"Mr. Malfoy," he greets me. He caps the ingredient flask, and sets the cauldron to stir. "How were your winter holidays?"

I shut the door behind me. I see my hand shake as I take it off the door.

"Excellent, Professor. How were yours?"

I turn to face him, and I let him look into my eyes. I swallow.

He reads me. Like a book. I let him see it all.

The morning I woke to my mother shaking my arm, telling me we have visitors. Her eyes wide and glassy, and she was trembling as she pulled clothes from my closet. The first time I heard his voice, high and slimy and like a song from a nightmare. The vision of my father on bended knee, before a cloaked figure.

"Ah. Young Draco Malfoy. At last we meet."

I twitch, and I see Severus press his lips together. He waves his hand and silences the room. He looks down at his desk.

"Have you taken the mark?"

"No," I croak. "Not yet."

Severus turns and faces his shelves. "What did it feel like to be in his presence? Were you shaking and terrified before him? Or was it a strange calmness."

"I wouldn't call it calmness –"

"Was your mind racing, or were you focused?" He snaps.

"More focused than scattered." I plant my feet and wait.

He sweeps in front of me, arms crossing like a bat. "And what is it that you are here for, Draco?"

I open my mouth to speak, but just stare at him, wanting him to just understand. He stares back.

"You told me you could help me—"

"Help you with what?" He stares into me. He's going to make me say it.

I took the winter break to clear my mind. No classes, no corridors, no shared meals. She wasn't there, invading my days. But I could still hear her. Just before I woke in the mornings, whispering exhilarating things into my ear to wake me up hard, or reading the History of Magic assignment to me in the evenings, just as my eyes were sliding off the pages. I tried not to think of her at night, tried to picture someone else as I pumped myself. But she always snaked her way in, just as I was close to finishing, and it would be her eyes looking up at me as I disappeared into her mouth, or her hands sliding around my shoulders. I tried to give up wanking for few days, to find some peace. Maybe a reset. I lasted four days before I gave in and let myself build a fantasy world around her, imagining her lips on mine and her hands on my face.

And then the next morning the Dark Lord was in my house. Like he knew. Like he had been summoned by the thoughts of her.

I look back to Severus. His eyes are blank. I want to learn to do that. I need to.

"I need you to teach me Occlumency." And it's like the stone sitting on my chest has been lifted.

Severus nods, and sweeps to the corner of his office. He begins rummaging through drawers.

"You are at an advantage, Draco, that you are able to clear your mind when you wish. There are several schools of Occlumency, and I believe you can master all of them with time. Your… family members," he says, and I know he means Bellatrix, who is escaping Azkaban as we speak according to father's conversation with the Dark Lord. "… are only capable of one discipline, rudimentary, but effective."

he wouldn't be dating. I mean, look at him. He's been idolized all week as an eligible bachelor. And she's... she's terribly beautiful. He's... Well, he's not mine to lose."

Ginny stared at her. "Of course," she said. "I just didn't want you to be... distracted."

Hermione nodded. "Thank you." She took the kettle back to kitchen and began pouring milk into her cup. "Besides," she called out to Ginny, "Maybe it's for the best if he does start to court her. It may help me."

"You're right. I'm so happy that you see it that way. And also," Ginny yelled over her shoulder, "it's good to know that he likes brunettes!"

Hermione snorted and took a sip from her cup, before realizing that she did not steep a teabag. She was drinking hot water with milk.

The next week was a blur. Apparently, the Wizarding world had no qualms about accused murderers anymore if they looked like Draco Malfoy. The Daily Prophet started running stories on Draco's social life, where he went in the evenings, who he was with. Rita Skeeter had developed quite a knack for guessing his schedule, and also a talent for comparing his hair to the golden tones of the gods.

Hermione woke every morning to an article on her bedside table, lovingly cut and placed by Ginny, until Friday morning when the table was bare. Hermione got out of bed and went to the kitchen to find Ginny reading the Prophet while stirring her cereal.

"Good morning," Ginny said.

"Good morning." Hermione grabbed a teacup from the shelf and went to the kettle. "Did the Daily Prophet get sick of printing information on Malfoy, or did you just get sick of cutting them out for me?"

"There was nothing today." Ginny's voice sounded strained. Hermione paused in pouring her water.

"Really?"

"Yep. Nothing."

Hermione rounded the corner of the kitchen and stood with her teacup in one hand and the kettle in the other. "What is it?"

Ginny looked up at her with wide eyes and a closed mouth smile. "What's what?"

"What's in the paper today?"

Ginny sighed and her whole body slumped. "I don't think you should see."

"That's ridiculous. What's in the paper today?"

Ginny frowned and flipped the page to the society section.

"DRACO MALFOY FINDS LOVE"

by Rita Skeeter

Hermione slowly set the kettle down before she dropped it. A picture of Draco entering a restaurant with a tall brunette with silky long hair stared back at her. He placed his hand very low on her back and guided her inside - due to the fact, Hermione could only hypothesize, that she did not possess the brain capacity to walk by herself. She smiled at him over her shoulder as she entered. She was stunning.

"I mean," Ginny started, "It's not love. They're clearly on a first date. I don't recognize her from Hogwarts, so they can't have been courting for very long —"

"I'm fine, Ginny." Hermione pulled the paper towards her to see if Rita Skeeter had identified the woman. Only the words "Bulgarian," "possible model," and "Durmstrang" jumped out to her. Hermione tore her eyes from the picture and looked up at Ginny. "It's stupid to think that

He turns and he has in his hands a book and an object wrapped in a cloth. "You will return here on Tuesday evening," he continues, walking to me. "You will start with basics, like clearing the mind and wall building." He hands me the book. "You will read the first seven chapters of this text by the time we meet on Tuesday." I take the book from him, trying to wrap my head around the idea of these lessons on top of normal schoolwork. "Since you are in a position to clear your mind at will, we will begin with the basic pillars of the craft, and build up until you are ready to advance to the more useful concepts, those not found in any book."

As I'm wondering how Severus was able to master a concept not found in any book, he extends the object wrapped in cloth to me. He continues, "Until that time, keep this in a safe place."

I look up at him. "What is it?" I take it from him, and peel back the dusty cloth to find a jewelry box slightly larger than my hand, made of antiquated mirrors and framed in brass. It reminds me of something my mother has on her vanity table.

"This," he says, as I open the lid to find it empty, "will be Miss Granger's box."

She grabbed the first bag in drawer under "B." The parchment on top read *Goblin Wars: Fact or Fiction*.

"Oh, this is an excellent one!" She smiled brightly at the bag that held the book. "She hypothesizes that several of the Goblin Rebellions didn't actually take place, and that Wizards created the myths of them to keep the goblins repressed. It's fascinating, actually!" She looked up and was startled when she realized she was gushing to Draco Malfoy about a book. She took a breath. "Your mother has excellent taste in books."

"I'll be sure to let her know," he said. His expression was unreadable. Almost a cross between bored and amused, if possible.

"Right," she said. "Well, the purchase has been billed to your mother's account." She held the bag out for him. "You're all set."

He took the bag from her. "Why Cornerstone?"

The question stopped her. She opened her mouth, then closed it. Then said, "I believe it's because it's located at the corner of Diagon Alley and Hor-"

"I know why it's named Cornerstone." He rolled his eyes and Hermione's cheeks warmed. "Why are you working here and not Flourish and Blotts? I would have thought you'd love to help the First Years pick up their text books and buy their parchment. Host monthly Gilderoy Lockheart fan club meetings."

The idea that he'd spent any time in his entire life thinking about what she would prefer to do after Hogwarts, without laughing endlessly at her of course, had her pulse racing. She tried to look away from his eyes and could not.

"I suppose I like Cornerstone because it's more out of the way. Less likely to be recognized here." The presumption of being recognized sounded silly and arrogant once it was out of her mouth, and Hermione finally tore her eyes away from him and looked down at the desk. She wished he would just leave.

"I used to come here during the summers for the same reasons."

She looked at him. He was staring off over her left shoulder.

"I never saw you here," Hermione said.

He brought his eyes back to her and she wished he hadn't. "That was sort of the point, wasn't it?" he said.

She couldn't read his face. It was completely blank. Her tongue was dry, so she nodded. She watched his eyes rove over her face once before taking his bag and giving her a head tilt, that she supposed was to be a "goodbye" or a "thanks."

And then she got to watch him walk away.

in their right mind would be so disrespectful as to pull a book off a shelf, look at it, and then place it back on another shelf? Hermione had set up a "To Be Filed" basket in every section of the store, hoping that the customers would use it.

A few customers were milling about, some sitting and reading the first few chapters before deciding. Hermione returned to the register desk and began filing yesterday's receipts that Morty had left for her.

"I thought you worked for the Ministry." A voice drawled from the counter.

Hermione whipped around and her eyes popped out of her skull when she saw Draco Malfoy standing at the register. His hair had changed. It was neither slicked back like the early years, nor cropped short like sixth year, but something in between. He had locks of blonde falling over his forehead. He was still lean from Azkaban, but he had more color, if you could call it that. Her eyes passed over his clothes, noting that he had well-tailored grey robes on. He raised a brow at her and she found her voice.

"No. I mean - I mean yes, I do, but not on the weekends. On the weekends I work here."

Draco stared at her, then looked around the store. "Obviously," he said. Hermione's neck grew hot. "But why?"

She opened her mouth, but nothing came out. She'd been asked that question multiple times by her friends, by admirers who stumbled upon Cornerstone Books. She'd always been able to answer with little anecdotes like "to keep busy" or "I miss the Hogwarts library" or "I get a discount!" But all of these sounded foolish when talking to Draco Malfoy.

"It's a bookstore. I like books." Hermione could have jumped in front of the Knight Bus right then and there. The blush spread up her jaw and she felt a bead of sweat rolling down her back.

He puffed a tiny laugh that didn't reach his eyes. "I remember." He'd perfected condescension over the years, or else Hermione wouldn't know how to spot it. "I'm picking up a book."

Hermione was abruptly reminded that she worked in a bookstore. A silly thing to forget as it just so happened to be the silliest thing she had ever explained.

"Yes, of course!" That was too chipper. She corrected herself. "Did you have it reserved?" Hermione started moving towards the drawer that held the pre-reserved books. Usually only the wealthy clientele would call ahead to reserve, much preferring to not mix with the consumer rabble.

"It's under Black." Her eyes flicked up to him. He shifted his weight and said, "It's my mother's order."

Curious.

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Six

That following Monday was to be Draco's first day in the Auror office. Hermione rationalized that she hardly even saw Harry at work, so it stood to reason that she would not be seeing Draco during the day either. Ginny disagreed.

Monday morning arrived with Ginny waking her up an hour before normal time, rushing her to get into the shower, and then staring at her wet hair for twenty minutes with a comb while Hermione sipped her tea.

"Ginny, please don't go overboard. The likelihood of even seeing him today –"

"Is it more or less than him favoring the bookshop that you work at? Now sit still. I think I'm going to have to plait it."

Hermione yawned. Ginny ended up doing a rather nice job with her hair, braiding the hair at her temples and pulling it down into a side braid that lay on her right shoulder, but the minute she suggested makeup Hermione was out of the chair.

"Just mascara!" was Ginny's parting shot as Hermione slammed the door behind her on her way out.

Hermione came through the fire into the Ministry Atrium, and the first person she saw was Draco Malfoy. He was standing next to the new fountain that had been erected last year and Harry was with him. It took Hermione a few hurried steps to realize that the irritating voice ringing through the whole Atrium was Rita Skeeter, directing the two of them while her photographer ran in circles trying to capture their interaction.

Hermione kept her head down and watched them out of the corner of her eyes, veering left to the lifts. Skeeter's voice pierced the hall, asking for a handshake. Draco murmured something to Harry, and Harry smiled. This stopped her. Harry's smile broke into a small laugh. She stood there watching Harry and Draco chuckle, shaking their heads at something Harry said in

response. It was such an odd yet comfortable sight. She should have known she was standing still for too long.

"Miss Granger!"

Rita had spotted her. Her eyes were bright with excitement and possibility. Harry saw her over Draco's shoulder, giving her a look that said "run!"

Draco turned around. His eyes grazed her up and down before landing on her hair. Stupid Ginny.

"Miss Granger, what perfect timing!" Rita was fluttering over to her. She grabbed her arm and began dragging her over to the boys. "We would love to get a picture of you and Harry, welcoming Draco into the Ministry."

"Wouldn't Minister Shaklebolt be a better welcoming committee?" Hermione said. She was practically digging her heels in for the last few feet.

"Oh, no, no, no! Childhood rivals, now co-workers! Possibly friends! *That* is where the story is."

Rita placed her at Harry's right side and asked her to smile as they shook hands again. She must not have been smiling, because Rita certainly was not.

"Miss Granger," she reached for her. "Let me get a few words from you while the boys finish."

Hermione trudged forward, and Rita grabbed her shoulder, taking her a few steps away.

"Miss Granger," Rita began, and the Quick-Quotes Quill twitched over her shoulder. "How does it feel to have Draco Malfoy, long-time rival, and short-time Death Eater, working for the Ministry?"

Hermione swallowed and chose her words carefully. "I think Draco Malfoy is more than capable for the position. He had outstanding marks at Hogwarts and has always been very ambitious."

Rita's lips tightened. She tried again.

"Was it difficult for you, a victim of his abuse and hate for so many years, to see him this morning, in the Ministry Atrium, looking so at home?"

Hermione clenched her jaw and counted to five. "Draco Malfoy will fit in well with the Ministry. The Auror Office will be lucky to have him and —"

"Do you think the Ministry is the best place for a former Dark Wizard?"

"He was never a Dark Wizard!" Hermione forgot to count to five. "That, in fact, is an insult to Dark Wizards everywhere!"

The Quick-Quotes Quill tremored with joy as it scribbled, but Rita was very still, like a hawk who'd found its prey.

"Why did you speak at his trial, Miss Granger?"

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Four

A week had passed without another Daily Prophet picture of the Malfoy family. There were still articles hypothesizing on what Draco would do now, or if he would be visiting Lucius any time soon, but they were assigned to the middle pages of the prophet, probably not worth much without facts or a photo.

Hermione closed the paper and tucked it into the drawers next to the cash register. She was fortunate to have enough space at the U-shaped register desk to work on several things at once. She looked around the empty bookshop and breathed in her favorite scent: books. It was probably one of the main reasons she chose to ask for a part-time position at Cornerstone Books. The smell. Hermione missed the Hogwarts library more than her childhood home at times. It was the smell. It reminded her of fixing things, and the power of knowledge, and magic.

The front door squelched open, bringing a gust of wind, and her hair lifted off her neck before settling again. The positioning of Cornerstone Books on the corner of Diagon Alley and Horizont Alley was fortunate for marketability, but unfortunate for the wind tunnels and twisters created on the corner. Hermione patted her hair down and looked up to see the hag that always visited at 11AM on Saturdays. Hermione's heart fell when she realized it was only 11AM.

The hag glanced at Hermione as she scuttled to the back. Hermione chanced a smile but knew it was no use. The hag had never spoken or smiled, eerily reminding Hermione of Bathilda Bagshot – or more accurately, the corpse of Bathilda Bagshot. She had asked Morty about the hag early on, wondering if she should keep an eye out for missing books, but Morty insisted that the hag had been a loyal customer though she'd never bought a thing.

Hermione grabbed up the pile of books to be shelved and headed to the fiction section. She placed them in their rightful spots, rearranging a few misfiled titles in her work. Honestly, who

widened. He turned her around, keeping his hand over her mouth as her back landed against his front. She watched as Umbridge entered the room with the other Inquisitorial Squad members towing her friends. She tried to stomp the floor, kick the wall, anything so Harry wouldn't be dragged out of the fire by Umbridge's tiny hands, but then Draco's arm wrapped around her waist, fingers fanning over her hip bone, pulling her back to him. She felt electrified and terrified. He was so warm and firm behind her and his hand was so intimately placed. He had no idea, of course, that her heartbeat wasn't racing out of fear. Once Harry was pulled out of the fire, his wand flew through the air. Draco released her, shoved her into Milicent Bulstrode's arms, and caught Harry's wand before it hit the ground. Seeker reflexes. That was the extent of the moment, but it was enough to keep her awake some nights, dreaming and breathing.

Hermione took a breath and reached for the book with the grey spine, adding it to the pile of reserved requests.

"Are you back?"

Hermione turned to see Ginny staring at her. "Back?" she said.

"From the little trip you took?" Ginny smirked at her. Hermione chuckled and brought the books to the counter. Ginny stayed another half hour or so, but she dropped the subject of Draco Malfoy.

Hermione counted to five. "It was the right thing to do."

"And have you and Mr. Malfoy interacted since his trial? Have you met privately?"

"No," Hermione said. No point in going into details. "Now, do you have enough? I am supposed to be upstairs in five minutes."

"Of course!" Rita bubbled. "Bozo, that's enough!" she yelled to the photographer. Rita grabbed Hermione's arm and dragged her back. "Let me have a moment with Mr. Potter, and let's get some shots of Mr. Malfoy heading to the lifts! Miss Granger, why don't you escort him?" Rita's eyes were sparkling.

"I don't work on his floor," Hermione said. "It would make the most sense –"

"Come now Miss Granger." Rita shoved her toward Draco. "It's for the paper. It doesn't have to be true."

Hermione shook her head, huffing out a breath. She glanced at Draco, who was looking at her, and then started to walk toward the lifts. She could feel him at her right side, and she could hear his shoes clicking on the floor. Dragon leather.

"Look into each other! Smile! We need the profile shot!" Rita was screeching from twenty feet away and the bulb of the camera was shooting light through the whole Atrium every two seconds. Hermione refused to give her what she wanted and kept her eyes on the lifts as they approached.

Draco reached for the golden grilles of an arriving lift and stood to the side to let her go through first. Chivalry from Draco seemed so out of place that Hermione glanced at him. He was looking down at her. He lifted a brow. She stepped through and felt the ghost of his hand on her back, guiding her, just like he had for the Bulgarian model in the papers. Draco stepped in after her and began to shut the gate.

"Alright, now come back and we'll do that again!" Rita's voice rang from the fountain. Other Ministry employees, those who hadn't already noticed Draco Malfoy and scuttled away, began to avoid their lift as the photographer closed in on them. "Not quite what we were going for!"

Draco continued to close the gate.

"Come back! Reset!"

Hermione watched him as he made a show of looking around the lift box for the way to get out, and then turned toward the photographer and yelled out, "Sorry! It's my first day!" He grabbed a hanging rope just as the box started to pull them backward and out of sight. Hermione sighed in relief.

It was quiet as the lift ascended to Level 7. The voice announced the Department of Magical Games and Sports and several interoffice memos flew in. She needed to break the silence.

"If you find that Skeeter is being too much of a 'pest,' I find that a jar with an Unbreakable Charm usually does the trick." Hermione watched several memos fly out as they reached Level 6.

"How Slytherin of you."

She looked at him. He was leaning against the wall of the lift, having claimed his balance again. He was smirking at her. She felt like this was a compliment, coming from him. She looked away as the lift moved to the side, heading upwards to Level 5. There was almost a need to justify herself.

"I just…" She reached for the explanation, "…hate her." She shook her head and let out a nervous laugh. She looked at her shoes, which were quite sensible by Ginny's standards.

"Come now," he said, and she could hear the smirk in his voice. "I thought Hermione Granger left all her hate behind at Hogwarts."

"No, there's a special reserve," she said. "Only for Rita Skeeter and those who do not appreciate Lance Gainsworth."

She looked up at him, smiling. That was the closest he would ever get to an apology for her behavior at Cornerstone a few days earlier. She watched as his satisfied smirk morphed into a real grin.

The lift slowed to arrive at Level 5. He opened his mouth to say something.

"Granger!"

Hermione snapped her head to see Aiden O'Connor entering the lift with a huge dopey smile on his face.

"Perfect timing," he said. "I need you."

Hermione hid her grimace. He always had a way of being so blunt.

"Aiden. Good morning. You remember Draco Malfoy," Hermione said by way of introduction.

Aiden turned to see Draco leaning against the wall of the lift. Hermione noticed Draco's grin was gone. He stepped off of the wall and stood tall, reaching his hand out.

"Malfoy, of course," Aiden said. He took Draco's hand and smiled. Draco did not return the sentiment. "Aiden O'Connor. I was a year behind you lot at Hogwarts. It's good to have you here at the Ministry."

Hermione wished Skeeter was here for that. Aiden just gave her exactly what she was looking for all morning.

"Thank you," Malfoy said. They released hands. "And what do you do here, Aiden?"

"I'm on Level 4 with Granger here, working in the Beast division." Aiden nudged her arm with his elbow, a friendly move she'd never seen him perform.

Hermione felt the lift slow for Level 4 and she could hardly wait to jump out.

It did seem rather silly when Ginny laid it out for her. They had never kissed or made eyes at each other, or even had a conversation that didn't end in wand work. He had never given her any reason to believe he may feel the same way, but still she felt *some* way for him. And there was no way he could have known that.

There were little moments that she could cling to, moments she could smile at or moments that could keep her up at night. There was the way the light streaming from the window in McGonagall's classroom would hit him just right for seven minutes or so during the spring of their fifth year. From her position a row behind and several over, she was able to watch and wait for it. He would always get warm in that class too, being so close to the window, so she sometimes got to watch him shed his outer robes during class. Thankfully McGonagall trusted that she was always paying close attention and never asked her to repeat the lesson during those seven minutes.

There was the Yule Ball in Fourth Year when she had practiced several dances to be on the arm of a Tri-Wizard Tournament Champion, only to realize that Viktor couldn't lead her around the room any better than she could remember the steps. During the French Waltz, a clear homage to their guests from Beauxbatons, the partners would split and turn to the couple on either side of them to bow and curtsey, turning around them before returning to their original partner. Hermione had never practiced with other dancers, so when she turned to find herself face-to-face with Draco Malfoy when the partners split, she stopped breathing. Draco pursed his lips at her, but then bowed first, as custom in the dance. She watched his back straighten and the lines of his body remain taut as he returned to standing tall. She could feel his eyes on her as she bowed her head and then tucked her right leg behind her, praying not to fall over. As she straightened, she found him clenching his jaw at her, no doubt ready to comment on her poor balance. Instead he brought his right hand up to chest-height, palm facing her, and waited for her palm to meet his. She brought her hand up to his but refrained from touching him, afraid of what he might do. They kept about an inch between their hands as they stepped around each other in a circle. He held her eyes until the very last moment before Viktor was in front of her again, arms open for the next portion of the dance. She didn't see him again that night, but Lavender told her later that he and Pansy had left early.

And there was a moment that really shouldn't have been a moment after all, but Hermione really couldn't judge herself when hormones were involved, now could she? She was standing in Umbridge's office, waiting for Harry to finish with the Floo. He was talking to Kreacher through the fire and Hermione was so distracted by trying to figure out if Kreacher was lying that she did not hear the office door open or the whispered "*Expelliarmus!*" from Umbridge's tiny mouth. As her wand flew out of her hand she drew a breath to warn Harry, turning to see Draco there as he clamped a hand over her mouth. He smirked at her in triumph as her eyes

"Oh, yes." She shoots me a glare and I keep my eyes on hers. "You could even say that I have the exact same opinion."

This does make me smile and I step away from the table before I begin laughing. I down what's left in my glass and head to the bar, thinking of her empty Butterbeer glass. The bartender is swamped. It's much more crowded than before. I'm almost to the front of the line when I glance back at the table and see that she's finally gotten herself a fucking chair, but now she's talking to no one, looking down at the table and trying to be interested in what Potter and Goldstein are discussing.

I order a firewhisky for me, and I order a Butterbeer before I can stop myself. I turn back and when the crowd parts, someone's taking the stool next to her. She's turning to face him with a small smile.

It's O'Connor. And I feel my molars grind together.

She looks uncomfortable though. Maybe he's not supposed to approach her in public.

I continue to them. I still need to repay her a drink. I refuse to owe her any favors.

Timing always was my strong suit, and this is no exception when she tries to take a sip from her empty glass and O'Connor says, "Let me get you another drink."

I slip her Butterbeer between them. Standing tall as I can, but still looking up at O'Connor's dopey face.

"O'Connor, wasn't it?"

"Yes. Malfoy, good to see you," he says, and he actually looks like he means it. He shakes my hand. "How was your first week?"

"Excellent, thank you."

I wait for him to invite me to join them, to claim her and allow my presence. But he excuses himself. Perhaps… they weren't…

He touches her shoulder gently as he leaves, and I have to tear my eyes away from the spot, watching his retreating back as he heads to the bar. He greets someone exuberantly, with a loud noise and a louder gesture.

A small "thank you" brings me back to her, and she's nodding at the Butterbeer. With as much confidence as I can gather, I take the seat next to her, facing her.

"He reminds me of Weasley." It's out of my mouth before I can stop it. And I blame the firewhisky.

This brings her eyes to me at least. She's in the middle of sipping from her glass. Her eyes are wide and round as she brings the glass down.

"Ron?"

"No, the mother," I quip. "Yes, Ron." The syllable in my mouth is foul.

I watch as she turns to look at Aiden, like she's expecting to find him with red hair today.

"Is it the way he smiles and shakes your hand that brings up memories of Ron?" She turns back to me and sends me a small grin. Like we have a private joke.

"That must be it."

"You seem to be fitting in with the Gryffindors quite nicely," she says, voicing all my concerns.

"Well, Goldstein is a Ravenclaw, so we cling to each other whenever anyone tries to run into a burning building to save kittens."

I watch as she smiles into her Butterbeer. A real smile. And I'm forgetting why I've stayed away from her all week.

"I would have thought you'd be saving house-elves, not studying dragons."

That's why. I squeeze my glass, feeling my ring scrape along the side of it while she stares at me, her eyes dancing over my face. It's too intimate. To know these details.

She has Butterbeer foam on her lips, and just as I notice it her pink tongue peaks through her lips to clean it off, then disappears back into her mouth. It's almost obscene. If she had any idea what she was doing.

I feel my chest heat, and I swallow as she looks past me, talking to some point over my shoulder. She says some drivel about wanting to work with the house-elves *eventually,* and I say, "Shouldn't they be bending over backwards to give you whatever position you desire? Or did you forget to put 'Golden Trio' on your resume?"

She looks down at her hands. "I actually submitted under a false name."

I squint at her. "And why was that?"

Her eyes are glassy when she looks up at me, and I wonder how much of this conversation is due to her loose tongue. I watch as she takes in my face, and then a deep breath in, like she's stopped breathing.

"I didn't really want to be handed anything after the war," she says. She looks away from me, and I wonder what it is just past my shoulder that she's looking at. "I wanted to earn my position based on merit and not on who I befriended as a First Year."

She smiles into her glass. Shy. Like she's done something wrong. Like she doesn't want to be looked at. I frown.

I think of the girl who conned Umbridge out of her office and into a forest of angry centaurs, the girl who dragged Goyle up onto her broomstick as the Fiendfyre licked her heels, the girl who campaigned to free the house-elves, who discovered the monster in Slytherin's chamber, who slapped me with hot eyes and hissed against my face – and a blue dress spinning.

She looks up at me cautiously, like she's forgotten who she is.

"You think that's why they call you the Golden Girl? Because Potter and Weasel allowed you into their club?"

Her eyes are deep as she watches me, her breath short. Do I really need to explain it to her, of all people?

And suddenly her eyes flit to my mouth. And I feel the air leave my chest slowly.

"Hey Granger!"

She's taken from me as O'Connor tries to pull her to him. I watch her blink, eyes hazy, and yell to him across the bar. I watch her turn down his offer, and her cheeks are pink. I'm thinking of her hair pulled back and the makeup on her eyes when O'Connor yells to her about "next time."

Was it for him? The hair, the makeup. Like it had been for Weasley and Krum, and even McLaggen.

She watches O'Connor leave, bringing her glass to her lips. My neck is hot and I speak without thinking.

"How long have you been seeing him?"

She jerks to look at me. "What?"

I feel the alcohol sloshing through the cracks in my brick wall.

"O'Connor," I say. "You're together?" And I drink more to forget that I'm drunk.

Her eyes pop open, like she's been caught. She opens her mouth and squeaks and Potter's voice cuts her off.

"Hey, Ginny and I are going to head out. Hermione, did you want to stay or side-along with us?" Potter asks.

She looks back and forth between the two of us for a moment. I can't be trusted alone with her.

"I'm about to head out too," I say. I glance at her wide eyes and slack jaw and I say, "She should side-along with you, Potter. She shouldn't be Apparating anywhere."

She frowns, and tries to prove her sobriety by falling off the stool. It's precious. I grasp her elbow before she falls, and only when she realizes it, do I let go. I have to separate from her before I do something awful. Like reach for her curls.

Potter's confirming with me about Quidditch tomorrow, and she's blushing red, looking a bit lost, and I wonder why she didn't go with O'Connor, come to think of it.

"Looking forward to it, Potter," I say. And she looks up at me with her dark eyes.

"Goodnight, Draco," she whispers.

And it sounds better on her lips than it ever did from my imagination, from my cell in Azkaban as I drifted off, or in my four-poster bed as my hand wandered down my stomach.

She blinks her eyelashes at me and turns to let Potter lead her out. He waves back and I nod. When the door closes behind them, I breathe.

I should scoff and tilt my nose in the air and tell them I have better things to do than to play amateur Quidditch with them.

And instead I'm asking if they have a Seeker.

Granger is moving back to her perch near the wall, and I think it's because the subject is Quidditch, but I can still feel her eyes on me as Potter offers me the third Chaser position.

"…If Katie's out then we'll need a third, with me and Ginny."

I turn my head to Weasley, and my gaze is that much closer to landing on her, leaning against the wall, holding her Butterbeer like a weapon.

"And how did you manage to make the D.M.L.E. team if you are not a D.M.L.E. officer?" I ask. I'm wondering if this light banter between the Weasley girl and me will last.

She simply smirks at me again, and says "Dating Harry Potter has its perks."

She was an incorrigible flirt back at Hogwarts, too. And here she is, on the arm of the most famous boy in the wizarding world, and she's smirking at me like she's testing me.

And I feel Granger's eyes on me, and I wonder if I can keep them there.

"I'll have to try it sometime."

I smirk. The Weasley girl smirks back. The table chuckles, and snorts, and her eyes are still on me, where they belong. And I don't dare look at her. I'll break whatever spell she's under now.

Potter starts giving me details on Quidditch. He's the team captain – of course – and he throws out a few plays that the D.M.L.E. team is fond of. Granger is still standing next to the Weasley girl and *will no one get her a fucking chair* and I hear Goldstein ask her about her job, ask her for book recommendations for his mother.

And I can't help myself.

"She should try the *Undesirable* series."

I glance at her and she's glaring at me. I smirk back.

"It's really quite crafty. It's seven novels, all different perspectives on the same moments. Some would say that it's tedious that way, but Gainsworth manages to keep it interesting, revealing new information each time the scene is revisited."

As I speak her eyes ignite and a blush spreads up her jaw. I notice just then she's wearing makeup of some kind on her eyes.

"Okay, thanks," Goldstein says. "And it's by…?"

I open my mouth but she beats me to it.

"Lance Gainsworth."

I sip from my glass to keep from smiling. I see that hers is almost empty.

"And you agree, Hermione?" Anthony says to her.

I nod, and in my peripheral vision I see Granger push her hair over her shoulder. My hand twitches around my glass.

I try to concentrate on what Potter is saying. After ten more minutes of this – and she is still standing at the table like she doesn't even want a chair – I see the Weasley girl lean down and whisper something into her ear. She jumps and then blushes. I look away as the color creeps up her neck and focus again on Potter. She slips out and disappears. I feel like I can breathe again.

"—to discuss it on Monday with Robards—"

"I have to say, this is exactly what I thought lounging in the Gryffindor common room would be like," I cut off Potter. "'Let's all sit around and talk about what the last eight hours were like for us.'"

Potter grins, and Bell and Goldstein laugh.

"Not all of us spent the evening hours on our hair, Malfoy," the Weasley says, with a smirk to rival my own.

As the table chuckles, I grin back at her. "Clearly. From the way Potter's sticks out at all ends."

Potter reaches up to flatten his hair down. "It's getting better, isn't it?"

"Of course it is, sweetie," Weasley says. She pulls a face, and the table laughs again.

I'm still grinning when a full firewhisky glass slides into my hand. I look up and Granger has brought us another round. Me, included. Like I'm one of her friends. She's gathering the empty glasses, standing next to Bell at the head of the table, and she's right there next to me.

And like always, she's avoiding my eyes.

And I do something stupid.

"After you're done liberating the dragons and the centaurs, Granger, you should consider a career in waiting tables."

And she looks up at me. And I realize the comment has lacked a compliment or an insult. It is simply nothing. But she's searching me for the something.

And the ginger cuts in, with some comment about Granger's clumsiness – a trait I've never seen – and it's like the Weasley girl just saved us both from I don't know what.

She's still standing close to me when Bell announces that she's going to have a baby. And I'm trying not to watch Granger as she reacts. Thankfully my focus is pulled when Bell mentions Quidditch.

"There's an interdepartmental Quidditch league at the Ministry?" I ask. And silence. And I realize I'm not invited.

Potter clears his throat to deliver the news, or lie, or let me down easy, and he says, "Yes, we formed it just a few months back. You game, Malfoy?"

As the sound of her voice saying my given name bounces around my head, I wonder what would happen if I didn't bring my walls back up.

~*~

Saturday, September 18, 1999

Getting back into an organized sport was a dream. Even with Potter at the lead. Even with a slight headache from the firewhisky.

I tried to be a "team player" all morning, listening to Potter's plays and assisting the Weasley girl to score instead of taking the Quaffle all the way myself. They even invited me to catch a drink after practice with the team, but I had to decline.

I'm headed back to Azkaban today to see my father.

I push the hair back from my brow, slicking it like he always taught me. It looks odd in the mirror after wearing it loose for the past few weeks. I can see my whole forehead.

Mother has been hovering all morning, and although I appreciate the tea, and the scones, and the fixing of my collar, I eventually snap at her to leave me alone.

I flip open the folio on the bathroom sink. I stare down at the pages, and look up into the mirror, practicing what my facial expressions will be.

"It's a kind of consulting firm, Father," I whisper. I grimace. I shake my head and look directly into my eyes in the mirror. "I'm starting a business. I need my inheritance." I squint at myself. No, no. Play to his weaknesses. "I'd like to start a business. In the Malfoy name. But I need your help, Father."

I close my eyes and think of bricks and stones, and mortar and cement, and I open my eyes to find them blank. In the far right corner of my mind I close the lid on a brass-lined jewelry box.

A stray hair is out of place. I dip the comb back in the gel.

I'm pacing the library at 3:42. Mother peaks in the doors.

"Do you need anything, Draco?"

"No," I bark. "Thank you," I say softer.

She nods, and stands there. "Remember, the money is yours, Draco. It's just the timetable that you are negotiating."

"I know, Mother." I cross back to the chairs, then turning on my heel and to the fireplace again. The timetable, and the marital stipulations.

"Skeeter will get a picture of you leaving. Says she wants to spin it into a piece about your bachelorhood."

I stop in my pacing. "How so?"

"Your inheritance, released to you without a wife. You'd be quite desirable."

I laugh. "That's the least of my concerns."

My wand buzzes in my pocket, letting me know it's 3:45. I grab the folio, my hands slipping on the leather. I nod at her and toss the Floo powder into the fireplace.

I step through and a familiar smell assaults me. Azkaban.

A guard greets me, scowling. I don't recognize him from my time here, but I'm sure he knows exactly who I am. He is rougher with my belongings than he needs to be, but after a thorough examination of the folio, we are walking down a familiar hall. The visitation cells.

He pulls the door for me, and I take a breath before stepping in.

He's got his back to me. He's standing on the other side of the table, facing away, like he's examining something out a window, but there are no windows. A power play.

He turns once the door is closed. His eyes land on me, and he gives an honest smile.

"Hello, Draco."

"Father." My voice is strong. I wonder if we hug. Or shake hands. Instead I do nothing.

"Please, have a seat." Ever the generous host.

I pull the metal chair and sit, placing the folio on the table. He eyes it but says nothing.

"How have you been?" I ask.

"Oh, the same. How do you feel?" he says. "Being out?"

"Some days it feels the same," I answer honestly. His face is kind. And I remember that I haven't seen him in a year and a half. He hasn't wrinkled at all. "Mother sends her regards."

"Yes, the same to her," he says. "I am so glad you chose to come see me on this visit, Draco. As much as I appreciate seeing your mother, of course."

"Of course. It's been too long." I lie.

"But, I feel like you have another motive?" His eyes slide down to the folio.

"You could say that." I smile lightly. I lean forward in my chair. "As you must know, I started work at the Ministry this week." He nods, and I carry on. "And although it is obviously a probationary job, it's been enough for me to know that I don't want to work as a dreg for the rest of my life." I check in with him. "*Malfoys* don't file reports." He lifts a brow in approval. I clear my throat. "I'll be done there on December 10th, and I've been thinking about what I'd like to do after. Being sedentary in Azkaban has given me quite a drive to achieve, to strive for something." I look him in the eye, the facial expression I've practiced. "I'd like to start a business. In the Malfoy name. But I need your help, Father."

His eyes turn on the folio, and he settles back in his chair.

"A business."

"Yes," I say. "A consulting firm. Malfoy Consulting Group. I want to rehabilitate our family's image and start to make a name for myself in the world." I reach for the leather folio, gripping it in my hands like a shield. "I have mission statements, business models, financial analyses and other paperwork here."

We walk over together, like a band of brothers, like a group of friends. Katie Bell is with us, and even she is asking me about my first week, about my mother.

Bloody Gryffindors.

Potter, true to his word, won't let me near the bar to pay for my own drink, so I'm stuck with Goldstein and Bell for a few minutes.

They're nice enough. They grab a high-top table against the wall as we wait for Potter, and they talk about the case at work, which is odd because I thought the point of getting together outside the office would be to *not* talk about the office, but I guess I still have a lot to learn about co-worker dynamics.

When Potter returns, he sits across from me. After fifteen minutes or so, Bell suddenly waves to someone and runs away faster than I can blink. It's getting crowded here, and I wonder if it will only get more impacted the longer the night goes on. I take a deep breath.

Bell returns with the female Weasley, who claims the chair next to Potter, sending me an odd smile in greeting. She's never smiled at me before.

And before I can do something insipid, like wave, Granger appears over her shoulder, saying hello to Potter, her presence small. She's done something to her hair again. I see Goldstein raise a hand to wave at her as he continues on about the Borisov and Dimov families, and she looks up and smiles quickly. She leans against the wall next to Weasley's chair.

Does she not want a chair? Is she not staying long? She's the Brightest Witch of Our Age, why are there not chairs immediately available for her?

I take a long drink from my glass, fingers beginning to itch.

I've done a fine job of avoiding her all week. We came through the fireplaces at the same time on Wednesday, and I managed to walk at the perfect pace to the lifts so that she got there first and completely missed me. I've had to drop my walls all week, meeting new people, apologizing to old people. Interacting with her without my mental defenses would not have been… advisable.

She's watching Goldstein intently as he speaks. And I wonder if keeping her eyes off of me is an active choice, or if I really do not warrant a hello.

"Surely, the Scandinavian Minister of Magic will deal with them?" Bell offers.

"Not likely," I say, chiming in for the first time since she sat down. I feel all eyes turn on me. All but one pair. "The Minster's sister has been married off to Dimitri Borisov's older brother. The families are very close."

I hear Bell groan, shaking her head.

"So, if they are turned over to their own government, they won't be punished?" Goldstein confirms.

"I couldn't agree more," I say.

~*~

Friday, September 17, 1999

"Merlin's Balls, it's been a long week."

I look up from stirring my tea to find Anthony Goldstein pulling a teacup from the cupboard. I nod in solidarity.

"Did you see the memo on the Durmstrang families?" Goldstein asks.

"No, not yet. I've been in the conference room."

"It's confirmed that it's Borisov and Dimov." He tips his cup at me. "You were right. Good call, Malfoy."

I suppress a smirk, and settle for nodding my head at him again.

"Malfoy." A new voice at the kitchenette entrance. I turn and it's Potter. "Do you have those reports on the Borisov and Dimov families? Turns out you were right."

I bring a hand to cup my ear. "Sorry, I missed that last part, Potter?"

He frowns and places his hands in his pockets. "I never said it wasn't them, I just said we should have reports on all possible Bulgarian families –"

"Hmm?" I'm leaning towards him, like I'm hard of hearing.

He sighs. "I said, 'you were right.'"

"Oh, splendid." I turn back to my tea, stirring in the last of the honey. "Yes, the Borisov and Dimov reports are finished. In the conference room."

"You don't think Robards is going to have us stay past five, do you?" Goldstein whines. "I really need that drink."

"No, it can't be that pressing. It can wait 'til Monday." Potter hovers in the doorway and I glance at him. He's watching me fix my tea with an odd look on his face.

"Brilliant," Goldstein mutters. "Still that pub down the street?"

"Er, yes." Potter looks up at me. "Would you want to join us, Malfoy?"

I blink. I haven't listened to hardly a word they've said. "Where?"

"Er… A small group of us is heading to the pub on the corner after work. Just a few people from the office."

I open my mouth to decline. To make some excuse about having far more interesting plans for a Friday evening. To possibly bite back about not wanting to spend any more time with them than necessary.

"First round's on me?" Potter says. Hands still in his pockets like some five-year-old. His brows are lifted. And I'm thinking of Madame Malkins again, and my hand outstretched to him on the train to Hogwarts when I say yes.

I start to flip it open.

"And you will need your inheritance," he says.

I look up at him. I focus on stillness, on my bricks.

"Yes, that is part of it."

He presses his lips together. He folds his hands on the table. "This is all very well thought out, Draco. I'm quite taken by surprise." He smiles and it doesn't reach his eyes. "You must have been planning this for some time."

I nod. "I'm sure I don't have to tell *you* that one needs to find ways to keep occupied in Azkaban." I grin.

He nods at the table. His thumbs spin around each other. He stands smoothly.

"This is all very impressive." He strolls around his chair and looks back at the blank wall. "And I'm inclined to help you." My pulse jumps. He turns and leans his arms on the back of the chair. "But you'll have to decide what you want more, Draco." He levels his eyes on me, and I feel quite young. "This business, or your Mudblood."

He blinks at me calmly.

I remain still, my breathing even – a technique I learned from him. The bile rises in my throat at the thought of him knowing about her. And I swallow involuntarily.

He sees it. And smiles.

There's no point in game-playing, asking him to clarify, asking him "which Mudblood."

The brass-lined jewelry box rattles.

"Don't blame your grandmother for tattling, Draco. She was quite concerned after your little lunch with her." He stands tall and starts a slow pace around the table. "She came to me, asking me to take pity on your circumstances. Telling me all about how difficult it was for her to lose Andromeda." The name is hissed next to my ear as he moves behind me. "I was quite confused," he chuckles, and I resist the urge to crack my neck. "*My son?* Running off with a *Muggle-born?"* He curves his path around my back. I don't trust myself to correct him. "*My son?* Jeopardizing his inheritance, his livelihood, for a Mudblood." He appears over my left shoulder, stopping there, like he wants me to look up at him. "And then I hear whispers of this… Auction. Certain numbers are being tossed out." He pauses, like I'm supposed to react. "And a few short months later, there she is, writhing on our drawing room floor. And there *you* are… weak for her."

I hear the echo of her scream against the fireplace. My eye twitches and he sees it. He comes around the table, taking his chair again.

"After all that time with Severus behind my back, I was quite surprised to see your emotions get the best of you."

I meet his eyes. I feel him press against my walls, but I'm confident in my abilities. I see the moment he knows he can't get in. And then he grins slowly at me, like some jungle cat.

"It's a shame Voldemort did not win, you know." He looks into me. "I would have loved to have tasted her."

My eye twitches. My knee bounces once.

"And I see you prepared for the possibility that she was untouched." He nods at me, approving of me. "I probably would have let you keep her, Draco. Provided you let me have her first."

My fingers squeeze around the portfolio.

"Don't worry, son. I would have repaid your 5,000 galleons in return."

My shoulders snap and I hurl the folio at his head. He bats it away before it hits him and I stand, facing the back wall. I press the heels of my hands into my eyes. He couldn't get past my walls, so he found another way.

"You're out of practice, Draco! It used to be harder to break you." He chuckles, like we're playing a game I know the rules to. "I really only had one more in me. Something along the lines of 'do you think she'll ever moan for you after she's screamed for me?'"

"Enough." I shake out my shoulders and turn to find him grinning at me. "I've come to discuss my future, not the past."

"She came to speak at your trial. How did that make you feel?" He tilts his head to the side.

"In the portfolio, you will find alternative business models, if you don't prefer the first—"

"And now you work together at the Ministry. Do you get to see her often?"

"This meeting isn't about her, it's about the business—"

"No, it's about the inheritance. Which has to do with her."

I take a shaky breath, and look at the ground. A sure sign of defeat. The jewelry box lid has cracked open.

"What's to say you don't run off with her once the money is in your accounts. How will I be able to guarantee the sanctity of my line, once I have signed away the money?"

"That's not going to happen—"

"Why not? You almost threw it all away before—"

"Because rebuilding my reputation - this family's reputation - is more important. Distancing myself as much as possible from *you* is more important to me."

I watch as he remains still. *Still as the grave,* he used to tell me.

"I'll need something more, Draco." His mouth opens, his tongue flaps, but otherwise still. "Something you need to hear as well." He sits forward, lecturing me as a six-year-old. "Why can't you just run off with her?"

Wide eyes flicker through my mind. Looking at me over a Butterbeer glass, over a ledger book. Consuming me, running over my face, my lips, my hair. Her lips parting whenever she can't breathe, whenever I look at her. The whisper of "goodnight, Draco" caressing my ear.

"What about you?" he says. "I'm sure with your 'Malfoy sensitivities,' you had her in your four-poster, candles lit, rose petals on the sheets…" He's grinning at me, shaking his head.

"No candles or roses, but yes." I roll my eyes at him, and I wonder how he's so at ease talking about this in public. I've been trying to keep that night off my mind for the past few days, and I wonder, if Blaise is able to speak so freely… perhaps there *is* some kind of conservative view that's been ingrained in me that makes me hesitant. "But I'll have to try the broom closet next time," I try.

"They don't take *appointments* there," he says. "You'll have to try being spontaneous for once."

"I'm spontaneous," I huff. I think of the conversations I overhear at Quidditch practice, between Marcus and other boys. I realize I've joined their "club." I know things now, and I have things to contribute.

"How long did you last?" he asks.

I glare at him, knowing what he's insinuating. "Hours," I say drily.

"Yeah, me neither." He grins. "I tried to get her off first, but it was taking too long." He sits back in his chair, and I try to forget that this is Daphne we're talking about. "You?"

I try to imitate his nonchalance. I smirk. "Yeah, once we got going I wasn't thinking much about her."

The double meaning hits me so hard that I feel the smirk slapped off my face. I see wide eyes underneath me instead of Pansy's deep-set pair, my face buried in curls instead of Pansy's bare neck. I blink, and take a breath, and look back up at him.

He's watching me. His eyes are tight. He takes a breath and says, "Do you know anyone with the password to the prefects' bath? I'd love to try it in water." And I feel like he's changed the subject. Purposefully.

We chat a bit back and forth, and I'm relaxing into this comradery, this brotherhood. He brings up a few sixth years who broke up at the Yule Ball, and jokes that I had a vastly better evening than them.

I smile.

"Granger was blubbering all over the place that night."

My eyes snap to him. "Why?" I regret it as soon as it leaves me.

He shrugs. "Dunno. Some fight with Weasley." His gaze comes back to me. "Or maybe Krum got fresh with her."

I swallow, and I feel the muscles in my jaw tighten. I smile lightly.

"He's an idiot for taking the Mudblood in the first place – to think she'd give him anything in return."

"Yeah." He stares at me. "Such a stupid thing. To fall for a Mudblood. Especially her."

His eyes are black and on me. I wish we were talking about sex in broom closets again.

"Of course. Excellent idea, Mother."

I look back down at the paper and there's my hand on her back again.

"The renovations will begin this weekend," she says. I glance at her again, her eyes back on the paper. "I've hired elves."

"Wonderful."

A *pop* and Mippy is there, holding a letter. "This arrived for you, sir."

I'm still trying to get used to Mippy calling me "sir." I thank her and find a familiar wax seal on the envelope. My lips twitch, and I smile when I pull out a short note and the clipping of Potter and me shaking hands.

Merlin, Draco. Didn't know how hard pressed you were for friends. I'm on my way.

BZ

I'm grinning down at the page. He's drawn some rather inappropriate pictures on Potter's face.

~*~

Tuesday, December 27, 1994

"I owe you a thank you, Draco."

I look up from my book through tired eyes to see Blaise flopping down into the armchair across from me. The fire is almost out in the common room.

"Oh, really?"

"Mm-hmm," he hums. "It seems that Daphne and Pansy have some sort of rivalry going right now – some 'girl thing' –" He waves his hand, like a fly has gotten in his way. "Anyway, let's just say that Pansy likes to brag, and Daphne won't be out done."

He grins at me, a secret smirk.

I blink at him. "Okay…"

"You and Pansy shagged after the Yule Ball, yes?" He spells it out for me. I feel heat on my neck.

"Oh, er…" I look around, finding no one listening. "Yes."

"Daphne told me that piece yesterday. Right before she pulled me into a broom closet." He smirks.

"Oh," I say, finally understanding. "Good on you, mate." I frown. "A broom closet?"

He nods at me, then leans forward in his chair, elbows on his knees. "Yeah, you have to try it," he says. "It was wild."

He continues. He talks about knocking the equipment over until they found a bare wall, silencing the closet, finding the best position. I keep checking the rest of the common room, making sure no one is overhearing.

It wasn't enough to pin a dream on.

"Because she wouldn't have me."

He checks my eyes, back and forth. He sits back, looks to the side, and places his thumb against his lips, thinking.

"When will operations begin?" he says. My heart beats.

"January 1st."

"And when will you announce?"

"November."

He nods at the table. "You can't begin operations January 1st."

I blink at him. "Why? It's a new millennium. Perfect marketing and visibility."

"Your mother's New Year's Eve party. It should be your launch party."

I open my mouth to argue. I close it.

"You can *open* on January 1st," he says, "continue lining up clients, lining up employees. But you won't be able to begin operating until February at the earliest."

I nod. His eyes pass over me, examining my expression, my tension. He looks to the side.

"I will release a *portion* of your inheritance to you, for start-up," he says. I clench my jaw, counting my blessings. "The rest to be released January 1st."

"Contingent on what?" I ask. There's always a catch.

"Contingent on nothing, Draco," he sings. "I just want to make sure that you're truly serious about this business." He leans back. "It's an awful lot of money. I'd hate to see it… go to waste."

Like before. When I almost traded it for her.

This business, or your Mudblood.

I swallow. He sees it. I circle back. "And what am I expected to do with this 'portion.'"

"Why, Draco," he says. "You won't need *all* of the inheritance to secure your office space, your legal counsel, and to begin socializing with potential investors, partners, and employees." His eyes twinkle and I know that he's won. "And I won't be stingy. For this start-up, I will release, oh, say…" His eyes dance on the ceiling, as if he's calculating. Then grey eyes pierce me. "…35,000 galleons."

My eye twitches. The corner of his mouth turns up.

"Yes, father."

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Five

Tuesday, September 14, 1999

"He was never a Dark Wizard."

It screams at me from the thin pages of the *Prophet*, and I feel the paper crumple against my fingers.

"He was never a Dark Wizard."

-Hermione Granger, Brightest Witch of Our Age

When asked for her thoughts on her old classmate, Hermione Granger assured us that Mr. Malfoy is fully capable. With the gleam of infatuation in her eyes, she told yours truly all about how ambitious and intelligent she finds Mr. Malfoy, and how well she thinks he'll fit in.

And who could blame her! Mr. Malfoy started his first day at the Ministry in well-tailored grey robes…

I squint down at the pages, trying to figure out where Skeeter has embellished the interview as she always does.

"He was never a Dark Wizard."

She has too much faith in me, that's for sure.

I blink away and grin at the picture of my handshake with Potter, counting the people who will have a heart attack at seeing this. But my eyes are drawn back to my hand on her back, her eyes staring up at me as I usher her into the lift.

I swallow. Our first picture together. I shake my head. Our *only* picture together, I'm sure.

"Rita did a lovely job, didn't she?"

I look up and my mother is reading the same paper over her morning tea.

"Yes," I say.

"You should send her a note, letting her know how grateful you are."

I look up at her, and she's eyeing me.

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Seven

Hermione survived the rest of the week without running into Draco. Not in the lifts, not at the café, not in the Atrium on the way in. She didn't let Ginny do her hair again. She'd told her "the wrong person noticed," which had gotten Ginny into quite a tizzy trying to figure out what she meant by that.

Friday rolled around and Hermione was glad to see the clock tick toward five o'clock. Sometimes Harry and a few other Aurors would head to a pub after work on Fridays, and Harry had invited her today. She didn't really drink, but a Butterbeer sounded wonderful about now.

It was 4:42 when Hermione heard footsteps coming by her cubicle. She looked up to see Harry round the corner. He was breathing hard, like he'd run.

"Harry," she said. "What is it?"

"I've made a mistake," he said. He ran his hand through his hair and shifted his glasses on his face. Hermione felt a tightness in her chest that she hadn't felt for almost two years.

"What's wrong?"

Ginny rounded the corner, also out of breath.

"Ginny! Is everything okay?"

"It will be!" She grinned. Things must not be that dire if Ginny was grinning.

"I, er…" Harry began. He lowered his voice. "I was talking with some of my team about going out to the pub tonight, and Malfoy was a few feet away."

Ginny was pulling a comb and pins out of her purse. Hermione stared at her, uncomprehending.

"And," Harry continued. "I said 'Hey Malfoy, if you're not busy after work…'"

As Ginny started tugging on Hermione's hair, she suddenly understood.

"We've got it, Potter. You can go," Ginny said, spinning Hermione's chair around.

"Wha—?" Hermione tried.

"Again, really sorry, Hermione," Harry said. He walked back to the lifts.

Ginny tugged on her hair to get her to face forward.

"We'll try something different this time, yeah?" Ginny said.

"Ginny, stop." Hermione turned in her chair. "You don't need to do this. I'll be fine."

"Listen up, Granger." Ginny leaned down and placed her hands on Hermione's armrests, bringing her face level with hers. "You have to try. There's no harm in trying."

"There's something to be said for 'trying' too hard," Hermione said. A thought hit her. "Did Harry call you?"

Ginny nodded. "He popped through the floo, said, 'I've just made a horrible mistake, I've invited Malfoy out with us tonight,' and I told him to go tell you and I'd be right there."

Hermione didn't know whether to be comforted that she had such caring friends, or insulted that no one thought she could dress herself.

"And this time," Ginny threatened. "We're doing mascara."

Hermione was able to stop her at lip gloss at least. Ginny had pulled the hair at her temples back into braids again, but let the rest hang down, using her wand to spin a few unruly locks into the curls they should be. Ginny didn't let her see herself until they were on their way to the pub, but she had to admit that Ginny had done a good job. The mascara was weighing on her eyes though.

The pub was particularly crowded for 5PM. They'd come here after work loads of times, but it was never like this. Ginny lead Hermione through the crowd to their usual corner, bumping elbows with people on the way. Katie Bell waved them over to their table and gave them both huge hugs. Katie had started at the Improper Use of Magic Division right after the Battle of Hogwarts, so she usually joined them on their Friday nights out.

"Hermione!" Katie said. "You look so pretty!"

Hermione glared at Ginny. Ginny grinned.

"I'm going to go take my hair out," Hermione said, but Ginny grabbed her arm when she began to walk away.

Ginny turned to Katie. "She's trying something new. Trying to get someone's attention."

"Ginny!" Hermione gaped. Ginny laughed and flounced away. Hermione turned to Katie, "That's not… I mean she's—"

"It's Friday night, Hermione!" Katie laughed. "You're allowed to be a young woman!" Katie leaned into her. "Who is it?"

"It's not… I mean, he probably won't even be here tonight," Hermione lied.

I'm trying to last longer, closing my eyes and trying to think of Quidditch teams, and counting the potions bottles in my trunk, when her fingers thread through my hair. It feels good so I try it on her.

My face is pressed into her neck and I run my fingers through her hair and it's too short. I try again, and the silky strands slip through my fingers, nothing I can hold onto.

I imagine what it would be like to have a fistful of a girl's hair in my fingers, pulling her neck open to me, and I feel my hips snap quickly.

Pansy squeaks, and her pitch is too high. Her breathing is too heavy instead of quick and short. I try to think of what it would be like with someone who whispers into my ear in low tones and laughs when it makes her feel good, perfectly sized teeth smiling up at me.

What it would be like to do this again, and take my time on her body, trying to touch her all over first, instead of jumping right into it. My hand snakes down and her hips are thinner than I remembered, and I'm imagining a slim waist with wider hips, and my fingers squeeze.

My hips are snapping too quickly and I can hear her squeaking under me, and I'm almost done, but wishing that I could have made her cry out too, and maybe she'd squeeze around me until I popped, as I buried my face into her curls –

And I come with a yelp, and her fingers are digging into my shoulders, nails too long, breathing too heavy, and when I've recovered I pull back to look at her.

I don't know why I'm surprised that it's Pansy beneath me.

She rises, and I still can't find it. I lift my hand, and I realize that she'll have to touch me.

She brings her palm to mine, and I wait. Nothing. Her hand hovers an inch away. I'm relieved, I think.

I turn around her. And I think of Krum spinning her in circles and the breathless smile on her face. She's stone cold now, short breaths coming in rapid succession, and I don't let my eyes wander to her pulsing chest.

We return to our original spots, and I'm turning away to find the Ravenclaw girl again before I realize that I learned nothing, except for the rhythm of her breathing, or the way her neck blushes.

I finish the dance, and return to Pansy's side. Like nothing's happened. Like I just went for a smoke with the boys.

Pansy links her arm with mine, and continues talking to Daphne. I watch Granger as Krum kisses her knuckles, leaving her side. She smiles after him. And I see her eyes search the ballroom.

I look away.

"Draco," Pansy says, and her voice is soft in my ear. "Do you want to go back to the dungeons?"

No. But I also don't know why I want to stay.

"Everyone will still be at the Ball. We'll have the dormitories to ourselves," she says.

I turn to look at Pansy. Her eyes are dark and promising me things.

"Yeah, alright." My throat is dry.

We slip out, and down to the dungeons. She follows me into the boys' dormitories, and her hands are sure as they slip off her gown, and I'm wondering where these glamours are that she's cast. I don't see any difference in her. Not like on Granger.

And Pansy's hands are slipping the buttons from my dress robes, and her lips are kissing my neck and I press my fingers into her hair, not finding any magic there to hold it together.

I jump when she reaches for my trousers, and as she unbuttons them, I pull back to look at her.

"Are you… You want to?"

She smiles at me, and I kiss her. I wonder how's she learned some of the things she's doing, but I don't really care when she takes off her underthings and lays down on my bed. I take off the rest of my clothing and when I join her, she's breathing heavily, and I stare at her face, looking for her Skin Shining Spell. I don't see it.

When we begin, it feels like slipping into heaven, and I try to touch her so she feels as good as I do, but I know this won't take long.

"Oh!" Katie had a thought, then leaned into Hermione. "Did you hear Harry invited Draco Malfoy? What a dolt!"

Hermione sighed, but then remembered pieces of Sixth Year —

"Katie, oh no. I'm so sorry. Are you okay with Malfoy being here?"

Katie waved her hand in front of her face. "It's fine," she said. "I've been working with him all week, now. Besides, he actually came to my cubicle on the first day and apologized for it all."

"He… He did?" Hermione didn't expect this at all.

"Yeah, he just said he wanted to clear the air." Katie took a sip from her water glass. She smiled facetiously at Hermione and said, "What? He hasn't made it to Level 4 yet to apologize to you for years of name calling and torture?"

Hermione chuckled. "No, not yet. But perhaps he started with the crimes punishable by law."

Katie laughed. "He's actually not all that bad. He's changed since Hogwarts."

"Really?" Hermione pried, "What's he been like at work?"

"Agreeable, actually. He's much more reserved and doesn't walk with his nose in the air like he used to."

Hermione was going to ask more, but then Ginny returned with a handful of Firewhisky shots.

"Who's got his nose in the air?" Ginny waggled her eyebrows at Hermione. "Draco Malfoy?"

"How'd you guess?" Katie laughed.

Ginny handed Hermione a glass and when Katie refused hers with a smile, Ginny took half and forced Hermione to down the rest. Hermione would have to stick to Butterbeer for the rest of the night.

"Let's join the boys!" Ginny yelled over the noise. It was even louder than when they came in.

As Katie and Ginny led her to the corner, she could just pick a drawl out of the racket. They were at a high-top table. It was Draco, Harry, and Anthony Goldstein. Harry stood and kissed Ginny and gave Hermione's arm a squeeze. Katie stood at the head of the small table, while Draco and Harry were across from each other. Anthony was against the wall, on Draco's left. Ginny went to the open stool on Harry's right. Hermione actively did not look at Draco.

They were talking about a case at work. Even Ginny knew some details through Harry, so Hermione was the only one trying to catch up. Something about a few Durmstrang students and an old family estate out on the English countryside. She didn't dare ask them to start from the beginning, so she just propped herself against the wall next to Ginny's stool and listened.

Draco would speak every so often. It seemed his expertise was on the families of the Durmstrang students, and that Lucius was close friends with the Scandinavian Minister. Hermione found herself watching the way his hands held his Firewhisky tumbler. He had a ring

on his left thumb that Hermione had seen often as a sort of Slytherin house ring. The ring would tap the glass in a rhythm only he knew, but that didn't stop Hermione trying to figure it.

She felt Ginny lean in to her left ear. "Stop staring at his hands and go buy another round for the table."

Hermione flushed and Ginny laughed at her. Hermione thought that was a wonderful idea, seeing as she couldn't join the conversation and she couldn't stop fixating on him. She squeezed out of the corner she found herself in, and made her way to the bar. She heard his voice saying something over the din, and then the table laughed. Old habits caused her to tense, as if the joke was about her, but she had to remind herself that Harry and Ginny would never laugh at her like that.

She asked the bartender for another round for the boys in the corner, a Firewhisky shot for Ginny, and two Butterbeers for Katie and her. She levitated the drinks over the crowd and landed them down one at a time in front of their owners.

"Oi! You're a right queen, you are, Granger!" Anthony downed his earlier tumbler and accepted the new one.

Draco's new drink clinked against that damned ring as she levitated it into his hands. She magically gathered the empty glasses and sent them back toward the bartender.

"After you're done liberating the dragons and the centaurs, Granger, you should consider a career in waiting tables," Draco said.

Hermione looked at him, waiting for the insult, but there was none.

Ginny stepped in with "This is actually quite rare. I'm more used to her breaking glasses than cleaning them."

"Hey!" Hermione nudged Ginny after the glasses landed safely at the bar. Hermione handed a Butterbeer to Katie which she didn't take.

"Actually," Katie said, smiling. "This is the perfect time to tell you the news." She looked around the table and said, "I'm pregnant."

Ginny gasped. "No!" She giggled.

The boys joined with a chorus of congratulations. Hermione squeezed her arm, but was trying to remember who Katie was dating, because she certainly was not married.

"So, Harry," Katie said. "I guess I'm going to have to bow out of Quidditch for a bit."

"Katie!" Anthony jumped in. "You have the worst timing! We play Magical Games and Sports next Sunday!"

Katie laughed, "I'm sorry! I'll tell the baby to wait another few months!"

"There's an interdepartmental Quidditch league at the Ministry?" Draco asked.

The awkward silence was short lived. Harry turned to Draco.

"Not at all!"

I tear my eyes away from her body falling against Krum as she laughs. I turn to see a balcony of boys puffing smoke and watching her chest rise and fall, eyes glinting and smiles tugging their mouths.

How has she done this? This is absolute insanity. She's charmed the room, or slipped a potion into all of our pumpkin juices at breakfast.

She gets swept up into another dance with Krum, and I'm mourning the loss of my respect for him.

The Bulgarians and Marcus talk of something else. I don't listen. I look up to excuse myself back inside, and Blaise is watching me.

As I re-enter, I hear the beginning of strings, and several French girls coo and grab their dates. Fleur Delacour passes in front of me, dragging Roger Davies to the dance floor. As my eyes dart across her body – as they always do when the part-Veela is close by – I wonder if there's something chemical happening with Granger. Some Veela gene, hidden by years of Squibs. It would explain everything.

I find her in the crowd, taking her place with Krum in the circle. The strings buzz. The French Waltz.

She looks around the room for a moment, looking for Merlin-knows who, but her eyes pass right over me. Never looking at me.

She smiles with perfectly sized teeth at Krum. He bows.

Bowing to a Mudblood. The bile rises in my throat.

She curtseys, and it looks like she may fall over. I pace the edge of the couples, looking for Pansy, keeping my gaze on her.

They spin around each other, and I get to see Krum's face. Enamored. I think of Marcus's eyes on her body. The Bulgarians laughing about her in bed.

It doesn't make any sense.

Two couples away from them, a pretty Ravenclaw dances with a Durmstrang boy. I tap him on the shoulder. "Get lost."

He must know who I am, because he moves. The Ravenclaw smiles at me. I think I smile back.

I take her through the steps. She tries to talk to me, but I'm waiting.

And finally we separate. And the Mudblood steps towards me, her smile still on her lips. And she looks at me. And she gasps. Like she's afraid.

You should be afraid of me, Granger. I'm going to discover all your secrets.

I'm looking for it. For the glamour, or the Veela gene. I bow to her, even as it repulses me, and I watch as she presses her lips together and curtseys to me.

"Draco, can we please talk about something other than the Mudblood?"

I look down at her and Pansy has a brow lifted at me. She's bored.

"Of course," I say. "I'm just irritated by her, that's all."

"Well, obviously. She's foul." She rolls her eyes. "Even all gussied up, she's still just a Mudblood in a dress."

I look over at said Mudblood, and find her blushing at something Krum has whispered to her. I see her mouth the words "thank you" and smile up at him through her lashes. My mind races with all the possible things that could make her smile like that and I look down at Pansy again.

"You look beautiful tonight, Pans."

Pansy looks up, eyes wide. "Thank you," she says. And she looks down at our feet, blushing.

I look over at Krum again. He twirls her. She laughs as she stumbles. She doesn't care that she looks like an idiot, or that her date is clearly more trained than she is.

I look down at Pansy. She would right herself. She would float back into my arms and smile if I reached my arm out to twist her underneath. Her steps would be sure and she would glide, not bumping into the opposite couples, no apologies and laughter.

I hear the Mudblood laugh again, and I focus on Pansy's face, focus on not turning to watch.

The song ends and I take Pansy to the punch bowl, meeting with Blaise and Theo there. I keep my back to the room as Pansy chats with Daphne, and Blaise offers me a smoke on the balcony. They've found a spot that Filch isn't keeping an eye on. I follow Blaise and Theo over to the curtains, and I find a blue dress in the crowds again. I turn away.

Marcus Flint is on the balcony with three Durmstrang boys. He passes me a smoke and I inhale deeply. There is probably some kind of herb in this roll, something from the greenhouses.

"You know Viktor's date?" One of the Bulgarian's asks Flint in a thick accent.

"Isn't that Potter's Mudblood?" Flint turns to me as I pass him back the smoke. "Granger, right?" I nod. "Why isn't she here with Potter tonight?"

I look up and he's directing the question to me.

"How am I supposed to know?" I snarl at him. He lifts a brow.

"She is Mudblood?" Another Bulgarian. "She must be very good in the bed!"

The Bulgarians laugh. Marcus laughs. Blaise and Theo laugh.

I stare at the smoke curling from the tip of a cigarette.

"No, no," Marcus says, and he pulls back the edge of the curtain, revealing just enough of the dance floor to see a blue dress spin in a circle. "She's a prude. Krum's not getting anywhere near those knickers."

She spins into view again, and the dress rises to reveal her calves. I blink.

"Doesn't hurt to try, though," Marcus says. I hear the Bulgarians laugh.

"Yes, we formed it just a few months back. You game, Malfoy?" Harry smiled. It seemed so natural, this acquaintance.

Draco smirked. "I'm sure you already have a Seeker?" Draco directed at Harry.

"We're scrimmaging without a Snitch, so I've actually been trying out Chaser. If Katie's out then we'll need a third, with me and Ginny."

Draco looked to Ginny. "And how did you manage to make the D.M.L.E. team if you are not a D.M.L.E. officer?"

"Dating Harry Potter has its perks." Ginny smiled.

"I'll have to try it sometime," Draco said, smirking at her. Anthony choked on his drink. Harry wrinkled his nose. Ginny held his stare with a smile, and Katie burst out laughing.

Hermione just watched. Her mind flashed to the moment outside of the Room of Requirement, Draco holding Goyle's unconscious body, screaming Crabbe's name. She felt a stab of irritation as she wondered where Pansy Parkinson was and how she would feel about Draco Malfoy having drinks with Harry Potter and Hermione Granger.

Harry invited Draco to tomorrow's practice, meaning that Hermione would not see him at Cornerstone tomorrow. She felt disappointed and relieved at the same time. She sipped her Butterbeer while they talked Quidditch, and as her stomach warmed, her lashes felt even heavier with the mascara. She should go to the bathroom and try to take the goo off.

"Granger, you're at Flourish and Blotts, yeah?"

Hermione looked up to see Anthony looking at her.

"Cornerstone, actually." She set her Butterbeer down, just now noticing that she had absently sipped half of it.

"That's right. My mum has been trying to read more. Can you recommend anything?"

Hermione opened her mouth, but a drawl beat her to it.

"She should try the *Undesirable* series."

She glared at Draco. He smirked at her with that glint in his eyes.

"It's really quite crafty," he continued, but he wasn't looking at Anthony. "It's seven novels, all different perspectives on the same moments. Some would say that it's tedious that way, but Gainsworth manages to keep it interesting, revealing new information each time the scene is revisited."

"Okay, thanks," Anthony said. "And it's by…?"

"Lance Gainsworth." Hermione jumped him to it. She watched his lips twitch. He took a sip from his tumbler.

"And you agree, Hermione?" Anthony said to her.

"Oh, yes," she said, glaring down Draco. "You could even say that I have the exact same opinion."

"Great." Anthony's voice floated over to her. "I'll have to come by to pick up the first one."

She watched as Draco smiled and slipped off his stool, heading to the bar. Sometime during the last minute Ginny had moved to talk with Katie about the baby. Harry and Anthony began a conversation about Quidditch again. She took Ginny's stool. It felt better to sit. She drank her Butterbeer down, anticipating leaving soon.

"Granger!"

Hermione winced at hearing a friendly, yet intrusive voice over her shoulder.

"Hi Aiden." She turned around and gave him a convincing smile.

"You keep doing your hair differently. I almost didn't recognize you!" Aiden leaned against the wall behind her stool, forcing her to turn all the way around to hold a conversation.

It wasn't that she didn't like Aiden. She thought he was perfectly nice. He just had a quality that was a little… absent.

"I was going to invite you out with us tonight, but I couldn't find you. Funny coincidence, huh?"

"Definitely." Hermione said, not committing to any conversation.

Aiden sipped on what seemed like his third Butterbeer. She looked over his shoulder to see three guys that were with him that she didn't recognize, but Harry seemed to know one of them. He'd gotten off his stool and was saying hello. Aiden took the opportunity to sit on Harry's empty stool next to her. And again she had to turn all the way around to face him.

"Did you see the article in the paper this morning on the Horntail they found?"

"Yes. I'm sure we'll be working on that all next week," Hermione said. She'd found the article next to the most recent Draco Malfoy story by Rita Skeeter. She took a sip and found her Butterbeer empty. How?

Aiden saw this and jumped up. "Let me get you another drink."

Just as Hermione was about to tell him "no, thank you," a hand appeared placing a Butterbeer down in front of her on the table. She stared at the Slytherin ring for a moment before looking up.

Draco wasn't looking at her, but instead was giving a condescending smile to Aiden.

"O'Connor, wasn't it?" he said.

"Yes. Malfoy, good to see you." Aiden stuck his hand out and Malfoy took it. "How was your first week?" Aiden smiled brightly. Hermione couldn't figure out how he didn't pick up on Malfoy's dislike of him. Or anyone's dislike of him, really.

"Excellent, thank you." That was all.

Aiden smiled and nodded. "I'm going to get another drink. I'll see you around Malfoy! Granger," Aiden placed his hand on her shoulder, possibly as a goodbye. "We'll talk Monday!"

Draco watched him walk away. Hermione grabbed the Butterbeer he'd placed in front of her.

Sunday, December 25, 1994

The bitch won't even look at me.

She had floated down the stairs like she owned the whole damned castle and giggled like a toddler when Krum escorted her into the Great Hall.

I had to ask Blaise who Krum's date was. He laughed at me.

She's been dancing with the Bulgarian for the past hour, messing up the steps, and smiling, and drinking punch.

And she hasn't spared me a glance. Like *I'm* the one not worthy. And I can't figure out what she's done to herself.

"It has to be a glamour, right?" I watch as she laughs at something Krum says. "She must have cast something –"

"Draco, we *all* have glamours on!" Pansy laughs. I look at her, sitting next to me at our table.

"What?"

"I've got a Skin Shining Spell and a Hair Holding Charm going right now. I'm sure every girl here has cast beauty spells –"

"No, no," I wave her off. "This is something different. You look as pretty as you always do. But, Granger…" I sneer as she starts swaying to the music. "She's done something drastic." She smiles and touches Krum's arm.

"Are you saying you find Hermione Granger pretty?" Pansy asks.

I whip my head to face her, and she's teasing me.

"Don't be daft. Of course not," I say. "I'm saying she's a filthy, deceiving Mudblood, and she has no right to walk among us like she's one of us."

Krum dips her.

I glare at her as she laughs, hoping she'll feel it, but of course she still won't look at me.

Later on, Pansy and I resume our dancing, and I try to keep my focus on the steps, but *she's* in the middle of the floor fucking them up. I have to remind myself that she's had no formal training. She's a Mudblood and wouldn't know a waltz if it slapped her in the face.

I glance to Potter and Weasley, slouching and pouting. She's burning bridges right and left it seems. This night is for the *champions*.

"What's happened to her teeth? That must be it." I spin Pansy in a circle.

"She fixed them months ago."

"What?" I look down at her. She's rolling her eyes at me.

"When you hit her with that beaver spell, or whatever it was, she shrank them down with Pomfrey."

"How is that fair!" I glare at her across the room. "You can't just go changing your appearance all willy-nilly!"

"Come now," I say. "I thought Hermione Granger left all her hate behind at Hogwarts."

She's smiling at her feet when she says, "No, there's a special reserve. Only for Rita Skeeter and those who do not appreciate Lance Gainsworth."

She glances up at me and I can't hold back a grin. I should clarify the Gainsworth predicament, tell her that he's my favorite too – maybe she'll gush about the books again, her eyes light and wide and color on her cheeks – but then the lift doors are opening and a floppy oaf-like creature is calling her name.

She tenses.

"I need you," he says, with a grin. She's grimacing, and there's something familiar about him.

"Aiden. Good morning. You remember Draco Malfoy," she says, not looking at either of us.

I'm standing as tall as I possibly can without a thought. He's got at least two inches on me. He's shaking my hand and grinning, and explaining that he went to Hogwarts with us.

That's not why he's familiar.

"And what do you do here, Aiden?"

"I'm on Level 4 with Granger here, working in the Beast division." He nudges her with his elbow. Friendly. Grinning down at her. Potter doesn't even touch her like that.

And it slams into me like gravity.

Weasley. Weasley, who's tall and broad and dopey. Who talks too loud in confined spaces. Who makes her laugh and makes her cry. Who is allowed to touch her.

My eyes drift to her and she's bouncing with energy. She looks awkward and stiff. He's standing close to her still, and his eyes are on her when he says, "You change your hair?"

Weasley who she'd fix her appearance for. Who she'd pull her curls back for.

"Oh, um, yes." She touches her hair. "I mean, no. It's just braided."

I listen as he tells her it looks nice. As she thanks him. And I'm in the middle of their private conversation.

Nothing about Aiden O'Connor in the papers. But she'd be too smart to let anything about the two of them slip.

The lift slows for Level 4. I imagine her box. I open the lid, and shove the both of them inside, giving them some privacy. Giving myself some space.

Aiden grins and says goodbye. She turns and says, "Have a great first day, Malfoy." She's blushing.

Is she embarrassed that I discovered them?

He's guiding her out of the lift, hand on her back, and she jumps. The doors close on the two of them walking away. And I have two floors to dwell on her hair braided back and his dim-witted grin before I arrive at the D.M.L.E. floor, and I head off to apologize to Katie Bell.

~*~

"Thank you," she said under her breath. She sipped it, but knew she shouldn't finish it.

Draco sat in the empty stool next to her. He faced her. Hermione realized that no one else was going to join their conversation because they were busy with their own. She took another sip of her Butterbeer.

"He reminds me of Weasley."

Hermione put down her drink and wiped at her mouth.

"Ron?"

"No, the mother." Draco rolled his eyes. "Yes, Ron."

Hermione looked at Aiden by the bar, chatting and smiling. She didn't quite see it.

"Is it the way he smiles and shakes your hand that brings up memories of Ron," Hermione asked. She looked at him under her lashes and smiled.

"That must be it." Draco smirked.

"You seem to be fitting in with the Gryffindors quite nicely." Hermione reached for the drink to do something with her hands, but stopped herself before taking a sip. Maybe this was how some developed a drinking problem: nervous sipping.

"Well, Goldstein is a Ravenclaw, so we cling to each other whenever anyone tries to run into a burning building to save kittens."

Hermione smiled. She forgot her promise to herself and took another sip.

"I would have thought you'd be saving house-elves, not studying dragons."

Hermione met his eyes over the top of her glass. If he meant an innuendo, his face didn't betray it. She swallowed and licked the foam off her lips.

"I do want to work in Relocation," she said, picking a point over his shoulder to stare at so she didn't have to look into his eyes while she spoke. "I hope to move there when there's an opening, but the Beast division is fine for now."

"Shouldn't they be bending over backwards to give you whatever position you desire? Or did you forget to put 'Golden Trio' on your resume?"

"I actually submitted under a false name." She looked down at her hands. Her nails needed to be done. She hoped no one had seen them this week.

"And why was that?"

She looked up at him, remembering that they were in the middle of a conversation. Her and Draco. Conversing. How odd.

"I didn't really want to be handed anything after the war," she said, looking over his shoulder again. "I wanted to earn my position based on merit and not on who I befriended as a First Year." She sipped her drink again and the cool liquid felt so nice.

There was silence. She checked in with him, wondering if she'd bored him.

He was frowning at her.

"You think that's why they call you the Golden Girl?" He lifted a brow. "Because Potter and Weasel allowed you into their club?"

She held her breath, waiting for him to tell her why. She watched him as he watched her and found her eyes drawn to the corner of his mouth where he hid his smirk. A small voice in her head told her that staring at his mouth was probably the wrong thing to do.

"Hey Granger!"

Hermione jumped and searched the room to see Aiden waving at her. Wonderful.

"We're headed down the street to the new pub on the corner. Wanna come with?" Aiden quirked his head back towards several other people from her department who she didn't know were there.

"Oh, no. Thanks though!" She smiled, hoping he would just leave so that Draco could tell her why she was golden. Or something like that.

"Alright!" he yelled back to her. "But I still owe you for lunch last week, so I got your drink next time!" He smiled like a huge puppy and waved at her, nodding at Malfoy. Hermione didn't even remember buying his lunch last week. She took a sip of her drink and watched as Aiden walked out with their coworkers.

"How long have you been seeing him?"

Hermione's eyes snapped back over to Draco. His face was neutral.

"I'm sorry?" she said.

"O'Connor," he said. "You're together?" He sipped his drink and watched her over the top of his glass.

She opened her mouth to protest, to correct him, to say anything, but Harry's voice interrupted them.

"Hey, Ginny and I are going to head out." He was standing over Draco's shoulder. "Hermione, did you want to stay or side-along with us?"

She really wanted to correct Draco, but that wasn't one of the options given.

"I'm about to head out too," Draco said. He started to stand. She needed to return to that other conversation. "She should side-along with you, Potter. She shouldn't be apparating anywhere."

They were talking about her like she wasn't even there. She started to get off the stool.

"I'll be fine. I only had like –"

She slipped a bit, but was able to stabilize. The stools were a bit higher than she thought they were. Not the best evidence for her case. Harry chuckled and reached out his hand for her. She frowned at him and extended her arm, and realized that Draco's hand was on her elbow. He must have caught her as she slipped. He released her just as she looked down to where his hand was on her. He'd touched her bare skin with his hand and she had missed it entirely.

"Bozo, that's enough!" Skeeter yells. And the photographer stands at attention. "Let me have a moment with Mr. Potter, and let's get some shots of Mr. Malfoy heading to the lifts! Miss Granger, why don't you escort him?"

She looks like how I feel. She starts to argue, saying she's not on my floor. I try to remember what floor she is on.

And she's being shoved towards me, and we're walking to the lifts together. She's very stiff. And I wonder if she wants nothing to do with me. If she doesn't want to be pictured with me. Skeeter yells to us to look in at each other, and we both ignore her. I pull the grate open for her, and she looks up at me, like she's surprised. Does no one pull doors for her? She's Hermione Fucking Granger.

She ducks her head and steps through, and I curse my hand that rises to guide her inside, grazing over the fabric of her blouse. She twitches.

I follow her in, and I can hear Skeeter screeching for us to come back and walk to the lifts again. Like we're actors in her little play. I know Granger hates her, and I'm quite done with this charade myself. I continue to close the gates, like I haven't heard her.

She's running after us, telling us to reset, and I feign ignorance, like I don't know how to get out of an elevator.

"Sorry! It's my first day!"

I hate myself as I check to see if she smiles at this. She's letting out a breath she's holding.

It's just us in the lift as it pulls backwards. I'll probably need to come back downstairs at some point. Or I wonder if Skeeter will come up.

Silence. And I'm regretting this as a familiar scent floats through the lift. Trapped in a box with her. I lean against the wall, away from her. I wonder how natural I could make stumbling into her as the lift zigzags, regaining my balance with my hands on her hips, maybe pressing her into the wall, but then I remind myself that Malfoys do not stumble.

I'm about to say… something, when she talks first.

"If you find that Skeeter is being too much of a 'pest,' I find that a jar with an Unbreakable Charm usually does the trick."

The full weight of her suggestion hits me. And I smirk at her as a wave of pride crashes down on me. She's watching the enchanted papers fly out of the lift.

Look at me.

"How Slytherin of you."

She turns to take me in, and I see her eyes barely dance over my body as I lean casually against the wall. I wait for her to prove her rightful place in Gryffindor, rebuke me for the Slytherin comment. The doors close and she looks away. I watch her press her lips together.

"I just… hate her." She laughs nervously. And the sound twists around my ribs, one by one.

Bell. Wonderful. I feel my stomach twist. Why did everyone have to go work for the fucking Ministry.

"You'll have your own cubicle, but you'll probably get dragged into team meetings, and brainstorming sessions, and the like. Oh, and there's a café on this level, just around the corner. Excellent croissants."

And a familiarity sweeps over me. The two of us, shoulder to shoulder. We might as well be standing on footstools, getting our robes pinned. Only this time it's Potter talking nervously, and instead of bragging like I did, he's trying to teach me, trying to make me feel comfortable.

I remember seeing Hagrid out the Madam Malkin's window, and thinking I'd get a laugh out of this boy. I had already known back then that picking at the weaker or lesser was a talent of mine, and perhaps I'd make a friend if he thought I was funny.

I blink to clear my head as Rita claps her hands, shouting at the photographer.

"Thank you for speaking on behalf of my mother, Potter." I feel him turn to look at me. "I'm… very grateful that she didn't have to endure Azkaban for long."

"Of course. Yes," he says. "She saved my life once. Thought it best to return the favor," he says with a smile.

Before it crosses my mind to thank him for speaking at *my* trial, Skeeter is back. She's telling us to stand in front of the fountain, face each other, and shake hands.

And maybe it's the memory of Madam Malkin's, or it's the absurdity of all this, but Rita sets us up and Potter reaches out his hand, and I say, "Merlin, Potter. Took you eight years to finally shake my hand."

I clasp his hand, and the camera flashes, and Potter snorts. He's hiding a smile when he says, "Think of all the unpleasantness we could have avoided."

I chuckle. Rita asks us to try it again, and then I hear, "Miss Granger!"

I knew I would see her today. But I still feel unprepared for the possibility of spending most of my days with her and Harry Potter.

I turn to see her. Something's wrong with her hair.

Skeeter is dragging her over, forcing her to stand at Potter's side while we shake hands. Her eyes are wide and her shoulders are tense, and finally Skeeter takes her to the side. I feel like I can breathe again. I look down at my shoes, surprised to see Potter's got a matching pair of dragon leather. Hm. Good for him. Finally dressing himself right.

I look up at him and he's watching me. I restrain myself from sneering back at him, but there's something in his stupid green eyes. Like he's piecing something together. I look away. Focusing on my bricks.

"So tomorrow at Hodgley Field, Malfoy?" Harry was escorting her out, but Hermione still felt like there was something she needed to say.

"Looking forward to it, Potter."

"Goodnight, Draco," she said. Maybe that was it? Her head was fuzzy. She looked at him one last time. He was standing very still as they moved away from him, looking at her.

She let Harry pull her out the door. He was stifling a smile and as Ginny met them outside, Ginny asked, "What's so funny?"

Harry laughed out loud after the door had closed all the way.

"You called him Draco." Harry's eyes were glistening. Hermione felt the warmth leave her face as she stood stock still.

"Oh, my god!" Ginny cackled.

"Oh, my god," Hermione covered her face with her hands.

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Four

Monday, September 13, 1999

Skeeter says I have to be at the Ministry early for a photoshoot. I almost hang myself with my old Hogwarts tie right there.

And when I enter the Atrium and Potter is there… well, icing on the cake.

He's eyeing me while Skeeter bounces around, snapping at her photographer, and touching both of our shoulders and chests far too much.

I thought she'd get the shot of me arriving through the fireplaces and walking to the lifts. I had no idea she'd want me to stand here and be greeted by The-Boy-Who-Lived-And-Died-And-Lived-Again.

Catchy, Skeeter.

Skeeter walks away, saying she's going to ask someone about adjusting the lighting in here. Good luck with that. It's an underground tomb.

"Are you ready for this?" Potter asks.

I glance at him, and he's trying so hard to be a friendly presence, but I see right through him.

"I suppose so."

We're turned, facing the Atrium, watching Skeeter drag a maintenance worker around pointing at lighting fixtures. We're shoulder to shoulder.

"Gowain Robards is quite excited to meet you," he says. "Head of the Auror Department. He's a pleasant fellow. Appreciates hard work."

I nod.

"You'll remember Goldstein. He's up there." Potter shifts next to me. "And I should tell you that Katie Bell is up there too."

as he stepped to the side for the model, opened the door to the restaurant and placed his hand on her low back. Maybe lower on the model's back than on her own, but she was still looking at the same move. She breathed a sigh of relief that maybe Draco wasn't actually courting the Bulgarian, maybe he was just a Pureblood gentleman.

Her smile left her face as she read the second page of the article where Rita Skeeter had taken extreme liberties with their interview. Apparently, Hermione had been gushing about Draco's good qualities with the gleam of infatuation in her eyes.

Perfect.

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Eight

Saturday morning found Hermione stumbling to her bathroom in search of Pepper-Up Potion. She'd never had a hangover, so she wasn't sure if this was one. She felt marginally better after drinking the potion before she remembered that she needed to leave for work in twenty minutes.

As she got dressed she remembered that Draco would be at the Quidditch practice today, and therefore would most likely not be stopping by Cornerstone. Hermione frowned at herself in the mirror. She looked so tired with dark circles around her eyes. She then realized that it wasn't dark circles, it was the mascara she didn't take off before crawling into bed.

She laughed and went to wash her face.

Feeling much fresher, she headed out the door to the apparition point.

"Miss Granger! Over here!" The journalist with the camera called to her as she popped into Diagon Alley. She continued on without responding. "What are you going to do for your birthday tomorrow?"

Now *there* was a good question. Her twentieth birthday had crept up on her. She was always older than the rest of her classmates, but to be entering her twenties when Ginny had just turned eighteen was very strange.

Harry had mentioned taking her to dinner, but that was all she really had planned. Morty had penned her a note midweek, chastising her for not telling him about her birthday, and demanding that she take the day off, so she couldn't spend the day there. Maybe she'd sleep? That seemed wrong.

After the first two hours of looking up whenever someone entered the shop, expecting it to be Draco, Hermione finally relaxed. Quidditch practice usually lasted until about noon, but then

they would head out for lunch, or stay and chat for a few hours. The practices Hermione had attended had all dragged on much longer than she felt was necessary.

Eventually she had to turn her back on the front door. She was only going to be disappointed when Draco didn't come by Cornerstone today. It wasn't as if they had a standing date, but he'd been in the past two weekends. Perhaps he took such offense to the use of his first name the night before that he would no longer be visiting her here.

Hermione shook her head. No, he was not *visiting* her. He was patronizing a book shop.

The door opened and while her back was turned she could feel the wind dance with her hair. It took every ounce of control not to turn around.

"Who do you have to know to get a book around here!" a familiar voice boomed from the doorway.

Hermione turned with wide eyes to see Ron Weasley on her "Welcome" carpet.

"Ron!" She gasped and he smiled at her, stretching his arms out.

She whipped around the counter and flew down the two steps to the entry landing, throwing her arms around him.

She felt her feet leave the ground as he squeezed her in his arms. It was like the past year and a half had never happened. That was her favorite thing about seeing Ron. Nothing ever changed.

"Happy birthday 'Mione."

Her feet touched down again, and she released her grip on him, but kept her arms around him, pulling back.

"What are you doing here? You're supposed to be training for the October season."

"I told them our second string could use some practice. I had to get home to see a girl."

She pulled back and punched his arm, smiling up at him. "You're not here only for my birthday."

"Well, it was a main reason! I have a meeting with George and several investors this afternoon and then a cocktail party tonight with some Minister of something, but I'm all yours tomorrow."

He smiled down at her and everything seemed very simple. Having someone hold her, friendly yet intimate touching. And there was an uncomplicated warmth that Ron always brought with him.

"Well," she said. "I work today until six, but tomorrow I have the day off."

"The day off? Hermione Granger takes the day off? Merlin, you've changed so much." He teased her and released her hips, taking a look around the shop. "This is a nice little place."

Hermione skipped up the steps to the counter. "I like it. It's very quiet." She moved back behind the counter. "So, when did you get in?"

He leaned down on the counter between them. "A few hours ago. I stopped by Hodgley Field first," Ron said.

"You change your hair?"

Hermione looked up and Aiden was looking at her. His eyes were dancing around her face and her hair.

"Oh, um, yes." She pushed a loose curl back over her ear. "I mean, no. It's just braided." She wished he would stop talking.

"It looks nice," he said. No luck. "Out of your face, and everything."

Hermione nodded at the ground. "Thank you."

The lift stopped at Level 4, announcing the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Aiden stepped to the side and gestured for Hermione to lead the way.

"Good to meet you again, Malfoy. Best of luck," Aiden said.

"Have a great first day, Malfoy," Hermione said.

She raised her eyes off the ground to see Draco giving them a neutral expression as they stepped off. Hermione felt Aiden's hand guide her through the lift, much like Draco's had when they stepped in. She tensed. She didn't dare look back at Draco.

What was with these men thinking she couldn't walk on her own?

Hermione woke the next morning to a Daily Prophet clipping on her table. Rita's article didn't make front page – which made Hermione smile – but it was heavily featured across two pages in the middle of the paper.

A picture of Harry and Draco shaking hands accompanied the first page, with Rita's hypothesizing of what exactly Draco would be doing at the Ministry. Hermione was so glad the picture of her awkwardly standing behind Harry didn't make it.

But then on the second half of the article, a pull-quote screamed at her in large lettering:

"He was never a Dark Wizard"

-Hermione Granger, Brightest Witch of Our Age

Hermione closed her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose. When she opened them she then saw the picture.

Bozo had captured them walking to the lifts together. She was almost unrecognizable with her hair in a braid, but of course as she watched the photo move, she saw Draco pull the grate open for her, and then she saw herself look up at him. It was clearly her in that profile.

She watched as she stepped through and Draco's hand came up to guide her. She sprung out of bed and opened her chest to find that clipping of the Bulgarian girl. She pulled the "Draco Malfoy Finds Love" article out of a shoe box, and placed the pictures side by side. She watched

It's gone too far, really. All this Gryffindor business. After-work drinks and bettering the world. And now here's Potter, two days after I laid into him for sticking up for me, still trying to be my *friend.*

He pities me, the friendless Slytherin.

My eyes are cold when I say, "My testimony is after lunch."

His eyebrows lift. He stammers and stumbles his way out of my office.

Gryffindors are too weak. They are comfortable in their weakness.

After lunch – which I take alone – I head to the courtrooms. I am half an hour early, but at least I'm out of that bloody office.

I let my gaze drift to the stones below my feet. I clear my head. I imagine Severus, staring at me over his desk, searching for open doors.

The click of shoes coming from the lifts. I look up to see a familiar pair of hideous heels. I can't get a moment's rest from these people.

"Malfoy." She nods at me, like we're acquaintances.

"What are you doing here?"

"Providing information to the Wizengamot. Much like I assume you are?"

She's here to free Dolohov.

My jaw tightens. I have to look away from her. From her stupidity. I draw up the curtains on my memories before I play all of my old fears in front of my eyes.

Engaged to Weasley. Fooling around with O'Connor. Blushing at me. And taking pity on the rapists and murders.

"Tell me, Granger." The words are tumbling out of me before I even know where they are taking me. "Do you make it a priority to free all of the Death Eaters? Is 'Testify on Behalf of the Accused' a standing Friday appointment in your calendar?"

My eyes are empty as I look at her. She blinks at me, her lashes fluttering against her cheeks. I hear the whisper of *Good night, Draco,* and swat it away just before she speaks.

"Actually, I am testifying *against* the accused today," she says. There's a fire lighting in her eyes, and I feel heat boiling under my skin. She lifts a brow at me, like she's ready for a fight. "Don't worry, Malfoy, you're still the exception to the rule."

My stomach jumps. Like a teenager who's just heard that his crush likes him. But that's not what she said. That's not what's happening here.

You'll have to decide what you want more, Draco.

"The exception," I whisper, rolling it around on my tongue. To be her exception…

The image of Weasley's lips on hers.

Her exception, but nothing more.

This business, or your Mudblood.

And it's like the last stone has set, like something's clicked into place. And all I can think is *Stay away from me, Hermione Granger.*

"And who asked you to *save* me, Granger?" I step towards her, and stop. "Because I didn't ask for your pity. I don't need a 'champion.'" I spit the word at her like it's dirty.

There's heat on her cheeks again and her breathing shallow and she says, "I never volunteered to be your 'champion.'"

I step into her and it's like throwing myself off a cliff. "Then what is it you *are* volunteering for?"

Her chest flushes, and her eyes drift to my mouth before she stammers and blinks. Her chest heaves, pulling her blouse tight, and I wonder if she knows exactly what she's doing behind that Golden Girl façade.

"So, is it a Life Debt, then?" I ask.

She narrows her eyes. "A Life Debt?"

"You saved me from a lifetime of rotting in Azkaban, so now I owe you, Granger? Is that how it works?"

But then I see her confusion and I know it's not about a Life Debt at all. She's looking down at her feet and trying to explain, and I feel a chill run through me as I realize.

It wasn't pity. It wasn't bargaining. Out of the goodness of her heart, she fought for me. She *believes* in me. And when she looks up at me from beneath her lashes and says," If anything, Malfoy, a Debt is repaid," I realize she thinks I'm worth the effort.

The exception.

And I feel bile in my throat at how foolish she is. The Brightest Witch of Our Age.

"I meant what I said at your trial. If you had identified us at the Manor—"

I hear her screaming. I hear my father's voice - *weak for her.*

"Stop! Stop glorifying that night."

She jumps and then studies me, like she's waiting for me to apologize or return to normal.

"I didn't give a fig about saving the world, or stopping the Dark Lord – or you and your idiotic friends for that matter!" I shove my hair away from my face, and try to breath, to calm my mind.

"I know you recognized me," she says. "I know you saw me, saw Ron, and could have easily–"

Ah, yes. *Ron.*

"Handed you over to the Death Eaters?" I finish for her. "Would you have liked that Granger? Would it have cleared things up in your logical brain?"

She still thinks there's something in me worth saving. It's time to rid her of that notion.

"Do you even know what they're capable of?" I step into her again, and I see her back land against the wall. "Dolohov? The Death Eaters?" She's rolling her eyes at me and protecting her forearm. "Not Bella," I continue. "The real Death Eaters."

Her eyes sparkle up at me in curiosity, and it's so tempting to stop myself from going further. To just reach up for her curls and say *but I wouldn't have let them touch you.*

But I'm only an exception. So, I smirk at her like I have a plan.

"Some of them are completely sane, with logical brains and the ability to dream up a future where Harry Potter and the Order are defeated, and Lord Voldemort reigns. And what do you think happens to people like you in this world, Granger?"

"I get it, Malfoy. We all get tortured. We all die. All Muggle-borns get a matching 'Mudblood' carving –"

"All the Muggle-borns, yes. But not Potter's 'Golden Girl.' Or his Weasley slag for that matter."

There's a fear in her eyes, and it's real this time. Yes, this is who we're supposed to be. And I pin her into the wall, like I've always wanted to, forcing her eyes on me, taking her air.

And I tell her about the Auction. Something I swore I'd never do.

But I'm doing the wrong things. I'm saying the wrong lines. She suggests that I would have sold her and I jump on it. She accuses me of planning to keep her in the dungeons of Malfoy Manor and I let her believe it. She throws out a number and I correct her. She shivers and I press into her, digging for information about her purity, begging her to run crying and to never speak to me again.

I'm heaving in the air that she's pushing out, our mouths so close, and I don't know how I landed here, almost pressed against her. It's contrary to the words pushing past my lips and it was the wrong thing to do. So, I finish it.

"So, tell me, Granger. I've been curious. Had events played out differently last spring, could I be 35,000 galleons richer?"

The sting of her hand on my cheek finally stops me, just as firm as it had been all those years ago. And I wonder if I've done it. If she'll finally give up on me now. She's glaring daggers into me, but she's panting against my mouth and I think I'm leaning into her when I hear:

"Mr. Malfoy. They are ready for you."

She releases me from her spell, and I step back from her. She leaves, almost running.

Good.

I blink away the heat.

I let the portly man take my wand. I push my hair back and walk into the courtroom and try to look reformed. I don't let my gaze wander to the cage. I explain the memories I provided and

"What are you idiots on about?" I say.

They turn to me. Dolohov snarls. "Do you make it a habit to eavesdrop, whelp?"

"When I'm in my own home, I do." I lift a brow.

"What do you think, Malfoy?" Rowle grabs the paper back from Dolohov and suddenly I'm staring at her face again. "She pure? Or do you think Potter's had her?"

I stare at them. I swallow. "What's it to you?"

"It's 5,000 more if she's clean." Rowle turns the paper back to himself and I watch his eyes dance over her face.

"She's a Mudblood," Dolohov says. "She can't be that clean. What else are they good for?" My skin is buzzing when he looks up at me. "What do you think, Draco?" His eyes are dark. "You in? I'd say 10,000 each should cover her."

"What's the money for?" I almost snap.

Rowle looks up at me. "The Auction."

My veins turn icy, but I keep my eyes even.

"Macnair thought of it," Rowle continues. "Whoever gets rounded up once Potter and the Order are gone will get auctioned off. Mudbloods, blood traitors, anyone worth anything to anyone."

"We trade her off every week, you think?" Rowle says, looking down at her picture again. I see him adjust his pants.

I wish I was back in the parlor, with my wand trained on them, Voldemort hissing in my ear to hurt them.

"Sorry, gentlemen," I say. "I don't share." I toss the Floo powder into the fireplace. I disappear into the green flames, twisting away from their glaring faces.

Just before I pop through to Borgin and Burkes, I hear a shouted, "Save your sickles, Malfoy!"

It takes me a moment to step through the fireplace, lifting a hand to Mr. Borgin in greeting. I wander through Knockturn Alley, towards Crabbe and Goyle. I greet them. We walk.

As they ask me questions about what Voldemort has planned for us for the next year, I see wild hair on the floor, thrashing. Only it's not the Cruciatus Curse she's fighting.

~*~

Friday, September 24, 1999

"Malfoy?" His voice timid. "Er, would you like to head downstairs together?"

My eyes lift to see Potter, stepping back and forth on each foot, just outside my cubicle, like he's ready to run.

"Our arrangement can also *end* whenever it is no longer mutually beneficial," she says lowly. I swallow. "The photographer just arrived. Are you going to pretend to enjoy this lunch or shall we stage our breakup now?"

I take a deep inhale, feeling the air circle through my limbs, clearing my head.

I look into her eyes. "I'm sorry. I've had a hell of a week." I smile at her, and she grins back. I hear a camera click.

~*~

Friday, August 22, 1997

Her face is on the front page of the *Prophet.* And my insides are screaming.

"MUGGLE-BORNS WANTED FOR INTERROGATION"

I'm late to meeting with Crabbe and Goyle. We're off to Diagon Alley for school supplies, but her face staring up at me from the side table stopped me. And her name at the top of a list.

A low whistle to my left shocks me. I drop the paper and begin looking for my coin bag, about to leave.

"Who's this pretty thing?"

I look over and Rowle is passing through our entrance hall from the dining room, from the breakfast *my* elves have served him. He grabs a newspaper off the side table, like he lives here. Which I guess he does. For now.

Dolohov enters behind him, and I'm fairly certain he would have washed his hair if the Dark Lord had been in town.

They had called Lord Voldemort back from a mission a few weeks ago when they'd located Potter at a café, only to return empty handed. They've been quite nasty to me since the Dark Lord requested my… "assistance" with their punishment for their failures.

I try to leave without being noticed, as they usually spit unpleasantness towards me, when I hear Dolohov say, "That's her! That's the bitch that Obliviated us!" He grabs the paper from Rowle.

"It is?"

"Yes, it's the Mudblood that's always with Potter."

I turn to the fireplaces, ready to slip by.

"Wish we'd grabbed her when we had the chance!" Rowle says. "Now it'll cost us galleons to have her."

The back of my neck pricks.

"You don't have the gold for her," Dolohov laughs. "Starting bid is ten thousand."

My hand pauses in reach for the Floo powder.

"We could have split her down the middle," Rowle says. "In more ways than one!"

I turn back to them. My eyes are cool. My skin is tight.

I let them ask questions about Dolohov's temperament. Dolohov spits at my feet, and hisses, "Coward" at me.

"Thank you, Mr. Malfoy," says the redhead. "You've been very helpful today."

I almost laugh. I retrieve my wand. The stone hallway feels like a graveyard as I pass through it.

I step in the lift, and I remind myself that it was necessary. I will be no one's *exception.*

I don't think Severus would approve.

Coward.

The lift stops at the Atrium for others to join and I elbow my way out, heading for the fireplaces. My legs shake and there's a hollow wind in my ears.

Mother is just about to head out when I pop through the fireplace in our entryway. I feel my fingers aching to hurt something.

"How was the trial today?"

"Fine."

I pass her, my heart choking me as it grows in my throat. I'm about to head to my room to destroy it when I see the closed door at the end of the entry hall.

"Have the renovations begun?" My voice is tight.

"On Sunday—"

I pull the doors open and the ghosts of the past hiss at me. I can hear her screaming. The room has been cleared. The chandelier is repaired, glinting and hanging. And I slash my wand through the air and it crashes to the floor.

I can see Bella dragging her knife across her pale skin and I point my wand at the spot on the floor. It explodes.

Rubble flies and I see the disgust on her face as she tells me to stop, tries to turn away from me and I press her into the stone wall in the ministry hallway.

Coward.

The curtains are on fire.

I feel her hand against my cheek, soft at first, like she wants nothing else in the world but to touch me, and then it's pain.

I hear screaming again as the glass in the windows shatter, bursting out to the gardens, and the bricks from the fireplace where I stood like a statue fly like magnets toward the hole in the ground. My throat hurts and I realize it's me screaming. And I've fallen to my knees.

I set fire to the bricks as they coalesce into the burning vortex in front of me and I think I can still see her blood staining the stones under my knees.

I'm finished. I'm breathing slowly. A movement from the doorway, where I know my mother has stood watching the whole thing.

"Is she engaged?"

I laugh. How mundane.

I open my eyes to see a brick, burning with magic in front of me.

Burning bricks, set into a line at my feet, held together with electricity as they build.

I take a deep breath and stand. A wall of burning bricks built around her in a circle, like a tower in those fairy stories.

"It doesn't matter."

I turn and exit, passing my mother in the doorway.

The whole group jumps. She huffs. A woman in blue blushes.

At Level 5, everyone steps off but her and one older man. She looks up, shyly. And her eyes widen as she sees me.

"Sorry," she laughs. "It's been a long day already."

I concentrate on the nothing I'm feeling.

"Obviously," I say.

She blushes. And jumps out at Level 4.

She still has the audacity to blush. A flicker of rage slicks its way through my veins. Kissing her childhood sweetheart. Fooling around with her co-worker. And *blushing* at me.

She's a right tease, she is.

My fingers twitch.

I can still smell her as the lift ascends.

~*~

Tuesday, September 21, 1999

Dear Draco Malfoy,

You don't know me, but I remember you. I went to Beauxbatons, but I was at Hogwarts for the Triwizard Tournament. I remember seeing you at the Yule Ball and –

And the letter explodes.

~*~

Wednesday, September 22, 1999

Goldstein thinks it's funny.

He's created an "application" for Lady Malfoy and has passed it out like a memo. He's threatened to send it out to the whole Ministry if I can't take the joke.

Potter finally has to step in, and tell Goldstein to knock it off before I snap.

I take it out on Potter instead.

~*~

Thursday, September 23, 1999

"What is the matter with you, Draco? You seem… off."

Katya dips her lettuce into her dressing, and lifts a brow at me.

I look at her. "I'm fine."

"You're not, but you don't have to discuss it, I guess."

"No, I don't. Our arrangement doesn't extend to our emotional well-being."

I stab at my lunch. She is still.

I check my timepiece. It's after 5PM. I'm trying to get a girl to agree to dinner by 6PM. 7PM at the latest. A girl who will show the *Daily Prophet* readers that I don't have a type. Or a death wish.

I rub my forehead. Jeannette will have to do. She's blonde, French, and I know she'd drop everything.

I send the owl. I send another to Skeeter. And one to the restaurant maître d'. And I head back to the Leaky for another drink.

~*~

Sunday, September 19, 1999

"Oh," Mother says, looking at me over the top of the paper. "Did you know that today is Miss Granger's birthday?"

Yes. Of course, I do.

She continues, "Perhaps you could send her a card? Or bring her by something tomorrow at work?"

"No, Mother."

I feel her eyes on me, but I stare down at my toast.

~*~

Monday, September 20, 1999

"HERMIONE GRANGER AND RONALD WEASLEY IN LOVE AGAIN!"

by Rita Skeeter

I stare at the picture of Weasley leaning in to kiss her. Softly. Like she'll break.

I let myself watch it once more, then I close the paper. Mother's eyes are on me.

"I'm quite surprised. I thought Mr. Weasley had been out of the country," she says.

I stand from the table. "Not all that surprising." I look up at her and focus on releasing all tension in my shoulders. I know my eyes are dead when I say, "They've been in love for years, you know."

I leave the room. I grab my satchel bag from Mippy, and toss the Floo powder into the fireplace. I step into the Ministry Atrium and head to the lifts. The three persons sharing the lift with me talk animatedly, and I block them out. I don't notice that they're all going down to the courtrooms until the lift doors open in the dark hallways. I roll my eyes, waiting for them to step off and four more join. We head up and the doors open again at the Atrium.

Three people step in at the Atrium, including her.

My pulse doesn't jump. My eyes don't drift to her. My skin doesn't prick.

The lift stops at every floor along the way. She hasn't seen me. And I'm counting down the floors until she jumps off at 4.

And suddenly - "I'm not engaged! Stop looking for a ring!"

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Seven

Saturday, September 25, 1999

Flying is easy. Zipping through Bludgers and winding over jerseys. The gasp of the wind in my ears overpowering any whispers.

What *isn't* easy, is the ginger glaring at me before we take off. Or the way Potter glances at me after the ginger takes him aside.

I have to remind myself that we aren't friends when Goldstein talks about drinks after practice. I decline, and I see Potter's shoulders drop in relief.

I get out of there before the Weasley girl tries to scream at me.

~*~

Sunday, September 26, 1999

At least we win against Magical Games and Sports. Ginny Weasley finds a way to put it all aside for the match, because she passes to me when I'm open and I slide the Quaffle just past the Keeper at the last second.

Goldstein hugs me in mid-air, almost knocking me from my broom. I let myself smile. Just once.

Potter looks like he wants to talk to me as we're heading to the cabins to shower and change, so I just grab my things and exit – as much as I would love to let Potter see the scar he dug into me as I change my shirt.

I'm casting a quick *Scourgify* over myself as I reach the edge of the pitch, and I hear a voice from a small distance away, chanting, "Go! Go! Gryffindor! Go! Go! Gryffindor!"

I turn to glare at the voice, and find myself looking into familiar, laughing eyes. My feet stop.

Pansy.

She smiles at me, like it's only been days since we've seen each other. She looks older.

I wonder if I do, too.

I think of the letters and notes she wrote to me for those fifteen months, and the denied visitation requests.

"You look good in red, Draco." She lifts a brow at me, and runs her eyes over my uniform.

We Apparate to a brunch place we used to go to in the summer before fifth year. Vincent used to order the French toast and the pancakes together and sit quietly eating next to Greg while Pansy, Blaise, Theo and I chatted. I blink.

"How's the Ministry?" she asks, once we've placed our orders. "Are you on your way to becoming the next Minister of Magic?" She teases me under lowered lids as she brings her teacup to her lips.

"Hardly." I stir in the honey. "It's as you would expect. A desk job with several of my least favorite people in England."

"How much longer do you have?"

"Eleven weeks." They could not pass soon enough. "And you? You're studying under Madame le Roux?"

"Ah, so you *did* receive my letters." She pats her napkin against her lips, and lifts a brow at me.

I feel heat come to my cheeks. "I read them. I didn't know how to respond."

"Oh, come now, Draco." She smiles. "I wanted to hear all about the exciting things going on with you. 'Today I walked around my cell *counter*-clockwise instead of clockwise. Today I was kicked by only *one* guard!'"

I stare down into my teacup.

"Who else is working with you?" she changes the subject – one of her strong suits. "I saw Anthony Goldstein today, and a few others I recognized. But Ginny Weasley – isn't she flying for the Harpies?"

"Mm-hmm. But she's Potter's girlfriend, so it seems she gets a free pass."

"Hm. Just like a Weasley." Pansy smirks, and we're thirteen again, picking apart the weak and laughing. She finds my eyes and says, "Always reaching for the cream of the crop, especially when they're unworthy."

And suddenly we're talking about a different Weasley, somehow. Another of her strong suits. I hold her stare, waiting.

"Who else works there, now?" She shifts in her chair, and I realize she's been working toward this for several minutes now. Working toward *her*. Pansy is marvelous. But I swallow.

"Katie Bell."

"Oo. Rough."

"Some idiot named O'Connor. He was a Gryffindor."

I'm standing now, still at the Manor, and the Dark Lord's eyes are trained on the ground again. Someone else is at his feet. Someone with wild curls, and wide eyes, and she's screaming. The Dark Lord is laughing. Everyone is laughing. There's a crowd around me. "This will teach you, Mudblood," Voldemort cackles. "For seducing pure-bloods, twisting them to bend to you." She begs, and then screams again as lightning hits her. I look down and it's my wand.

"STOP!"

And I'm back in Snape's classroom, on my knees and sweating. My vision blurring, and I'm gasping for air.

I look up at him. He's sipping from his teacup.

"What was that? What did you do?" I gasp.

"That," he says, "was skilled Legilimency on an untrained mind."

I glare at him. His greasy hair swings as he turns to set down his teacup.

"This isn't basic Occlumency, Draco," he says. "If all you want is a quick fix for pesky, prying minds, then your father could help you with that." He looks down at me. I'm still on my knees. "This kind of Occlumency is for the moment you will look into the eyes of the Dark Lord, and lie." He watches me as I blink. "The moment you tell him that you are devoted to no one above him. And trust me," he says, tilting his head, "that day is closer than you think."

"I'm not *devoted* to her."

He looks down at me, and I see pity in his eyes. "Draco, it's not *me* you need to lie to."

I swallow and I feel acid burning my throat as I try to keep my dinner down. I hear her screaming still. I take a deep breath, clearing the nightmare from my mind, and stand tall. I level my eyes on him, and she's tucked away, safe behind stone and brick.

"Ready?"

He sits at his desk. I sit in the chair.

I let him stare at me for the next four and a half hours, without a thought in my brain.

~*~

Saturday, September 18, 1999 – later

I hear the click of the camera as I leave. I can't be bothered to lift my head. Skeeter can deal. She can spin it like she always does.

I take the Floo to the Leaky Cauldron. I can't face my mother yet.

I down a firewhisky and head to an owlery. I'm halfway through a note to Katya before I remember she is unavailable all weekend. I crush the note in my fist, clenching my jaw. I flip names through my mind. Who could I bear listening to?

I'm folding and sealing the note to Jacqueline when I realize that she's brunette with intelligent eyes and wide teeth, and I'm ripping that letter up.

"No." I'm reaching for the handle on the door.

"Miss Granger drinks coffee, not tea." This stops me, my back still facing him. "She laughs to herself more often than she laughs out loud." I swallow. "She likes Sugar Quills. And while that revelation led me down a rabbit hole of dark fantasies I wish I'd never followed—"

"Stop."

"—The fact remains that your mind is not as well prepared as you think it to be. Miss Granger is not safe as long as you remain incompetent."

I spin back to him. "Safe?! How am *I* going to endanger her? She does a just fine job of that herself!"

He studies me. "He has plans for you, Draco. You must know."

I blink at him. I pretend I do know. "And?"

"And your loyalty will be tested."

I march back to him. "I am *loyal* to the Dark Lord," I hiss.

"For Miss Granger's sake, I hope so."

I stare at him. The tea kettle whistles. He turns and pours himself a cup.

"Are you ready to begin again?" he asks.

The muscle in my jaw ticks. "I cannot comprehend the idea that the Dark Lord would spend hours searching my mind. Your lessons make no sense," I seethe.

"It's not about the *hours,* Draco. It's about patience and training." He sips his tea, and then sets it on his desk.

"Patience and training for *what?* You've told me nothing of that damned *jewelry box* or how any of this will actually help me –"

"*Legilimens,*" he whispers.

A bolt of light speeds towards me, and I throw up a brick wall in surprise.

It is blasted into pieces, crumbling and cracking.

I erase my mind, letting the anger drift. But he's pushing past the doors and opening locks and drawing things forward and suddenly I'm seeing something I've never seen before.

She's in front of me on a cobblestone street. I have my wand trained on her, and her eyes are wide. Her wand is on the ground. Explosions around me. I lower my arm, my heart beating. She takes a quick breath, grabs her wand, and runs.

*I'm in the ballroom at Malfoy Manor. The Dark Lord is before me, taller than I've seen him. And I realize I'm on one knee, like my father was. "You hesitated, Draco," he hisses. "They saw you. Tell me why." I look into his red eyes and lie and say I didn't, say she overpowered me. "**Legilimens,**" he screams, and he's diving into my memories and he sees my desires and he's breaking through walls, stretching me, looking for truth, and he finds her.*

"I think I tripped him once."

"A few older Ravenclaws are Unspeakables."

"Naturally."

"That Kingsley fellow is Minister—"

"What about Granger?" She sips her tea, watching me.

"She's on the 4th Level. Magical Creatures."

"Hm. Seems right. Do you have to spend much time with her and Potter?" She sets her teacup down. Barely a click.

"Potter, I do. He'll bring me cases to research."

"But not Granger?"

"No, we have no need to directly interact."

"And indirectly?" There's a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. My fingers curl around the napkin in my lap.

"There's no need for that either."

"Hm," she hums, and I'm looking down at my saucer when she says, "What a shame. You were always so fond of the indirect interactions."

I can't bring my eyes to her. My tea is too hot, but I let it burn me as I sip.

~*~

Saturday, October 7, 1995

"Don't you want to find a classroom, Draco? It's so cold in the hallway."

"Shh. I'll keep you warm." I hum into her ear, pulling her against me. She laughs.

"What if someone catches us? Isn't this Granger's night for patrol?"

My hand stills on her hip. "Is it?" I kiss her neck. A small gasp escapes her. "Come on, let's go down here." I take her hand and pull her towards the hallway intersection.

"Don't you want privacy?" Pansy digs her heels in, and I almost yank her forward. We're going to be late. "I can't do all the things I want to while we're in the hallway, Draco." She whispers my name against my ear and I give her a shiver for show.

"Really?" I say. "I can think of plenty of things I can do to you in the hallway." I send her the smile that always works, and I drag her down the stones. I check my timepiece while she's trailing behind me, and see that we should have three minutes. Unless she took a different route. Unless she's early.

"Draco—"

I hush her with my mouth. I press her into the wall, and immediately slide my thigh between her legs. She squeaks and giggles. I hold her head still while I kiss her, opening her mouth, tilting her head, pouring my breath into her. She clutches my shoulders and I think I can hear footsteps.

My hands slide down, and round over Pansy's backside. She gasps. I pull her against me, sliding her along my thigh, pressing higher and she moans.

I hear a gasp, from twenty paces away, just near the hallway intersection. I press my tongue into Pansy's mouth again. I massage circles into her backside, and she's grinding down on my thigh. Good girl.

There's silence behind us. Pansy's hands twist into my hair, and she pulls my head down to her neck. I pinch my eyes closed to keep from searching for her face as I attach to Pansy's neck.

Where was the clearing of the throat? The indignant noise before she called my name?

A chill races through my veins when I realize that she's watching. I bite down on Pansy's neck and she gasps. I bring my hands to her face, kissing her mouth again as I let my palms wander down the front of her, grazing her chest and pressing against her stomach.

I want her to see this. I want her to know what I can do.

I hear quiet footsteps when I reach under Pansy's skirt, and let my fingers dance toward her. She's coming closer? Pansy groans, and I realize I'm snapping my hips against her.

I listen, hoping to hear her breathing, or the sound of her heartbeat. And the footsteps are getting softer.

I can't help it. I lift my head, and turn to where she's supposed to be. And there's a figure disappearing down the other end of the hallway, curls bouncing, head turned down.

Like I'm not worth the effort.

"Draco?" Pansy whispers against my cheek, and I realize I've stopped. Stopped everything. I feel Pansy turning to follow my gaze and I snap my head to her, taking her mouth again.

She was about twenty paces from the end of the hallway. I wonder how loud Pansy can get in twenty paces.

~*~

Sunday, September 26, 1999 – later

Pansy chats about her new fashion line she hopes to build. I get to bounce ideas off of her for the consulting group. We don't talk about the war or Hogwarts or hallways. When we separate, she makes me promise to write to her. She'll be in France for the foreseeable future, and I wonder about running away to the vineyards again.

I pop through the fireplaces at the Manor, ready to head upstairs, bathe, and just lay in silence until dinner.

"Mr. Malfoy, sir!"

I stop. I turn. I glare.

Mippy is smiling up at me.

"Your mother is requesting you in the library, sir!"

I clench my jaw. "Thank you, Mippy."

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Six

Thursday, February 1, 1996

Severus has been staring at me for fifteen minutes.

I know it's a test. I know he's probably reading me at this very moment.

But damn, I'm bored.

I've been coming to his office twice a week for the past month. I've been *meditating,* and clearing my mind three times a day per his instructions. We've built walls – literal walls. Last week I came in and there were bricks and mortar waiting for me. Two hours later I had made a three-foot-high brick wall.

But he hasn't mentioned the bloody jewelry box once. It still sits at the bottom of my trunk, hidden underneath spare robes and old parchment.

I don't take my eyes away from his. But I do start on my Ancient Runes essay. Mentally. Ten minutes later he finally speaks.

"I think you're thinking of late Egyptian. Not Scandinavian."

I blink, for what feels like the first time in half an hour. He lifts a brow at me.

"Congratulations, Draco," he says. "You failed your first test." He crosses his arms and swoops away from me.

My mouth opens and closes. I huff. "How did I fail if I didn't know what the test was?"

"Do you think the Dark Lord will give you a warning before he searches your mind?" He warms a kettle by his desk. My cheeks warm with it.

"This is ridiculous." I stand, grabbing for my school bag. "You haven't taught me *anything!* You're shit at this, you know that?" I spin on my heel, a move I learned from him and stomp to the door.

"Do you want to know what I learned while you were working on your Ancient Runes essay?"

Her breath left her lungs with a small laugh. He was smiling smugly at her, teasing her, watching her.

"You can't be serious," she said. She was going to cry or be sick or both. And none of those things did she want to do in front of him.

"And let's not forget my favorite part." He brought his face closer to hers, if it was even possible. "Another 5,000 would be added on if it could be proven that you were 'untouched.'"

Her lungs were begging for air, but she could not cooperate.

"So, tell me, Granger. I've been curious," he whispered. "Had events played out differently last spring, could I be 35,000 galleons richer?"

Her hand moved before her brain did. She slapped him. Her dirty blood was screaming in her veins and she was panting. His face barely moved as she connected, but she'd gotten him good. They glared into each other's eyes.

"Mr. Malfoy," a voice a thousand miles away called. "They are ready for you."

He straightened, and as he turned to face the oak doors, she turned on her heel and headed back to the lifts. She took them to the Atrium. Her heels clicked towards the first fireplace on the right, she spoke her Floo address as the dust hit the flames, and when Ginny jumped off the couch, spilling her popcorn on the floor, Hermione proceeded straight to the loo as her stomach heaved.

Ginny sat with her on the bathroom floor for the next several hours, without comment.

She dreamt that night of Malfoy Manor. She was lying on the drawing room floor, memorizing the chandelier and the patterns the light made on the ceiling. Something was tugging on her arm but she couldn't see.

"Where did you get the sword?" A hiss.

"We found it - I swear." Her voice floated to her ears. She did not remember speaking.

"You're a liar, aren't you, Granger."

The pain in her arm. Her voice screaming. And she looked to her left and Draco Malfoy was carving the word "Mudblood" into her arm.

Ginny was there when she woke up, sweating.

As I walk down the hallway, I shake my shoulders out, trying to focus on the qualities of a loving son.

I knock lightly and push open the doors. "Mother, you wanted to see me?"

She's sitting delicately in her chair, teacup beside her. She beams with mischief when she sees me, which is not my favorite expression.

"Draco! Home already!"

She has plans. I refrain from rolling my eyes and I step in the room.

"Yes, I was out with—"

But there's a figure in the chair next to her, still as a stone and I lose all my words when I see her sitting there, ankles crossed, floral skirt, holding a teacup. Like she belongs perfectly.

Which I suppose she does.

And her hair is fucking *wrong* again.

Her eyes are huge and waiting, and I forget that we're not alone, and that the entire reason she's here is because Mother is *absolutely* insane.

Mother smiles at me, eyes bright. "Draco, dear." Sickly sweet. Who is she fooling? "I invited Hermione to tea today. Didn't I tell you?"

My jaw tightens. I think of the two of them, sitting for hours, talking about me. Mother forcing her to discuss our past and our time at the Ministry, and has she told Mother about Friday? About never wanting to see me again?

"No, you didn't."

"Please join us, Draco." Not a request.

I'm about to ask Granger to excuse us so I can have a moment to scream, when she does exactly that. She stammers something about getting back to the bookstore, and I wonder how it is that she's even here and not at work. She drops her teacup on the side table with such a noise that it rattles for minutes afterwards, humming in the room.

Mother frowns and talks about setting up another time for tea with her, and she's practically shaking as she nods, standing and grabbing her bag.

Run, Granger.

"Draco, will you please escort Hermione the fireplaces?"

My jaw may break. My teeth grind against each other, and I'm about to snap for Mippy to take my place when she's mumbling that she can find her way.

"Oh, nonsense," Mother says. "It's no trouble, is it Draco?" I've seen this look on her before. When I was much younger. She used to give me this look when I was about to embarrass her in front of her socialite friends.

I snap into the guise of someone with nothing to fear and nothing to hide and I open the library door for her. She turns to thank my mother and Mother is asking her to call her Narcissa.

That I *do* roll my eyes at. My mother catches it as Granger turns to pass me, her scent blossoming in the air she passes.

I lead her to the fireplaces, concentrating on the destination and not the too-loud footfalls or the way I can feel the air move between us.

Just when I think I'm done. Just when I feel the air start to lighten, and the end is in sight, the elves – the usually silent elves – drop something in the drawing room. Her head turns, and she stares at the door.

I wonder if she knows where she is, and a spike of heat darkens my eyes when I think that Mother could have met her elsewhere.

I see her eyes on that door, her burning curiosity. And she needs to leave before she sees the chandelier crashed again and the hole in the ground where her body spasmed and the wrecked fireplace where –

"Renovations." I hear myself.

I feel her eyes on me, so I offer her the Floo powder and she disappears, leaving only her scent behind.

I watch the fireplaces for a moment longer. Then I turn on my heel, and head for Mother.

I push the doors open, and Mother is reading contentedly, sipping her tea.

"She's not engaged," she says. She flips a page.

Something releases its grasp on my ribs. And I swallow.

"We had an argument on Friday, and I think it's best if I stay away from her."

Mother looks up at me, brow raised.

"What kind of an argument?" she asks, sly as a fox.

I don't think Mother knows about the Auction. Being the wife of a Death Eater, she is no stranger to the crude and violent people that lived on her estate a few years ago, but I don't want her to know what I would have done. How I would have kept her.

I blink away the thoughts. "It doesn't matter now."

I turn and close the library doors behind me.

~*~

Thursday, September 30, 1999

She's been inescapable all week. I've joined her in the lifts, I've met her in the café, and now I'm working directly with her on a case.

Draco Malfoy
Analyst and Consult
Department of Magical Law Enforcement
Auror's Office

on the wall beside her head, grinning at her, and all she could think about was how many times she had found him in a similar position with Pansy Parkinson while on Prefect rounds.

"You see," he continued. "Macnair came up with the idea of the Auction. Brilliant business man he is." He laughed lightly at some hidden joke only he knew, and Hermione felt his breath puff across her face.

"The Auction?" She blinked at him. He smirked at her.

"A way to sort of… divvy up the spoils of war. Whoever came into possession of certain Muggle-borns, Blood-traitors, or Order members at the end the of the war, would have first right to auction them off to the highest bidder… for whatever purpose they would like."

Hermione's chest felt hollow. She wasn't breathing, but he kept going.

"And trust me, Granger." He smiled at her. "It isn't your housekeeping skills that they were after."

She could feel the bile building in her throat while tears pricked her eyes. She cleared her throat.

"Then I assume thanks are still in order, Malfoy," she bit out. "If you had identified me that night, 'The Golden Girl' would have belonged to Greyback and the Snatchers – theirs to auction. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to live out the rest of the war in the Malfoy dungeons! If you're going to become a 'spoil of war,' best to do it in style!" She spat his words back at him and saw her breath sweep the hair that had fallen on his forehead again.

"Oh, you're very welcome, Granger," he hissed at her. "After all, I've heard that Greyback wasn't so interested in waiting for the Auction. He preferred to *keep* all of his 'spoils.'"

She could feel the heat dancing up her neck and across her jaw. She swallowed and held his cruel eyes. "And, of course, being the shrewd business man that you are, that wouldn't do. Why let Greyback have me when you could use the opportunity to make a few hundred galleons after the war. Is that it, Malfoy?"

He laughed, and the sound rattled her ribs. "A few hundred galleons? Come now, Granger, you must know that your… *skills* would have been worth much more than that. You would have been the top prize."

"Stop," she hissed at him.

"Bidding for you and the Weasley girl actually started at 10,000 galleons each, but I had it on good authority that the highest bid discussed was 20,000 for the ginger –"

"You're disgusting." She needed to get out before she cried. She started to step around him, away from the wall, but he pinned her in with his other arm.

"—And 30,000 galleons for the Brightest Witch of Our Age."

"You saved me from a lifetime of rotting in Azkaban, so now I owe you, Granger? Is that how it works?"

Hermione was genuinely shocked. "No. No, that wasn't my intention at all." She shook her head and centered herself by looking down at the space between the tips of their shoes. Barely two strides. She swallowed. "If anything, Malfoy, a Debt is repaid." She glanced up from beneath her lashes. He was squinting at her. "I meant what I said at your trial. If you had identified us at the Manor—"

"Stop!" he snapped and she jumped. "Stop glorifying that night."

She jerked back from him, searching his face. He was glaring at her again. And he was flushed.

"I didn't give a fig about saving the world, or stopping the Dark Lord – or you and your idiotic friends for that matter!" Part of his bangs fell forward onto his forehead and he shoved it back into place.

"I know you recognized me," she said, shaking her head at him. "I know you saw me, saw Ron, and could have easily –"

"Handed you over to the Death Eaters? Would you have liked that Granger? Would it have cleared things up in your logical brain?"

"Of course not!" She almost laughed at the absurdity.

He shifted his weight so he could meet her at eye level, leaning toward her. Her back felt the cold of the stone wall just behind her. "Do you even know what they're capable of? Dolohov? The Death Eaters?"

She squashed the slight joy at hearing him talk about the Death Eaters as if he were not a part of them and straightened her spine.

"Clearly I do! You were in the room for it!" She couldn't help but reach for her arm, still magically scarred with the word forever.

"Not Bella. The real Death Eaters."

She didn't understand. Something on her face must have told him so.

He continued, "Some of them are completely sane, with logical brains and the ability to dream up a future where Harry Potter and the Order are defeated, and Lord Voldemort reigns. And what do you think happens to people like you in this world, Granger?" His steel grey eyes drilled into hers, and the trace of that hidden smirk was back. He was winning at something. She just didn't know what yet.

"I get it, Malfoy." Hermione rolled her eyes, trying bravado. "We all get tortured. We all die. All Muggle-borns get a matching 'Mudblood' carving –"

"All the Muggle-borns, yes." The glimmer was back in his eyes. He took another step toward her, and her back landed against the wall. "But not Potter's 'Golden Girl.'" She rankled at the term. "Or his Weasley slag for that matter." She scowled at Ginny's mention. He placed a hand

Thank you for the detailed report on the incident regarding the dragon egg. The Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures would like as much information as possible on the physical attributes of the egg itself so that we may begin to identify the breed.

A response at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

Hermione J. Granger

Analyst and Research Assistant

Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures

Beast Division

Dragon Research and Restraint Bureau

I roll my eyes at her scratchy penmanship and civility.

I write back:

It was shaped liked an egg.

No formalities. No titles. No greetings. I smirk as I imagine her opening it, storming around her cubicle, demanding justice and competence.

It's already sent off when I realize that pulling an emotional response from her is the wrong thing.

I bite my cheek and wait.

~*~

Friday, October 8, 1999

"Draco." Mother's voice stops me as I stand from the breakfast table. "I request that you be at home tomorrow evening. Please cancel any plans you may have with… Katya."

She hisses the Slavic name like it's disgraceful against her tongue.

"Alright," I say. No point in arguing over plans I don't have with a girlfriend who's not mine. "What scheme do you have planned, Mother?" I bring my teacup to my lips and finish my tea.

"Hermione is coming over tomorrow."

I cough. I grab at my napkin and pat my chin before the tea stains my robes. She's smiling. She timed it, hoping I would choke.

"What are you playing at?" I hiss at her.

"Nothing, dear," she says. "I made a new friend and I'd like to keep her."

"Then why do I have to be there?" I hiss. "I really should be seen out with companions on Saturday evenings –"

"Should the three of us go out then?" She smiles at me.

I frown back. "*Suitable* companions." My blood heats thinking of being photographed with her. Sitting at a table with a white cloth and wine glasses while Mother chats and approves and the world sees a happy family, and all my father sees is betrayal. And weakness.

"I can't think of a better companion for your reputation," Mother says. She begins to put jam and clotted cream on her scone. "Skeeter would be ecstatic, don't you think?"

I'm tempted to make her choke on her scone, as she made me choke on my tea, but I decide to speak before she takes a bite.

"Father wants me to stay away from her if I am to receive the inheritance before I marry."

Her butter knife stops its journey to the jam. And my mother, snapping her head to me, eyes dark with fury, says, "Poppycock!"

I chuckle. There are moments when I find my mother so precious. And I feel if I don't laugh, I'll scream.

"He said that to you?" she demands.

I nod, and look at the stone beneath my feet. "He gave me a portion of my inheritance to work with until the new year. But the rest would only be released if he was sure I remained focused."

I watch as she rolls her eyes and smooths her napkin on her lap.

"Well, what your father doesn't know, won't hurt him." She pops the bite of scone into her mouth and chews.

"Perhaps just the two of you should have dinner. Like I said, we had an argument…" I swallow and blink away the sight of her watery eyes as I asked her if I could have bought her virginity back then. "I said all the right things to make her hate me." I look up to my mother. "She won't agree to dinner."

"She already has." Mother lifts her brows at me. Mine pull together.

What game was Granger playing.

"There didn't seem to be anything out of sorts the last time she was over," Mother continues. "She was perfectly happy to visit, and even talk a bit about your shared time at Hogwarts." My eyes snap to her while she smirks and brushes the jam with little flourishes. "Perhaps, you're not as *evil* as you think, Draco."

She pushes the scone past her lips and grins at me.

"Or perhaps, she's a fool," I say.

I turn to leave and head to work.

~*~

Saturday, October 9, 1999

I take afternoon tea with Noelle Ogden. I've seen her at holiday parties over the years, but we've never had an opportunity to really get to know each other. She's several years older, and currently at a Muggle university in the States, so we catchup on a few things.

I bring up the consulting group, and begin opening doors for asking to sit down with her father.

"What are you doing here?" He squinted at her. She came to a stop about two meters from him.

"Providing information to the Wizengamot. Much like I assume you are?"

He clenched his jaw and glared at the floor again. When it was clear he would say no more, she settled herself against the opposite wall. Standing with him against his wall would have been awkward she assumed, but now she wished she had because they had to face each other from across a wide hallway. She focused her eyes on the oak door down the hall, craning her neck to keep him out of her line of sight.

"Tell me, Granger," he said, and she did her best to face him. He wasn't looking at her. "Do you make it a priority to free all of the Death Eaters?" She blinked at him, and he continued, "Is 'Testify on Behalf of the Accused' a standing Friday appointment in your calendar?"

He looked at her with the half-bored, half-annoyed expression that she'd seen so often on him. He was so warm to her last Friday, even buying her a drink, chatting with her. And there was something about her being golden…. It was as if she'd imagined all of it, and instead, they were still twelve years old on the Quidditch pitch.

"Actually, I am testifying *against* the accused today," she said, holding his stare. His eyes flickered, and she suspected that that was all she needed to say, but her mouth had a different idea. "Don't worry, Malfoy, you're still the exception to the rule." She raised a brow at him, like he always did to her.

"The exception…" He muttered and his eyes narrowed at the ground in between them. Then suddenly, "And who asked you to *save* me, Granger?" He stepped off the wall, neck and shoulders tense. She held her breath. "Because I didn't ask for your pity. I don't need a 'champion.'" He sneered at her. It reminded her so much of Hogwarts that she took a moment before she replied.

"I never volunteered to be your 'champion,'" Hermione scoffed.

He stepped into her.

"Then what is it you *are* volunteering for?" There was a glimmer in his eyes and a smirk hiding at the corner of his mouth. Hermione felt small and quiet, but mostly she felt hot. It was as if he'd flipped a switch somewhere and had changed the entire atmosphere of the hallway.

"N-nothing." She focused on the disgusted look on her own face, trying to keep it there, trying to portray confusion. "Merlin, Malfoy! Can't you just accept it when someone is nice to you? It … it was the right thing to do."

The smirk slid off his lips, but his eyes were still gleaming. His pupils danced back and forth between her eyes with a determination she remembered from watching him during Arithmancy.

"So, is it a Life Debt, then?" he asked.

She no longer needed to pretend to be confused. "A Life Debt?"

that the flash of blonde hair she'd seen on the front page had been Lucius Malfoy. She felt her breath leave her while staring at his face for the first time in a year and a half. The similarities with Draco were so striking, and even in his Azkaban robes, staring into her eyes through the paper, she still felt the cold chill of inferiority.

She arrived back at home and flipped through the article, landing on the photos of Draco's date. They had gone to dinner at one of the fancier Wizarding London cafés. She had wavy blonde hair and perfect teeth and Draco smirked at her. She was a Pureblood French girl according to Rita, which in Hermione's opinion would have not helped the case for all the Half-Bloods and Muggle-borns scrambling to be first in line. Rita did not even indicate in the article that Draco's "preferences" had changed since the war, but basically gave a "Have at it!" to all ages, sizes, and births. It was quite encouraging if you were vapid enough to believe it.

Hermione noted that at no point did Rita confirm that the meeting was a success and the inheritance released. And she did not comment on the picture of Draco leaving Azkaban, head down, scowling, and jaw clenched.

On Friday, Hermione was wearing her sensible heels again. She really needed Ginny to take her shopping to find shoes that wouldn't embarrass her, but today there was no time. She was speaking to the Wizengamot today regarding the sentencing of Antonin Dolohov.

According to Harry, the Wizengamot had been arguing for quite some time regarding the worst of the Death Eaters, particularly the ones who had been imprisoned before and had escaped. She'd heard rumblings through the office that a Dementor had been captured last week, and while Aiden liked to hypothesize the silliest things, Hermione knew that the timing with Dolohov's trial was suspicious.

She held no pity for Dolohov, but if The Kiss was being reintroduced as a possibility, where did it end?

Hermione exited the lifts on the bottom floor, and stopped short when she spotted a blonde head twenty meters away. He was leaning against the stone wall and staring down at his shoes. She hadn't seen him since her mental break in lifts on Monday, but Rita Skeeter had kept his name in the papers. In fact, he had a lunch date with the same Bulgarian girl the day before. She smiled too much.

As far as she could tell, he had not noticed her yet, and she was so tempted to turn and head back upstairs. Her feet began to carry her toward him. He heard the clicking of her shoes and looked up at her. She saw for the smallest of moments a look of open curiosity before it was replaced with distrust.

"Malfoy," she greeted him, remembering that the last time they had truly spoken she had called him Draco.

I stay out past dinner time. I'll deal with Mother's wrath later.

I finally pop through the fireplaces just past eight, and prepare myself to run into her while she's leaving. Silence in the hall.

I wander towards the western dining room, ready to join them if they're still eating. I turn the corner and Mother is sitting, reading a book at the table.

"She didn't show?"

She looks up at me, displeased. "She did. She's in the library, browsing."

"Suddenly we're a used book shop?" I shoot at her. She glares back at me. "I'm sorry I missed dinner, but –"

"You didn't." She smiles at me. "Will you please check on our guest?"

I frown. "You waited for me for dinner?

"I didn't," she says, flipping a page in her book. "Hermione had errands to run as well." She looks up at me with a wide smile, and three place settings appear on the table. "Perfect timing, really."

I stomp out of the dining room, feeling like knocking something over on the way out. I trudge to the library and when I open the doors and cannot immediately see her, I realize I'll have to search for her, like a fucking servant.

She's not far from the main stacks. Her back is to me, and her hair is down, falling past her shoulders. I'm tempted to knock my knuckles on the wooden stacks as a hello, but this is *my fucking library* and she has no *fucking business* being here. I'm about to say something prickly, that will hopefully make her jump, when I see that she's juggling several books in one arm. She's got one open on her elbow, reading the Table of Contents, and she's balancing the rest against her hip and chest.

It's all very nostalgic. I swallow. I remember seeing her this way in the Hogwarts library, never pausing to set anything down and never levitating.

I conjure a basket. I clear my throat. I clear my head.

She jumps and her eyes grow round when she sees me. Her cheeks flush, and I hope I'm still frowning at her.

When she sputters out that she's just borrowing books, I realize I shouldn't be giving her a basket. She should have to fumble these books all night. Through dinner even.

"I know," I say. I step closer to her, and twirl the basket between my fingers. "I told my mother that she was foolish to think that you would be able to carry your selections out with you without the aid of a small sled. So she sent me to give you this."

I extend the basket to her. My insult didn't come out nearly insulting enough. I can tell because she's watching me closely as she takes the basket from me, and breathing deeply. I let her organize the books, and I'm just two steps away from her, breathing her in.

"My mother would like you to join us for a late dinner."

And just as I suspected, she has no idea about staying for dinner.

"What? It's half past eight!"

"Yes, that's why they call it a 'late' dinner, Granger." A fire lights behind her eyes as I talk down to her, and I try to refocus on the matter at hand. "The table is already set for three. She is waiting on us."

She stutters, and tries to say she's not hungry, and the blush on her neck is distracting me as I tell her dinner is not optional.

"Just because you are unable to say 'no' to Mummy, doesn't mean no one else can," she snaps. "I will apologize to her directly and decline."

She sticks her nose in the air and something clicks into place inside of me.

I grab her arm as she tries to walk around me.

"Look, you silly bint." I wait for her face to turn up to mine, and there's something burning inside of her. "You have chosen to befriend my mother and pester my household—"

"To clarify, she chose me—"

I cut her off, squeezing the flesh of her arm just a bit tighter. "And for whatever reason, she has invited you to dine with her this evening, going out of her way to eat later in the evening so she could fit into your *busy* schedule—"

"I tried to come over *after* dinner!" she screeches. She's taking shallow breaths, eyes flickering back and forth between mine.

"—So I don't know what your intentions are for being here, haunting my library, and playing house with my mother—"

"I find your mother to be a wonderful conversationalist, a generous host, and all-around lovely person. It's a shame those genetic traits ended with her."

My skin is searing where I have my fingers wrapped around her. She is glaring up into my face, insulting me like she used to, and it would be so easy to push her against the shelves and taste her – give her imprints on her back.

Something crosses her face, and she pulls her arm back, breaking our eye contact. And I miss everything.

She marches out of the library, with theatrics that I remember from school. I follow silently, and smirk as she goes the wrong way out the doors. I lean against the doorframe and try to look smug.

"Granger."

She turns and glares at me as I gesture toward the right. She huffs and lets me lead her through the house. I hear her slow several times, and when I look over my shoulder I see her looking at

looked at it. He smiled in thanks at the ladies who had stood from it, clearly not done with their lunches.

"So, he wants his money early? That's all Rita had to say?" Hermione watched Harry devour his first croissant in a perfect impersonation of Ron at dinner time.

Harry wiped his mouth. "Pretty much." He sipped his tea and looked at a point over her shoulder. Hermione frowned at him.

"What else, Harry."

His shoulders slumped. "Well, that evening he went on a date."

Hermione kept her face neutral. "Is that all?"

Harry studied her. "Yes. I guess we just didn't want you to read about all that and look at the pictures of them on your birthday." He stared longingly at his second croissant. Hermione noted that there were pictures.

"Well, I guess that was for the best. I had a lovely day until my fiancé decided to kiss me." She cut into her croissant, giving Harry the permission he needed to continue ravishing his plate. "So, he's been in a mood? Malfoy?"

With his mouth full, "He's been getting harassed all week."

"What do you mean?"

"Cards, flowers, resumes…all from potential wives. It's like mating season. Rita's article almost gave permission to court him. He's been setting fire to anything that enters his office with hearts on it."

"But that doesn't make sense," Hermione said. "He's been listed as an eligible bachelor for weeks. Why are these crazed Witches acting like this now?"

Harry swiftly finished his last bite, and while picking at the flakes left on the plate, said, "I guess if his inheritance was released to him on Saturday, then he could now marry a Half-Blood, a Muggle-born – Merlin even a Muggle! – and still receive the money. Lucius couldn't hold it hostage." Harry leaned back in his chair, smiling. "*And* now he's probably the richest unmarried Wizard of his age."

"*If* the money was released to him." She scratched off the top layer of the pastry with her fingernail.

"Right. *If*."

Hermione quietly finished her croissant while Harry prattled on about work.

Once she'd ransacked all the rubbish bins at home, finding nothing, Hermione took the Floo to the *Daily Prophet* Headquarters, asking for the paper printed on her birthday, as a "memento." After the older dark skinned woman handed her the paper – holding her hand for longer than necessary, thanking her for all she did in the war – Hermione realized

The lifts arrived at the Atrium. Harry led out, saying over his shoulder, "Most sensible people know that Rita publishes absolute drivel most of the time. I mean, look at what she said about Malfoy over the weekend! He's been in a right state too!"

Hermione stopped, letting Ministry employees push past her to get into their lift. Her mind flitted through the events of the weekend, and found no Malfoy article.

"Which article was that?" She found her legs again and followed.

Harry turned to walk backwards as he led the way to the café. "You know, the one about him visiting his father? And her guesses at why they were meeting? But, she wasn't there. She couldn't have known. Absolute drivel."

Hermione didn't bother reminding him that she *could* have been there, a *fly-on-the-wall*. "What day was this?"

"He visited Saturday, after our Quidditch practice I guess," Harry said, lowering his voice as they entered the café and joined the back of the line. "The article was published Sunday."

The faint memory of a blonde head on the front page, Ginny not letting her read the article…. Hermione made a mental note to check the rubbish bins for Sunday's paper.

"What did it say? What was she hypothesizing?"

Harry turned to her and she could see now the same look on his face when Ginny told him not to share the paper with her.

"Just… why he was visiting Lucius." He grabbed a tray and stared at it.

"Harry, I'm going to find it and read it anyway."

Harry sighed and scratched his jaw. He looked around the café to make sure no one could eavesdrop. "She brought up Draco's inheritance, and how he might be trying to get it released to him early."

Hermione squinted at him. "And he needed to speak to Lucius? Shouldn't all of his money be available to Narcissa?"

They arrived at the front of the line then, and Hermione had to wait while Harry ordered tea and two of the croissants he'd been pestering her about. Then when he stepped aside for her to order, and she realized that both croissants were for *him*, she stifled a smile and ordered one for herself.

"Some of the Pureblood families have their money guarded with old magic," Harry said. Hermione nodded. She knew a little about this, but clearly Harry knew more. He continued, "Most likely in Malfoy's case, his inheritance would be released to him on his wedding day, after Lucius performed a ritual passed down through the Malfoy men."

Hermione's eye twitched at the words "wedding day." Harry found a little table that mysteriously became available the moment The-Boy-Who-Lived-And-Died-And-Lived-Again

the art on the walls, and even once stopping dead to take in the sunset through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

I wonder if she likes it. The Manor.

I blink and keep moving, hearing her catch up.

Mother smiles as we enter the small dining room, and when I take the basket from her arm, she looks suspicious. I pull her chair for her and she looks suspicious. I sit down across from her and she looks suspicious.

My mother encourages her to take the entire library home with her, and I watch as she smiles easily at her, and I look down at the table cloth. It's white. It's blank. It holds no memories or feelings.

I breath into its emptiness.

"I almost took the signed copies of the Lance Gainsworth series to read again, but your mother was telling me how much you love them, Draco. I'd hate for you to part with them."

Like ice water poured down my back, and fire licking my front all at the same time.

Draco.

I meet her eyes.

She sends me a mischievous smile that reminds me far too much of my Mother's, and I focus on what she's saying about the books before I even comprehend she's found my Gainsworth series.

I grimace back at her. "That was very kind of you, Granger." And I can see that Mother is quite pleased with herself. "And which books *are* you leaving with tonight?"

She frowns at my accusation of stealing our books, and continues to speak directly to my mother. The concept of blocking her out is infinitely harder when her voice is floating through the room, and I try to focus on the way her tone swings up on words to a pitch that is almost annoying.

The first course appears on the table.

My breathing is even. My eyes are taking her in. And my hands are steady.

Just in time for Mother to bring me back into the conversation.

"Draco, you've heard about Hermione's Gringotts project, yes?"

"I can't say that I have."

She starts on her pitch. Something about the dragon at Gringotts. When she's done with her story, I see her look down at the soup, and catalogue the spoons. She quickly glances to my mother to see which spoon she's selected.

It's abhorrent. Not precious.

"And you think the goblins will be willing to do things a different way?" I ask, and I'm almost certain she watches my soup spoon meet my lips.

Her eyes flip away and she says, “I think negotiation is always possible.”

I laugh. The most non-negotiable person I’ve ever met…

“I’ve worked with them personally several times over the past months. They are not amenable to wizarding changes.”

She’s dipped her spoon in the soup by now. I wonder how her lips will look, pouting around the utensil. Or maybe because she’s not been trained, the spoon will disappear between her lips –

I blink.

“Then we will have to make them see—”

“You can’t make a goblin see anything.” I cut her off. She’s forgotten about her spoon and maybe I can too.

“The Ministry will be able to mandate laws that will force the goblins to comply,” she says. Her cheeks begin to blush and I feel an answering response in my own. There’s a flicker behind her eyes and I want to see it spark, so I use the precise word to set her off.

“So you think goblin rights should be subordinate to wizards law?”

Her eyes widen and her jaw drops and my chest is warm. I’m smiling before I can stop myself.

“I said no such thing-” And I cut her off again, speaking just close enough to the truth that it will set her off.

“The negotiations will only work if you get what you want, is that right Granger?” I relax back against my chair, and watch as she blinks rapidly at me, and I can feel her hand against my cheek again—

“Draco.”

I had forgotten Mother was here at all. An excellent cool down.

She puts her spoon down. “The only thing I *want* is for no further harm to come to magical creatures by Gringotts’ hands. There is a better solution out there, and I want wizards and goblins to agree upon it.”

I notice she hasn’t taken a bite of pumpkin soup yet, and perhaps she shouldn’t. She doesn’t deserve it.

“Maybe it *is* the best solution, Granger,” I say lazily. “Maybe you’re not the first person to start this fight, only to find that keeping a dragon in the bowels of Gringotts is the best security method there is.”

I look at the tablecloth, the soup bowl, anywhere but her. Like she’s inconsequential.

“It must not be the best method if three seventeen-year-olds were able to free it and ride out on its back last spring,” she snaps, and when I look at her she’s burning, glaring directly into me, and I think of us fighting like this without a table between us. Sparring in the bedroom

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Nine

By Tuesday morning, everyone on Level 4 knew not to look for a ring, ask her about her coming nuptials, or even glance her way. The rest of the day on Monday had been so tense after she had screamed at Aiden for filing a case file incorrectly, that Mathilda probably sent out some kind of a memo. Word must have traveled up to Level 2, because Harry appeared at her cubicle on Wednesday just before lunch.

“How’s the bride-to-be?” He smiled.

She glared at him, and continued throwing files around in an order only she knew.

“Come on. Let’s go down to the café.”

“I’m not hungry,” she bit out.

“Well, *I* am and *I* want some company.” He grinned at her. “Besides, those files will still be here in half an hour, and they will still be in need of some roughing up.”

She looked down and realized that every file she’d touched had now been crumpled, torn, or bent. She sighed and grabbed her coin purse.

Once alone in the lifts, Harry turned to her.

“So who is it you’re really upset with? Ron or Skeeter?”

“Both, but mainly me.” She closed her eyes and pressed her temples. “I’m so angry that I let him kiss me.”

There was silence. The gates opened and a few memos flew out.

“Do you want to get back together with Ron?”

She looked up at him. Harry’s face was completely open to her. He wasn’t hoping for an answer. He was asking her from honest curiosity. She tried as honest an answer as she could.

“Not really, no. Or maybe it’s ‘not now’? I’m not really sure.” She pushed up the sleeves of her robes. “I just don’t like feeling like the choice is being taken from me. By Rita *bloody* Skeeter!”

Level 5, and almost every single person exited, even though Hermione was sure not everyone worked at the Department of International Magical Cooperation. She was a right nutter.

Two men stayed on with her as the lift headed to Level 4. She looked up to apologize to them and found herself looking at Draco Malfoy.

He must have been tucked in the back when she jumped on at the Atrium, because there was no way she could have missed him otherwise. He had a neutral expression on his face as he stared at her.

She let out a nervous laugh. "Sorry," she said. "It's been a long day already."

The other man nodded. Draco blinked.

"Obviously." A drawl.

The lift stopped at Level 4. She jumped out and didn't look back. She got to her desk and just as she sat, breathing again, Aiden appeared eating an apple.

"Oi! Let's have a look at the ring."

maybe. Maybe she'd still be arguing with me while on her back, my hands opening her blouse. Still glaring at me, fighting over something we said at dinner.

"Mippy!" My mother is still here. She asks the elf for wine.

I watch her look at my mother, smile apologetically, and try to pick up her spoon again.

Oh, no you don't, Granger.

"Of course, getting down into the lower vaults required a bit of mischief if I remember correctly," I say, picking right back up. "The three seventeen-year-olds first used Unforgivables to pass through the first layers of security. So maybe it's not the dragon at all that failed."

Her eyes on me again, and I almost sigh. Mother tries to offer her wine and she declines.

"So, you're saying" – I see her crack a knuckle – "keep the maimed and tortured dragon downstairs, and beef up the upstairs security? That will solve the problem with the maim and torture."

I don't even know what we're talking about anymore. All I know is that she's not allowed to eat her soup, and she's not allowed to look away from me.

"Draco? Wine?"

"No, Mother." My eyes are focused in on her, and I feel the rest of my vision start to blur. "I'm just saying that the fault you find in the security is based on the ability to get past the dragon, but they would not have been able to get past the dragon without a bit of law-breaking upstairs." I pick up my spoon again, and smirk. "You might want to keep these arguments out of your presentation, Granger, else they decide to investigate further."

Mother is still talking about wine. I'm trying not to smirk. And Granger has abandoned her soup.

"Oh, thank you, Draco, but the Wizengamot already knows every detail of that situation," she hisses. I bring my spoon to my lips again, feeling perfectly content. "See, *I'm* perfectly capable of staying out of Azkaban all by myself, without the aid of a *champion*."

I freeze. Oh, you haughty little bitch.

I look up at her, ready with some kind of comment, and I see the heat leaving her eyes as she pulls her napkin off her lap, blushing across her face and chest.

I watch as she excuses herself, as she apologizes to my mother, as she looks mournfully at the soup.

Where are you going, Granger? We're just getting started.

She's standing and Mother is begging her to stay.

I imagine forcing her to stay. Tying her to her chair and taunting with that soup, pouring it down her throat while I make her moan with my other hand –

Mother is still talking and I blink. She's suggesting that I walk her out and I'd really prefer not to stand right now.

She scoffs. Says she'd rather get lost in the house than have me walk her.

I watch her as she ignores me, saying goodbye to my mother and fleeing the dining room. My heart is still thundering and the blood is still rushing downwards thinking of her angry face and her heated eyes and how much I'd like Mother to excuse us while I ravish her on top of the dining room table, soup spilling onto the tablecloth—

"Well, Draco," Mother whispers. "I hope you're happy."

It's supposed to be condescending. It's supposed to be sarcastic.

My lips lift. It the first time in two weeks that I've felt anything other than cold.

"Indescribably." I laugh. I stand, moving to leave.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm showing our guest out," I say innocently. Mother rolls her eyes at me.

Mippy appears, looking nervous, saying, "Miss forgot her books!" I take them and head toward the fireplaces. The books are monstrously heavy, so I cast a feather-light charm. I'm approaching the entry hall when I hear a whispered *"Accio Floo powder!"*

I smirk, and she hears me coming. She crosses her arms over her chest and I keep my eyes on her face. She's still glaring, so when I hand her the books I lift the weightless charm, and her eyes darken when she's done fumbling her books.

She's heaving in air through her nose, pressing her lips together and her chest is moving against the books. I flick my wrist and the Floo powder appears. She rolls her eyes and tries to reach for it. I pull it away.

I consider lifting it above our heads, watching her jump for it. Maybe she'll drop the books and press against me, grabbing my shoulders.

"Mother's quite upset, you know," I say. "After the scene you've made, I hope this is your last visit to Malfoy Manor."

She glares daggers into me, and I see the light in her eyes again.

"Oh, fuck off, Draco."

She grabs the Floo powder, and disappears.

I don't know what's gotten me harder: the obscenity, or the third "Draco" from her lips in one night.

I'm still standing at the fireplaces. I should go back and apologize to Mother. Finish dinner with her. I head upstairs and close my bedroom door, and let myself think of Hermione Granger's thighs on either side of mine, my hands wound in her hair, her lips whispering "Draco" against my neck.

It's the first time I've let myself think of her in two weeks.

"HERMIONE GRANGER AND RONALD WEASLEY IN LOVE AGAIN!"

by Rita Skeeter

In uncertain times, we look towards hope. We look towards those who give us hope.

Over the past eight years, Hermione Granger and Ronald Weasley have given us hope in many forms, but they now offer us a different kind of hope. A hope for happily ever after.

Hermione gaped at the picture on the page. She'd never even seen the camera man, but Bozo had gotten the kiss. The kiss that… when thinking later, didn't mean anything to her. She'd thought maybe Ron was trying to make her a promise to return for her, or to be true to her. But there was nothing to be true for. They were not together and they hadn't been in over a year.

Of course, Skeeter's article disagreed.

Ever since the Final Battle, Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley have been in touch despite the distance. Miss Granger visits her beloved in Ireland every weekend, and Ronald Weasley was just seen visiting her at work this Saturday.

After a birthday dinner for Miss Granger yesterday with only close friends, Mr. Weasley bid her goodnight with a promise for their future. My only question, dear readers, is… have we had a look at Miss Granger's ring finger?

Hermione huffed. She crumpled the paper and tossed it in the rubbish bin. It took her twenty minutes of stewing and pouting before she could pull herself together enough to head to work.

Arriving in the Ministry Atrium, she was surrounded by her face kissing Ron's. It seemed that everyone was reading a paper, had a paper tucked under their arm, was gesturing wildly with a paper. She embarked on a direct course for the lifts, hoping she was giving off the impression that she was in a foul mood and nobody better talk to her today.

She jumped into the first lift available, filled with several Ministry employees coming up from the lower floors. Some from the Atrium joined her in the lift, some who she recognized by face, not by name. She reached up to grab a hanging rope, and as the lift zoomed backwards she noticed several witches turn towards her. She frowned back at them. She was used to people staring at her – she generally looked at the floor when this happened – but today she was so angry with Skeeter, with Bozo, with Ron….

The lift stopped at Level 6 and admitted a witch in bright blue robes. She joined the crowded lift and grabbed on, standing in front of Hermione. It wasn't until that witch turned around, smiled at her, and quickly looked up that Hermione realized she had grabbed a rope with her left hand. Everyone was looking for the blasted ring.

"I'm not engaged! Stop looking for a ring!"

Silence. Every witch that had been looking at her hand stood still as a statue. The wizards who had no idea what was happening, edged away from her. The lift slowed and stopped at

He shook his head. “A mention of the twentieth birthday of the ‘Golden Girl,’ of course.” He smiled at her and she frowned at him.

“Did she really use that phrase?”

“Of course she did.” Harry laughed. “Here, let me show you how she rambles on about you—”

“Ah-ah! No papers today!” Ginny interrupted. “No news!” Ginny gave Harry a look that he immediately understood. Hermione was lost unfortunately.

“No news?” Hermione asked.

“Yes, no news.” Ginny placed the milk on the table in front of Hermione. “We are celebrating today, and nothing else will distract us! Eat your eggs,” she concluded, in a very Molly-Weasley-like manner.

They chatted over breakfast about work, about Ron being home, about nothing really. Ginny had made plans for dinner that evening at one of the nicer restaurants in Wizarding London, so after a very pleasant day of doing nothing but enjoying the company of her best friends, they met up with Ron at about five o’clock to stroll the neighborhood before heading to their six o’clock reservation. Ron kissed her on the corner of her mouth again, and she felt his hand on her ribs as he pulled away.

It struck her as they were seated at a four-person table - Harry at her left, Ron at her right, and Ginny across from her - that this was just as it was supposed to be. The four of them were very simple when they were not saving the Wizarding World. Ron was telling a story with loud arm gestures, Ginny was rolling her eyes at him, Harry was correcting him, and Hermione was laughing. They were not war heroes or famous child wizards or Quidditch players. They were four friends. Two couples. She could maybe get used to that again.

After presents, after dessert, Harry and Ron walked the girls to the apparition point.

“I think I will be back next month, maybe around Halloween,” Ron said. Her arm was in his and he was very warm.

“Wonderful. We’ll need to plan something then.”

“I do miss you very much, Hermione.”

She glanced up at him. He was looking down at her with a sad smile. She beamed at him and squeezed his arm close to hers.

“I miss you very much as well. We all do. But I’m very proud of you for pursuing your dreams, Ron.”

He smiled at the ground. When they reached the apparition point, Harry kissed Ginny goodbye and gave Hermione a hug. Ron punched his sister’s arm and hugged her. Then he turned to Hermione and held her tight. He pulled away and placed a simple kiss to her lips. She smiled up at him.

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Ten

Ginny spent the whole night on the bathroom floor with her, comforting her the best she could, but every time Hermione looked at her, she felt Draco’s breath against her face as he told her how much her best friend was worth to the Death Eaters. She wouldn’t let her brain focus for too long on that number, or else the number 35,000 would flicker across her eyelids.

On the night in question, she had been “untouched,” as Draco called it. She was still untouched. She and Ron had never gotten far enough in their relationship before he took off for Ireland and she left for Hogwarts. So, there would have been some sort of a test to see if she was still a virgin? She clamped down on the gates of her mind before she could imagine a world where the Auction took place.

She always assumed that if Harry lost the war, she would have already died on the battlefield, or else she would have gone down fighting after his death. She never imagined what would have happened to her if she survived the battle.

Ginny had surmised that she was distraught over something to do with Draco pretty early on, but she didn’t play her game, digging for information. She just sat with her on the bathroom floor all night, conjuring a blanket and pillow whenever Hermione started nodding off, crying, dreaming. It wasn’t until around three in the morning that Hermione could speak to her. She told her about the Wizengamot dungeons. About how cold he was until suddenly he snapped. She told her pieces that she had forgotten by now, pieces that still did not make sense to her – he accused her of wanting to “save” him, he accused her of creating a Life Debt, he…

Ginny watched her stutter. “What?”

“I think he came on to me.” Hermione’s brows stitched together as she tried to remember.

I never volunteered to be your ‘champion.’

*Then what is it you **are** volunteering for?*

"Really?" Ginny waited.

"Don't get too excited," Hermione scoffed. She adjusted her position on the floor. "I probably misread it."

Ginny watched her carefully, but asked her to continue. Hermione told her how quickly it all shifted downhill. When she got to the Auction, she left Ginny out of it. She didn't want that to sit on her friend's shoulders. When Ginny heard the amount 30,000 galleons, her eyebrows shot up and her jaw dropped.

"I—I can't…. Hermione, that can't be real. He has to be messing with you."

"The Auction?"

"Oh, no, I'm sure the Auction was actually discussed, those sick fucks," Ginny said, waving her hand. Hermione thought it odd that Ginny took it so well when *she* had been up all night vomiting over it. "It's the amount. Who has 30,000 galleons lying around for that kind of thing!"

"Pure-blood aristocrats?" Hermione shrugged, sipping from the water glass Ginny had conjured for her.

"That can't have been the amount. He's exaggerating or made it up on the spot to torture you." Ginny huffed.

"It's an oddly specific amount to 'make up,'" Hermione said. "He also said 5,000 galleons would be added on if I was a virgin."

Ginny pulled her eyes from the bathroom cabinets she was frowning at to look at Hermione with wide eyes. "He said that to you?"

"If it could be proven that I was 'untouched' they would pay more for me." Hermione felt like saying this out loud to her should make her cry or vomit again, but she supposed she was a bit numb to it now.

"What brought this up?" Ginny said. Hermione looked up from her glass of water to see Ginny's eyes sparkling.

"It was… a part of his stream of consciousness, I suppose."

"But he's saying these awful things to you, and you… what?" Ginny searched her eyes for something.

"I was trying to get out. I was about to throw up on him." Hermione laughed a little at that horrible thought.

"Get out?" Ginny asked.

"Yes, he had me pinned. And every time I tried to leave he'd block my path." Hermione shuddered at the memory of his eyes and the hot puff of his breath. Hermione looked up when Ginny said no more. Ginny's face was oddly bright, but she wasn't smiling. "What?"

Hermione's hands stuttered over the books she started sorting. "Oh?"

"Did you know Harry let Malfoy join their little Quidditch team? That's insane!"

"Oh, I know," Hermione tried to meet his indignation.

"I hear he's hanging around a lot more. Git can't find his own friends?"

"Ha, I guess not." Hermione turned from the counter to grab the ledger.

"His friends are all either dead or in Azkaban, I'm sure."

Hermione winced, but turned to smile at him. Ron's dislike of Draco was legendary. And the feeling was mutual, Hermione was certain. She changed the subject to Ron's Quidditch team and how everything was going for him in Ireland. She noticed he conveniently left out little details, like the dates he took to certain after parties, and incidents the papers had covered about him getting thrown out of pubs with teammates and fangirls. That was alright. Hermione just wanted to chat with her friend Ron, not her ex-boyfriend.

He stayed for another hour, chatting and helping her sort books. She completely forgot about Draco Malfoy and for that, she was grateful. Ron left to head to his meeting with George, but on his way out he gave her a kiss on the cheek that lingered very close to the corner of her mouth. He grinned at her as the door closed behind him.

On Sunday, Hermione woke up to balloons covering her entire bedroom ceiling. She smiled and crawled out of bed, following the smell of breakfast from the kitchen.

She tiptoed out of her bedroom to find Harry and Ginny in the kitchen. Harry had his back to her, working the bacon on the stove, and Ginny was sitting on a countertop kicking her legs. They were chatting in hushed voices, smiling at each other, feeding each other. Hermione almost disappeared back into her bedroom to give them privacy before she remembered that it was her breakfast they were preparing for *her* birthday.

She gave a little cough to announce her presence before moving into the kitchen. Ginny jumped off the counter and threw her arms around her.

"Happy birthday, Hermione!"

"Good morning, Gin. Thank you." Hermione released Ginny only to be engulfed by Harry next.

"Happy birthday," he said, squeezing her tight.

"Thank you, Harry," she said. "You didn't need to cook breakfast."

"Oh, but I did." Harry pulled away and gave Ginny a pointed look.

Ginny forced her to sit and let them serve her. Quite ridiculous actually. When she stood to get more milk for her tea, Ginny threatened her with the spatula to remain seated.

Hermione sat back in her chair, shaking her head, and as Harry was folding the morning's *Daily Prophet*, she caught a glimpse of a blonde head. Harry tossed the paper on the floor, and Hermione asked, "Anything good in the paper today, Harry?"

He gave her a patronizing smile that didn't reach his eyes. "That was very kind of you, Granger." Narcissa smiled into her water glass. He continued, "And which books *are* you leaving with tonight?"

"Well, I am *borrowing*," she directed this at Draco, and then changed her focus to Narcissa, who seemed quite interested in her selections, "several texts that I know are now out of print, a few books that were used at Hogwarts before they were updated, and I found a book on dragon capture and control that I had never seen before. So, I am hoping it helps with my research project."

"Oh, wonderful!" Narcissa said. The bowls in front of them filled with pumpkin soup, and Hermione was reminded that she barely ate dinner earlier. Narcissa continued, "Draco, you've heard about Hermione's Gringotts project, yes?"

Draco paused in plucking a bread roll from the floating basket. "I can't say that I have." He looked to her, expectantly, but bored.

"The goblins at Gringotts are hoping to bring in and 'train' another dragon to replace the Ukrainian Ironbelly that escaped last year," she said, straightening the napkin on her lap. "I want to avoid this barbaric treatment as much as possible, and hope to work with the goblins to create alternative means of protection."

Hermione hoped the conversation would end there, as she had no intention of fully explaining the depths of the project with Draco. And also the pumpkin soup smelled delicious. She looked to her silverware and found three spoons. How many courses did Narcissa prepare? It seemed like Narcissa had chosen the furthest away from the plate, so Hermione did the same.

"And you think the goblins will be willing to do things a different way?"

She looked at him as he brought his spoon to his lips. She found herself quite jealous of the elegance in that movement.

"I think negotiation is always possible," she said, dipping her spoon, but a chuckle paused her.

"I've worked with them personally several times over the past months." Draco smirked at her like he had whenever Snape had chosen him for a potions demonstration. "They are not amenable to wizarding changes."

Hermione's full spoon hovered over her soup dish. "Then we will have to make them see—"

"You can't make a goblin see anything," he said, with a slight shake of his head, as if she was absolutely going to lose. She felt the heat come to her cheeks.

"The Ministry will be able to mandate laws that will force the goblins to comply," she said.

"So you think goblin rights should be subordinate to wizards law?" He lifted a brow at her.

She gaped at him. "I said no such thing-"

"The negotiations will only work if you get what you want, is that right Granger?" He leaned back in his chair.

"Draco," Narcissa cooed, and Hermione remembered that she was there too. Hermione finally placed her uneaten spoonful of soup back in the bowl and sat tall.

"The only thing I *want* is for no further harm to come to magical creatures by Gringotts' hands. There is a better solution out there, and I want wizards and goblins to agree upon it."

He picked up his spoon as if the conversation was not fazing him at all. "Maybe it *is* the best solution, Granger. Maybe you're not the first person to start this fight, only to find that keeping a dragon in the bowels of Gringotts is the best security method there is."

"It must not be the best method if three seventeen-year-olds were able to free it and ride out on its back last spring," she said.

His eyes flashed at her and he took a breath—

"Mippy!" Narcissa called, voice strained. Mippy appeared and Narcissa asked, "Can we please get some wine for the table?"

As Mippy produced a carafe of red wine and disappeared, Hermione regretted ignoring Narcissa thus far. She turned to her host to begin some sort of conversation and picked up her spoon again. It really smelled so good.

Draco had other ideas. "Of course, getting down into the lower vaults required a bit of mischief if I remember correctly," he said, and Hermione turned back to him, lips tight. "The three seventeen-year-olds first used Unforgivables to pass through the first layers of security. So maybe it's not the dragon at all that failed."

She narrowed her eyes at him and he raised a brow at her.

"Hermione, dear," Narcissa said. "A glass of elf-made wine?"

She turned to Narcissa, "No, thank you, Narcissa." She turned back to his smug face. "So, you're saying, keep the maimed and tortured dragon downstairs, and beef up the upstairs security? That will solve the problem with the maim and torture."

"Draco? Wine?"

"No, mother." Eyes never leaving Hermione. "I'm just saying that the fault you find in the security is based on the ability to get past the dragon, but they would not have been able to get past the dragon without a bit of law-breaking upstairs. You might want to keep these arguments out of your presentation, Granger, else they decide to investigate further."

"Well, I'm going to have some wine," she heard Narcissa mutter, as Hermione's ears burned, watching Draco dip his spoon in that beautiful soup she had yet to taste.

"Oh, thank you, Draco, but the Wizengamot already knows every detail of that situation. See, *I'm* perfectly capable of staying out of Azkaban all by myself, without the aid of a *champion*."

She watched as his spoon stopped on its way to his lips, and the color on his cheekbones brightened. Any victory she felt was short-lived when she realized that even Narcissa had become very still next to her. She had gone too far.

"I—Narcissa thank you for dinner. You really are too kind to invite me to stay, but I must leave now." She placed her spoon back on the table and took one last look at the pumpkin soup before standing.

"Oh, Hermione dear, please stay," Narcissa said. Hermione looked to her and did not see disgust, so it was possible the relationship was salvageable.

"I'm sorry, I can't." She placed her napkin on her chair, avoiding Draco's gaze that she knew was on her.

"Let Draco walk you out," Narcissa said. "I'd hate for you to lose your way."

"Absolutely not," she said, almost laughing. "I'd rather get lost in the Malfoy dungeons than have him anywhere near me. Again, thank you Narcissa. You've been nothing but generous."

She nodded one last time to Narcissa, and walked out of the dining room. She turned right outside of the doors, huffing, and continued down the hall, recognizing several of the tapestries. It took her a bit longer to find the library than she had remembered, taking several incorrect turns, and even pausing at the window overlooking the grounds to take in the view at night. Once she found the busts of Malfoy men, she knew her own way and was quite proud of herself. She approached the fireplaces and found no Floo powder. Draco had offered her a bag of it two weeks ago, but she didn't remember him reaching for it. The hall was bare. No end tables or hidden shelves where one could store the powder.

"*Accio Floo powder!*" she whispered, with no luck.

Just as she was about to walk out the front door and try to make her way to an Apparition point, she heard the click of dragon leather. She closed her eyes and prayed to Merlin that it was Narcissa. She turned and Draco was making his way toward her, hiding a smug smirk. She glared at him and crossed her arms.

When he reached her, she noticed that he was holding her books that she had left without. She blushed but tried to raise a brow at him. They were bound together by a ribbon of Mippy's crafting, and as he extended them to her, one finger hooked in the ribbon, she realized he placed a feather-light charm on them. She took the books without comment, and it seemed the minute she touched them the charm wore off, and she found herself fumbling with eight heavy tomes with no help from him.

Once she righted herself, she glared up at him and his eyes were gleaming with delight, but he hid a smile still. He produced the Floo powder bag with a wave of his hand. Of course. She reached for it and he pulled it away from her.

feeling her arm burning from where his fingers were. She heard him follow. She turned left outside of the library, passing the Malfoy men.

"Granger." She looked back to see Draco in the doorway. He cocked his head to the right, and leaned against the door frame.

She glared at him and turned around, having clearly no idea where she was going. He led her further down the corridor than she'd been before, passing beautiful tapestries and a grand window overlooking the grounds. The sky was still pink with the sunset, and she struggled to keep up with him *and* fully examine the Manor.

He stopped outside of a grand entryway, and gestured for her to enter first. She turned the corner to find an extravagant dining room with a long table, and Narcissa Malfoy at the head.

"Hermione, dear. I'm so glad you could sit down with us."

"Yes, thank you, Narcissa. I wouldn't miss it for the world," she said. Draco entered and snorted so only she could hear. Narcissa gestured for her to sit to her left and she felt Draco lift the basket of books from her arm. She looked up at him and he raised a brow at her as Mippy appeared to take the basket elsewhere.

Hermione turned back to Narcissa and headed for her chair. Draco followed, and pulled her chair for her. She found herself irritated that he behaved like a perfect gentleman in front of Narcissa, albeit a frowning one.

"Did you have luck in the library?" Narcissa asked, as Draco seated himself across from her. Wonderful.

"Amazing luck," she said, smiling at Narcissa. "I barely left the instructional texts. I do think I've taken too many though, so I will try to consolidate before I leave."

"Oh, absolutely not." Narcissa waved her hand. "You are welcome to take as many as you'd like, and I expect you to come back and exchange them for more." Hermione smiled back at her as Draco aggressively shook his napkin onto his lap. "Draco is really the only one who uses the library anymore."

Hermione watched him pick lint off of the tablecloth, refusing to make eye contact with either of them. Her eyes narrowed at him and she couldn't resist.

"I almost took the signed copies of the Lance Gainsworth series to read again, but your mother was telling me how much you love them, Draco. I'd hate for you to part with them."

His hands stilled and his jaw tightened. Hermione's lips twisted into a smile as he looked up at her.

She continued, "I, myself, have read the series four or five times through as well, so I know how difficult it is not to have them at your fingertips."

"Your – your mother invited me over this evening to browse the library. I'm selecting books which I'd like to borrow." Her heart was racing. She regretted explaining herself, as if she was guilty of breaking into Malfoy Manor to steal books. Where was Narcissa?

"I know," he said, looking her up and down. He stepped closer to her and said, "I told my mother that she was foolish to think that you would be able to carry your selections out with you without the aid of a small sled." She blushed. He continued, "So she sent me to give you this." He held out a wicker basket that she had not realized he was holding.

She took the basket from him and clumsily found a way to dump her books into it. She looked up and he was watching her.

"Thank you," she tried.

"My mother would like you to join us for a late dinner."

Hermione's eyes popped out of her head. "What? It's half past eight!"

He looked as pleased as she did as he said, "Yes, that's why they call it a 'late' dinner, Granger. The table is already set for three. She is waiting on us."

"I—I'm not…" She took a breath. "What I meant to say is that I've already eaten, and I would hate to take up any more of her time this evening –"

"Granger." He rolled his eyes at her. "Do you really think saying 'no' is an option?"

"Just because you are unable to say 'no' to Mummy, doesn't mean no one else can," she hissed. "I will apologize to her directly and decline." She hooked the basket over her elbow and walked around him. He grabbed her other arm as she passed.

"Look, you silly bint. You have chosen to befriend my mother and pester my household –"

"To clarify, she chose me—"

"And for whatever reason, she has invited you to dine with her this evening, going out of her way to eat later in the evening so she could fit into your *busy* schedule—"

"I tried to come over *after* dinner!"

"—So I don't know what your intentions are for being here, haunting my library, and playing house with my mother—"

"I find your mother to be a wonderful conversationalist, a generous host, and all-around lovely person. It's a shame those genetic traits ended with her," she said.

She was almost panting, and his hand was still on her arm, squeezing her. She desperately wanted to pull her eyes from him, but she knew it would be admitting defeat. So, she glared up at him, taking the opportunity to truly study his irises, finding the speckles of blue that popped when there was color on his cheekbones.

She blinked, feeling stupid for still finding him attractive after everything, and looked away, pulling her arm from him. She continued around the stacks, heading for the library doors, still

"Mother's quite upset, you know. After the scene you've made, I hope this is your last visit to Malfoy Manor."

"Oh, fuck off, Draco," she said.

She grabbed the Floo powder, tossed it into the fireplace, and as she entered and turned to call out her destination, she got one last glimpse of him, still holding the Floo powder, staring at the spot next to him that she used to occupy, and the corner of his lips lifting.

She wandered through the fiction section, but was truly most interested in some of the spell books and potions manuals that had been out of print for decades. She disappeared behind a stack, and found an entire section that was not visible from the chairs in the main room. She gasped at how expansive the library actually was, and now knew for certain that she would need to come back at a later time to fully examine it.

She found an entire shelf of Draco's old Hogwarts texts, still in pristine condition. She ran her fingers over the book that Remus Lupin had used in third year, smiling at the memory of him. Pulling it from the shelf, she flipped to the center where she knew she would find Grindylows, and her smile vanished when she saw a tight cursive in the margins.

green or beige?

assoc. w merpeople?

Her lips tightened, realizing that similar questions were scratched into her own copies. She turned the page to find moving drawings of Harry being chased by a Dementor, Ron being shot with several arrows, and one possibly of her, but it was hard to tell as a cloud of hair was attacking the subject.

She rolled her eyes and flipped through a few more chapters and found that Chapter 18 had been completely ignored in Draco Malfoy's studies, and instead he had spent that week drawing pictures of her various deaths. There were decapitations, strangulations, even several eviscerations.

Hermione closed the book and placed it back on the shelf, frowning. She blinked away the shame at remembering that certain chapters of her own text books were also filled with doodlings, although not of his death. She had been so foolish. All thoughts were forgotten though when she spotted a first edition of *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*.

Twenty minutes later had Hermione holding seven books in her arms, most of them heavy tomes. She hadn't even left the educational section, still looking through textbooks that had been used fifty years ago, or potions manuals that had been forbidden in teaching since the nineteenth century. Her arms were starting to shake, and there was sweat at the back of her neck, causing her hair to begin its humid journey away from her body. Every time she thought of levitating the books, she got distracted by another volume she wanted to browse.

When she added an eighth book to her pile, she decided it was time to consolidate. There was really no way she could take eight books.

A throat cleared behind her, and Hermione spun around to see Draco Malfoy standing ten paces from her. She held her breath, and pulled the books even closer to her chest.

He looked between her face and the stack of books she was clutching. He lifted a brow at her and said nothing, which of course caused Hermione to begin speaking quickly.

Narcissa laughed and sipped her tea. Hermione's eyes were watering, so she did the same.

"That's very generous of you, Narcissa. I'm sure Mippy appreciates the opportunity to continue serving you and your family."

"Thank you, dear. Now let me show you around!" Narcissa spun to the shelves on her left, and Hermione's heart skipped at the idea of browsing this library.

She took her over to the catalogue at the front of the room, explaining that she need only speak any kind of title, author, or genre, and fairy lights would appear to guide you to those texts. She led her over to the fiction section, showing her where the first editions were.

Hermione spotted several red volumes that she recognized. "Is that the Lance Gainsworth series, the *Undesirables*?"

"Yes, they're signed copies," Narcissa replied, and Hermione's fingers itched. "I do love that series. Is it a favorite of yours as well?"

"Absolutely," Hermione said. "He's currently my favorite fiction author."

"Draco loved the *Undesirable* series. They were the only books he requested while he was awaiting trial for that year."

Hermione blinked. "The *Undesirable* series?"

Narcissa nodded.

"All seven books, or just a few?"

"All of them. I think he's read that series about four or five times all the way through." Narcissa reached out and touched the books lovingly.

Hermione frowned. Why would he lie to her about something as trivial as books? Not that books were trivial to *her*—

"What's the matter, dear?" Narcissa must have seen the frown on her face.

"Oh, I—It's nothing. He told me he wasn't a fan of the books." Hermione tried nonchalance and looked elsewhere at the other stacks.

"Probably just toying with you, I'm sure." Narcissa chuckled and searched Hermione's face.

Toying with her. She wasn't sure she liked that, now knowing about his intentions of selling her like cattle that night. Worse than cattle...

She looked at Narcissa and she was watching her, so she smiled back and quickly looked at the ground.

"Well, I will leave you to browse, dear. And, please do take whatever you'd like."

"Thank you Narcissa. You are very kind." Hermione still couldn't believe that she would have free run of the Malfoy library for the next… half an hour? Hour? She looked at the grandfather clock in the corner as Narcissa slipped through the door. It was ten minutes to eight. She would try her hardest to be finishing up at half past eight. Nine at the latest.

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Thirteen

Dear Narcissa,

I beg your forgiveness for the way I behaved at dinner last night. I can be very passionate about my projects and I know that Draco can be very passionate as well. I very much enjoy your company and I truly appreciate the invitation into your home and to your dinner table.

If there is anything I can do to apologize, please let me know.

Sincerely,

Hermione J. Granger

Dearest Hermione,

You are so kind to think you need to apologize. The truth is, I quite enjoyed myself last night. I don't get to Muggle London for theatre as often as I used to, so last night was just what I needed.

I am sure to be visiting Cornerstone next weekend, so I shall see you then. Perhaps we can have a quick lunch on your break?

And I have sent with this note a small package, as I believe you did not get to taste it last night.

Yours,

Narcissa Malfoy

Hermione opened the small brown package and found a container of the pumpkin soup. When she brought it to her lips she almost cried.

Monday morning she was met at her cubicle with a memo from the Auror Office. She winced as she opened it, hoping not to be dealing with Draco this early in the week, but it was from the head of the Auror Office requesting a collaborative meeting between her department and theirs regarding the dragon egg found the week before.

Clunky footsteps, and then Aiden was poking his head over her cubicle wall.

"You get invited to the party, too?" He flashed her a grin and waived a matching memo at her.

Less than an hour later she and Aiden were sharing a lift up to Level 2 with the scent of the orange Aiden was peeling and devouring. She declined when he offered her a wedge, and tried to ignore the smell like she was currently ignoring his yammering about how much nicer the Level 2 desks and cubes were from theirs.

They found their way to the conference room with a minute to spare and the first pair of eyes she met upon entering were Draco's. It was to be expected, as he was the analyst on the dragon egg case, but still surprising first thing in the morning. She quickly looked elsewhere and found Aiden pulling a chair for her next to an older witch who was there to take a transcript.

"Let's get started." Gawain Robards, head of the Auror Department, stood and tapped his wand on the table. A three-dimensional image of a dragon egg appeared in the middle of the table, and Hermione immediately thought of those science fiction holograms. "As you all know, this dragon egg was apprehended in London last week, and with the help of Miss Granger," he nodded at her, "it was identified as a Portuguese Long-Snout egg. Now, smuggling dragon eggs is not uncommon, but it was Mr. Malfoy who pieced together that the Long-Snout egg was found within a three-block radius of where the Hungarian Horntail egg was found a month ago."

Hermione looked at Draco, and found him suppressing the smirk he would wear in Snape's class every time the professor would praise his potion-making. Well, at least he was suppressing it. Draco stood.

"We believe these dragon dealers are selling to the same buyer, although unsuccessfully thus far," Draco said.

He took a stack of papers that were arranged in front of him and began passing them out. When Hermione received hers, she found that it was a full seventeen-page report. Hermione looked up at him, and watched as he summarized the report, pointed to the important charts and maps, maintained control of the room, and for the first time she wondered what it was he planned to do after his probation completed in December. Because he was quite good at this.

Hermione raised her hand. Draco blinked at her.

"Yes, Miss Granger," Draco articulated.

"The dragon dealer who was apprehended last week. What does he have to say?"

Robards cleared his throat. "He has been questioned, and found to know nothing about the buyer. He was just the transportation it seems."

"And what country was the Portuguese Long-Snout egg smuggled in from?" Hermione asked Robards.

"How lovely, Hermione. But, you didn't need to do that." She unwrapped the gift and read the cover, finding the author's name. "Another McHandry book!" She looked to Hermione.

"Yes, it's a fiction though. Before she started her history series." Arms now empty, Hermione let one arm hang dead at her side, not sure what she was supposed to do with it.

"I can't wait to read it. Thank you, Hermione." Narcissa waved and Mippy appeared, curtseyed at Hermione, and took the book and the wrapping paper before disappearing. Hermione noted that she wore a little dress today. "Shall we go to the library?"

"Yes, thank you." Hermione smiled. "And thank you so much for offering your books to me." She began to follow Narcissa down the hall. "I have to admit, I have been curious about the Malfoy library for many years."

"Well, then consider this the first of many visits." Narcissa's teeth were quite straight.

Narcissa placed delicate hands on the doors to the library and they seemed to open at her touch. Hermione was shocked again at how vast the room was, with the sun setting through the western windows lighting the stacks and shelves, the smell. Hermione was feeling greedy just standing on the threshold.

"Can I interest you in a cup of tea while I show you around?" Narcissa spun to face her, golden hair floating momentarily.

"I would love that, thank you," Hermione said.

Mippy appeared without even being called. She held a tray with two cups and saucers.

"Miss likes milk and three honey spoons?" Mippy's bright eyes batted up at her. Mippy was wearing a top hat with a little flower in it.

"I – yes, thank you, Mippy." Hermione smiled down at her and Mippy handed her a cup and saucer.

Narcissa took hers and thanked Mippy, and then Mippy disappeared again. Hermione stared at the spot she had previously occupied. She took the plunge.

"Narcissa, forgive me if this question is impertinent, but I've been wondering if Mippy is a free elf."

Narcissa looked at her over the top of her teacup. She quirked her lips. "She is indeed."

And just like that, Hermione felt even more drawn to Narcissa Malfoy.

Narcissa continued, "After I was released from custody last summer, almost all of our assets had been frozen, our house-elves relocated, and all dark objects seized. I came home to a lonely house, but Mippy greeted me at the fireplace." Narcissa smiled softly. "She had hidden and stayed behind, waiting for me to come home. I told her I couldn't keep her on, as Malfoy Manor is now forbidden to house-elf servitude, so she pointed to the glove I was holding and asked me to free her. She's been with me ever since. I put fifty galleons into a Gringotts vault every week for her, and I suspect she spends it on clothes and hats."

Miss Granger,

I'd like to invite you to have a look around our library and borrow any books you take an interest in. Any day after work next week or next weekend is fine. Please let me know your preference.

Yours,

Narcissa Malfoy

Hermione sighed and placed her head in her hands. How had she gotten to be such good friends with Narcissa Malfoy?

Hermione chose the following Saturday evening. She told Narcissa that she had errands to run after she closed up at Cornerstone, so she wouldn't be able to arrive until 7:30PM, if that was alright with her. That way, she would arrive after dinner so Narcissa could not invite her to sit with them, just in case Draco was home. Which she also assumed he would not be, as he had a very active social life, according to Rita Skeeter, and should not be at home at 7:30 on a Saturday evening eating dinner with his mother. She hoped.

At ten minutes to six, Hermione was thinking of what she could do for an hour and a half, seeing as she, of course, had no errands to run. She then realized that she could bring Narcissa a gift for inviting her over… and then realized that she probably should have done this the first time Narcissa invited her over. Hermione slapped her forehead and closed her eyes. What a commoner she was.

After spending ten minutes thinking of gifts to bring, she finally settled on bringing Narcissa a book, as she was going to be taking a book (or five) from her. She sent Morty a quick Patronus, letting him know that she would be doing some personal shopping after the store closed if that was alright with him.

Hermione settled on a Mattie McHandry fiction novel that was written before the author began writing on goblin and elf histories. She added the sickles to the drawer and made the note in the ledger, before closing the store properly and Apparating home.

Ginny was out with Harry, so she was on her own for her hair – a fact she only realized when she saw herself in the mirror. She tried clipping some of it back, away from her face. Hopefully it was only Narcissa tonight.

She grabbed the Floo powder and spoke "Malfoy Manor" at 7:30 on the dot. She popped through the fireplace and Narcissa Malfoy was waiting for her with a smile.

"Hello, Narcissa."

"Welcome, Hermione. I hope you had enough time to run your errands?"

Hermione fumbled momentarily with her small purse and the wrapped book in her arms. "Yes, I – one moment." She shifted her belongings. "Actually, I brought this for you." She extended the book to Narcissa, and her smile became even more genuine, if possible.

"Portugal," Draco said drily. Hermione narrowed her eyes at him.

"Are we sure?" she said.

Robards pushed his glasses up and leaned forward. "What is it you're getting at, Miss Granger?"

"There was a case of a newly laid Portuguese Long-Snout egg being smuggled into Switzerland last year with the intention of hatching it during the coldest point of winter. Long-Snouts are typically hatched only in the Portuguese heat, so the dragon dealers and buyers were clearly experimenting with something."

Robards nodded at her. "I will look into that for you."

"Thank you."

Draco looked back and forth between the two of them, waiting for the go ahead to continue. She raised a brow at him.

"As I was saying, we're hoping the Bureau can help us determine what the buyer might want with two very different types of dragon eggs –"

She raised her hand again. This time knowing that he hated it.

"Granger."

"What causes you to believe there might be similarities? Can't the buyer just be wanting to farm himself a whole variety of dragons?"

Draco took a cleansing breath. "That is a possibility, but we would like to rule out others."

"Why would he want a Long-Snout though?" Aiden asked, twirling his quill in a distracted way. "That's like, the least impressive dragon. There's no uses for any of its skin in fashion, and the horns have no magical properties. I mean, if I were to start a dragon collection, I'd go for the best."

Hermione gasped, thoughts buzzing in her brain. The room looked at her.

"The only interesting quality about the Portuguese Long-Snout is that it is easiest to cross-breed with a Common Welsh Green," she said. She looked to Aiden for confirmation. "The Long-Snout and—"

"The Hungarian Horntail," Aiden finished for her, smiling.

Hermione turned back to Draco, as he was still standing at the front of the room.

"And a Common Welsh Green egg went 'missing' from the Wales reserve two months ago, appearing in Knockturn Alley shortly after," she said. "It was sighted, but not recovered."

"So, Miss Granger," Robards nodded to the transcribing witch, "your analysis would be that whoever was trying to procure the Horntail and Long-Snout already has the Common Welsh egg, and is hoping to cross-breed?"

"Yes, sir."

Draco's lips quirked and he swallowed. "Ten points to Gryffindor."

Aiden chuckled in a dim sort of way, and Hermione sent Draco a glare.

"Well, that's that!" Robards stood from the table. "We'll be in touch on this, exchanging memos and the like, but I'd say that's the fastest mystery ever solved here. I'll get the team researching the Welsh Green disappearance and get it tracked. Miss Granger please send me all your notes on the Welsh Green." She nodded. Robards gestured back and forth between Hermione and Draco. "You two should work together more often. You'd save the rest of us a world of trouble."

Hermione released a shaky laugh and Draco frowned at Robards. She looked down at the desk as she stood and gathered her paperwork, intending to read through Draco's work later. Robards strolled out with a thank you to all, and Aiden began chatting with Draco, much to Hermione's delight. She snuck out before she could have more of an interaction with either of them.

That following Saturday was a slow day at Cornerstone, and Hermione found herself daydreaming more often than usual. She had fifteen minutes until Morty came downstairs to take over the desk for her lunch break, and she found the need to step out for some cool air.

There was a book in the reserved requests under Black, and Hermione remembered Narcissa's note from last weekend, mentioning that she may stop by and possibly invite her to lunch. As it was now lunch time, and she had not yet seen Narcissa, she supposed she should get used to the idea of the crackers she brought as a back-up plan.

She had spent the morning pretending not to read the day's *Prophet*, which featured a picture of Draco and the blonde girl he'd been out with before. They had gone out again last night apparently. She kept arranging books on top of the article so customers wouldn't catch her re-reading it, but she always kept a gap over the image of Draco's profile, smiling at the girl over drinks in Hogsmeade. The ledger rested permanently over the girl's face though.

As a large woman wearing far too much purple bid her a good day, she went back to her doodlings, wondering what she would do to entertain herself this evening. Ginny was out of town with her team but would be home very late in the night. Halloween was in two weeks, and she knew it would be tremendously busy, so this weekend she planned to enjoy the quiet. Perhaps she would clean?

Hermione frowned at her quill, hovering over the picture of Draco, and resolved to acquire a more active social life just as the front door opened. Perhaps Ron was right. She didn't need to work on the weekends if it was keeping her from leading a normal life, going out of town and the like.

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Twelve

Of course, weeks ago, when Hermione had only wanted a daily *glimpse* of Draco to keep her eyes satisfied, she never saw him during the week at the Ministry. Now that she would rather be slowly devoured by a Manticore than share a lift with him, that was all she did.

She saw him in the lifts twice on Monday, thankfully with others hopping on and off. Then she just managed to evade him at the café, but only by turning around and choosing to starve. Tuesday had her running to the café half an hour before lunch to grab one of those blasted croissants that Harry had gotten her addicted to, only to find that he had the same intention. They made eye contact this time, so she had no choice but to go to the counter and order while he sat at a corner table, possibly watching her. She then took the croissant and ate at her desk.

On Wednesday, Harry and a few other Aurors apprehended a man trying to smuggle a dragon egg into London, and seeing as Draco did paperwork and consulting for the Auror Office, and the Auror Office needed to collaborate with the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures on this case, and Hermione accepted and prepared reports for the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, and Aiden was out sick that day…. A memo arrived on her desk with perfectly curved lettering that she recognized immediately. And that's how she found herself essentially "passing notes" with Draco for the remainder of the week.

She finally penned a note to Harry on Thursday afternoon – after she had asked Draco for as much information as possible on the physical attributes of the egg itself, and his memo back to her read "It was shaped like an egg." – asking Harry politely if there was possibly anyone else who she could correspond with on this case.

On Friday, the mailroom tray delivered an envelope addressed to *Miss Hermione Granger* in a slanted cursive she now knew.

She lifted her eyes from *Prophet*-Draco smiling at his date, chirping a "Good afternoon," to see the real Draco at her counter, not smiling. She blinked.

"What." She stood up straight.

"'What?'" he repeated. "Is that how you greet customers here?" He lifted a brow at her, and her hands tried to move the books around on the desk to cover the article without drawing attention.

She took a deep breath and tried a bit nicer. "Are you here for the reserved book?"

She watched as he opened his mouth, as if to speak, and then simply nodded once. Her brows knitted together, but she did not comment. Hermione grabbed up the bag labeled "Black," and began entering a line in the ledger, which she left right where it was on top of the blonde dolt's face.

The book, Hermione realized, was considered to be quite "girly" – a fiction by a female writer with a female lead character. She looked up, about to tease him, and found him watching her.

"Have your tastes changed, Draco?" The corner of her mouth pulled up into a smirk. He blinked at her. She shook the book at him.

"Oh, it's... not for me."

"Oh, alright." She felt like she should tease him about his "gift," but he was standing so stiffly and there was something off about him. She plucked a bag from the shelf, placed the book inside and held it out to him. He stared at it.

"Does Cornerstone do gift wrapping?"

"Do we… uh, yes, we do." She took the bag back and began to clear the counter as he watched her. Her face began to warm and she didn't know why.

She cleared a space on the counter, pushing a few books aside, and turned to grab the wrapping paper. When she turned back she realized that the *Daily Prophet* was spread out on the desk, visible now that she had removed the books. She held her breath. She didn't dare look up at him, but just closed the paper, and tucked it away. It was completely natural to read the paper during the day, and perhaps that was the article she landed on when the last customer came in. Perfectly explainable. She laid the wrapping paper out and placed the book on top, only now realizing that this could indeed be a gift – for the blonde.

"My mother and I are stopping for a quick lunch at Fortescue's."

"Oh. Tell her I say hello?" Her hands straightened the paper beneath the book and grabbed up the scissors from the cup next to the register. So Narcissa had chosen lunch with her son over lunch with her? Fine. Of course, Hermione realized that this was not the most rational of grumbling –

"Does Mr. Hindes come downstairs to cover your lunch?"

She looked to the clock as she folded the wrapping paper around the book. “Yes, usually around one.” Her fingers struggled with the tape and she glanced up to find him watching her hands work. She looked down quickly and finished taping one side then folding the other.

“Would you like to join us for lunch?”

Her hands slipped on the paper, losing the fold, and her eyes snapped to his. He was wearing his neutral expression again, but as she searched his face for the joke, he swallowed.

“Your mother wants a repeat performance of last Saturday? In public?” She smiled and refolded the side, taping it with trembling fingers and turned to grab the ribbon.

“If there’s pumpkin soup, I promise to let you eat it.”

She grinned at the ribbon and began twisting it around the package. “Tell your mother that I appreciate the invitation, but I’m too busy here today. It was nice of her to offer.”

“I’m the one offering, Granger.”

She looked up at him and his eyes narrowed at her.

“We both know who sent you, Malfoy.” She tugged the ribbon closed, placed the wrapped gift into the small bag, and held the bag out to him. He took it from her and opened his mouth to speak. Just then, the door hiding the staircase to Morty’s upstairs flat opened. Morty exited, adjusting his glasses.

“Miss Granger,” he said. “Good business today?”

“Yes, absolutely —”

“Mr. Malfoy,” Morty smiled. “Such a pleasure to see you here.” Morty’s eyes brightened and Hermione frowned.

“Mr. Hindes, how are you?” Draco grinned and shook Morty’s hand.

“Look how tall you’ve gotten! My! Was he always this tall, Miss Granger?”

Hermione looked between the two of them. “Uh, no. He was shorter... before...” She picked up the quill and began copying notes into the ledger.

“Did you get everything you need today, Draco?” Morty said.

“Yes, thank you. I was just here to see if Miss Granger would accompany me for lunch today. My mother is just down the street.”

Her ink blotted and she ground her teeth together.

“Oh, lovely! Yes, please do. I’ve got the shop.” Morty started pushing her out from behind the counter.

“Well, I —I have so much to do here, I don’t think—”

“Nonsense. Take all the time you need.”

Hermione found her bag shoved into her chest, her quill ripped from her hand, and her body forced away from the counter as Morty asked Draco to say hello to Narcissa for him and to take care of himself. Hermione got her bearings and pulled her bag strap up to her shoulder. Draco

“Yes,” Hermione said. “I would love that.” She didn’t dare look at the figure standing still in the center of the room. “And again, thank you very much for inviting me to tea.”

“Of course, dear.” Narcissa smiled at her. “Draco, will you please escort Hermione to the fireplaces?”

Hermione looked to Draco, eyes wide, and found him still glaring at his mother. His jaw was clenched.

“I—That’s very kind, but I’m sure I can find my way back to –”

“Oh, nonsense.” Narcissa waved her hand. “It’s no trouble, is it Draco?” Narcissa locked eyes with Draco. Hermione wondered if they had an ability to speak telepathically with each other, because she was clearly missing something.

Draco straightened. “Not at all.” Draco turned and walked to the library doors, holding one open for her.

Hermione turned to Narcissa. “Thank you again Mrs. Malfoy. It has been a pleasure.” Hermione watched her feet as they carried her across the carpeted floor to a pair of dragon leather shoes.

“Hermione, dear,” Narcissa called to her. Hermione turned to find Narcissa smiling. “Please call me Narcissa.”

Hermione’s face felt hot, and she didn’t know why, but she felt embarrassed to be so familiar with Draco’s mother without his consent. She didn’t dare look at him as she smiled to Narcissa, turned and headed out of the room first. She faced the bust of Lucius Malfoy, and as his son closed the door behind her, she looked at Draco quickly. His face was as cold and stony as the line of Malfoys they passed.

Draco led her down the hall without a sound. She could hear her footsteps, but not his. He led her past the grand staircase and into the hall with three fireplaces for arriving guests.

A loud clank from behind a closed door to her right. A hum of magic. Hermione jumped and held her breath. She hadn’t noticed that door before.

“Renovations.”

She looked up at Draco. He was looking at a point over her shoulder. She remembered Narcissa now saying that the drawing room was being renovated. Was she now just outside the room where Draco’s silence had bought him a potential 35,000 galleons? Just beyond that door would she find house elves cleaning the crashed chandelier and the stain of her dirty blood on the stone?

He offered her the bag of Floo powder, and without looking at him she tossed the dust into the fireplace, whispering her destination, and disappeared.

"Yes, I remember Draco telling me that." Narcissa smiled. Hermione's cup stopped at her lips. "He'd write home saying 'Mother, that Granger girl doesn't even watch the match when she's in the stands. I look down and she's reading a book.'"

Narcissa laughed, a sound like twinkling lights, but Hermione paused. Maybe she was a footnote in a story about the match, and in his rambling about losing to Harry, he'd add in other things he found annoying. Maybe?

Narcissa was smiling at her, so she took a sip and placed her cup down. "I – I wouldn't have thought anyone was paying any mind to me, though it is satisfying to think that somehow I might have distracted the other team's Seeker, allowing Harry to score!" Hermione joked.

Narcissa chuckled. "Distracted indeed."

Before she could fully process the conversation at hand, the opening of the library doors caused Hermione's teacup to rattle in its saucer.

"Mother." A drawl. And then Draco Malfoy was peeking his head around the door. "You wanted to see me?"

Hermione held her breath. She blinked before the number 35,000 could flash before her eyes. She begged whichever gods were listening that he would leave the room without noticing her there.

"Draco! Home already?" Narcissa beamed.

He stepped fully into the room. She gripped her teacup so hard she thought it would break.

"Yes, I was out with –" And his gaze landed on her. She felt the heat from his body two days ago, trapping her against the stone wall, and she could smell his breath as he smiled cruelly at her. She begged her watering eyes not to shut or look away.

He had frozen in place, seeing her there. And then his eyes flickered, slowly looking at his mother. The disdain she had feared from him was now directed at Narcissa. Hermione was confused.

"Draco, dear," Narcissa said, "I invited Hermione to tea today. Didn't I tell you?"

Narcissa was gazing intently at him. Draco blinked and his lips tightened.

"No, you didn't."

"Please join us, Draco." Narcissa's request had a tone of finality. Hermione started to panic.

"I-I actually do need to be off." Hermione set her teacup down with a clank. "I should really see if Morty needs any help closing the shop." She turned to Narcissa. "Thank you so much for having me over for tea. I have truly enjoyed your company."

Narcissa was annoyed, Hermione could tell. As she stood and grabbed her bag from the floor, Narcissa stood.

"What a shame that you must leave so soon. I would love to find another time to continue our conversation."

bid Morty a good day and Hermione stalked behind him as he exited the shop, holding the door for her.

She walked through and suddenly the chatter and noise disappeared and she was on a quiet street corner with Draco Malfoy with nothing to talk about. He let the door shut behind him and turned to her, lifting a brow.

"Well, congratulations, Malfoy," she said, shifting her bag on her shoulder. "You have a lunch companion."

"Oh, I'm just so glad Morty could cover your lunch," he said, turning down the street toward Fortescue's. He turned over his shoulder. "You looked swamped in there."

She glared at him and followed. The Cornerstone Books bag swung from his fingers in a jaunty way and Hermione skipped to catch up with him. They paused as a group of shoppers crossed them at the next corner, and when it was clear to go, she felt his hand come up to her back, guiding her softly. Her body must have twitched because he looked down at her and she watched her feet as they carried her across the cobblestones.

They arrived at the corner across from Florean Fortescue's moments later, and Hermione looked up to see Narcissa Malfoy sitting on the patio, dressed in decadent blue robes with a matching oversized blue hat that reminded Hermione very much of the grand Muggle movie stars. Hermione felt severely under-dressed. Draco sighed next to her. She looked up at him, and she could tell he was biting back a comment.

"Your mother certainly knows how to make a statement," she said as they approached the gate to the patio.

He held it open for her, and as she passed him he muttered, "You have no idea." His voice brushed across her ear and she smiled and shivered.

Narcissa stood from the table. "Hermione! Oh, I'm so glad you were able to join us." She couldn't help but notice that the table was already set for three.

"Yes, thank you," Hermione said, as Narcissa clasped her hand and pulled her in for a light embrace. "Your son can be very persuasive."

Narcissa smiled at Draco, and gestured for Hermione to take the seat across from her. Draco pulled her chair for her, which was starting to become a habit, and then nodded at his mother and headed inside to order.

It was a beautiful fall afternoon, and Narcissa looked stunning in the sunlight peeking through the patio roof. They made small talk for a minute or so before Draco returned with three cups and saucers.

"Oh, thank you, Draco," Narcissa said. "I do hope you brought over enough honey for the two of you."

Hermione's pulse spiked. Narcissa was just about to tell Draco about the "coincidence" that they took their tea the same way, and Draco was going to see right through it. Hermione held her breath as Narcissa's lips split into a grin.

"Do you happen to know how Hermione takes her tea?"

"Granger drinks coffee."

Hermione's eyes snapped to his as he set down a cup of coffee in front of her. She stared at it.

"So unless she puts honey in her coffee…"

"Oh," Narcissa said, turning her eyes on her. "I didn't know you preferred coffee to tea."

"I – yes, I do drink coffee more often." She turned to Draco. "Thank you."

"The next time you're at the Manor I will have some brewed for you," Narcissa said.

"That's very kind of you." Hermione poured the milk into her cup.

Narcissa carried on a conversation with her for the next twenty minutes or so, discussing everything from the new ownership of Fortescue's to the McHandry fiction she'd finished. Draco sat silently with them, fixing his tea with three spoons of honey and milk, and picking at the scones that the waiter delivered. Hermione could feel him at her right side where he sat between the two women, but kept from looking at him unless Narcissa dragged him into the conversation. She could feel him watching her.

"Hermione, dear, I'd love to meet your parents the next time they are in England," Narcissa said, and Hermione almost choked on her scone. She quickly sipped her coffee before she coughed. She glanced up to see if either of them noticed, and saw that Draco was frowning at his mother. Narcissa continued, "Will they be coming here for the holidays or will you be heading to Australia to visit them?"

Narcissa was spreading jam onto her scone, smiling at her. Hermione looked at the table.

"Neither, unfortunately. The holiday season is a very busy time… for dentists. Umm…" She trailed off, and could feel two pairs of pale eyes on her.

"Oh, that's very interesting," Narcissa jumped in. "What a shame though. And when do they plan to visit you next?"

"I… Well, they…"

Hermione felt like she should lie and say "springtime." The odds of Narcissa Malfoy actually wanting to visit with them, or following up in the spring, or asking to write them letters… or continue speaking of this at all…were extremely high, she realized. She put down her butter knife that she had begun playing with. She looked up and Draco was watching her very carefully. She turned to Narcissa and found her searching her face, and knew then that she had hesitated too long. She took a breath and looked at her coffee cup.

"Yes, I did. I tried very hard to catch up." She set her cup down, clanking against the saucer. She very much wished to talk about something else before she cried in front of Narcissa Malfoy for no reason whatsoever. So, of course, she chose the other topic she wished not to discuss. "I'm sure Draco and the others found me quite irritating that first year." And every year after.

"Oh, how he would rant about you." Narcissa laughed. Hermione nodded and reached for a scone to keep her hands busy. "He would write to me, 'Mother, that Granger girl has stolen my favorite table in the library.' Or 'Mother, that Granger girl has cheated on her end of year exams, I know she did.'"

Hermione smiled at Narcissa's polite editing. She was sure "that Granger girl" was not what Draco had called her.

"I have to admit, I aimed to score evenly with Draco. That was always my goal."

"Well, I'm sure your parents are quite proud of you and the name you have carved out for yourself. What do they do in the Muggle world?"

Narcissa plucked a scone from the tray and served herself some jam as well.

"Well, they are both dentists. They fix teeth."

"Oh, how interesting," she said. "And what part of England do they live in?"

"They… Well, they actually live in Australia at the moment."

Hermione was able to dodge any further specifics about her parents and her current non-relationship with them. Narcissa asked her if she had any siblings, how her parents reacted when she received her Hogwarts letter, if she had experienced any magical outbursts before, etc. They kept a nice conversation for almost another half an hour. Hermione wasn't quite sure how it happened, but Narcissa turned the conversation back to Draco at one point.

"Draco has very much enjoyed playing Quidditch again. I must thank you and Mr. Potter for allowing him to join the Ministry's league." Narcissa placed her empty cup and saucer on the side table, and Mippy appeared immediately to pour her another cup.

"Oh, that's all Harry, really. I don't play in the league. Riding a broom was never my strong suit."

Mippy poured Hermione a second cup as well and disappeared before she could say thank you. It wasn't until that very moment that Hermione noticed that Mippy was wearing an apron.

"I must admit, Quidditch was never my passion either. You must have been dragged along to all sorts of practices and matches at Hogwarts."

Hermione shook the questions of Mippy's apron from her head and focused on Narcissa. "Oh, yes. I had to support Harry, Ginny, and Ron at every game. Usually I'd bring a book." Hermione laughed lightly and brought her cup to her lips.

and a half ago, there was a blinded dragon chained in the bowels of the building, used as a security method for the more important vaults. They tortured the dragon to respond to certain sounds and…" Hermione realized that it is possible Narcissa knew everything about this dragon, as it was her sister's vault they had broken into. "And I would like to help the goblins come up with an alternative, so another dragon is not tortured in this way."

Hermione focused on pouring milk into her tea.

"That is quite honorable Miss Granger. Our family has such a long history with dragons and I cannot tell you how many stories I've heard about the creatures being used for wizards' own ends." Narcissa shook her head. "Well, you must keep me updated on that project. I do hope you have the proper support you need."

"I—yes, thank you. I'm just at the beginning, so I look forward to where it goes." Hermione added three spoonfuls of honey to her cup and began stirring.

"Do you know, my son takes his tea the exact same way. What a coincidence," Narcissa said. Hermione looked up at her and she was smiling. "Milk and three spoons of honey."

"How strange." Hermione neglected to inform her that she, of course, knew how Draco took his tea and, as a coffee addict by age thirteen, she had tried "Draco's way" when she was forced to drink tea. She lifted the cup to take a sip. Quite delicious in comparison to Ginny's breakfast tea.

"Do you run into him at work often?"

Hermione looked at her over her teacup. "Dr-Draco?" There was no getting around saying his given name there. She couldn't very well call him "Malfoy" in this house. She stuttered, "Yes, I – I mean, not very much. I've seen him in the lifts." She set the cup down, and blocked the memory of his hot breath on her cheek from a few days before. "He seems to be getting on well?"

"Yes, I do believe so. He is quite glad to have befriended Mr. Potter and yourself."

Hermione suppressed a laugh. "I can only imagine how difficult it must be for him to change the public view of himself." Hermione took a sip before she said anything else.

"But I'm sure you know exactly what he is going through, Miss Granger."

Hermione looked at her. Her eyes were kind.

Narcissa continued, "As a Muggle-born child entering a pure-blood world, I believe you worked *very* hard at changing opinions."

Hermione waited for the other shoe to drop, but there was silence. Narcissa Malfoy had just recognized her as a witch who had fought for her rightful place against those who'd dismissed her in the pure-blood world, including herself. Hermione felt a knot in her throat, blocking her breath.

"Actually, never." She smiled sadly and trained her eyes on Narcissa. "We had to erase their memories two years ago, before… everything began." Narcissa pursed her lips. "They live in Australia together, with no memory of me." She swallowed and looked down at her hands. "I've created a 'pen-pal' relationship with my mother though, so I get to hear about what they're doing and how they're getting on," she rambled. Hermione painted on a fake smile and looked up to find Draco clenching his jaw, frowning at her.

She pulled her eyes away from him when Narcissa's hand grasped hers.

"I'm so sorry, Hermione." Narcissa's blue eyes were swimming as they looked into Hermione's, and she had never felt such honest compassion coming from her. She was apologizing for so much. "You're very strong. And I admire that so."

Hermione nodded so her voice wouldn't break. She took a breath. "Well, I would love to talk about something else." She gave a shaky laugh. "I didn't mean for the mood to change so dramatically."

She chanced a glance at Draco, and found him glaring at the table, jaw tight.

"It was very insightful of the Order," he looked up at her, "to take that precaution." The way his voice rolled over "the Order," she knew that he understood exactly what happened.

"Yes," she said, staring directly into his clever eyes. "I can't thank them enough."

Narcissa fiddled with her teacup and milk, watching them.

Twenty minutes of light conversation later and it was time for Hermione to return to Cornerstone. Narcissa suggested Draco walk her back, of course, and she found herself retracing their path back to the bookshop.

"Do you think you'll stay on with the Auror Office?" she asked. "Your term is up in six weeks or so, yes?" A chill wind brushed across the alley, and she had to push her hair away from her face as it whipped around her head.

"Yes, December 10th." He tucked his hands into his coat pockets. "I'll be starting something new, actually. Take a few weeks for the holidays, then jump into the new year. New millennium."

"Right," she said, and couldn't decide if she was glad or disappointed that she wouldn't be seeing him around the Ministry past December 10th. "What is it you plan do?"

They paused at a corner and he took a breath. "I'm opening my own company." He cleared his throat and she looked up at him. "A kind of consulting group. I'm announcing on November 1st."

His sentences were clipped and his eyes darted around the street looking at anything but her, but Hermione had her interest piqued.

"A consulting group? And what will you specialize in?"

He paused before answering, then took a breath. “Litigation and contracts, finances, management and operations, and I’m hoping to have a few other minor branches with select specialists.”

Hermione stared up at him. She hardly knew what half of that meant. She laughed.

“What?” he said, looking down at her with untrusting eyes.

“You’re just... opening a company,” she said. A laughed bubbled up. “At nineteen.” She smiled at him shaking her head.

“You and your friends defeated a dark wizard at eighteen.” He lifted a brow at her, challenging.

“Actually, Harry was seventeen.”

“Thanks for reminding me.”

She smiled at the ground, watching her feet as they walked. “So, if I’m understanding this correctly, you’ll be providing legal counsel for Wizengamot hearings, advising businesses on their budgets and operations, things like that?”

“Essentially.” Very non-committal.

“And you think individuals and businesses will hire you based on your nineteen years of experience in those fields?” She knew teasing him lightly like this would probably provoke him, but while he was being so cagey…

“No.” He shook his head. “They will hire my *firm* based on the personnel I will surround myself with. Specialists and the like. I’m in talks with Cuthbert Mockridge to bring him out of retirement to take over the finances department—”

Hermione looked up at him. Cuthbert Mockridge had been the head of the Goblin Liaison Office before retiring. His brow was drawn together as he continued.

“—And I’ve begun a relationship with Tiberius Ogden, and plan to ask him to specialize in Wizengamot services—”

Hermione remembered the name from the papers. He had been an elder in the Wizengamot, resigning when Umbridge arrived. He and his son were also heir to the Ogden’s Old Firewhisky fortune. She watched him as he listed off several others and explained their capabilities. His cheekbones were pink and he kept his gaze on the ground, on the shops, on the sky, anywhere but her, but he was speaking fast, ready for a fight. He took a breath to explain another personnel decision he’d made and she stopped him.

“That’s very exciting, Draco,” she said. He looked down at her. “You don’t need to defend your company to me. I think it will be a great success. You were excellent at leading the meeting on the dragon egg this week – prepared, succinct, authoritative. It’s like you were born for it.”

“Oh, my,” Hermione muttered while spinning in her chair to see the stacks upon stacks of tomes and old volumes. Malfoy Manor’s library was cited as one of the oldest and most expansive libraries in all of Wizarding England, but of course when Hermione read this in her second year, she never imagined she would get to see it one day. Everything was immaculately dusted and cared for, and there was even a catalog near the door that would assist you with any topic you desired.

“Oh, yes,” Narcissa said. “I hope you don’t mind leaving Cornerstone’s books for ours. Our drawing room is being renovated.”

“No, no. I’m absolutely floored. Your library is beautiful Mrs. Malfoy.” Her eyes danced along the spines, finding what she thought might be a first edition of *Moste Potente Potions* tucked in between two heavy volumes.

“Please, dear, call me Narcissa.”

And just like that, Hermione was brought back to the oddity that was tea with Narcissa Malfoy.

“Narcissa. Your library is beautiful.” Hermione smiled. She wondered what to do with her hands, so she just let them lay awkwardly on her lap.

“Thank you, dear. You will have to come by just to browse one day. Any book you would like to borrow, it’s yours.” Narcissa waved her arm and Mippy appeared with the tea service before Hermione’s brain could process the idea of browsing the Malfoy library.

Mippy pushed over a cart with the most decadent looking sandwiches and scones. Mippy snapped and the teacups and saucers were produced from thin air. She laid them down on the table between Hermione and Narcissa. Hermione was entranced, but of course cautious when it came to house-elf servitude.

“Tell me, Miss Granger.” Hermione looked up and Narcissa was watching her. “You work at Cornerstone Books on the weekends, but during the week you work at the Ministry?”

“Yes. At the Department of Magical Creatures, in the Beast Division.”

“Fascinating.” And she actually looked fascinated. “And what does the Beast Division entail? Werewolves and Centaurs, yes?”

“Yes, the Centaur Liaison office, the Werewolf Registry. But also the Ghoul Task Force and the Dragon Research and Restraint Bureau, which is where I spend most of my time.” She watched as Mippy poured their tea and set small plates in front of them.

“Thank you Mippy,” Narcissa said, and Mippy disappeared. “Dragon research? That must be quite interesting.” She poured milk into her cup and began stirring without a single “clink” against the teacup edge.

“Yes, it is. I analyze and write reports on dragon eggs found around Wizarding England, and I’ve requested to head my own research project on Gringotts, actually. You see, up until a year

Hermione took a breath. She grabbed a handful of Floo powder and whispered, "Malfoy Manor" as the flames turned green.

She stepped out of an opulent fireplace. White marble everywhere. She had been a bit distracted the last time she'd been to Malfoy Manor, so seeing it again, as a guest, was stunning. She was not in the drawing room, thankfully. It was not until stepping through the fireplace that Hermione realized that she might be having tea with Narcissa Malfoy in the same room her sister tortured her. She wondered what the spell was for cleaning blood out of the carpets.

Just as she was finishing admiring the hall, a tiny house-elf rounded a corner and tottered toward her.

"Miss Hermione Granger?"

"Yes, hello." Hermione smiled thinking of the house-elf history book sitting on Narcissa Malfoy's settee.

"Will you please come with Mippy?" The tiny girl elf curtsied for her, then turned to lead her away.

Mippy lead her down the hall past a grand staircase that Hermione tried not to recognize. She passed busts of past Malfoy men, all with the same grey eyes, ending with Lucius. She shivered at the likeness. Mippy paused at a pair of doors. She knocked twice and then entered, opening the doors wide for Hermione.

"Miss Hermione Granger to see you ma'am."

Narcissa Malfoy was bathed in sunlight streaming in from the western windows. The rays bounced off her long hair and spread over the room. She stood from her chair as Hermione entered, and Hermione felt like she was being welcomed to Mount Olympus by Hera herself.

"Miss Granger." Narcissa floated to her. She extended her hand and Hermione took it. "I'm so grateful that you were able to come to tea today." Narcissa clasped her other hand around Hermione's and looked deeply into her eyes. "I do so want the opportunity to get to know you better."

"I- Yes, thank you. I agree. It would be so lovely to get to know you as well." Hermione smiled and found she couldn't blink.

"Was Mortimer able to cover your shift?" Narcissa released her hand and lead her to the cushioned chairs. She glided into her chair, and Hermione tried to replicate the motion.

"Yes, he was very kind to allow this. He's really a great man." Hermione crossed her legs at the ankles, instead of at the knees like the Muggles do. "Both he and Maggie are wonderful people." She opened her mouth to ask Narcissa how long she'd been patronizing Cornerstone, but stopped as she took in the room for the first time. She wasn't sure how she'd missed it, but they were having tea in the Malfoy personal library.

She smiled warmly. His jaw tightened and the wind blew a lock of hair across his forehead. She looked away to keep from pushing it back into place and saw that they had arrived back at Cornerstone. She had a thought.

"You've been planning this for a while, it seems," she said, noting his silence. "Are you investing your inheritance into this new business?"

He paused. "That's the plan."

"Investment and passion are two key ingredients for success." He looked down at her again and the wind blew her hair across her face this time. She pushed it back. "And your father must be in support if he released your inheritance to you?"

His eye twitched as he looked away from her, something she'd never seen. He didn't like her bringing up Lucius.

"Yes, a small amount at first. Then the rest on January 1st. Contingent on a few things." He scratched at his jaw and shifted his weight. She'd never seen him so uncomfortable. She tried to lighten the moment.

"Well," she said, turning to step up to the door, "what a pity for all those half-blood and Muggle-born girls that thought you would invest all that money in their happy future with you." She turned and found him studying her. "How disappointing for them." She gave him a sarcastic smile.

"I thought you of all people knew not to believe a word of what Skeeter prints." He smirked at her. She stood on the doorstep of Cornerstone and was struck by the image of a boy walking a girl to her door at the end of a date, waiting for a kiss. Her heart ached. She shook herself.

"I think we did a fine job today, Malfoy." She hugged herself against the wind. "A full hour lunch date with your mother and no casualties. I'd say that's progress." She grinned and watched his eyes flash at her. She nodded at him in goodbye.

"Granger." She turned with her hand on the doorknob. "About your parents…"

Her throat clicked as she took a breath. "Yes?"

"You did the right thing." His eyes were pale and they bored into her. She was breathless.

"Thank you."

"Have you… been by your home since the war ended?"

"No, not since I left."

He nodded at her.

"Don't."

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Eleven

At five minutes ‘til four, Morty came downstairs and started picking up the register for her.

“Let me just, um…” Hermione grabbed a few volumes that she had pulled off the shelves for a gentleman earlier that morning.

“Ah-ah-ah—” Morty clucked. He took the books from her. “I think I know where they go,” he said, raising a brow. “Besides. Do you really want to be *late* to tea with Narcissa Malfoy?”

Hermione looked at the clock. Three minutes ‘til four. No, she supposed being late to tea would be worse than tea at all. But standing her up all together….

“Off with you!” Morty said, reading her mind. “I’ve opened my Floo upstairs, so you can head straight to the Manor.”

Hermione’s heart jumped. “Alright,” she said, grabbing her bag. “But I haven’t finished updating the ledger. So be sure to add –”

“Got it. Goodbye.” Morty waved her away.

Hermione slumped and headed upstairs. Morty’s sweet wife, Maggie, let her into their flat and gave her the Floo powder. She was tempted to start a conversation with Maggie to delay the process, but Maggie waved and disappeared into their kitchen.

Hermione checked her reflection in the mirror on the mantle. She had actually *asked* Ginny to work with her hair today. She didn’t let her do makeup, but Ginny had pulled it back into the braid she’d done a few weeks ago as she filled Hermione in on Quidditch practice the day before, telling her that Draco had been irritable and distracted. Good. Then Hermione had found something suitable to wear that was not made of denim, but then again, what could possibly be “suitable” to wear to afternoon tea at Malfoy Manor. Hermione had settled on a skirt borrowed from Ginny, and a blouse borrowed from the back of her own closet.

"I received this note this afternoon." He pulled a thick parchment paper from his breast pocket. "It requests that you be given the afternoon off. And I couldn't agree more."

"I- I still don't understand," Hermione said. Was she being let go?

"And a note for you arrived with it." Morty pulled an envelope from his pocket that perfectly matched the parchment he had. It had a slanted and even cursive on the front.

Miss Hermione Granger
c/o Mortimer Hindes
Cornerstone Books
Horizont Alley & Diagon Alley

Hermione opened the thick envelope and found matching script on the note.

Dear Miss Granger,

Please do me the honor of sitting down to afternoon tea with me tomorrow. I would greatly love your company. I have asked Mr. Hindes to cover the shop for you.

Yours,
Narcissa Malfoy

Hermione reread the note four times. She was torn between shock that Narcissa would be bold enough to ask a business owner to alter his schedule for her, and terror that she would be sitting down to tea with Narcissa Malfoy tomorrow. The terror was winning.

"I had no idea you were such close friends with Mrs. Malfoy. She's been a loyal customer for years now." Morty took off his glasses to clean them.

"N-no I'm not." Hermione folded up the note. "We are merely acquaintances."

"Well, that's definitely a good acquaintance to have."

"I suppose so."

Hermione headed to Eeylops Owl Emporium after work to send a response to Narcissa Malfoy. By the time she'd arrived home, a grand grey owl was pecking at her glass. She would be sitting down to tea at Malfoy Manor at 4PM tomorrow.

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Eight

Monday, October 11, 1999

I have to work with her on Monday morning for the dragon egg project. I'd had a moment of brilliancy on Friday afternoon, and Robards asked me to prepare for a staff meeting early in the week.

I get in a few hours early to start, and he's at my cubicle, asking about that meeting. It's ambitious of me, but I tell him I'll be ready for a 9:30AM start. I scramble together the maps and the research I started on Friday, and begin spinning them into something resembling a report.

I'm in the conference room on Level 2 – my second office, I've named it – when several other staff members begin filing in, and suddenly she's there, looking directly into my eyes.

My visions of her face from last night swim in my mind, looking into me while I thrust into her, her lips pulling into a tight circle as her neck stretches, reaching for something, and I'm pulling her hair to get to look back at me –

She looks away and takes a seat as far from me as possible. I see O'Connor pull her chair for her. Oh. He's here too.

I refocus my energies on this staff meeting that I'm completely unprepared for.

And just as I had feared, she's asking questions. She's raising her hand like the good little Gryffindor she is, and I wonder if she *knows* what she's doing, sitting there with her back straight, like this is potions class and she's trying to get a *rise* out of her teacher.

By the end of the meeting I'm able to get in a "Ten points to Gryffindor."

She scowls and I think today will be a good day.

~*~

Wednesday, October 13, 1999

I have a meeting with Rita Skeeter to discuss the beginnings of Malfoy Consulting Group. She comes over for dinner, and I get the impression that every time Rita enters Malfoy Manor, she is living her best life.

Slimy, ladder-climbing roach.

Mother sits at the head of the table, quiet and letting me take the floor. I appreciate her so much.

"I'd like to announce on November 1st," I say, as the first course appears on the table, and after I've detailed my five-year-plan. "And I'd very much like to give you an exclusive interview, for the November 1st *Prophet*."

Skeeter's greedy eyes wander my face as she tears into her bread roll.

"I'd be honored, Mr. Malfoy." She winks at me.

I smirk back at her.

It's always strange, remembering that women find me attractive. I didn't have a mirror for fifteen months, and things start to become less important in Azkaban… I've been focusing for so long on different ways to get what I want, that I have forgotten the most basic of techniques.

I use my thumb to brush away imaginary mushroom soup from the corner of my mouth, and watch as her eyes follow the movement, dipping my thumb between my lips and sucking the nothing off it. Her eyes sparkle behind her glasses.

"What about your love life, dear?" She dips her spoon in her soup bowl. "Who is on your social calendar this weekend?"

I blink. I should have remembered that Skeeter prioritizes her job higher than any personal wants. Admirable.

As I have *no* social commitments this weekend, I choose the easiest response.

"I believe I'll be seeing Jeannette DuPont again on Friday evening." I flip my napkin on my lap, and make a mental note to contact Jeannette. "Location pending, but you'll be the first to know."

She gleams at me. "And are you going to be seeing more of Miss DuPont? Perhaps she'll be meeting your mother soon?" Rita glances at Mother and I hear an unladylike snort into her soup.

"You know I don't play favorites, Rita." I let my voice move like silk, hooding my eyes at her.

"You *have* been seen most often with Katya Viktor," Skeeter said. "And I know that Miss Viktor's father is in total support of the… relationship."

"Our families have been friends for a long time," Mother says. I think she'll say more, but she returns to her soup.

"Yes," I say. "Katya and I have a very special friendship." I let the words hang in the air, letting Skeeter interpret them in any way she wants.

"Yes, dear. Thank you."

"And I have the pre-order ledger here," Hermione said, pulling a notepad from the bottom drawer. "I will list you for the McHandry Werewolf book."

"Do you work both Saturday and Sunday, Miss Granger?"

Hermione looked up into Narcissa's clear eyes. They were bluer than Draco's grey, but just as intense.

"Yes, I do. Every weekend. Ten in the morning until six at night." She finished writing Narcissa's order on the list, and placed the notepad back in the bottom drawer.

"And with a Ministry job on the weekdays? You must keep yourself very busy," Narcissa said. She hadn't taken her eyes off Hermione. She began to wonder if she had ink on her face.

"I- Yes, I do. I suppose I've always kept busy." Hermione had the bag ready to hand to Narcissa, but she didn't want to seem like she was dismissing her in the middle of a conversation.

"It must be very hard for you and Mr. Weasley to see each other, with you both having such different schedules." Narcissa's eyes flickered. Hermione couldn't blink.

"I-I guess so. Harry and I do miss him while he's away, but Ron is accomplishing so much for himself in Ireland." Hermione swallowed.

"Do you get to visit him much?" Narcissa twitched her head to the side, examining her.

"Ron?" Hermione felt like there was an answer she was supposed to be giving. "No, I haven't made it out to Ireland yet." And suddenly it became clear. *Miss Granger visits her beloved in Ireland every weekend.* Narcissa was digging. For whatever reason. Hermione added, "I believe Ron keeps himself… quite busy as well."

Narcissa's lips twitched. "I see." She took a breath. "Well, I thank you very much for your assistance today Miss Granger."

"Not at all." Hermione handed Narcissa the bag. There was something behind her eyes, some sort of approval. "We hope to see you at Cornerstone again very soon, Mrs. Malfoy."

Narcissa's delicate fingers took the bag. "Please, dear, call me Narcissa." She smiled at her. Hermione blinked.

Narcissa turned and glided out, not making a sound.

That afternoon Morty came downstairs as she was closing up. He was a tall and thin man with a grey mustache that twitched as he talked. Hermione thought he was just the loveliest gentleman.

"Good evening, Morty," she chirped.

"Miss Granger, you are to take the afternoon off tomorrow."

A book slipped from her hands as she was filing it. "I'm sorry?" She turned to look at Morty.

into him here before, yes?" Narcissa's eyes flickered for a moment, just as her son's did. She wanted a specific answer…

"I- Um, no, actually. We never saw each other here before… before a few weeks ago." Hermione placed her hands on the counter and immediately brought them back down. "What brings you in to Cornerstone today?" She held her breath, waiting for the ball to drop –

"The book on the Goblin Wars," Narcissa said.

Hermione's brows lifted. A book? Not "the handprint you left on my son's cheek" or "the silly infatuation you have with my son"? A book? She came to a bookstore for the purpose of a book?

"Yes?" Hermione said. "Did you need to return it?"

"I loved it," Narcissa said. She grinned at her. "Draco told me it was a favorite of yours as well?"

Draco… did what?

"I – Well, yes. I do love that author—"

"I was hoping you could point me to another book of hers or a similar title."

"I – Yes, I can absolutely – um," Hermione stammered. She began to move around the counter, then remembered that she had left the ledger open on the counter. "I will… just let me…" She doubled back and tucked the ledger into a drawer. "Yes. Alright. Follow me, please."

Hermione rounded the counter, praying that Narcissa Malfoy did not now think she was ill in the head. She could hear the click of dragon leather heels behind her as she stumbled to the stacks to the left of the entrance, just now remembering that she was wearing trainers, Muggle jeans, and a T-shirt of a Muggle music group. She stopped in front of the M's.

"Alright, so, Mattie McHandry has also written similar non-fictions with regard to the Centaur and Elvish histories, and she should be coming out with a Werewolf book later this year –"

"I'll take both. And please place an order for me for the third when it comes out."

Hermione looked over her shoulder at Narcissa Malfoy. She had a pleasant smile on her lips, and a plan behind her eyes.

"Of course, Mrs. Malfoy. Excellent choices." Hermione grabbed the Centaur book and reached for the Elf book. It hit her that Narcissa Malfoy was about to purchase a book about house-elf repression and the role wizards have played. It was like a broomstick collision that you couldn't look away from. "Was there anything else you were looking for today?"

"I think that should satisfy me for a few weeks now. Thank you." Narcissa Malfoy pulled a lock of silky hair behind her ear.

Hermione walked the books back to the register to bag them.

"Shall I put these on the family account, Mrs. Malfoy?"

"Will you be seeing her this weekend as well? Surely Draco Malfoy can handle more than one date per weekend." Skeeter winks at me again.

My lips part, ready to make up two other scheduled dates.

"We will be sitting down to lunch with Hermione Granger on Saturday."

The words are like ice against my neck, and I snap my head to look at Mother, finding Skeeter doing the same.

She's sipping from her soup spoon, like she hadn't just shattered the thin glass I'd been walking on for months.

"Hermione Granger?" Skeeter slides her eyes to me, and they're wide and clawing. "I had no idea you were so well acquainted, Narcissa."

I feel like a fish, gasping for air outside of the river. And I realize that whatever Skeeter is reading from my face will make it into the *Prophet.* I close down, blinking, and refocus on Mother, who is patting her lips with her napkin.

"She works at that lovely bookshop in Diagon Alley. Draco and I have been going there for years, and we were so pleasantly surprised to find Miss Granger working there." She smiles. "And of course, Draco has gotten to know her much better from working at the Ministry together."

I have no idea what Mother is doing, but I know I need to stop it.

"Yes, there are several people I've become reacquainted with since starting at the Ministry." I pick up my soup spoon, and find my hand shaking. "Harry Potter and I might even be what you call 'friends' now. He's asked me to play on their interdepartmental—"

"And around what time did you say the three of you would be having lunch on Saturday?" Skeeter asks Mother. And I know I'm in deep when not even the mention of Harry Potter has Skeeter's head turning.

"Just the two of them, I'm afraid." I sit back, and let my spoon clatter against the bowl. The soup disappears. "I have other engagements this Saturday. But my mother and Miss Granger wish to continue their… acquaintance."

"Oh, but Draco will, of course, be able to stop in. Your business is already in Diagon Alley, isn't it dear?" My mother's eyes are cool, and I don't know how to argue with her here.

Skeeter's eyes are flipping between the two of us like following a Quaffle. "And how long have you and Miss Granger been developing your… acquaintance, Narcissa?"

I open my mouth, and Mother beats me to it.

"A few weeks now. She was at the Manor for dinner just last weekend, in fact."

And it's like a door has been opened that cannot ever be shut.

I stare at my mother, innocently finishing her soup. Skeeter has lost her appetite in favor of a different kind of hunger. And I watch as her eyes burn and move quickly, like there's a quill moving in her mind.

I try to think of what to say. A way to turn this around. To deny the explosion of facts in Skeeter's brain. To make her forget all the old customs of pure-blood courting and to ignore the clear evidence in front of her.

Skeeter turns to me. "Well, that's lovely. I think it would be very positive for public opinion to know that your…" – her eyes dance – "…*tastes* have changed, Draco. No matter whose acquaintance she is."

I swallow.

"I'm thinking…" Skeeter lifts her eyes to the ceiling, calculating. "A Sunday morning print feature." She taps her chin. "We'll get a few shots of you and Miss DuPont of course. But if we can see you taking your tea with Hermione Granger, maybe drop a line or two about your future business plans, a bit of a 'something's brewing' tease…"

"I couldn't agree more, Rita," Mother says. "I think a friendship with Hermione Granger could bring great things down the line."

I stare at my place setting until the second course arrives.

After dinner, I walk Skeeter out. I kiss her hand smoothly before she disappears into the fireplace. I return to my mother, finding her in the library.

"Perhaps I wasn't clear." My voice is tense. "Father will deny me my inheritance if I don't stay away from her."

She pulls her teacup from her lips. "Is that what he said? The exact words?" She looks up at me and waits.

"'This business or your Mudblood.'" It's a difficult sentence to say aloud. And I don't know when the last time was that I used that word. It feels different on my tongue.

She chuckles. "Oh, so dramatic…" she whispers into her teacup. Then up at me, and louder: "Have you made an offer of marriage to Miss Granger?"

I feel my ribs rattle in my chest. "No, of course not," I scoff.

"Then I see no reason for these 'terms' of his to be broken. You are moving forward with your business operations as planned, clearly *choosing* it."

"And what would 'public lunch with my mother' fall under, but 'moving forward?'"

"Like you said, Draco." She smiles. "She's my friend, not yours."

I huff. "I don't…" I run my hand through my hair. "I don't want to ruin this, Mother." She looks at me curiously and I clarify, "The business plan," before she can assume I meant anything else. "I don't want to anger him and jeopardize my future."

"So," Ginny began. "He's teasing you about your virginity as he's pressing you up against a wall?"

Hermione frowned. "You make it sound very juvenile."

"It *is* very juvenile." Ginny nodded. "It sounds like the two of you never left Hogwarts."

Hermione shook her head and looked at the rug she was sitting on. It hadn't *felt* juvenile in the moment. It had felt terrifying.

"I guess it only supports your point that I slapped him, too?" She looked up at Ginny with a shy smile.

This sent Ginny over the moon, and she laughed and begged for more information, and for the first time in twenty-four hours Hermione felt proud of herself.

She almost called in sick to Cornerstone on Saturday morning, but she was at least grateful that she would not be seeing Draco. She supposed he might be cruel enough to show his face after their conversation yesterday. She really had no idea to what lengths he would go anymore. And she probably had never known.

She checked the reserved requests first thing that morning to make sure there were none under Black or Malfoy. As the shop opened and the hag shuffled in, she was able to put yesterday behind her.

Cornerstone was surprisingly busy that day, with almost always a line of two people at the register, so when a large gentleman with a mustache bid her a good day and moved away from the register, Hermione was completely thrown to see Narcissa Malfoy in the doorway.

Narcissa's eyes roved over the stacks before landing on her. Frozen in place, Hermione's ears started burning. Merlin, she had slapped her son yesterday. Was Narcissa Malfoy here to request that she please keep her filthy Muggle-born hands off her precious pure-blood heir?

Narcissa Malfoy smiled.

Hermione blinked.

"Miss Granger," she said. Her voice dripped like honey out of a bottle. "Good morning."

Hermione watched Narcissa Malfoy ascend the two steps to the main landing, smiling at her.

"Mrs. Malfoy," Hermione croaked. "Good morning."

"Draco did tell me that you had a weekend job here." Narcissa Malfoy floated to the counter and placed a delicate hand on it. "I love this shop. It's so much nicer to be out of the way of the bustle of Diagon Alley, don't you think?"

Hermione swallowed. "Yes, absolutely. I feel the same way."

"I believe Draco spent several of his summers at this shop, reading and escaping the rush of the market." Narcissa waved her hand and shook her head, smiling still. "You must have run

My eyes cross, and I pick a spot on the ground to focus on, reaching for the entry table to steady myself.

I can feel my heartbeat in my toes. I try to concentrate on that.

I inhale, feeling it spin around my chest, and force myself to exhale.

Usually I'm leaning on a sink, a pimply-faced ghost hushing me, trying to ease her hand across my back and sending shivers down my spine.

I feel the shivers regardless.

I inhale.

There's water rushing through my ears, and I feel like it pours in one ear, sloshes, fills to the top, then a valve opens to rush out.

I hear Myrtle's flirty laugh.

I inhale, but it's not accomplishing anything.

What have I been doing? Playing house with Granger. Pretending to open a company with no skillset and no investors.

With money that isn't mine. Not yet.

I have no contract with Father.

I inhale.

I have no binding document that states he will give me this money.

I focus on my Slytherin ring against the stone floor. I guess I fell.

I inhale. I hear it dragged across the stones.

The only thing I have is an agreement with him that if I spend the 35,000 wisely, and stay away from her, I'll be opening a company on January 1st.

A company I don't know how to manage.

A dream.

I inhale and it chokes me.

I smell the dust on the floor and I wonder how Mippy could allow such dirt in my father's home.

Not mine.

Nothing is yet.

I push air through my nose, and I'm able to flip onto my back, staring at my father's ceiling.

I don't have a technique for this. Severus does.

Severus knows how. Standing over me, digging into my mind.

I feel the stone beneath my ribs, pressing up against me. Pressing down on me. Pressing in on me.

"Mr. Malfoy, you can breathe."

"I can't."

My hands on my chest, scratching at old scars, staring at the low ceiling of a small house, dusty with cobwebs and neglect.

"Mr. Malfoy, there is no time. He is expecting us back."

"I failed."

"The task is complete. The headmaster is dead."

"But I failed."

I'm looking up into Severus's eyes, sucking in air, throat closing. Potter's voice yelling "Coward!" at our backs is bouncing around my skull.

"You are more trained than this. This behavior is beneath you. You cannot stand before the Dark Lord unprepared."

Black spots peppering the edges of my vision.

"He's dead."

"Draco, find your walls."

His presence in my mind like a snake, pushing and seeing everything. Seeing the moment Dumbledore offered me sanctuary.

"Draco, he will want to know why you did not do it yourself. Work harder. I have trained you better than this."

He slithers through me and I only see his black eyes hovering. Tears leak out from the sides of my face, sliding down to my ears.

"Do you know how easily I can find her like this?"

And he's pulling forward a blue dress spinning, coffee cups, my hand on her hip in Umbridge's office, the fantasy of her breasts bouncing as she rides me – pumping myself in my four-poster, sugar quills, wide eyes, pink lips on my chest, small hands threading into my hair –

I can hear my throat rasping around thin air.

"Don't—"

"Stop me. Protect her."

And a jewelry box finally appears in my mind. It closes, and locks.

SPLASH!

Ice cold water against my face, burning my eyes, drowning my open mouth.

"Master Malfoy!"

I'm back in the manor, and Mippy is above me, terrified, holding a bucket.

"Master Malfoy! Mippy is not knowing what to do!"

I'm coughing, sitting up, heaving in air.

"You is laying there. You is not hearing me!"

The letter from Mockridge is just there, to my left, floating away on the stream.

I wipe my face.

"Mippy gets Mistress for you?"

"No." I stand on shaking legs. "No, I—Thank you, Mippy. Please don't tell my mother."

I snatch up the letter, and crawl up the stairs to my room, leaving the elf in the entry hall. I cast a drying charm and a warming charm.

I don't stop shivering.

I re-read Mockridge's letter for what it is. A positive sign. A good thing.

I write back to him, quill scratching strange penmanship on the parchment, setting up a time and place.

I pull another parchment and think of how to ask Father about our deal. How to apologize—

Not apologize. If I apologize then there is something to apologize for.

How to trivialize. How to suggest that our deal remains and to get something in writing.

The ink blots on the empty page.

Father won't appreciate letters. He values actions.

The quill meets the parchment to write:

Katya,

Dinner tomorrow night. It's important.

D.M.

~*~

Friday, October 22, 1999

"I had no idea you knew Hermione Granger so well! I've been hoping to make an acquaintance with her."

My wine glass stops its journey to my lips. I blink at her.

"I don't."

Katya stares at me.

"What do you mean, 'you don't,'" she says, laughing. "You spent the afternoon with her last week!"

I take a deep swallow of the wine.

"She's friends with my mother." I pat my lips with my napkin.

I cut into my meat. I chew aggressively. It's bland.

Katya is quiet. I look up, and she has her elbows on the table, fingers steepled under her chin. She's studying me.

Fuck.

"We were in the same year at Hogwarts. You knew that." My voice is lighter. Friendlier.

"True," she says. "But I didn't know you kept in touch."

Katya takes a deep drink from her glass, eyes on me.

and her eyes are wide and there are spots of pink on her neck, right where I'd kill to place my lips. "Was that not what happened?"

She opens her mouth, and then squashes whatever words she wants to say.

"Fine, then," she says. "It was her artistic interpretation of things. 'Lust-filled eyes' and exaggerations –"

"Ah, but I believe the 'lust-filled eyes' were mine," I interrupt, sending her my smuggest grin. "Are you worried about the stretch of the *Prophet?* If it's made its way to… say, Ireland?" I'm desperate to know what she thinks of her "fiancé's" reaction to all this.

She stares at me. Then recovers. "No, not really," she says, shrugging. "I was honestly more concerned with your reputation than mine. But if you don't care, I'll leave it alone."

She sits at the table, looking to start work. There's a superiority there. Like she thinks she's won something.

"My reputation?"

"Yes." I watch as she scratches her jaw and concentrates on her work. "If I had a girlfriend for every day of the week, I'd be in a hurry to mend things after that article."

My mouth drops. *A girlfriend for every day of the week.*

A laugh tears its way from my chest, and I'm thinking of how she keeps tabs on me in the newspaper. Knows about my dates. Knows about Skeeter's assumptions with my inheritance.

And something dances in my chest at the idea that she could possibly – even an inch of her – be envious.

"How kind of you to worry about my social life, Granger," I coo. "But I believe my stock might have gone up." She looks at me. "Nothing boosts a reputation more than having the Golden Girl on your arm."

I hand her the coffee cup, and set about working on the Runes for the next six hours until she jumps up and squeals, bringing a copy of an old text in front of my face, pointing at the similarities in the case, eyes bright and chest heaving with anticipation.

~*~

Thursday, October 21, 1999

Getting to work next to her all week blinded me. I had some kind of single-minded focus on her and her reactions to me and how she makes me feel.

I'm just arriving home when I get a letter back from Cuthbert Mockridge, agreeing to sit down with me soon, paying me lip service about my father and how proud he would be of me. And I'm spiraling into sensations that my body hasn't untangled in years.

My tongue is dry.

I drop the letter from Mockridge, and watch it flutter to the floor, my eye twitching.

Proud of me.

Barely half an hour passes before she asks me how I knew she liked coffee over tea.

My pulse pounds, careful to give nothing away.

"Everyone knows you prefer coffee, Granger." I flip a page, refusing to give her a glance. "You've been spilling it all over the Hogwarts library books for years."

An indignant gasp, and before she can fight, I say, "I've checked books out after you and found the pages just soiled with spilt coffee. Practically dipped in it."

I smirk at the notes I'm going through. She huffs. And I remember the way she'd sip from a mug and read at the breakfast table.

I buy her another coffee on Wednesday morning, if anything, so I can see her blush at the gesture again. I beat her to the conference room, so I set it at her chair and start shuffling the notes. We're very close to finishing this.

I'm wearing an older set of robes today. They're not my favorite, but Mother says they bring out my eyes, whatever that means. I hate wearing colors other than grey or black, but I decided to give them a try.

I take a sip from my tea, and she flies into the room.

"That bitch!"

I sputter, trying to reconcile the idea of Granger using foul language outside of the bedroom.

"Sorry," she waves me off. "But she's wicked."

"Skeeter, I presume?"

"Yes. I wrote a follow-up letter last night asking about the status of my corrections, and threatening to write my next letter to her editor. And then this morning she prints this!"

She shoves the paper at me, and I try to focus on it instead of the spots of pink on her cheeks, or that fire in her eyes that's usually turned towards me.

At the bottom corner in tiny print, Skeeter has amended that we don't "canoodle" at Cornerstone Books.

Yeah, alright.

I look up. "Did you expect more, Granger?"

"I demanded more!" she screeches. "I demanded a re-print!"

I toss the *Prophet* back to her and smirk. We've steered clear of the article, and the "date" itself. Seems like the perfect opportunity to get inside her head. I ask, "And which portions of Sunday's article so offended you, Granger?"

She stares at me like she's just seen thestrals for the first time. And blushes. I almost shiver.

"The inaccuracies."

I smile down at my finger, scratching at the old table. "I believe Skeeter reported that I visited you at work, invited you to lunch with my mother, and then walked you back," I say. I look up

"We work at the Ministry together now." I hear the familiar lines spin out of me. I look back at my plate and continue picking at the tasteless meal.

"So," Katya chirps, changing the subject. "What is so 'important' about this dinner? I saw your *Daily Prophet* photographer waiting outside."

I nod. "I was wondering if we could discuss public affection… in relation to our agreement."

Her brows raise. "I assume you're not talking about holding my hand." She laughs. "Is your social life not 'desirable' enough yet, Draco?" she teases. "You have at least two dates a week *and* you are going on family outings with Hermione Granger."

The muscle under my eye twitches, and I look away. When I come back to her she's watching me. I give her the reason I'm sure she'll understand, better than anyone.

"My father is not impressed."

We finish our meal. She laughs. I help her slip into her coat. She takes my hand as we exit. We turn the corner for the Apparition point, and Katya turns to look up at me.

I'm trying to remember the last time I kissed a girl. It was Pansy of course. But had it really been almost three years ago?

I slide my fingers into her hair, and it's too smooth. I press my lips to hers and they're too full.

I hear the click.

~*~

Saturday, October 23, 1999

"What do you think you're doing?"

The voice is firm, hiding anger.

I blink awake, wondering if I need locking charms on my door to stop friends and family from waking me with newspapers.

My mother stands tall next to my bed, glaring down at me. And, alas, holding the *Prophet.*

"Sleeping?"

She unfolds the paper and hands it to me. Katya and I have made the society section.

"Why would you do this? What *possible* game do you think you're playing?"

I tear my eyes away from the information Skeeter has gleaned. I look into my mother's cold blue eyes, surprised I need to spell this out for her.

"Father's game."

She scoffs. "I told you not to worry about your father –"

"No, you told me to make up my own rules. Here they are."

She stomps her foot and grabs the paper back from me. She's usually more controlled than this.

"Have you given any thought to the repercussions of this?" She shakes the paper.

I blink at her. "Meaning?"

"How do you think this will affect Hermione?"

I stare at her. "Probably not one bit." I shove the covers off and start getting dressed. I have Quidditch practice at dawn, and I can just make out the first rays of sunlight through my curtains.

"You will fix this."

I turn from my closet door. "Excuse me?" I lift a brow at her.

She's gone mental.

"You will go to Cornerstone today and fix this." She paces. "I have a book on reserve that I intended to pick up myself, but you will go instead."

"Fix *what?* Mother, I have no idea what you're on about." I grab a shirt from its hanger. "What on *earth* gave you the impression that Granger and I are *courting?"*

She throws the paper on the ground.

"You're an idiot."

She storms out.

~*~

Saturday, October 23, 1999 – later

The Weasley girl is watching me again. She grins whenever I catch her.

It gives me anxiety.

We play the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes tomorrow, and although they are no match for us, Potter's insisting on trying out new drills to prepare for Magical Transportation next weekend on Halloween.

The Weasley girl keeps passing to me whenever I'm open, congratulating me on scoring, trying to make small talk with me on our breaks.

Her change of heart has transferred to Potter, who is also behaving uncharacteristically kind to me.

I feel like there's a joke I'm not in on. It sours my mood.

Then, after practice, I see one of our Beaters flipping through the *Prophet.* He whistles.

"Malfoy, you have excellent taste."

I see the top of Katya's head from where he turns the page to the Keeper.

"She's a family friend," I say, grimacing. I wanted the gossip, didn't I?

"Wish I had family friends like her," one of them says and the other one laughs.

"Oi!" Weasley calls. "No misogyny allowed in the locker room!" She kicks the shins of one of them. And I see her eyes take in the *Prophet* as they chuckle. She blinks down at the picture of Katya and I, seeing it for the first time.

She lifts a brow at me, and hits my foot with her paperwork. I suppose I could stand. I let her push past me to her chair, and don't bother to move fully out of her way. Her hips brush against my thighs.

She prompts me about Robards and I hand her the memo. I watch her face as she reads. She's still pink. The moment she fully comprehends the memo, I see her eyes widen in anxiety. Before she can think about arguing with Mathilda, I say, "I've reserved the conference room upstairs for this afternoon, seeing as Level 4 has appallingly small rooms and cubicles." I look around her space. "I think my cube might be twice the size of yours, Granger. And I'm temporary." I lift a brow at her and she's glaring back. "See you at one, Granger."

I practically skip out of her office.

When she comes up after lunch, I already have the entire case laid out on the desk. I take the time to fully explain the points of interest, handing her pictures and notes, leaning over her shoulder to point at things. I get to see a blush creep up her neck.

Once she's settled, we're silent for the majority of the afternoon. When I get bored or need a stretch, I'll reach across her for something and watch her jump.

I wonder if she would have reacted like this last week, before the article. But then again, it's an unnecessary question because I would never have been this bold before – stretching my arms above my head, smirking at her, entering her personal space.

But before… I *had* seen her skin darken with a blush, her eyes take in my face and shoulders and occasionally my body. I look at her now. She's hunched over a picture, deciphering its origin, her tongue dragging over her bottom lip, concentrating. It's possible she's attracted to me. To my looks. Which is an excellent place to start.

My stomach tightens with the possibilities.

She feels my eyes and just before she looks up at me, I make the decision not to look away.

"Find anything interesting?" I say.

"Er, not yet." She blinks and looks back down at the pictures.

She blushes.

I grin.

On Tuesday morning, I swing by the café and get a tea. I was up most of the night, frustrated and overheated. As I reach the front of the line, I hear myself ordering a tea and a coffee. I fix it with a splash of milk and one sugar, fix my own tea, and then head upstairs.

Katie Bell and I share a lift on the way up. She chats with me about the charmed Muggle object they found last week, and I see her eyes drop to the second cup in my hands.

When I enter the conference room, she's already there. She's startled to see me so early, but I just place her cup in front of her and begin discussing the theories that ran through my head last night when I couldn't sleep for thoughts of her heaving chest.

"Morning, Malfoy!"

"Good morning, O'Connor," I say. "Is Granger in?"

"Not yet. But should be any minute!"

"Excellent." I'm walking away from him as he starts to ask about my weekend.

Her cubicle is tidy. Several files she worked through on Friday are stacked in a neat pile. She has a picture of Potter, Weasley and her from third year, and another of two people who must be her parents, also taken about the same time.

I hear her voice coming from the direction of the lift. I sit in her chair. I stand. No, no. I'll sit.

I pull a file from the stack into my lap. I hear the click of her shoes, her ugly ministry ones, no doubt. At the last moment, just before she rounds the corner, I kick my legs up onto her desk. Perfect.

She stops in the entry when she sees me.

I smirk at her. "Hello, lover."

She blushes. Her breath leaves her in a laugh. And I watch as she pulls her eyes away from me.

"Good morning, Malfoy." She busies herself with her coat and bag. "What brings you here?"

Your legs – No, don't be ridiculous, Draco.

"Robards."

"Oh? More on the dragon eggs?"

She stands there, useless. I've completely thrown her off.

Excellent.

"Oh, no. That all got settled on Friday. Buyer caught and under questioning." I send her a grin. "I would have thought it would make the papers, but apparently there were more important things to report this weekend."

Merlin, I'm good. I can't believe how easy it is to bring up the article. I have to refrain from winking at her.

"Right. Apparently." She smiles back and I feel my blood humming. She turns to her cabinets, trying to get ready for the day, but she'll just have to work around me. I'll stay in this chair and if she wants to work, she'll have to sit in my lap. She continues, "I've written to Skeeter to ask her to correct some of her glaring inaccuracies. I would have thought the corrections would have made today's *Prophet,* but hopefully this week."

Of course she's already complained to Skeeter.

"Inaccuracies?" I pout. "You mean those mints weren't for me?"

I have to avoid her eyes as she looks up at me, glaring as if I've dumped her best friend for a second-rate version, and then paraded her around town. Which, according to Skeeter, is exactly what I did.

They invite me for drinks. I decline. Potter forces me to go, even as the Weasley girl glares at me. I leave after one drink, and everyone complains, begging me to spend more time. I'm still confused as I pop into Diagon Alley, shaking off the feeling of Goldstein's drunken goodbye hug.

I'm not sure I much care for "friends." They're fickle things.

I'm approaching Cornerstone when suddenly a small grey-haired lady jumps in my path.

"You should be *ashamed* of yourself, Draco Malfoy!"

My eyes widen as I trip to keep from running into her.

"I'm sorry?"

"Hermione Granger would have made you a better man by *far* – and although I have no idea why such a bright girl would ever *lower* herself to be with *you,* you deserve Dragon Pox in the nastiest of areas for breaking her heart!"

She shoves me, and then marches away.

I'm dumbfounded, standing on the cobblestones and deciding that, no – I have *never seen that woman before in my life!*

I look back at her. A Cornerstone bag clutched in her withered hand.

I look to the stone building on the corner, with the slightly-off front door.

Breaking her heart.

I move toward one of the side windows, and peek in at her. She's behind the counter, smiling with a customer, writing in the ledger book.

I shake myself. Ridiculous. She looks well-rested and content.

The front door swings open as I reach for it, and I'm face-to-face with a nine-year-old girl – pigtails and glasses. She gasps when she sees me. Then bursts into tears.

"Why – why would you d-do that??"

I stare down at her. "What?"

"You w-were so perfect!" Her little brown eyes look up at me, glassy and red-rimmed.

"What?"

Her father appears behind her.

"Sorry, Mr. Malfoy." He takes her shoulders. "She's a big fan of Miss Granger's." He gives me an apologetic smile and steers her away down the street, her hiccups echoing as they go.

Perhaps the kiss with Katya was the wrong thing to do.

The door falls shut in front of me, and I look in once more. She's reading a book behind the counter, smiling to herself.

I roll my shoulders. She's fine. Her fan club is simply over-reacting.

A woman enters, passing me in the doorway, and sends me a glare to rival Ginny Weasley's.

But maybe I'll come back later when there are less spectators.

I occupy myself in Diagon Alley for the next few hours. Finally, at quarter to six, when I see the last of her customers trickle out the door, I take a deep breath and let myself in.

"What do *you* want?" she hisses at me.

I'm rethinking my plan. But I paste on a cocky smirk and try to play the part.

"A book? Do you sell those here?"

She grimaces. "We close in fourteen minutes. You had to come at the very end of the day?"

I reach the counter and lean as casually as I can. "Well, I didn't want any onlookers for our torrid love affair, Granger."

She looks away, and I think I spot pink on her cheeks. I tell her the book is on reserve. She bends to retrieve the book, and I'm ever so grateful that there's no one else here to catch me drinking in the sight of her.

Mother has picked another pink and bedazzled book. She raises a brow at me as she sets it on the counter.

She's quiet as she opens the ledger book. I think of her sharp greeting to me, the people on the street today, even Mother's reaction.

I'm supposed to "fix this," according to Mother.

I'm about to ask her something to gauge her mood when she speaks first.

"A reporter asked me today if you let me down easy." She continues to write in the ledger, with a quick glance at me. "I assume you were seen with one of your girls last night?"

One of my girls. The phrase irks me.

"Yes, Katya," I say. And I can't help myself. "I have six more to go. One for every day of the week, right?" she frowns up me, quill scratching deeply. "Which reminds me," I say, leaning down onto the counter comfortably. "Do you have five more copies of this?" I tap the book she's logging.

She rolls her eyes, and with the perfect amount of swottiness, says, "You know Draco, just because you *give* them books doesn't mean they'll learn to read."

The ease with which she hums my name. The clear and strong dislike of the girls I'm dating.

I can feel my blood heat, and as she checks in with me to see her joke land, I push further, begging her to play this game with me.

"Granger. If you miss being pictured in the papers with me, I think my Wednesday girl might be a bit of a dud. The day's all yours."

It catches her off guard, but she recovers with a frown. "I'll have to check my calendar and get back to you."

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Nine

Monday, October 18, 1999

There is no letter from Father. Not yesterday. Not yet today.

And I feel like I'm in a strange bubble until it arrives. A bubble that can be popped, yes, but still floating.

I run my hands through my hair for the fourteenth time, rustling the sides. I sprayed one more spritz of my cologne than normal, and immediately regretted it, so I had to take another shower.

After one last practiced smirk to the mirror, I head to the fireplaces, grab my briefcase from Mippy and pop through to the Ministry Atrium. I keep my eyes open for her, but I'm earlier than normal, and she likes to arrive right on time and stay late.

I get settled and meet with Robards.

"Can't say I know much about Runes, myself. Elected not to take that course," Robards mutters. I nod, looking down at the file we have. "But if you have any ideas," he continued. "I'd love to hear them. Let me know if you need a second pair of eyes."

I look up at him. I take a deep breath and dive in. "I suppose I could use another person. Any chance you think Granger could be spared from downstairs?"

Robards stares at me like I've given him a brilliant idea. "Granger? Yes, yes!" He smiles wide. "The two of you make a great team!"

I shrug. "She received an Outstanding in Runes. That's all I meant."

I'm whistling as I leave Robards office, offering to walk his note downstairs for him. I duplicate it, hand the original to Mathilda, and offer to tell Granger myself.

I'm twirling my wand around my fingers when I pass O'Connor, and not even his daft grin can put off my mood.

She tries to get rid of me. She hands me the book in a paper bag.

"Gift wrap?"

She produces a gift bag and tissue paper, and hisses, "Do it yourself."

She stomps off, taking the books she needs to refile, and ends the conversation.

Well, Mother wouldn't really call that "fixing it."

I'm about to leave when I see the corner of a newspaper peeking out of the rubbish bin behind the counter. And like a magnet, I'm pulled around the counter to the picture of Katya kissing me last night.

I assume you were seen with one of your girls last night?

She knew. And she still brought it up.

That familiar pull in my chest. The hope that she cares even the slightest about my social life.

I can't leave now. She'll have to force me out. I have to know…

I find the wrapping paper roll under the counter, and that's how she finds me: smarmy and making a mess at her station.

"Malfoy! You can't be back here!"

"You said 'do it yourself!'"

She moves behind me, coming to the wrapping paper area and huffs. She frowns down at the counter. "You don't want a gift bag?"

"Well, Katya received that beautifully wrapped gift that you prepared last week, so I can't go giving the rest of them second rate wrap-jobs. Best to be equal with things like this."

She mutters something condescending about me, but I can't hear her. I'm focusing on the way her lips press together at Katya's name and her agitation as she begins wrapping the book. I watch her fingers as they move, the Muggle way again. I should step back from her. We're very close now that she's behind the counter as well, and I can feel the heat from her. She has to tuck her elbows in to keep from knocking me as she works. But I don't care.

"How's your dragon project going?"

She stops and looks up at me, eyes curious.

"Er… fine. I submitted my initial proposal yesterday, so Mathilda will review it and make the necessary adjustments before submitting it to Kingsley – er, Minister Shacklebolt."

She's fumbling with tape when I ask, "And have you sat down with the Minister, to discuss it?"

She glances at me again, as if confused by my interest. "Um, no? That's what the proposal is for."

How could she be so intelligent yet so unwise?

"You are close, personal friends with the Minister of Magic, having fought a war with him. If you can't take the man to tea – or coffee – to discuss a passion project, then what good is that friendship?"

"How very Slytherin of you," she scoffs, and I bristle at the words. "A friendship cannot be just a friendship. You have to gain something from it, is that right, Malfoy?"

I'm stepping into her and wondering how much I could "gain" with her as I say, "And how very Gryffindor of you. Bravely beginning something without any idea of how to get what you want."

I see her take a shallow breath and look up at me. I'm so much closer to her now. Haven't stood this close since the hallway at the Ministry. I see her eyes roam my face, and I think of all the different ways my words can be interpreted. And I want to push her back against the countertop, feel her body along mine and discuss all the ways the two of us can get what we want.

"All good down here?" Morty. "Mr. Malfoy! What a pleasure again!"

I step away from her and smile at him. I make apologies for keeping her late, but I don't retreat from the counter. I stay at her side as she hurries to finish the ribbon on my gift, her body stretching to accommodate my presence. I can feel her breath and I can smell her hair.

She stuffs the book in the bag.

"Thank you for shopping at Cornerstone Books." She glares up at me. And I'm still dreaming about what would have happened if Morty hadn't interrupted when she pushes past me – hips against my thighs again.

I bid Morty a good night, and Apparate home.

Mother is in the library. I toss the wrapped book on the settee.

"Why do you keep getting these wrapped?" she asks.

I shrug. "It pisses her off."

She scowls at me. I turn to head to the kitchen, to find what's left of dinner.

"Any message for your father?"

I stop, the warmth of the past hour leaching from me. I turn to her.

"Father?"

She begins unwrapping her book with delicate fingers.

"His October visit. I'll be going tomorrow." She glances up at me like everything is normal. "Anything you'd like me to discuss with him?"

So many things race around my brain, and I think about asking to go in her place. I have so many things to finalize with him.

"No," I say. "Tell him… Tell him hello, I guess."

She studies me, and nods.

"Back to Italy. I'm thirty minutes late for a meeting." He winks at me, and starts to leave.

"You want a new job in January? Marketing and Public Relations?"

He turns, a smug and condescending expression on his face. "Draco, I already have the business cards drawn up." He smirks and disappears out the door.

I listen to his footsteps carry him down the hall. I swallow. I watch our faces turn towards each other again. Watch how she joked about the girls who wouldn't be my wife, and how I agreed. And it looks like I might kiss her goodbye. And she might have let me.

Anyone can be seduced.

I roll the words around my chest until I believe them.

I look away from him. I run my hand through my hair as I turn back to the front page, watching her turn and smile at me.

"So, you two are friends?" he asks, eyes flicking over to the two of us on the front page.

I stare at him. "No," I say. "I'm trying to distance myself from her."

"Yeah, how's that going?" he quips, and I watch as she turns on the steps of Cornerstone again. In the picture, my eyes do something strange, like fire.

"My mother is friends with her. They've been spending time together." I pull my eyes off of her. "But she and I are the same we've always been."

He laughs, and scrambles with the paper until it's open to page seven again. "Yes, that's how I look at my new friends' sons." He points to the picture of us walking, her eyes snapping up to look at me as I touch her.

I close the paper and shove it toward him. "We're not –" I shake my head, trying to find the words. "We're not going to happen." I feel the words sinking in my chest until they hit the bottom of my stomach.

"She dating someone?"

I look up, rolling my eyes. "No—"

"She a lesbian?"

I take moment to consider. "… No—"

The newspaper smacks me across the face again.

"The fuck is wrong with you, Draco!?"

"Stop hitting me!" He hits me again. "Stop! She doesn't want me!"

He pauses, his arm still outstretched, ready to hit me again. "Have you *tried?* Made any kind of effort?"

I blink at him. This is nonsense.

He stares at me. And shrugs.

"Fine," he says. "She doesn't want you." Factual and flippant. He opens the paper he's been hitting me with, and shoves the front page into my face. I look up at him as he levels his gaze on me. "That doesn't mean she never will."

I narrow my eyes at him. He stands, places his hand on my shoulder, and smirks at me.

"Anyone can be seduced, Draco."

I feel the words float onto my skin. He hands me the paper, and says, "Believe what you will – I mean, I haven't been around. But I'd wager she's halfway there."

I look down at where we turn to smile at each other. The way her eyes almost look happy to land on mine.

Blaise claps my shoulder and pushes past me.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

I head up to my room, not hungry.

~*~

Sunday, July 13, 1997

I didn't sleep well last night.

But of course, I haven't slept in two weeks. Not since the Astronomy Tower.

I climb from bed, stumble into proper clothing, and make my way to the drawing room, ignoring the sounds of other people in my house. Mother and I have been taking tea in the mornings in the drawing room while our houseguests ravage the breakfast table. There's a cold, hollow wind in the hallways – a feeling I've come to associate with the presence of the Dark Lord in our house.

I gather myself, and turn at the base of the stairs, pushing open the drawing room door.

My feet stop when I see my Father.

He turns to me. I haven't seen him in the flesh for over a year. He's so thin. He's still in his Azkaban robes. This must have just happened.

My mother stands next to him, holding his hands.

"Draco," he says. His voice is thin too.

I move toward him. I reach my hands to hug him, to hold him as if no time has passed.

His hands clutch my shoulders, stopping me, staring at me.

"You did well, son."

There is a muscle twitching at his temple.

"Severus had to step in, yes, but they shouldn't have expected more from you," he says. His eyes are glued to my face, like he sees something he hadn't before. "Bella told me about the Vanishing Cabinets. *Very good,* Draco." He presses a cold hand to my cheek.

If my father ever was released from Azkaban, I imagined him waking me in the night, my mother throwing my traveling cloak at me, and ordering me to pack only what would fit in one valise. I imagined a portkey to France, to our vineyards.

"I've spoken to Bella about your future," he says. His eyes continue to drink me in. "Our future," he says.

Mother turns to the windows, and I see her stare at the gardens with empty eyes.

"You will need more training, Draco. More than just Occlumency."

He still assumes Bella is the one who taught me all that I know.

If my father ever was freed, I imagined a trip to Italy to his favorite restaurant, drinking the 500-year-old scotch with him, like we did for my fourteenth birthday.

"They don't expect anything of you, Draco," he says. "So, you will impress them greatly once you've learned from Bella."

"Learned what?" I say, the first words I've spoken in this room.

"Dark magic. The Unforgivables." His fingers are digging into my shoulders, and I can feel my pale skin accepting the marks he indents. "She'll start with you today. Resisting the Imperius Curse, then casting it." He nods vigorously. "You have six weeks before returning to school. The Carrows will be there. If you know the Cruciatus and Imperius Curse, you will impress them greatly."

I swallow. "And after the Cruciatus and Imperius?"

My mother shifts at the window, pressing her teeth together.

"Then she'll prepare you for battle." He smiles at me. His teeth are yellow. His temple twitches.

If my father ever returned to us, I imagined the three of us would run away from all of this. We wouldn't look back as Great Britain destroyed itself. And we would be happy.

THE STAR-CROSSED ROMANCE OF HERMIONE GRANGER AND DRACO MALFOY

By Rita Skeeter

"What the fuck??"

I sit up, grabbing the paper from him and twisting my legs to ground my feet on the floor. There's a picture. I'm smirking at her. And I'm positively ravenous.

"No, no, no, no," I mutter, scanning the words and finding "lust-filled eyes" and "favorite mints" popping out at me. Skeeter botched it. She tricked me. "That bitch…"

"So, I can assume that this *isn't* your engagement announcement?" Blaise says from behind me.

"This isn't—It's not…" I take a deep breath, feeling my air thickening. "This was supposed to be in the society pages. It was supposed to be lunch with my mother. Good press for us."

"Oh, she has the lunch with your mother in there. Check page seven."

My fingers fumble, tearing at the paper, and there I am, escorting her across the street, my hand on her back as she looks up at me with wide eyes.

"She twitched! Why doesn't it show her twitching?? Why is she looking up at me like a doe-eyed, fucking…"

I see the picture of the three of us on the patio at Fortescue's. She's talking with my mother, and I'm devouring her.

"Oh fuck." I drop my head into my hands. "Oh, that slimy bitch."

"So," Blaise starts, "you and Granger –"

"Are *not* together." I jump up and begin pacing the room. "This has been grossly exaggerated. It was just lunch with my mother."

"Then what's the big deal?"

I look up at him. He's still on my bed, wearing his shoes. "What?"

"If it was just lunch…" he says. "If it was just for public opinion, then I'd say you accomplished that. Everyone knows Skeeter is a sensationalist."

I pace again. "These pictures are…"

"Two young people flirting?" Blaise laughed. "Nothing wrong with that. She's not with Weasley anymore, right?"

Ron Weasley is the least of my concerns. My father will see this paper today. Probably already has.

I look up at Blaise. "Why are you here?"

"Are you joking?" He smiles. He nods at the paper crumpled in my hands. "You're practically snogging Granger on the front page of the *Prophet.*" He grins and leans back on his hands. "Thought it was time I checked in!"

I meditate, and pull the twisting clouded thoughts forward that Bella had me conjure as I trained my wand on the vermin. And I set my mind to planning.

Greyback first or Greyback last.

I dress in my black robes, sliding my arms into the fabric.

Dolohov will incapacitate before killing. He will tease. He will taunt. He won't be my first.

I unwrap the marble in the white handkerchief, staring at it and watching the clouded glass catch the light.

Yaxley is efficient. He will kill on sight. He won't be my last.

I pocket the marble and handkerchief, and grab my wand and my mask.

Greyback first or Greyback last.

I leave my room, shut my door, and walk down my hallway, ignoring the bedroom next to mine. I descend the stairs.

Greyback is not adept at wandwork. He's easily surprised and slow to move. But if Yaxley goes first and then Dolohov, Greyback will have time to react. If he is in close proximity to either Muggle, taking him last will put them at risk.

I meet their sneering faces in my entry hall, and we trudge together through the snow to the hill we can Disapparate from.

But if Greyback goes first, Yaxley will act immediately.

I'm still deciding the order in which to kill them when I Apparate onto the cement in front of a two-story house, neighbor's sprinkler clicking to my right.

~*~

Sunday, October 17, 1999

"Draco Lucius Malfoy, WAKE UP!"

I'm pulled from sleep by this voice. I'm still opening my eyes when something light slaps my face.

"What the fuck is this!"

Something slaps my chest.

"Bloody hell, what is going on?" I whine.

"I should ask you the same question!"

I look up and Blaise Zabini is on my bed, standing over me, hitting me with a newspaper.

"The fuck! Get off me!"

"You're out of Azkaban for barely two months and you're already fucking Hermione Granger?"

My eyes snap fully open. Cold chills through my chest.

"What?" I ask, heart pounding.

He unfolds the rolled up paper and shoves the front page in my face.

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Fourteen

"*Hermione Jean Granger, WAKE UP!*"

Hermione snapped her eyes open and sprang up in bed, reaching for her wand, to find Ginny Weasley standing on her bed.

"What? What's happened?" Her heart was racing and she felt like ice had been thrown on her.

"What the *bloody hell* is this??" Ginny stood above her, one foot on either side of her legs and held up a newspaper. Her eyes were wide and bright, surprisingly awake.

"What… I mean, well, what is it?" Hermione's eyes were adjusting. She waved her wand and lit all the bulbs in the room.

Ginny knelt over her and thrust the paper into her face, reading the headline out loud as Hermione's brain registered it on the page.

"The Star-Crossed Romance of Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy."

Hermione gasped and grabbed the pages from the feral-looking ginger. She unfolded the top pages to find a picture of two young people outside of Cornerstone. Her eyes squinted, and she realized the young people were her and Draco. She could barely recognize them. Did Skeeter doctor the photo?

"When did *this* happen?" Ginny screeched and Hermione winced as her eyes ran over the article, catching the phrases "visited her at work," "lust-filled eyes," "lunch with his mother."

"I—I – Yesterday!" Hermione's pitch was slowly matching Ginny's without her permission. "We had lunch with Narcissa yesterday and –"

"Oh, I know!" Ginny bounced. "It continues on page seven!"

"*What?!*" Hermione ripped through the pages to find page seven featuring several more highlights of the afternoon, including a picture of the three of them at Fortescue's and a picture of the two of them crossing the street, his hand coming up to guide her.

"Why didn't you tell me about this!"

"It wasn't planned! He asked me to join them for lunch –"

"*He* asked you?" Ginny grabbed her shoulders.

"I – yes, but it was clear that Narcissa had sent him. And then we walked to Fortescue's—" Hermione pointed to the picture of them walking, Draco swinging his Cornerstone bag from his fingertips of one hand, and using the other to touch her back. "—And then we had lunch with Narcissa—" She pointed to the picture of the three of them sitting on the patio, Narcissa looking positively regal in her robes and hat. "—And then I went back to work! That's all!"

"That doesn't explain *this*!"

Ginny crumpled the pages around until the photo on the front page showed again.

"She must have altered it. She –"

Hermione stopped and looked. There was Draco's smirk, and the way his eyes flash at her. She turned from him, stepping up to the door of Cornerstone, and turned back grinning. It was *just* like a boy walking a girl home from a date, just as she remembered.

She had given her condolences to all the half-bloods and Muggle-borns who would not be marrying him, and he had smirked back at her, telling her not to trust the papers.

"Oh, Merlin, this is terrible." Hermione covered her face with her hands.

"Terrible? This is the most brilliant thing to happen in months!" Ginny squealed.

"How can you say that?" Hermione grabbed her arm. "Look how desperate I look. Look how easy it is to believe everything Skeeter is saying!"

"Hermione," Ginny giggled and grabbed her face. "It's easy to believe because it's so *mutual*." She jabbed her finger at Draco's face. Hermione felt her face flush, watching him smirk at her in the photo. "If you're desperate," Ginny said, turning the pages over to the picture of the three of them on the patio, "then he's *starving*."

Hermione looked down to see Narcissa chatting animatedly with her, Hermione picking at the scone in front of her, and Draco watching her. She watched as Draco would take a sip of his tea, his eyes moving between her and his mother, landing back on her as he licked the liquid off his lips.

"That's… That's not… I mean, Ginny. That's not what it's like in person. It's not accurate!"

"How would you know! You're not even looking at him in the photo!"

"Oh, my god." Hermione closed her eyes. "Oh, my *god*. This is the Sunday paper! Everyone I know will see this!

He turns to my desk, and produces a large rolled parchment from beneath his robes. He lets it unravel, and places a paperweight down on the curling edge.

"Destroy this when you are done."

I nod at him.

He pulls a handkerchief from his breast pocket, and clutched in the center of it is a marble. Careful not to touch the orb, he holds it out to me.

"This will take you to an abandoned mill in Cokeworth. There is a hotel called Railview just south. You can leave the Muggles there. Alter their memories if necessary."

I nod, taking the handkerchief and portkey and placing them on my end table.

"Request an audience with Remus Lupin if you are captured by the Order. Tell him everything," he says. I look at him blankly. "And I mean, *everything,* Draco."

I nod.

He looks me up and down, then back to my empty eyes.

"It is possible she will not be there. She is very bright."

"Weasley is with his family, yes? That is what the spies have told us?"

Severus lifts a brow in agreement.

"Gryffindors are acutely sentimental. You know this." I move past him toward the parchment rolled open on my desk. "And the odds of her being there must be very high if Greyback is tagging along."

He watches me as I look over the parchment, eyes dragging over the lines, trying to understand the drawing.

"You understand why I could not volunteer." It's not a question.

"Of course, Severus." My eyes find a legend in the corner of the paperwork.

"I hope to see you back at Hogwarts in two weeks. If not, I will see you at the end of this."

I chuckle. The end of this. Whatever that means.

I feel him staring at me, until he leaves.

The designs of a small two-story house stare up at me. A small entryway, and an opening to the left to the living area. A fireplace. Kitchen in the back. A staircase leading up to two bedrooms. I lean forward to examine them. Neither is larger. There is no master suite. One bedroom farther away from the street, quieter, easier to sleep, to read. Possibly for the parents.

But in that same back bedroom I see small markings inside the closet. I look closer, trying to figure out what they mean.

Bookshelves. Built in.

I spend the next hour memorizing the distance from the front door to the stairs, from the kitchen to the back door, from the front bedroom to the back bedroom.

I burn the scroll. I ask Mippy to bring my tea at 6AM. I refuse to see my mother.

"Granger. About your parents…"

The words physically hit her. "Yes?"

I want to tell her. I want to tell her how smart she was to see it coming. How awful it could have been. How bloody brilliant she is to have hidden them so well.

"You did the right thing."

"Thank you." She's gazing at me.

I should say goodbye. But I need to know.

"Have you… been by your home since the war ended?"

"No, not since I left."

I feel fresh air flow into me. So grateful she hasn't seen the wall. Seen the blood.

"Don't."

~*~

Wednesday, December 24, 1997

I couldn't sleep the night Dumbledore died either. I lie in my bed now, like then, staring at the ceiling and waiting.

It's snowing. A bit of Christmas magic.

I look at my clock. 5AM. Twelve hours.

A quiet knock on my door. It must be Mother.

I slip from my sheets and pad to pull the door open.

I'm surprised to see Severus. He stares at me on the threshold, black robes folded around him. He makes no move to enter, but looks into me. I feel him push against my walls.

"Good. You are focused," he says, and sweeps into my room.

I close the door behind him and silence the room, casting charms to let us know if someone is coming close.

I turn to face him. I catch sight of my hollow cheeks in my mirror. Severus stands near my desk.

"Your aunt took you into the dungeons yesterday. More Cruciatus resistance?"

"No," I say. "We killed rats. Father asked her to teach me."

He nods. "Was she pleased with your progress?"

"Yes. I was able to kill three on my own."

"It's not the same, Draco."

"I know it's not."

His black eyes prod into mine, taking me by surprise. But still he finds no cracks.

"Greyback will be joining them," he says. He waits for me to react.

I don't.

Greyback. I will need to adjust my approach.

"More than that! This is delivered all over the world!" Ginny laughed, and then she and Hermione thought it at the same time. "Ron will see this." Ginny raised her brows at her.

Hermione shook her head and held up her hand. "I honestly cannot deal with that right now. My god, was there really nothing that happened in the Wizarding world this weekend that warranted the front page of Sunday's *Daily Prophet*?" Hermione shook the paper and crumpled the edges.

"Well, the introduction of the 'new wizarding power couple' is pretty important, I'd say." Ginny bit back a grin.

"She does *not* say that!" Hermione gaped at her and Ginny pointed to the words on the page.

Ms. Skeeter,

I am honored that you find my personal life so interesting, but I would appreciate a re-print to reflect the following changes, to maintain your accuracy:

Draco Malfoy has indeed been visiting Cornerstone Bookshop since his release in August, but he has not been seen "courting" Miss Granger. He has been patronizing a favorite bookshop.

Draco Malfoy has not been visiting Miss Granger every Saturday and Sunday since his release date. If the Daily Prophet *cares to check, the dates he has patronized the bookshop are as follows: Saturday September 4, Saturday September 11, and Saturday October 16. You may pull the ledger notes from Cornerstone Bookshop if you would like.*

Miss Granger and Draco Malfoy have not been found "canoodling" in the stacks of Cornerstone Bookshop, and I would ask your "eye-witnesses" to reexamine their statement, as a false report such as this could cost an employee her job. Said employee would be sure to sue the Daily Prophet, *the author, and the witnesses should this happen.*

If the mints left on the counter for customers are indeed Draco Malfoy's "favorite mints" then it was unbeknownst to Hermione Granger. She has not put them out for him every time he visits.

Miss Granger is not "leading around" Ronald Weasley **or** *Draco Malfoy. She is not dating either wizard, and has no intention of "drawing this out until the wedding date."*

And lastly, Miss Granger **was** *available for comment, she simply was not asked for one. If she had been asked for a comment, she would have requested the author pull the story.*

Sincerely,

Hermione J. Granger

That day at Cornerstone was pure hell. Rita's article had put Cornerstone on the map for a lot of witches and wizards, which Hermione couldn't have been happier about, but unfortunately the influx of new customers all smiled at Hermione with wide, greedy eyes. By noon, when she realized that there were more than twenty people browsing the stacks, and not

a one of them had bought anything, she concluded that they were all waiting for Draco to show up.

She started approaching them, asking if they needed recommendations, conjuring comfy chairs to sit and read, and ending with "When you're ready to check out, I'll be at the counter."

That got several of them to leave, including one witch that only bought one book, but stood at the counter for twenty minutes, crying, telling her how wonderful it was to see such a union after all these years.

Morty came downstairs some time after that, took a look around the full shop, and said, "Listen up, you lot. Miss Granger will not be giving private interviews today, as she is at *work*. Mr. Malfoy has no books on reserve, so he will not be visiting her. Please kindly either place your book back where you found it, or bring it up to the register, where *I* will ring you up, as Miss Granger is going on lunch."

Hermione's ears turned red as she smiled down at the ledger. Morty placed a hand on her shoulder.

"If I were you, Miss Granger," he whispered, "I would take my lunch somewhere less public than Fortescue's today."

When she returned from lunch there was a significant drop in the number of people browsing the shop. Morty handed the ledger over to her, and said, "Alright. My turn."

She looked up at him.

"Have you been placing the mints out for him?"

Hermione laughed, knowing full well that Morty chose the mints long ago.

"I hope you don't think that any of that is true. I would never use work hours to… *canoodle*." The word was vile coming from her lips.

"Yes, yes, I know, Miss Granger." Morty took his glasses off to clean them. "But do be careful." She looked up at him, and he pointed to the newspaper that a customer had left on the counter. His finger rested on the picture of Draco and her walking, his hand coming up to her back, and her slight flinch as she looked at the ground. "A boy can only pursue 'hard-to-get' for so long."

She gaped at him. He lifted his brows at her and walked upstairs.

Hard-to-get. Hard-to-get!

It bothered her the rest of the day and into the next morning.

If there was *anyone* playing hard-to-get, it was –

Hermione stopped that thought. *No one* was playing hard-to-get. They were not courting.

The next day Hermione took the Floo into work, and ignored any staring or whispering as she walked to the lifts. She shared a lift with a young woman she recognized as being a few years

Draco.

I close my mind. She's gotten too far inside. The wind twists around us again, and I have to keep myself from touching her. Kissing her, maybe.

We're back at Cornerstone, stopping to finish our conversation, and I think I should just wave goodbye and leave.

"You've been planning this for a while, it seems," she says. "Are you investing your inheritance into this new business?"

And that's what it was. The ugly feeling spinning around my ribs as she clawed her way into my plans and dreams. The need to keep her separate. To keep her in the dark. Like watching your mistress meet your wife.

"That's the plan."

"Investment and passion are two key ingredients for success," she says. I look down at her and she's smiling up at me. The wind pushes her hair towards me again. "And your father must be in support if he released your inheritance to you?"

It's like electricity. My face twitches, and I have to look away from her.

But she's asked a question that I have to answer. My skin itches.

"Yes, a small amount at first. Then the rest on January 1st. Contingent on a few things." Like us not having this conversation at all.

I have a sudden realization that once I leave the Ministry, once January 1st rolls around, I will probably never see her again but in passing. I swallow. My eyes rake over her while she steps up to the bookshop entrance.

"Well," she says, voice airy, turning back to me. "What a pity for all those half-blood and Muggle-born girls that thought you would invest all that money in their happy future with you." My heart beats in my ears, wondering if she knows how close she is to the truth. "How disappointing for them."

She reads the articles on me in the paper, clearly. And, of course she does, but she doesn't skim them. I think of the piece about last night's date with Jeannette, laying open on the counter.

"I thought you of all people knew not to believe a word of what Skeeter prints." I smirk at her, begging her to hear me. To disregard the Jeannettes and Jacquelines and Noelles and Katyas.

There's a smile tugging at her lips, and her face is turned to me, open and waiting. I watch as she shakes herself, like waking from a small dream.

She grins at me. Like we're friends. And maybe we are.

"I think we did a fine job today, Malfoy," she says. "A full hour lunch date with your mother and no casualties. I'd say that's progress."

A lunch date. Progressing toward what? I feel my skin heat at the possibilities.

She nods goodbye, and turns to go inside. But I need her to know…

"I'm announcing on November 1st." I don't know why I find that relevant. I look down an alley as we pass it, thinking of what else we could talk about.

But she doesn't want to talk about anything else.

"A consulting group? And what will you specialize in?"

I try to remember my pitch to Skeeter from the other night. "Litigation and contracts, finances, management and operations, and I'm hoping to have a few other minor branches with select specialists." I'm vague enough to be uninteresting, I hope.

She chuckles.

"What?"

"You're just... opening a company," she says. She laughs again. "At nineteen."

Does she think me incapable? A flicker of rage licks at me.

"You and your friends defeated a dark wizard at eighteen."

"Actually, Harry was seventeen," she says, grinning at the ground.

"Thanks for reminding me." I roll my eyes.

"So, if I'm understanding this correctly, you'll be providing legal counsel for Wizengamot hearings, advising businesses on their budgets and operations, things like that?"

There a discomfort in my chest. Something familiar. And the more information she tries to pry from me about M.C.G. the more the feeling spins.

All I know is that I want her as far away from M.C.G. and the inheritance as possible.

"Essentially." I could go on, but I won't.

"And you think individuals and businesses will hire you based on your nineteen years of experience in those fields?"

Is she mocking me? The tone of her voice wakes my pride like sleeping dragon.

"No. They will hire my *firm* based on the personnel I will surround myself with. Specialists and the like." I huff.

I launch into a monologue about all the important people I will surround myself with. Mockridge, Ogden, Wentworth. I'm bragging. I'm name-dropping. And I can't stop. I feel her eyes turn up to me, and I want her to be impressed. I want her approval. I'm launching into my plans for other branches to include charitable divisions when she stops me.

"That's very exciting, Draco," she says. I look at her for the first time and she's grinning. No longer teasing me. "You don't need to defend your company to me. I think it will be a great success." I feel a lightness in my chest, eradicating the uncomfortable feeling from before. "You were excellent at leading the meeting on the dragon egg this week – prepared, succinct, authoritative. It's like you were born for it."

She was impressed by the meeting. Her words tumble around my mind.

Prepared. Succinct. Authoritative. Born for it.

above her in Slytherin. She glared and rolled her eyes at her. Hermione didn't know why she felt so shocked. There was sure to be reactions from all different sides of the spectrum.

She got off at her floor and as she walked to her desk, she heard Aiden call out to her.

"Granger!"

Hermione took a calming breath and turned to him. "Good morning, Aiden." She really didn't want any teasing from him today.

He jogged to catch up with her, leaning in conspiratorially. "Did you hear the news?"

"News?"

"Rosenberg's retiring."

Hermione blinked. "Rochelle Rosenberg? From —?"

"House-Elf Relocation." Aiden grinned at her. Hermione's brain was spinning. "Of course, I'm only telling you this out of professional courtesy," he said grandly. "I mean to apply for the position myself, and you *obviously* would not get the job over me." He rolled his eyes dramatically, reminding her of George. "I have seniority over you, so…"

She shifted her bag on her shoulder and shook her head, smiling. "Yes, beginning one day before me *does* give you seniority." She knew he would not be applying for the position.

"Well, something to think about," he said walking back to his desk. "Oh, and you have a visitor." He nodded at her cubicle.

Hermione's brows came together, trying to remember if she had a meeting. Hopefully Mathilda wasn't being kept waiting?

She turned the corner to her cube and found Draco Malfoy, sitting in her chair, legs up on the desk, flipping through one of her files. He looked up at her and grinned.

"Hello, lover."

Her cheeks burned and she lost her breath in a puff that she turned into a laugh.

"Good morning, Malfoy." She took a moment to place her coat on the hook and put her bag into the drawer. "What brings you here?"

"Robards."

"Oh?" She was disappointed and relieved at the same time. She turned back to him and found he had not moved out of her chair. "More on the dragon eggs?" She placed her hands on her hips, as she had no idea what to do with them.

"Oh, no." He waved his hand. "That all got settled on Friday. Buyer caught and under questioning." He looked up at her. "I would have thought it would make the papers, but apparently there were more important things to report this weekend."

"Right," she tried to grin back at him. "Apparently." She turned to a cabinet and tried to look busy, as he would still not stand from her desk. "I've written to Skeeter to ask her to correct some of her glaring inaccuracies. I would have thought the corrections would have made today's

Prophet, but hopefully this week." She pulled out several files that she would work on today and a fresh pot of ink, even though she was positive that the one next to Draco's foot was full.

"Inaccuracies?" Draco pouted in a mocking way, and Hermione wished he would put his lips away. "You mean those mints weren't for me?"

She bit back a smile and tapped his feet with a file, having nothing else to do but sit at *her* desk. He kicked his feet off and stood, buttoning his robes. She pushed past him, ignoring the way their bodies brushed each other's.

"You mentioned Robards?" She spread out her files and replaced the full pot of ink with another full pot of ink.

He handed her a memo. She looked at him quickly, then sat and opened it. It was a copy.

Mathilda,

I was hoping to borrow Granger to work with Malfoy on a case. I believe the two of them could have this figured out by the end of the week!

Hoping you can spare her.

Gawain

A week? Working with Malfoy?

"I've reserved the conference room upstairs for this afternoon, seeing as Level 4 has appallingly small rooms and cubicles. I think my cube might be twice the size of yours, Granger." He looked around, brow raised. "And I'm temporary." She glared at him. He turned to exit and tossed over his shoulder, "See you at one, Granger."

She was in so much trouble.

They solved the case by Wednesday afternoon. Half due to their combined brilliance, and half due to Hermione working hard as Horcruxes to get out of that conference room. It was an ancient rune solving case, which meant utmost concentration was necessary. Quite impossible when Draco looked and smelled like… Draco.

On Tuesday, Hermione had come into the conference room thirty minutes early, just for some peace before Draco joined. It didn't work. He was twenty-eight minutes early, and carrying a coffee cup for her and a tea for him. He placed the cup down in front of her and started talking about the runes, not even allowing her a "thank you." After twenty minutes or so, once he'd settled in and gotten invested in his reading, she took a sip of her coffee and found it prepared exactly how she liked it.

"How had you known that I drink coffee instead of tea?"

He flipped a page.

"Everyone knows you prefer coffee, Granger." She blinked at him. He continued to read. "You've been spilling it all over the Hogwarts library books for years."

My mother grabs her hand. And I don't know how I could survive if my mother was gone. If she didn't remember me.

Granger smiles at her, eyes wet.

I watch as she tries to shake it off. Tries to change the subject, but something's tugging at me.

Dolohov and Rowle.

"That's her! That's the bitch that Obliviated us!"

And I can see her. In her living room – only now filled with furniture. And I can't even fathom the idea of training my wand on my own mother.

She hasn't seen her parents in two years. Because of the Death Eaters. And the skin on my left arm pricks.

"It was very insightful of the Order to take that precaution." I look up at her, and her eyes are drilling into me, reading my meaning.

"Yes," she says. Her voice is stilted, laced with years of secrets. "I can't thank them enough."

Her eyes on mine. And she thanks me for my silence. Mother manages to take control of the conversation, and I let myself just enjoy the ride.

"Well, I should really be getting back to the shop. Thank you both so much for inviting me." Her eyes flicker to mine, before coming back to my mother. "And thank you for lunch."

"It was so wonderful to see you dear," Mother says. "Draco can escort you back to Cornerstone."

I watch as she opens her mouth to decline, and thinks better of it.

I'm pulling her chair, and handing her purse to her. She hugs my mother, and I watch her arms squeeze.

I wonder how badly she misses her parents. If they were close. If she's tried to reverse the charm.

She's quiet next to me as we walk. The wind is twisting the scent of her around us.

"Do you think you'll stay on with the Auror Office?" she asks. "Your term is up in six weeks or so, yes?" She looks up at me and several of her curls fly into her face.

I shove my hands into my pockets to keep from pushing them behind her ear for her. Perhaps walls were necessary at this point. Even weak ones.

"Yes, December 10th. I'll be starting something new, actually. Take a few weeks for the holidays, then jump into the new year," I say. "New millennium."

She probes. As I knew she would. And as I tell her I'm starting a consulting group, I feel a heaviness in my chest. Like waiting for my father to step out from the shadows and chastise me for involving her in any of this.

I hold the gate open for her as we enter the patio. "You have no idea."

I watch as my mother greets her, and I can't help but notice the true smile on her face. Mother gestures to the chair across from her, and I pull the chair for her. She stares at me like she had at dinner, then sits.

I hurry inside to order our drinks and a plate of scones. And think of skipping out instead.

I return to the table and Mother is muttering some nonsense about needing more honey for Granger's tea so I respond, "Granger drinks coffee."

The table is still. It's a mistake, to be this familiar. So, I finish with a quip about putting honey in her coffee.

"I – yes, I do drink coffee more often." She looks up at me before I sit next to her. "Thank you."

She looks away before I can reply.

I go about fixing my tea. The two of them talk. The waiter delivers the scones. And I find moments of time where I'm frozen and can't look away from her lips. She licks the coffee from her mouth after every sip, and though this is something I'm already aware she does, it makes it more difficult to look elsewhere when I'm this close to her and not across the Great Hall.

Mother will interrupt my staring for a question or an opinion, and I get the feeling she's aware of my compulsion, saving me from embarrassing myself.

Is this what it's like to live without Occlumency? This hopeless surrender to what you want?

The conversation has been perfectly light, perfectly non-intrusive. So, I should have known Mother was only just warming up.

"Hermione, dear, I'd love to meet your parents the next time they are in England," she says. Granger chokes on her scone, and I have to glare at my mother. She ignores me.

Could she be anymore obvious?

Granger looks down at the table as she spouts some nonsense about the holidays being busy for them.

She's lying.

I watch her as my mother pries, as Granger's fingers twist around the napkin, as she picks up the butter knife and puts it back down and picks it up again.

"We had to erase their memories two years ago, before… everything began. They live in Australia together, with no memory of me."

There's a hollow wind in my ears. She continues. She talks about the little ways she's kept tabs on them. Her eyes are empty.

And I'm running up a flight of stairs, two at a time, bursting through a bedroom door, spinning and breathing and crumbling.

She gasped. "I would *never* –"

The corner of his mouth twitched. "I've checked books out after you and found the pages just soiled with spilt coffee. Practically dipped in it."

She knew he was teasing her. She glared at him as he turned another page, holding back a smirk, and tried to remember the last time Harry or Ginny offered her coffee instead of tea.

On Wednesday morning, she flew into the conference room, livid.

"That bitch!" She shook the morning's paper at him, and looked up in time to see Draco snort the tea he was in the middle of sipping. "Sorry," she waved at him, "But she's wicked."

Draco patted his mouth with a napkin and said, "Skeeter, I presume?"

"Yes." She tossed the paper at him and noticed that he was wearing the blue robes that made his eyes stand out. Damn him. "I wrote a follow-up letter last night asking about the status of my corrections, and threatening to write my next letter to her editor. And then this morning she prints this!"

She watched as his eyes scanned the page, searching until he spotted the one-inch box in the bottom right corner of the page, then squinting at the font.

"A correction to 'The Star-Crossed Romance of Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy.' Granger and Malfoy have not been found canoodling at Cornerstone Books."

He looked up at her over the paper, and she threw her arms out in exasperation.

"Did you expect more, Granger?"

"I demanded more! I demanded a re-print!"

He closed the paper and tossed it back to her. He smirked. "And which portions of Sunday's article so offended you, Granger?"

She blinked at him, hands on her hips. She could feel the heat creeping up her neck.

"The inaccuracies."

Draco watched his fingers play with the chipped woodgrain on the table. "I believe Skeeter reported that I visited you at work, invited you to lunch with my mother, and then walked you back." He looked up at her from beneath his lashes. "Was that not what happened?"

Her brows came together. This was a trap. Wasn't it?

"Fine, then." She crossed her arms. "It was her artistic interpretation of things. 'Lust-filled eyes' and exaggerations –"

"Ah, but I believe the 'lust-filled eyes' were mine." He raised a brow at her. "Are you worried about the stretch of the *Prophet*? If it's made its way to… say, Ireland?"

The blush had started up her jaw. He was staring at her so casually.

"No, not really." She shrugged. "I was honestly more concerned with your reputation than mine." The smirk dropped off his lips. "But if you don't care, I'll leave it alone."

She took her seat at the table. Casually.

"My reputation?"

"Yes." She opened her notebook. "If I had a girlfriend for every day of the week, I'd be in a hurry to mend things after that article."

Dangerous, Hermione. Retreat… retreat.

He chuckled. The sound crackled through her. She kept her eyes on her notes.

"How kind of you to worry about my social life, Granger. But I believe my stock might have gone up," he drawled. "Nothing boosts a reputation more than having the Golden Girl on your arm."

She glared at him. He raised his brows, and pushed the coffee cup she had not noticed towards her.

Thursday and Friday were relatively uneventful after she and Draco solved the ancient runes case. She received a personal thank you from Robards for donating her time to the Auror Office, and his sincerest hopes to work with her again.

Saturday morning she'd woken up late, thrown her clothes on, and headed to the local apparition point without much time to spare. She popped through next to Florean Fortescue's and the bulb flashed to her right.

"Miss Granger!" the reporter yelled. "How did Draco Malfoy break things off with you? Was it a shock? Or did he let you down easy?"

She stumbled. She looked at the reporter, camera-in-hand, and a greedy smile on his face.

"*Excuse* me?" She pinned him with her eyes. "Even *if* I had been dating Draco Malfoy and *if* he had broken things off with me, how *dare* you ask someone that type of question."

He shrugged. "Fine, then. Have you met Katya Viktor? And what do you think of her for your *friend* Draco Malfoy." He smirked at her.

"I have not met her. So, I have no comment. Have a nice day."

Hermione turned and continued down the street to Cornerstone, head spinning.

Who the fuck was Katya Viktor?

"Tell your mother that I appreciate the invitation, but I'm too busy here today. It was nice of her to offer."

I look around the store. There's two people sitting in chairs in the corner. And I'm a bit peeved that she thinks my mother invited her. Even though… she's right.

"I'm the one offering, Granger."

"We both know who sent you, Malfoy."

Malfoy.

She drops the wrapped book into a Cornerstone bag, and reaches it out to me. I've failed. Why would she go anywhere with me after the way I've treated her.

The door behind her opens and the shopkeeper Morty is interrupting us before I do something stupid, like tell her how much it would mean to me to take her to lunch.

His eyes brighten at the sight of me. I shake his hand. He's still fond of me. Something that pisses Granger off.

And as she grumbles into the ledger book, and Morty's eyes twinkle at me, maybe the best way to Hermione Granger is not through her at all.

"I was just here to see if Miss Granger would accompany me for lunch today. My mother is just down the street."

Morty's eyes grow wide, and he says, "Oh, lovely! Yes, please do. I've got the shop." And suddenly she's being pushed from the counter even as she fights him.

"You're too kind, Mr. Hindes," I say. And he has the audacity to wink at me as Granger stomps towards the door I'm holding for her. And I wonder if he remembers the way my eyes would drift to her when I would lay in the loft, reading during the summer.

I follow her out, feeling quite victorious.

"Well, congratulations, Malfoy," she snaps. "You have a lunch companion."

"Oh, I'm just so glad Morty could cover your lunch," I drawl at her, rolling my eyes. "You looked swamped in there."

We walk toward Fortescue's. And it's silent. And I'm aching for the bustle of Diagon Alley proper, instead of this damned side street. We finally make the corner, and I feel her stop next to me. A few older women with shopping bags cross in front of us, and I step off the curb, guiding her forward, and she jumps. I realize my hand is on her back, and I drop it as she averts her eyes from me, feeling foolish for touching her.

We turn the corner and there's my mother. The height of fashion, ready to be featured in the *Prophet.* She's wearing a fucking hat for Merlin's sake.

"Your mother certainly knows how to make a statement," she muses. We approach the gate, and I realize Mother has chosen a table closest to the street so that all passersby can see, and a better view for the photographer.

She gestures to the book she's holding. It's got a pink cover. Of course, Mother would make this difficult.

"Oh, it's... not for me," is all I can mumble.

"Oh, alright." Like she's disappointed she can't tease me about the book. And suddenly the book is in a bag and the bag is held out to me, and her eyes are saying goodbye.

But I haven't even brought up lunch yet.

"Does Cornerstone do gift wrapping?"

She blinks at me. She mumbles something and blushes as she takes the bag away. She clears the ledger and reaches for the wrapping paper. And there I am, on the counter. She'd been reading the *Prophet* earlier that day. And she'd left the page open to my date with Jeannette.

Or perhaps it's a coincidence. And she has no emotional attachment to seeing me out with a beautiful French girl.

She turns back to the counter, and she pauses when she sees the article laid open like that. Spots of pink high on her cheekbones.

Not a coincidence. My blood heats. Does she possibly have even the slightest interest in my social life?

I watch her put the paper away and start to lay out the wrapping paper. I only have a number of seconds before she taps her wand and the edges fold and the tape floats over.

"My mother and I are stopping for a quick lunch at Fortescue's."

It's quick. Factual. But not a question, I realize.

"Oh. Tell her I say hello?"

And strangely, she's folding the paper herself. She centers the book in the wrapping paper, meeting the edges, taping them shut. How odd.

"Does Mr. Hindes come downstairs to cover your lunch?" I say, as her fingers work over the paper. I've never seen someone wrap a gift without magic.

"Yes, usually around one."

She's distracted by the work her hands are doing, so I take the plunge. "Would you like to join us for lunch?"

She fumbles with the wrapping paper, and looks up me. I try to keep my expression open.

"Your mother wants a repeat performance of last Saturday? In public?" she teases, and looks away from me.

"If there's pumpkin soup, I promise to let you eat it."

She smiles, like pumpkin soup is forever a joke between us now. And maybe it is. She's working with a ribbon, making the gift beautiful, and I'm thinking of how no one should have to tear this wrapping apart.

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Fifteen

Katya Viktor, it turned out, was the name of the Bulgarian girl Draco had gone out with after his release from Azkaban, star of the "DRACO MALFOY FINDS LOVE" article.

Katya Viktor was also the girl that Draco had been out with the night before. The *Prophet* had printed a photo of him kissing her, accompanied by a Skeeter piece lamenting the loss of the new wizarding power couple.

Hermione had stopped at the *Daily Prophet* main office before rushing to Cornerstone, grabbing up a paper and tucking it into her bag. Once she'd gotten the store open and ready – with only two minutes to spare – she pulled out the paper.

Nothing on the front page, but she flipped to the society and gossip section that Skeeter penned, and there was Draco, pushing the hair out of the Bulgarian's face, and leaning in to kiss her. The girl smiled against his lips.

Hermione frowned as the picture repeated itself. She'd caught Draco and Pansy Parkinson snogging in the hallways loads of times in 5th year, a few times in 6th. Sometimes she'd be too nervous to interrupt them, knowing that it would be two Slytherins against one Gryffindor. Sometimes she'd be just jealous enough to clear her throat. Pansy would glare at her and call her names, but Draco would turn from where he'd have Pansy pressed against a wall and catch his breath as he looked at her with icy eyes.

This picture didn't look like that. Draco pushed Katya's hair away from her eyes and leaned in slowly. It was less… hurried.

Did that mean that Draco wanted her less? Or that he liked her more?

Hermione glanced through the rest of the article, grimacing at her own name splashed throughout. Katya was a model in Bulgaria and her father was a professor at Durmstrang. She was half-blood, surprisingly. The last line:

And poor Hermione Granger. How is she taking the news?

"Not great." Hermione chuckled to herself as the first customers entered. She threw the paper in the rubbish bin.

After a very long day of pitying looks and a series of "Such a shame," it was finally quarter 'til six. Hermione leaned against the counter as the last customers bid her a good night, and enjoyed the peace for ten seconds until the door opened again.

Draco walked in. She narrowed her eyes at him.

"What do *you* want?"

He lifted a brow at her as he hopped up the stairs. "A book? Do you sell those here?"

She checked her timepiece. "We close in fourteen minutes. You had to come at the very end of the day?"

"Well, I didn't want any onlookers for our torrid love affair, Granger." He leaned against the counter and she turned to a stack of books so he wouldn't see her blush.

"Be quick. I still need to file all of these."

"It's on reserve."

She stopped and looked to the reserve shelf, just now noticing a bag there. She pulled it and saw another girly-fiction title. She raised her brow at him and he raised his in return. She started entering it on the ledger as he watched her.

"A reporter asked me today if you let me down easy," she said. She glanced at him. "I assume you were seen with one of your girls last night?"

"Yes, Katya. I have six more to go."

She looked up at him.

"One for every day of the week, right?" he said. She scowled at him for throwing her words back at her. "Which reminds me," he drawled, "do you have five more copies of this?" He tapped the girly book she was writing the title of.

She scoffed at him while she finished the entry. "You know Draco, just because you *give* them books doesn't mean they'll learn to read."

She looked up at him when he didn't respond, and found him watching her. His eyes flashed at her.

"Granger," he said. "If you miss being pictured in the papers with me, I think my Wednesday girl might be a bit of a dud. The day's all yours."

His grey eyes were searching her, and she frowned at him. "I'll have to check my calendar and get back to you." She held the bag out to him.

"Gift wrap?" So innocent with his brows raised and eyes wide.

She sets her teacup down, stands from her chair, and moves toward me. "Draco." She places her hand on my shoulder. "Now that you're an adult in this family, you *will* have to learn how to play your father's games, yes." She quirks her lips at me. "But you can always make up your own rules."

She squeezes my shoulder, and heads up to bed.

~*~

Saturday, October 16, 1999

I am to retrieve a book for my mother, and retrieve a Golden Girl for lunch.

She sends me ahead with a look that brokers no arguments. I am to arrive at Florean Fortescue's with Hermione Granger on my arm, or die trying.

I force myself to remember that any press is good press as long as the Dark Mark isn't floating in the sky above Fortescue's by the end of the day. Mother is right. A friendship with Granger will only help.

I'm about to open the door to Cornerstone, when I realize I'm frowning at the cobblestone street. I have to be approachable. Honest. Kind. And I am none of those things around her. I knock down a wall of bricks, and open the door.

She's scribbling something down, leaning on the counter, and she's got on her damned denims and a low-neck top. Or least it seems low-neck, as she pushes her chest towards the front door.

I walk up to the counter, trying to remember what it was I had planned.

She looks up at me, smiling, and then the smile drops off her face.

"What."

Of course.

"'What?' Is that how you greet customers here?"

She stands tall, and I see that her top isn't that revealing after all. Just my rampant imagination.

"Are you here for the reserved book?" she says, and my mind runs.

Yes, and lunch.

You look hungry.

I'm here to drag you to Fortescue's.

I end up nodding my head, waiting for a better moment. She frowns at me and retrieves the book from the shelf behind her. As she makes markings in her ledger book, I try to find the right words. I've asked loads of girls on dates. But this isn't a date. This is a publicity scam, so that the world will think that –

"Have your tastes changed, Draco?"

She pulls the words right out of my mind. And I stare at her as she smiles at me.

Draco, again.

After that, Ron left. He'd hugged her and smiled sadly as he pulled her door closed. She stood there, listening to him make plans with Ginny for Christmas, and truly felt for the first time in almost ten years like she and Ron Weasley would not be getting married and having children one day. She felt a loss, but not so sharp as the one nagging at her now that she'd taken stock of her "relationship" with Draco Malfoy.

Perhaps she should contact Rita Skeeter. She would be devastated to hear that neither gentleman was her chosen beau. She laughed at herself as a knock rapped on the door.

Harry leaned against the door frame. "He's gone."

Hermione nodded, and turned to fold some clothes. Harry was the only one she knew who chose to do certain household chores the Muggle way, like her.

"You know," he continued, "I didn't get it for the longest time."

She looked back at him, raising her brows in question, picking up clothing to fold.

"I thought… well, I thought it was very odd… and unlike you."

"Harry, what—?"

"But I saw you together today. And I think I get it now."

Hermione frowned at him. "Saw…?"

"You and Malfoy."

Her hands stopped folding the jeans she was working on. "Saw us? What do you mean?"

He looked at his shoes. Trainers, she realized, and her heart warmed at the normalcy.

"You're very alike. Both well-read, both passionate. And when you fight…. It's not like with you and Ron. And I think I get it now."

He looked back up at her and smiled lightly.

"There's nothing to get," she said softly. "Malfoy and I do not have a relationship."

Harry blinked at her, and looked at his shoes again. "Okay."

She turned and continued folding her jeans. She heard him close the door.

The date on the paper read November 1, 1999. Today was the day Draco was to announce his consulting firm, wooing the entire wizarding world with how far he'd come and how ambitious he was. Instead, he was punching Ron Weasley in the face.

"THE FIGHT FOR HERMIONE GRANGER'S HEART!"

by Rita Skeeter

Hermione frowned. Her head hurt. The article featured some wonderful pictures of the fight, but several more of Hermione standing at the edge of the field with Katie, Hermione shoving Draco, Hermione storming off the pitch.

What angered Hermione most about the article was its accuracy. There was nothing to fight with Skeeter over. The two boys *did* start a brawl on the Quidditch field and it *did* have something to do with her. Skeeter didn't exaggerate anything.

Hermione shoved the paper into the rubbish bin. She took the Floo into work and ignored the staring and the conversations that would stop as she passed. She got to her desk and found seven Howlers waiting for her. She frowned. She sent them into the conference room and cast a silencing charm.

After thirty minutes of enduring the Ron Weasley Fan Club, the Society for the Preservation of Draco Malfoy's Lineage, and a few Quidditch enthusiasts who were really looking forward to yesterday's game, Hermione finally got to turn in her proposal to Mathilda. She returned to her desk to find a note from Narcissa, requesting that they meet somewhere private for their lunch that afternoon, and suggested a little shop in Muggle London, surprisingly.

Hermione was more surprised that Narcissa still even wanted to meet. If Hermione was having a day like today, Draco and Narcissa must be swamped as well.

Hermione arrived at the coffee shop and found Narcissa tucked into a corner next to a bookshelf. She was dressed as "Muggle" as Narcissa Malfoy could manage, but still looked the epitome of grace and fashion.

"Oh, Hermione, dear," Narcissa stood and pulled her in. "What a day I'm sure you must be having."

"Yes," Hermione said, pulling back. "It's been trying. But what about you? Wasn't Draco supposed to announce his consulting firm today?"

Narcissa pursed her lips together. "Yes. Yes, he was. And now it needs to be postponed at least a week." Narcissa shook her napkin onto her lap.

"I'm so sorry, Narcissa."

"Oh, it's not your fault. *You* didn't engage in a pissing contest in front of a camera." Narcissa pressed her hand to her temple, and Hermione's eyes widened at her language. "I apologize. I'm under a lot of stress."

Hermione hid a smile. "Not at all. And do let me know if there is anything I can do to help with… 'damage control.' I suspect that the best thing I *can* do is stay away though."

Narcissa's eyes sparkled and the waiter arrived. Narcissa ordered a tea for her and coffee for Hermione, but when the waiter asked about French press, drip, decaf, espresso, macchiato, Hermione watched Narcissa's brows shoot up in confusion. Hermione jumped in and just clarified that a regular coffee would be perfect with some milk.

Narcissa turned back to her and said, "Well, before the shenanigans of this weekend happened, I did want to invite you to lunch for a specific purpose, Hermione."

"Oh?" Hermione set the menu down to give Narcissa her full attention. Narcissa leveled her eyes on her.

"Hermione," she began, "You do know how grateful I am that you chose to speak at Draco's trial?"

Hermione blinked at her. "Oh… yes, of course. It was the right thing to do."

"You have really given him a second chance. This business – should it ever get off the ground," she mumbled, rolling her eyes and then continued, "will truly be an opportunity for Draco to prove himself. To set himself apart from the War. From Lucius's reputation. And I cannot thank you enough for that opportunity."

Hermione was so thankful that the waiter arrived with their coffee and tea and to take their order. She had never heard Narcissa talk about Lucius and she didn't know how to respond to this at all. She had a faint memory of Narcissa using her maiden name when placing books on reserve at Cornerstone. The waiter moved away and Hermione clutched at her coffee cup.

"I- Yes, I am so glad that Draco has this opportunity as well. He has a very keen eye for business opportunities."

Narcissa sipped her tea, eyeing her over her cup. She set it down. "I have also told Lucius just how instrumental you have been in Draco's new life. Your friendship and Mr. Potter's friendship have been most influential."

Hermione blinked at her. Narcissa continued.

"Lucius would like the opportunity to thank you for speaking at Draco's trial as well." Narcissa's eyes glittered and Hermione felt very stiff. "I've also told him you are now a dear friend of mine, and that it would… behoove him to get to know you better."

Narcissa added just a touch more sugar to her tea. She stirred with her spoon, and watched Hermione's face.

"He would be honored if you would visit him at Azkaban this coming Saturday."

"Yeah," Ron stood and dragged his eyes off the carpets. "I wanted to say goodbye before I left."

"Goodbye." Hermione turned and headed toward her bedroom. She tossed her bag on the bed and flipped on the lights with her wand. She heard the door creak and turned to scowl at a very small looking Ron Weasley leaning against her door frame.

"I'm sorry." He pouted.

"For?" She placed her hands on her hips.

"…for whatever you're mad at me for."

She threw her hands up and growled. "Not good enough, Ron!"

"Look, I don't know what to say!" He stepped into the room and left the door cracked just enough for Harry and Ginny to inevitably eavesdrop. "You should have heard what he said about you, Hermione. You would have punched him too!"

She felt a blush run up her neck. "Then *let me* punch him!"

"I was defending you –"

"No, you were staking your claim," she said. He looked up at her. "I don't know what you think is going on here—"

"I saw the papers," he said. "I've seen the pictures of you both."

"Oh, wonderful!" she quipped. "You know, Skeeter printed that *Harry* and I were dating when we were fourteen, and that was true as well!"

Ron looked at the ground. Hermione stepped closer to him and touched his arm.

"Ron, I want to make sure that we're clear," she said quietly. "You and I are not dating." He looked up at her. "It's impossible to do so at this time, and… and I don't think it's what we'd want anyway." He opened his mouth, and before he could say anything they'd regret about him wanting her, she said, "And I'm going to begin seeing people." He closed his mouth. "You can't come punch people in the face whenever you see me pictured in the paper with them."

He nodded. He looked at her face, searching. "So, there's nothing going on with you and Draco Malfoy?"

Hermione looked into his blue eyes and thought of a Slytherin ring handing her a drink, grey eyes flashing at her, warming her, a silver voice whispering *You think that's why they call you the Golden Girl?*, the ghost of a hand guiding her across the street, the press of her hip against the Cornerstone counter as his body invaded her space… and the heat of his breath on her face as he hissed the number 35,000 at her.

The moments that were only moments, and not enough to wait for, not enough to pin a dream on.

She blinked and did not lie. "There is nothing going on between Malfoy and me."

"Yes, and I'm sure whatever you said to get him to hit you first had nothing to do with me. You've been baiting him all weekend!"

"Baiting him? I sure I don't know what you mean—"

"Oh, please, Malfoy. The *mint*?" she said. He hid a smirk and bit his tongue between his teeth.

"Those *are* my favorite mints, Granger. However did you know?" His voice lilted.

"And you knew he'd be with me when your *present* arrived –"

"And you're welcome for that, by the way," he smirked. "Or have you not figured it out yet."

She gasped. "'Have I not figured it out!?' Of *course*, I have! Even someone as vapid as your *Tuesday* girl could figure that out –"

"Oh, I was curious, seeing as I received no 'thank you' card –"

"Well *thank you*, Malfoy, for swooping in and *saving* me from my ignorance—"

"It's back to Malfoy, is it? I thought we were getting somewhere, Granger."

"Yes, when you're being an absolute *moron*, it's Malfoy."

"And when is it Draco?"

"When you're being an absolute *asshole*!" She shoved his shoulders again. "Don't you *dare* bring me into this petty behavior again." She pointed a finger at his face.

"I didn't bring you into it at all, Granger. He did."

"If you want to hit him, hit him. Don't use me to get him to hit you first," she hissed.

On cue, a bulb flashed to her left. She turned and found the camera, Skeeter, and Harry, Ginny and several other members of both teams watching them.

"I apologize that your game was ruined," she said. She marched off just as Ron and Oliver Wood were heading into the other cabins.

"Hermione—" Ron's voice.

"Don't start, Ronald Weasley!" She growled at him and continued off the field.

The rest of the day was ruined. She said goodbye to a smirking Katie Bell and went straight to the library to continue drafting her new proposal. Her goal was to lay it on Mathilda's desk the following morning and demand a meeting the following day. She penned a note to Kingsley asking if they could meet tomorrow afternoon. Her determination distracted her from the overwhelming desire to hit someone herself.

She came home just before dinner time, and found Harry and Ron still in her living room. They both stopped talking when she entered and looked up at her. Ginny popped her head out from the kitchen.

"Dinner, Hermione?"

"No, thank you." Her stomach grumbled. She turned to Ron. "Didn't you have to leave tonight?"

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Ten

Thursday, March 2, 1995

I smile at the magazine, reading it at breakfast. I don't know how she's managed to piss off Rita Skeeter, but Skeeter has retaliated.

Miss Granger, a plain but ambitious girl, seems to have a taste for famous wizards that Harry alone cannot satisfy.

Pansy is giggling next to me. She had slid the magazine to me, happily awaiting my response. Tracey Davis is trying to read it over my other shoulder.

"You're in here Pans!" Tracey squeals. "You called her ugly!" Tracey cackles.

"'*Really* ugly,'" Pansy corrects. I can feel her watching me, waiting for praise.

My eyes stutter over the bit about Krum inviting her to Bulgaria over the summer. I tear my eyes from the page and turn to Pansy.

"Brilliant," I say. I wink at her.

She kisses me on the mouth.

I'm still trying to get used to this odd relationship Pansy's gotten me into. Apparently if I get to have sex with her once a week, she gets to kiss me in public.

"Has Potter seen it?" I ask.

It feels like the entire Slytherin table cranes their necks to peer around the Ravenclaws. The Golden Trio are chatting happily, Weasley dropping food onto himself, Potter reading a letter, and the Golden Girl is going over her Potions book.

"Let's take it over there!" Pansy grabs for the magazine.

"Not so fast!" I take it back. "In Potions." I smirk. Pansy giggles.

We stride out of the Great Hall, like a pack of wolves. Pansy shoves the magazine into Blaise's face, and he and Daphne read as they walk. Crabbe and Goyle trail behind. I can hear Goyle asking Crabbe what we're all supposed to be happy about.

We wait for them outside Snape's classroom. As they approach, Pansy is barely in control of her excitement – quite irritating actually – and tosses the magazine at Granger.

Before they can read it, Snape ushers us in. We're twisting in our seats to watch them read it.

I'm waiting to see her face change. I'm waiting for her to flush with embarrassment, and Potter to grumble. Skeeter laying their personal details out in the open, possibly ruining their future happiness, and I'm giddy. Maybe Potter will see what a slag she is and ditch her.

"I can't wait to see how this affects Weasley," Pansy chuckles.

She's sitting just to my right, and I take my eyes off of Granger's furrowed brows to look at her. "Weasley?"

"Yes!" she whispers. "I want to see if he believes any of it! See if they fight!"

I blink at her. "Believes what?"

"About her and Potter! Oh, it would be so lovely to split them all up over this," she hisses. "He's already so broken up about Krum and her."

I look back to the three of them in the back row. Weasley is frowning, ears turning red.

My brain is spinning.

"What do you mean? About Weasley?"

My eyes dig into her as she turns to look at me. She speaks slowly. "Weasley and Granger are completely obsessed with each other."

I feel like a piece of me cracks. Maybe it's a rib. Maybe is a piece of my skull, opening to allow this to pour into me.

"You mean Potter. She's Potter's Mudblood." My voice is flat, lifeless.

Pansy chuckles. "Boys can be so thick sometimes." She glances back to watch the Golden Trio again before leaning into me. "Potter and the Mudblood are friends. Nothing there. It's Weasley she's got her sights set on. I mean, I think the Weasleys are worse than Muggles really, but the thought of her trying to dilute their pure blood with her disgusting…"

Pansy's diatribe washes over me as I look back the three of them, words and phrases jumping out.

"… always fighting…"

I watch as he points at the article and she rolls her eyes at him.

"… so jealous *all* the time…"

He asks her a question and she blushes. He starts absently grinding his pestle onto the table, watching for her answer.

"… probably fancied each other for years."

Hermione stared down to the left and saw Harry taking Draco to the cabins. She looked at Ginny, who was standing in the middle of the field with her hands on her hips, breathing hard. They made eye contact and Ginny's face split into a huge grin. Katie laughed again.

"I… I still have no idea what everyone thinks is so funny. That was totally barbaric." Hermione shook her head and looked at Katie.

"Well, Hermione," Katie said. "Oliver Wood might have been the referee of the match today, but it seems like you get to decide who won." Katie smiled brightly.

Hermione blinked at her. She looked to Ron with Oliver Wood's hand on his shoulder across the field, and then to the cabins where Draco and Harry were disappearing, the rest of the D.M.L.E. team following.

She turned to Katie, who was wiggling her brows at her. Hermione frowned. "You tell me. To wait or to settle." She turned from Katie and headed back up the stands to gather her belongings.

The game was effectively postponed. Skeeter tried to interview her as she stomped over to the cabins, but Hermione found that silence was the best remedy for Rita Skeeter.

"Miss Granger! Which of these dashing gentlemen has your heart? Have you told Ron Weasley about your romance with Draco Malfoy? Is he still waiting on your response to his proposal? Do you think either of these men truly won that fight?"

"I think they're both morons," Hermione mumbled as she outpaced Skeeter and her ridiculous heels, sinking into the grass.

"What? What was that? Miss Granger?"

Hermione ignored her and continued. She approached the cabin door just as Draco and Harry exited it. Draco's eye was swollen and cut along the brow. There was bruise forming on his jaw as well. Harry saw her marching over and quickly stepped to the side. Smart man.

"Are you alright?" She stopped in front of Draco. His hair was wet from the shower.

He looked at her and tightened his jaw. "I'm fine."

"Good." She shoved at his shoulders. "What the hell is wrong with you?!"

He stumbled in surprise and his back landed against the door of the cabin.

"Me?"

"Yes! Why are you giving Skeeter more ammunition?!" She shoved him again. "You know the pictures of you two *brawling* will be all over the papers tomorrow!"

"And what makes you think that was all about you, Granger?" he hissed at her and stepped off the door. She held her ground.

"Of *course* it was about me, because *you* can't leave well enough alone!"

"For your information, I've been aching to pop him since the day we met."

"Interesting," Katie said next to her.

Harry was dismounting his broom a few paces away. Ginny was circling above, looking down at them, then looking at her in the stands. Ron took a step in to Draco. Draco remained very still, waiting. Then Ron shoved him. And then there was chaos.

Harry ran the twenty paces to them as Ginny dove. The people in the stands murmured. Draco regained his footing and said something back to Ron. Ron responded by punching him in the face.

"Oh! Ron!" Hermione stood. She ran down the bleachers, hopping over the onlookers who had started cheering on the fight. She could hear Katie on her heels and the clicking of the camera to her right. Hermione reached the wall at the edge of the pitch just as Draco rammed into Ron, taking him to the ground.

"Stop!" Hermione yelled. Ginny hit the ground running as Harry pulled Draco off Ron. Hermione had never seen Draco in a real fight. Usually Crabbe and Goyle had taken charge in these situations and Draco had escaped to whine about his injuries. She'd never seen him hit someone in the face like she was currently watching him hit Ron.

Hermione started moving to the entrance to the field, but Katie grabbed her arm. "They've got it Hermione. Just sit back and enjoy the ride!" Katie's face was beaming.

"What?" Hermione was breathless, looking between Katie and the boys. A flash went off to her right and she turned to see Bozo taking a picture of *her*! She looked back to the field. Harry had pulled Draco back by the arms but Ginny hadn't gotten to Ron yet, so he charged at them both. Ron sucker punched Draco in the stomach while Harry had his arms restrained. Harry looked affronted while Draco slumped to the ground, gasping for air.

"Ron! Stop it!" Hermione tried to run to the field again, but Katie grabbed her again.

"Don't you wonder who it is that's gotten them in such a tizzy, Hermione?" Katie was smiling at the field.

"Oh, I know *exactly* what's happening here, and it's completely juvenile!" Hermione pouted.

Ginny stood in front of Ron, pushing on his chest. Harry helped Draco up, shielding him from Ron. As the boys were pulled further apart from each other, Ron yelled across the distance.

"Stay the hell away from her!"

Heat danced up Hermione's back. Ginny looked at her, and Katie squeezed her arm, laughing. Ron finally looked back to the stands and found her there at the edge of the pitch. His eyes burned into hers as she gaped at him. He turned and headed to the opposite stands. Oliver Wood, who had missed the whole thing from being up in the air fixing the hoop, sensed that someone should be with Ron and followed him over.

I take in the way he's leaning into her. Closer than Potter gets. She looks up at him and averts her eyes, lashes fluttering and blush creeping up her neck.

Severus interrupts everyone. He takes points from the Gryffindors for reading a magazine in class. He then proceeds to read the article out loud.

I laugh at all the right moments. I sneer at the back table.

But I'm watching as Potter's embarrassment is not for himself, even as Severus reads gossip about his love life. He's embarrassed for his friend.

I look at Weasley. He's boiling.

I'm still trying to piece together how I missed this.

I'd always thought it was Potter. Potter with the Quidditch skills and the amazing luck. Potter with the ear of Dumbledore and every bloody teacher at this school. Potter who took her on adventures, and needed her intellect, and allowed her into their Golden Trio.

Severus separates them. She's banished to a seat on Pansy's other side, much to Pansy's delight. Potter sits up front.

I glance at the back of the room again, where I find a ginger staring at her, pouting.

Pansy turns to me, cackling at something she just said to Granger, expecting me to have heard and approved. I tear my eyes from the back row and smile at her.

Krum was a travesty, but acceptable.

Potter I could live with.

But a Weasley?

I blink at the chalkboard, writing the ingredients down, Pansy's hand on my knee.

~*~

Thursday, October 28, 1999

She's been trying to ignore me this week. In the lifts. In the café.

When Potter appeared, looking for his blasted croissants, dragging her along behind him on Tuesday, she couldn't meet my eyes.

I'm trying to figure out if she's uncomfortable with our… "flirting" on Saturday, or if it's something else. Maybe the Gringotts project.

But when I find myself in a slowly moving lift on Thursday with Mathilda Grimblehawk, I take an opportunity.

"I hear Granger's got some excellent ideas for Gringotts," I say to her, after we've exchanged our hellos.

"Yes, yes. She's quite forward-minded, isn't she?" Mathilda says as she thumbs through the chin-high stack of paperwork in her arms, looking for something. I reach for the pile as it leans dangerously to the left. "Thank you, Malfoy. But yes, I'm reviewing it with her tomorrow." She

pulls a folder from the stack and stares down at it quizzically. "Must find a compromise the Goblins will like."

I watch her as her eyes scan the folder. She's given nothing away to an untrained eye. But clearly Granger's proposal is not going through.

"I do hope a compromise can be reached," I say, grinning. "My family has a long history with dragons. I'm named for the dragon constellation, of course."

Mathilda looks up at me, almost seeing me for the first time. It looks like she only had time to brush her mascara over one eye, not the other.

"Of course. I assumed!" She grins. I send her the same smirk I graced Skeeter with a few weeks ago.

"My mother is also very interested in the project. Granger has discussed it with her and caught her attention with it. And my mother is always looking for projects to invest in…"

It was like Mathilda had galleons in her eyes.

"That's very kind of her. Your mother has always been very philanthropic, hasn't she?"

I nod. I notice that Mathilda has stopped flipping through her file, giving me her undivided attention as the lift jumps toward her floor.

"Well," she continues, "we'll do our best to prevent harm to the dragons. But Gringotts won't be budging on a few things. They want a beast."

We arrive at her floor. I help her gather her paperwork into a manageable pile and say goodbye.

A beast.

I head straight home after work. I was going to head to the field, fly around, practice some of the drills Potter will play on Sunday. But I pop through the Manor fireplaces and head into the library. I take my dinner in there, and Mother doesn't mind.

There's something about the word "beast" that hangs on my mind.

I'm digging through the stacks for the copy of *Fantastic Beasts* for ten minutes before I realize *she* has it. Borrowed it. Probably has the answer right there in front of her.

I frown at the books in front of me. There's a book on goblins from the 16th century that winks at me. I pull it, and flip through several chapters.

I'm sitting in between the bookshelves, two hundred pages in when I find it.

Substantial evidence hath proven a dislike and loathing between the race of Chimaera and the race of Goblin, such as it behooves the Chimaera to avoid the Goblin altogether.

I drop the book and jump to my feet, turning the corners to find the fables and fictions.

Three hours later I have sources from five different texts, all claiming that the Chimaera bow only to goblins. I'm itching to pull together a report and cite these books before I realize that

"Well, he and his mother frequent Cornerstone Books, so I run into him on occasion." Hermione played with the open-close flip on her thermos.

"And how is that?" Katie was still watching her.

"Tense, at times." Hermione laughed. "But in general, there's a sense of moving forward." Hermione looked up in time to see Draco chuck the Quaffle toward the hoops. Ron came in at the last second to bat it away. Ron gave him a smug grin and Draco immediately turned and headed down the field, waiting for the play to start.

"You're becoming friendly with Narcissa Malfoy I hear?" Katie twisted the top off her thermos and added more hot cocoa with her wand. "That must be interesting!"

"'Challenging', is more the word." Hermione laughed. "She originally just wanted to invite me to tea to thank me for speaking at her son's trial. She's quite kind actually."

"That's nice to hear. I've never met her before." Katie dropped some marshmallows into her cocoa and twisted the cap back on. Hermione noticed that Katie's attention had fully left the game. "And the three of you spend time together? I couldn't help but see the pictures from Fortescue's."

"Oh," Hermione laughed. "That was… an odd, one-time thing. Narcissa wanted to see me on my lunch break at Cornerstone, and Malfoy was with her that day." She watched as the D.M.L.E. Keeper let the Quaffle slip by him, allowing ten points to Magical Transport. The stands cheered and groaned, all but Katie Bell. "It was… completely random."

"Or completely intentional." Katie raised her brows at Hermione.

Hermione was about to respond when the group to their right gasped. She looked up in time to see Ron catch the Quaffle hurtling toward the right hoop, but duck at the last moment as a Bludger aimed for him smashed through the hoop. The wood splintered and sprayed everywhere, leaving just the post behind. Oliver blew his whistle and asked for a pause so they could repair the hoop.

The clock stopped and Oliver froze the Bludgers in midair. Ginny and some of the other players stayed in the air, but others made their way to the ground to grab water.

"I don't know if I've ever seen a match pause. I mean, other than when Dementors attack, or when someone enchants a Bludger," Hermione said.

"I'd say any game where Harry Potter is involved is always an exception to the rule." Katie laughed. "No, they don't usually pause, but professional Quidditch pitches have reinforced hoops, not wooden ones. So, this wouldn't usually happen."

Hermione looked down and saw that both Draco and Ron had dropped down to the field and had dismounted. Harry was drifting down too. From a distance, it looked like Draco and Ron were talking, which was… different. Then she saw Ron cock his head in her direction. She froze.

Katie threw more popcorn into her mouth and replied, "It's a timed game instead. So, they play until the timer runs out." Her eyes were flitting across the field, catching all the nuances that Hermione would never understand.

"And how long is the game?" Hermione realized she had no idea how much of her day would be spent here at the field.

"Usually around six hours." Katie grabbed her hot cocoa.

"Six hours?!" Hermione squawked.

Katie was laughing. "Relax, Hermione! It's only an hour and a half." Katie was still giggling as Hermione glowered at her. "You looked like a Grindylow had stolen your galleons!"

Hermione humphed and sipped her cocoa. She tried to follow the Quaffle, asking Katie a few times where it had gotten to, but found it infinitely easier to follow Harry and Ginny, and infinitely more interesting to follow Draco. It had been so long since she'd gotten to watch him fly. He had retreated from Quidditch in their sixth year, and Umbridge had made everything so unpleasant in fifth, and the Tri-Wizard Tournament had canceled the sport in fourth. She'd never gotten to see how good he'd gotten. He flew so differently from Harry. He was more precise.

She watched him spin the Quaffle to Ginny as a Bludger rocketed towards him. Hermione gasped as he dipped at the last moment, the Bludger grazing his ear. Katie looked at her.

Ginny curved the ball toward the left hoop, and Ron missed it by inches. Half the stands cheered as the D.M.L.E. scored the first points. Ron and Ginny shared words in the air, while Harry laughed. Oliver Wood dove to grab the Quaffle and bring it up to Ron, as he had no intention of doing anything but argue with Ginny.

Once the ball was back in play, Katie said, "It's so odd seeing Draco Malfoy in red, don't you think?"

Hermione was, of course, already watching him, so she adjusted her eyes to take in his whole appearance. The D.M.L.E. chosen color was red, as they were mostly Gryffindors. The Department of Magical Transportation had chosen a lavender color, which was clashing wonderfully with Ron's hair. But Draco… looked good in anything.

"I guess so. He's more of a Gryffindor these days than most, though." Hermione laughed at bit as Harry dodged a Bludger and tossed the Quaffle to Draco.

"How are things with you and him?" Katie asked. Hermione took her eyes off Draco as he swerved around the D.M.T.'s Chasers, and checked in with Katie. She was eyeing her over the top of her cocoa, innocence written across her brow.

"Me and Malfoy?"

"Yeah. Do you see him much?"

that is Granger's job. And handing her a proposal before she meets with Mathilda today will only aggravate her.

No, this has to be her project.

I'm penning Morty a note, asking if Cornerstone carries the fairytale book, and if so, can he put it on hold for tomorrow, when Mother enters the library.

It must be late. Why is she still up?

"Breakfast?" she says.

I twist my head to look at the grandfather clock in the corner. It's 5AM already.

I look back at her in surprise. "Yes, thank you."

She's scowling at me, holding a newspaper between her fingers.

She slaps the paper down on the side table.

"I *told* you not to mess with that Bulgarian girl." She marches out of the room.

I approach the *Daily Prophet* slowly, mind racing through all of the possible things that could have set my mother off.

She has it flipped open to the society pages, and I turn the paper over, finding a picture of Granger with a sandy-haired bloke.

And Hermione Granger seems to have recovered from the sting of Draco Malfoy's womanizing ways! She was seen last night at the Galloping Griffin, drinking Butterbeer with Rolf Scamander, grandson of Magical Creature activist and author Newt Scamander. The two of them chatted for three hours, in what looks to be the first of many promising dates between the two activists.

I can't stop watching the picture move. She's flapping her hands around, telling him a story. He makes her laugh, and then continues to stare at her fixedly.

I set the paper down, and run a hand down my face. Exhaustion finally claims me. I look at the note I'm about to send to Morty.

While I was slaving through the library, filling holes in her dragon project, she was on a date.

For at least three hours. Maybe she's still on that date.

Maybe she's waking up just now, silencing her alarm, and turning over in his arms and asking if he'd like breakfast.

No. It was a first date. She wouldn't…

The picture of them stares up at me from the side table. She laughs.

I swallow, and head to find my owl.

~*~

Saturday, October 30, 1999

At precisely 5:30PM, I pull the door to Cornerstone, whistling some old tune.

She practically growls at me.

Oh, excellent.

"Draco, just because Skeeter *writes* that you visit Cornerstone every Saturday, doesn't mean that you *have* to."

She grabs the bag that Morty left for me yesterday and punches it down on the counter. She looks like she's been waiting all day to beat something up. Or someone.

"Why, you look positively *feral* today, Granger. Something new with your hair?" I snipe back, eyeing her curls pulled back into a loose ponytail.

She says nothing to that. "Will you be needing this gift wrapped, sir?"

"Naturally." She turns to pull the ledger book. I jump right to it. "Your meeting with Mathilda didn't go as planned, eh?"

She stops flipping pages in the book. "How did you know?" She looks at me, as if wondering if *I* am the reason the proposal didn't go through. Oh, if she only knew.

"I hear things," I say, smirking.

"She thinks the goblins won't compromise, that they want a beast," she grumbles, pulling the book out of the bag.

"That's too bad. You'll think of something else." I say it like it's timed that way.

She sees the book, and a sly smile pulls her lips. Her eyes drift to mine, ready for a battle.

"Could your girl not handle the fiction?" she says, and I watch gleefully as she thinks she's won the game. "We could also wrap up a dictionary for her?"

Her eyes are wide and happy. I lean forward, relaxing into the counter, ready to spend the next five minutes bantering with her while she wraps.

"No, no. If she learned bigger words, then we'd have to communicate more."

"Of course," she agrees, and she turns away, rolling her eyes. She grabbed the wrapping paper and scissors. "If she likes this one, Draco, there is another I'd recommend. *A is for Acid Pops, B is for Broom, C is for Centaurs.* It's a best seller for that reading level."

She thinks she's hilarious. She thinks she's got me beat.

"You've started calling me Draco," I hum.

Her fingers freeze on the fold. She looks up at me, like I've caught her cheating on her O.W.L.s. Some of her hair is falling into her eyes and I want to push it back for her. I wonder what she'd do.

She moves her hair behind her ear, and clears her throat.

"Well, I guess… your mother calls you Draco, so…"

"Yeah, I can't get her to stop doing that."

I see her smile down at the paper, and my chest warms. It's not like when she used to laugh with Potter. It's quieter. More like she wants the moment for herself.

I watch her wrap the book. Silly childish thing. But I'm going to make her wrap it. And put a nice bow on it.

"What if…" Hermione stopped and rephrased. "Do you fear that you've moved too quickly? If that perfect man that wants a family as well comes along—"

"Then we'll have another. The 'perfect' man would be 'perfectly' fine with dating and wedding a single mother, don't you think?" Katie smiled at her. She was so confident, as if she'd answered these questions thousands of times.

"I believe so." Hermione laughed. "I applaud you for going after what you want."

"Thank you," Katie said, taking a sip from her cocoa. "I felt like, I've come this far. I've fought in a war, I chose the winning side. I shouldn't have to wait or settle. Those are the two most damaging things a person could do."

Hermione was struck. She stared at Katie as she wiped cocoa off her lips and marveled at her getting what she wanted. She was brave. Gryffindor brave. Hermione let her mind ruminate on waiting and settling. She agreed. Quite damaging.

As if on cue, twelve broomsticks shot out of the cabins, blonde and ginger heads immediately spotted. The friends, family and co-workers in the stands cheered, stomping their feet. Katie stood and yelled something, some chant that other D.M.L.E. officers joined her on. Hermione clapped and whooped, mentally preparing herself for a Quidditch match.

"I think you may be the only person in the history of the magical community that doesn't like Quidditch, Hermione Granger." Katie looked down at her, laughing.

"I like Quidditch just fine!" Hermione yelled over the crowd.

"You're lying!" Katie sat back down and knocked her elbow playfully. Hermione grinned.

Oliver Wood grabbed his broom and headed to the center of the field.

"Thank Merlin Oliver Wood is back in England." Katie said, grabbing some popcorn from her bag. She offered the container to Hermione.

"Thank Merlin for Oliver Wood!" Hermione grabbed a handful of popcorn, and Katie laughed, wiggling her eyebrows.

The players lined up in a circle in the air around Oliver, and Hermione spotted Draco looking surly next to Harry, so different from the flirt who asked for books to be gift wrapped. His face was set. She scowled at him, examining him. Oliver was giving a pre-game pep-talk, and the whole group laughed at something he said, all except Draco. He was adjusting his gloves. Hermione watched as he held his broom steady with just his thighs while his hands were busy. She swallowed.

Movement from the right drew her attention. Ron was waving at her. She lifted her arm to wave back. He beamed.

Oliver Wood dove down to the box holding the balls. When the Bludgers flew up and the Quaffle was tossed, Hermione had a thought.

"Katie, when does the game end if there is no Snitch to catch?"

"How's everything going? With the baby?"

"Excellent." Katie sat and began unpacking a bag, handing Hermione a bag of popcorn for them both. "My sister just had her first last year, so I've got the inside scoop for all the tricks and potions."

"Oh, that's wonderful."

Katie smiled and waved at someone Hermione didn't recognize. Hermione caught a glimpse of Aiden and a few other Magical Creatures coworkers settling in a few sections over. She still could not believe how many people were here. She saw a flash go off, and to her right she found Bozo and Skeeter.

"What is the press doing here? Isn't it just a scrimmage?" Hermione said.

"They'll have photographers here every now and then. It's rather nice to see all of the Hogwarts alums back on the same field again, especially after Draco joined the team." Katie munched her popcorn. "And I guess with Ron playing Keeper for the other team, it's probably a nice newspaper opportunity."

"Hm." Hermione scowled at Skeeter.

"So, they tell me not to have too much chocolate while pregnant," Katie said, turning to her bag, "but if you drink some too, I feel like I could get away with it." Katie pulled out two thermoses and offered one to Hermione. "Hot cocoa?"

Hermione smiled and took it. "Thanks."

Katie smiled and tucked her chin into her scarf as a wind gusted past them.

"Katie," Hermione started. "Can I ask you who the father is?"

Katie laughed and turned to her. "Merlin, how long have you been holding that in?"

"About six weeks." Hermione smiled. "I don't mean to pry. I'm just curious."

"Of course. Not at all." Katie pushed her hair away from her face. "I actually had a donor."

Hermione was not expecting this at all. She blinked at Katie. "Really? I- I mean, do they have magical options for women in the Wizarding World?"

"I had it done the Muggle way." Katie grinned, and her hand absently came up to her stomach.

"Oh! How … how nice!" Hermione smiled at her. Katie gave her a sly grin.

"You want to know why, don't you?" Katie said.

"Terribly so." Hermione gave a nervous laugh. "I've never heard of someone seeking out a donor at twenty-one."

"Twenty, actually," Katie said. "My birthday is in December." Katie's eyes glazed as she looked out over the empty field. "With the War, and watching so many people I loved die, I just decided that I didn't want to waste any more time before getting what I want. I want a family. I want to be a mother. And I decided to get it."

I can feel my heartbeat in my fingertips, excited for her to realize what I've discovered. My hands almost shake, so I twist my ring around my thumb. She's pressing the fold down on the orange wrapping paper. Her fingers move quickly. And I think of how strong they probably are. Years of doing things the Muggle way, still doing things the Muggle way out of habit, and maybe her hands have little calluses or scars. How her fingers would feel on my skin.

And I'm yanked out of my meandering thoughts by the image of her strong fingers with the sandy-haired Scamander boy.

"I've not had the opportunity to meet Rolf Scamander, but I hear he's a fascinating bloke."

I wish I hadn't once it's out of me.

She looks up at me, and her strong hands fumble with the wrapping. She opens her mouth, and closes it.

"I… Yes, I mean, I hadn't met him before either." Her eyes come back to the wrapping. "He's very open to discussing his grandfather's legacy, so I found him quite… er, quite fascinating."

She's nervous. Maybe hiding something. Maybe she's embarrassed that she'd let Scamander take her home on the first date, something "she never does, really, Rolf," and after she'd examined his book collection and had another glass of wine, she let him undress her—

She's blushing. I refocus on my plan.

She'll wrap this gift in a bow. I'll ask her to retie it, since this gift is pretty special to me. She'll roll her eyes.

And then I'll ask her if she wouldn't mind addressing it for me, since her penmanship is so much nicer than my own. She'll growl and hiss at me and I'll watch her pout about which girl this was for. But I'll make her write a note about the chapter on Chimaeras. If she doesn't see it then, then I'll ask for her to address it directly to herself.

And when she looks up at me in awe and confusion, I'll smirk at her, raise a brow, and walk out, leaving her with the perfectly wrapped gift.

Maybe she'll come to her senses, remember the fable about Chimaeras, and come running around the counter –

The door behind me clicks. I sigh. I'm thinking about hexing whoever it is when she says, "Good evening."

I need to make up an excuse to stay. To walk around the stacks for bit until this customer has left. I look past her and don't see any other books on reserve. Who is this idiot?

"Ron. Hi."

Every muscle in my body freezes. My eyes snap up to her to make sure she's kidding. She's not.

I stand up, and turn my head to find Weasley on her welcome mat. His hand is still on the door, like he's not sure he's fully entered the space yet. He looks between me and her. And his eyes come back to me.

I feel my body humming again, drunk on testosterone. I smirk at him, and turn back to my comfortable position, right where I was before he so rudely interrupted.

"Well, what do you know. They *do* get the paper in Ireland."

She slowly drops the work she was doing on the wrapping paper, and comes around the counter. My eyes track her as she approaches him. His eyes are still on me. I smile at him.

They hug, exchange pleasantries. And still I stand here. Leaning really. Seeing as this is a book shop, and I am purchasing a book, there's really no reason for me to leave.

She tries to pull back from him and he holds her close, his eyes sliding to me.

So he knows.

I wonder if it was the pictures that did it.

Or just my presence here, cementing the wild thoughts running through his mind for the past few weeks.

Finally, she's able to escape him, coming back around the counter. He looks at me.

"Malfoy."

"Weasley," I say. I make sure to look as "at home" as I possibly can. "Excellent game last week."

I can't help myself. He scowls at me, ears turning red.

"So, you'll be here tomorrow morning for the Quidditch scrimmage?" she asks, fingers moving quickly on the wrapping. I wonder if I should still tease her about making the wrap and bow perfect. "You can sit with me and Katie Bell."

Weasley is still glaring at me when he says, "No, actually. I just finished speaking with Harry and Mr. Acorn." His lips twist into something that must be "smug" on him. "Seems like Magical Transport's Keeper has fallen ill today, and instead of canceling the event all together, Acorn's asked me to step in tomorrow."

I show him what "smug" is. I return the smirk tenfold.

He's a lousy Keeper, and I plan on reinforcing that with him tomorrow.

"Oh, wonderful."

Oh, Granger was still here.

"Yes, wonderful," I repeat. "It's so nice that they'll let in just anybody… when there's a need like that."

"Yes, evidently." He nods in my direction.

I smile at him. He's gotten better at this since Hogwarts.

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Sixteen

She'd spent the rest of the evening at the library, pulling books, newspaper clippings, and journals on Chimaeras and any relation to goblins. Though there was not much to be found, there was enough to put together a solid case for bringing a Chimaera into Gringotts. There would not have to be any torture or training, as Chimaeras are naturally fierce and antagonistic. Except to goblins. Wizards could securely access their vaults at Gringotts as long as a goblin was with them at all times.

She quarreled with whether or not to pen a thank you note to Draco. He clearly had two intentions with sending that book. One - to help her; two - to anger Ron. After four drafts, she decided against it, and would thank him in person. If the opportunity arose.

When she saw Ron the next morning before the game, he was his normal self again. There was no indication that he had been troubled by Draco Malfoy the day before. Ginny kept trying to communicate with Hermione with her eyes, but Hermione just shook her head and told her they'd talk later. She knew she'd seen Draco's initials on that note, so there would be no getting around explaining to Ginny why Draco Malfoy had sent her a gift with a note calling her his *Saturday girl*.

Ridiculous.

She went with Harry, Ron, and Ginny to Hodgley Field at 7AM, and while they warmed up and got dressed, she picked out a place in the stands for Katie and her to sit. She brought a book, of course, and cast a warming charm on herself. Katie arrived around 7:30AM as the rest of the crowd began filing in. Hermione was surprised to see so many people out this early on a Sunday, but she supposed she didn't fully understand the fascination with Quidditch anyway.

"Hello, there!" Katie ambled up the bleachers, and Hermione stood to guide her up. Katie batted her away. "I'm not so pregnant I can't see my feet!" She laughed. "Not yet anyway!"

She rips the black ribbon from the wheel, bringing both of our attention back to her as she scrambles to finish wrapping.

I won't be able to give it to her here. I frown as Weasley steps closer to the counter.

"Buying a Halloween gift for someone?" he asks, like it's something to tease me for.

Her strong fingers pull the ribbon tight and flip the book over.

But the idea of Weasley knowing I've given her a gift…

"Yes," I say. "Someone special to me."

I glance up at him, ready to tell him more about how important the recipient of this book is, perhaps drop a few imagined details about her strong hands and her shapely hips—

Granger snorts.

Both of us turn to look at her.

She blushes, and quickly finishes with the bow, dropping the present into a Cornerstone bag.

"Here. Thank you."

Her eyes beg me to just go away, but not so fast, Granger.

"Oh, thank *you,* Granger." I smile at her, the charm I give to Skeeter, and Mathilda, and Jeannette and Jacqueline. She blinks at me. I turn to Weasley, letting that smile fade slowly. "I'll see you on the field tomorrow, Weasley."

"Looking forward to it, Malfoy."

And really, it was *his* fault for trying to have the last word.

I take the bag from her, and reach across him, grabbing up a mint – *Miss Granger discovered that Icicle Pops were Mr. Malfoy's favorite after-dinner mint, and personally stocks the register at Cornerstone with them* – and twist it between my fingers as Weasley's small mind tries to comprehend.

"'Til tomorrow," I sing.

I'm popping the mint between my lips, not daring to glance back.

~*~

Monday, September 2, 1996

The scent of her hair is overwhelming today. She must have done something to it.

Or perhaps it's that I haven't been in her proximity for two months, and the scent of her has faded from my mind.

It's the first day of classes, and she's already bouncing on her heels, begging Slughorn to give her house points for reading ahead.

And as much as I've prepared for today, as much as I've meditated and closed my mind and focused on my task this year, I still can't look away from her.

"It's Polyjuice Potion, sir." She correctly identifies the roiling cauldron in front of her. Her eyes brighten when Slughorn agrees.

I've tried not to think of her since I received my assignment. Severus is pleased with my progress, my ability to separate her from the mission, but that was in the Manor, before school started. Before I shared classes with her again, and before the scent of her smothered the rooms I was in.

"It's Amortentia!"

I look up at the sound of her cheery voice. She's standing in front of a cauldron barely five paces from me. The blood drains from my face as I watch her and the professor rattle off information about the love potion.

The love potion that's been wafting the scent of her hair towards me.

She's bubbling, preening under Slughorn's attention. It's always nice to watch her in class, when she's proud and bursting with knowledge, and she's not aware of eyes on her.

"—and it's supposed to smell differently to each of us, according to what attracts us, and I can smell freshly mown grass and new parchment and –"

She cuts off, blushing. Probably about to say something foolish about the smell of Weasley's feet or Potter's armpits. Or Gilderoy Lockhart's morning breath.

Or more likely, something resembling Weasley's aftershave. I clench my jaw, and turn my eyes to find him, see if he's grown a brain over the summer. If he's possibly smelling her hair throughout the room as well.

I find a ginger head on the other side of the room, across from me, Granger in the middle of us. How poetic.

I lift my gaze to see if he's heard her slip, her almost confession.

He's watching me, eyes tight. His arms across his chest, he looks at her once, then back at me.

I scowl back at him. Then turn my head away, wondering what my face was doing as she answered questions and blushed and described the qualities of a love potion.

I resolve to visit Severus's office tonight. I'm underprepared for the beginning of the term.

I manage to make a remark to Theo next to me when Slughorn asks her if she's related to Hector Dagworth-Granger, sneering about her dirty blood.

~*~

Sunday, October 31, 1999

I haven't heard from her.

I thought I would have heard from her by now.

I pull on my undershirt, and pack up any clothes I'd like to wear after the match.

Maybe she threw the gift away. She took one look at it and became so furious that she didn't even read the card.

I spray my cologne, apply my sunblock cream, tousle my hair.

She flipped a few pages, looked at the inside cover, shook the pages for any notes. She settled back on page 23. *The Chimaera*. She'd read this story before, or at least variations of it. A Chimaera lived alone in the woods, guarding a sparkling fountain that could cure all injuries. A wizard wants to take his sick father to the fountain, but first must befriend a goblin to help him. It was a wonderful little allegory for human and goblin interactions, so if he was trying to make a point about her bullheadedness regarding the goblins, fine. She'd take that. But why go through all of this just to poke at her.

Her eyes landed on a passage. The passage that explained that Chimaeras are naturally repelled by goblins, and only with the goblin by his side could the wizard pass the Chimaera.

Her heart stopped. A gasp tore its way from her throat.

"What!" Ginny appeared in the doorway. "What is it?"

Hermione looked at her with shining eyes.

"I have to go to the library!"

"'Til tomorrow." And Malfoy walked out, quite proud of himself.

Ron looked up from the mints to her.

She smiled at him and asked him about his week in Prague.

Later that evening, after Hermione had successfully navigated any further conversation away from Draco Malfoy, Hermione sat in her living room with Ginny, Ron, and Harry, drinking wine and laughing. The three of them were discussing the scrimmage tomorrow, so Hermione sipped at her wine slowly and listened, hoping Harry and Ginny would not bring up Draco.

A tap on their window, and Ginny stood to open the glass for a large eagle owl that Hermione immediately recognized. Her heart skipped as it landed in front of her and dropped off a black and orange package, and turned and flew out.

"Hermione, what's that?" Ginny bounced over to her.

The hastily tied black ribbon shined, and Hermione stared at it. What game was he playing? She plucked the small card from the top of the gift.

To my Saturday girl

If you need a dictionary for this, the harpy at Cornerstone Books said she'd gladly provide it.

D.M.

p.s. Have a second look at page 23.

Hermione reread the note four times. Ginny read it over her shoulder and looked up at her. It was silent in the room, and Hermione looked up to see Harry looking curiously at her, and Ron scowling.

This was about Ron. It had to be. That son of a bitch.

"What does that mean?" Ginny whispered, taking the card.

"It's a game, that's all." Hermione stood from the couch and tugged at the bow, ripped at the Halloween wrapping paper she had wrapped herself, and found the children's book Draco Malfoy had bought from her earlier today. She didn't know why she hoped it was something different, seeing as she recognized her wrapping job, but she growled and went to the kitchen to throw the wrapping and bow in the trash.

She threw the book on the counter and glared at it.

Buying a Halloween gift for someone?

Yes, someone special to me.

He knew Ron would be with her when she received this. What in Merlin's name was his problem!

She flipped to page 23. It was a children's fable. She threw up her hands, exasperated.

Except this was on reserve, before she even got to work today. She glanced at the book. He had picked this out before he'd known Ron was coming into town.

Maybe she and Weasley are still laughing at me.

I grab my cloak and head downstairs.

Maybe she never got a chance to open it. She and Weasley have been wrapped up in each other all evening.

I take my broom from Mippy and head through the front door, past the gardens and to the main gates. I walk twenty more paces and feel the Apparition wards dissolve. I Disapparate.

I'm the first one to the field. I check my timepiece. 6:30AM.

Perhaps I was a bit overzealous.

I drop my bag, discard my cloak, and jump on my broom, wearing only a thin shirt. The wind bites at me but I use this time to warm up, executing complex moves to strain my muscles, Quidditch plays I haven't needed since I was a Seeker.

I practice my version of a Wronski Feint, something I've been trying to execute for years since I saw Viktor Krum pull one at the Quidditch World Cup when I was fourteen. Potter got quite good at it over the years too – not that I'd ever tell him that – but I'd never had the stones to try the move in a real match. If I couldn't pull it off, and crashed into the ground in front of everyone in the school… Well that wouldn't be worth it.

I hurtle as close to the ground as I dare – not as low as Krum would go – and pull up sharply, my knees grazing the grass.

I hear a *pop!*

I look down and several players from Magical Transport are arriving. I see a red head among them.

I start my cool down, simple circles around the field, as several D.M.T. players jump on their brooms. About five minutes later, Weasley and Potter and she-Weasley are at the edge of the field now, near my bag. I drop and walk back towards them. Ginny is stretching, while Potter gets ready to mount his broom to warm up. I glance up to the stands and see Granger sauntering up, trying to find seating.

"Robes are in the cabins, Malfoy," Potter says as he takes off.

I grab up my bag and cloak, noticing that while his sister is stretching, doing sit ups, running in place, Weasley is simply standing there, taking in the field.

I wonder if he's even going to bother warming up, or if that's beneath a professional Quidditch player like himself.

I turn to the cabins and hear, "Fancy flying, Malfoy." I look back. Weasley is surveying the field, arms crossed. "You've certainly kept up. Didn't know they had a Quidditch pitch in Azkaban."

I feel my already heated blood start to boil. I narrow my eyes at him. I see Ginny Weasley stop mid-sit up, and stare at her brother. She opens her mouth but I can handle this myself, thank you.

"They don't," I say calmly, watching Weasley's self-satisfied grin as he keeps his eyes on the field. "I'm so glad to be back at it. I really can't thank Granger enough for getting me out."

His eye twitches.

I turn to head to the cabins, briefly seeing Ginny Weasley's brows pop up.

Forty-five minutes later and we're all changed into our uniforms. Potter's giving us the pep talk, but I'm concentrating on leveling my breathing. Goldstein says that Skeeter is out there. A huge crowd.

I'm not nervous for the publicity or the stadium. I just desperately want to score one on Weasley. Just one. Maybe Skeeter's photographer will catch just the moment, and I'll ask her office for the original, just to frame it next to my bed.

"And don't let the crowd get to you," Potter says to us. "Just keep the plays as we've always done them. Ron's a great Keeper, a professional player, but he has his weaknesses, just like all of us –"

"He can be an arrogant hothead," Ginny says. A few of them laugh.

"And he favors the middle and right hoop," I say.

It's quiet, and I see Potter looking at me.

"He does?" Ginny's brows pull together.

I nod. Potter looks like he's considering the new information.

Just then our referee walks in. "Everybody ready?"

It's Oliver Wood. My immediate reaction is disdain. A Gryffindor ref to favor the Gryffindor players.

It takes me a moment to realize that *I* am one of those Gryffindor players, dressed in red and everything.

"Alright," Potter says, as Wood leaves. "I'm hoping for a fifty point lead by the forty-five minute mark, and an eighty point lead at the whistle!"

The team cheers. I focus my energy on re-lacing my trainers.

At eight on the dot we rocket out of the cabin. The crowd *is* large. I haven't flown before this big of a crowd since Hogwarts. I keep my eyes off of the spot where I saw Granger choosing her seats earlier.

We come to a mid-air circle around Wood. He makes some joke about how proud Madam Hooch would be of all of us playing on the same field again. Eleven broomsticks laugh. I find that my gloves need tightening.

Hermione nodded and retraced the fold in the wrapping paper with shaking fingers. With nothing else to do, Ron looked at Draco.

"Malfoy." A greeting of sorts.

"Weasley," Draco drawled. She noticed that Draco was leaning casually on the counter again. "Excellent game last week."

Hermione looked between the two of them. From what she remembered, Ireland had lost last weekend. From the way Ron was scowling at Draco, it seemed she remembered correctly.

She tried to change the subject. "So, you'll be here tomorrow morning for the Quidditch scrimmage? You can sit with me and Katie Bell." Her voice was higher than normal.

"No, actually," Ron said. Hermione looked up at him, and found him looking at Draco. "I just finished speaking with Harry and Mr. Acorn. Seems like Magical Transport's Keeper has fallen ill today, and instead of canceling the event all together, Acorn's asked me to step in tomorrow."

Hermione looked back and forth between the two men. Draco's smirk was just turning up the corners of his mouth, and Ron's brows raised in challenge. She suddenly felt quite ill, herself. Perhaps she should faint. Then all of this would stop.

"Oh, wonderful," she said, when no one responded.

"Yes, wonderful," Draco said. "It's so nice that they'll let in just anybody… when there's a need like that."

Ron frowned at him. "Yes, evidently," he directed at Draco.

Hermione grabbed up the black ribbon to tie around Draco's gift. It was best to separate these two, she realized. That caught Ron's eye and he stepped up to the counter, standing next to Draco.

"Buying a Halloween gift for someone?"

Hermione took a breath and begged her fingers to cooperate as they spun around the small wrapped book.

"Yes," Draco said. "Someone special to me."

Hermione let out a laugh. She looked up and both men were looking at her. She tightened the ribbon as her cheeks reddened. She grabbed up a bag and tossed the wrapped gift inside and held it out to Draco.

"Here. Thank you." Please leave.

"Oh, thank *you*, Granger." He smiled at her with his teeth, and she wished it wasn't for show. He turned to Ron and said, "I'll see you on the field tomorrow, Weasley."

"Looking forward to it, Malfoy."

Draco nodded at her once, then leaned across Ron, grabbing up a mint from the dish. Hermione watched as Ron's eyes rested on those mints for a second too long.

She heard the front door open, and decided to say nothing and continue wrapping quickly, hoping she could usher Draco out and hurry along whoever it was who decided to come to Cornerstone at twenty minutes until closing. Draco, of course, seemed to be in no rush, still leaning on the counter comfortably.

"Good evening," Hermione said, and leaned around Draco's form to welcome the newcomer. Her face paled when she saw Ron Weasley standing in the doorway, looking back and forth between her and the Slytherin. "Ron. Hi." She smiled tightly.

She felt Draco's eyes flip up to her, before he straightened and turned to glance at Ron behind him. Hermione watched as the two of them stared at each other with hard eyes.

"Well, what do you know," Draco murmured to her as he turned back around. "They *do* get the paper in Ireland."

Her eyes flickered to Draco and saw a satisfied smirk. She looked back at Ron and he was glaring at Draco's back.

If this were a normal situation, which it was clearly not, she would give Ron a hug. She would actually run into her best friend's arms – her best friend that she had not seen in a month. But seeing as her fingers were currently holding the fold on the gift Draco Malfoy was planning to give to one of his seven girlfriends, she was stuck behind the counter. She made the decision to release the fold, and walk – not run – around the desk, passing Draco, and hug Ron as he stepped up to the main landing.

"Happy Halloween," he said stiffly into her ear.

"H-Happy Halloween, yes." She pulled away after a rather unimpressive hug, intending to walk back to the wrapping paper and get Draco Malfoy out of her shop as soon as humanly possible. But Ron held onto her hips, holding her to him. She let her arms hang limp, but then decided to place them on his elbows. "What—what are you doing here?"

She almost winced at her choice of words, but then saw that Ron's attention was directed elsewhere. She didn't dare look at Draco while Ron's hands were firm on her hips.

"I told you I'd be back around Halloween." Ron looked down at her, and for the first time he smiled his warm smile, spreading to his eyes.

But it was too intimate. His hands on her hips, standing barely a foot apart, smiling down at her, with Draco still in her peripheral sight. She cast Ron a small smile and stepped backwards, out of his grasp, and journeyed back around the counter.

"How long are you here for?" It was odd, having a conversation without Draco in it when he was standing in between them, but the two of them hadn't verbally acknowledged each other yet.

"Just until tomorrow night."

I'm centering my mind, trying to get rid of any wandering thought that isn't about my broom, the wind, the hoops.

I wonder if they spent the night together last night. So soon after Rolf Scamander?

I brush that away, like dirt under a rug.

I look up at Weasley and find him waving at someone in the crowd. I don't need to look to know she's waving back at him.

Keepers to their posts. Beaters to theirs. Wood tosses the Quaffle, and we're off. Magical Transport takes control of the Quaffle first, per Potter's strategy, and I'm tailing a dark-skinned woman down the field, giving her room to be open.

Our Keeper is quite good. He blocks the first shot easily, swooping down to grab the Quaffle and tosses it out to Ginny Weasley. She dodges a Bludger and swings low, tossing the Quaffle blindly upwards, and there's Potter to catch it. The Chasers are trying to readjust, having swept low with her, and I'm heading toward the hoops as a backup. Potter swerves, aiming for the left hoop and I see Weasley jerk the wrong direction before lurching back and barely batting away the throw.

Weasley sends Potter a playful jibe while Potter rolls his eyes, smiling. Potter turns to me as we head back down the field. He nods, seeing firsthand that Weasley favors the right hoop. I raise a brow and zoom away.

Ten minutes later I'm zipping down the field with the Quaffle. I'm three seconds away from the hoops, and Weasley is ready for me, tense, arms in the air. The D.M.T. Chaser is tailing me, and I see her pull back.

Which means a Bludger is coming my way. I look to Weasley, wondering if I can make it. He smiles.

"OPEN!" I hear over the wind, and I chuck the Quaffle in the direction I heard Ginny Weasley's voice, then diving low. The Bludger kisses my ear.

I wouldn't have made it. The Bludger would have taken my head off.

I look up to see the Quaffle go through – the left hoop again – as he tries to lunge for it.

I grin, as the crowd cheers. The Bludger ricochets back towards me and I swerve away, listening merrily as the Weasley siblings verbally assault each other.

The Quaffle gets tossed out, and I intercept it. My other two Chasers are already on defense, so I rocket toward the hoops, half a field away. I hear the crowd humming, and the smack of a Beater's bat against a ball. I come from the left, curving the Quaffle at the center hoop. Weasley almost misses it. His fingertips tilt it away.

He smirks at me, and I turn before I lose my focus. Reset. Players in place.

Magical Transport gets past us a few times, but our Keeper stops them. It's 10-0 and we're already twenty minutes in.

Every time Potter gets close to the hoops and doesn't score, Weasley shoots something smarmy at him. It's starting to grate him, I can tell. He takes it on the chin though.

One of the D.M.T. Beaters has it out for me. He's tailing me as close as the Chaser, always swinging Bludgers at me. His aim is good too. He four or five years ahead of us at Hogwarts. Slytherin, actually.

Potter calls out a play we've been practicing. All three of us will hurtle down the field at the same pace, tossing the Quaffle back and forth, trying to trick the Keeper and the defensive players.

Just before the Quaffle is thrown back in, I turn to the Beater who's been after me.

I wonder if this will be worth it…

"Oi, Williams!"

He glares at me.

"Now I know why Flint wouldn't let you on the team. Your aim is shit."

He narrows his eyes at me as the whistle blows. I take off, middle of our Chaser formation. Potter passes over my head to Ginny Weasley, Weasley dodges her Chaser and tosses to me.

I see her brother at the hoops, staring us down, waiting to see if we'll get taken out by Chasers or Bludgers. Waiting to see who will have the Quaffle once we're in throwing distance.

I toss back to Ginny Weasley, she quickly throws back to me and I toss over to Potter at the last minute.

I hear a whistling behind my head.

Williams's Bludger.

Potter aims for the right hoop, Weasley bats it away, and I dive, turning up in time to watch the Bludger aimed for my head narrowly miss Ron Weasley, smashing through the hoops, splintering the wood and spraying everywhere.

Damn. So close. Good shot, Williams.

Wood's whistle blows. I look to the crowds, finding half the stadium on their feet.

I find her immediately. Sitting with Katie Bell, mouth open.

I wonder if she's concerned for him.

I drop to the grass, going to grab water from the cheery young girls manning the fountain, giving out paper cups.

"Close call there."

I turn, paper cup to my lips, and find Weasley. His eyes are hard as he grabs up a cup without a glance to the girls.

"Yes, it's a shame about the hoops." I glance up, seeing Wood trying to pull the pieces back together. "Williams's aim really needs some work." I toss the paper cup in the rubbish bag and move back toward my broom.

"She thinks the goblins won't compromise, that they want a beast," she said. She pulled out the book and began writing the title.

"That's too bad. You'll think of something else."

She was about to respond but then saw the title. It was a children's book, similar to *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, but less respected.

She glanced up at him. "Could your girl not handle the fiction?" He smirked at her. She looked down at the book, pondering. "We could also wrap up a dictionary for her?" She turned innocent eyes on him and he leaned his elbows down on the counter.

"No, no. If she learned bigger words, then we'd have to communicate more."

"Of course." Hermione shook her head and tugged at the roll of wrapping paper, pulling scissors to cut it for the small size of the book. "If she likes this one, Draco, there is another I'd recommend. *A is for Acid Pops, B is for Broom, C is for Centaurs*. It's a best seller for that reading level."

She laid the book on the paper and began folding in the sides.

"You've started calling me Draco," he drawled, and her hands stilled. Was it a question?

She looked up at him, finding his eyes on her, and quickly looked back down. She pushed a few stray curls back and said, "Well, I guess… your mother calls you Draco, so…"

"Yeah, I can't get her to stop doing that," he quipped.

She fought the smile that wanted to split her lips, and kept her eyes on the wrapping paper. His thumb and index finger were playing with the Slytherin ring on his left thumb, inches from where she was folding the small book into the orange and black paper. Halloween themed. She could feel his eyes on her fingers, making her so self-conscious that she slipped on the fold a few times and needed to try again. She reached for the tape.

"I've not had the opportunity to meet Rolf Scamander, but I hear he's a fascinating bloke."

The tape wrapped around Hermione's fingers, winding and becoming useless. She looked up at him and his eyes were on her face.

"I… Yes, I mean, I hadn't met him before either," she stammered and looked down. "He's very open to discussing his grandfather's legacy, so I found him quite… er, quite fascinating."

She ripped the crumbled tape from her fingers and realized for the first time that she could be using spells for all this gift wrapping. It was just second nature to her to do it the Muggle way. Perhaps that was why Draco watched her hands whenever she wrapped.

Only now he was watching her face. Watching her face and talking about the bloke she'd been out with two days ago. She was unsure if she should elaborate on the date with Rolf. She could tell him the truth – that they were going to get together again, as friends – or she could embellish the date a bit. Maybe saying nothing was better?

Rita Skeeter disagreed. Her society pages on Friday featured a picture of their animated discussion of his grandfather's work with Grindylows, stating that they had really "hit it off," and that she seemed to be recovering from the sting of Draco Malfoy's rejection.

Mathilda had a chance to meet with her on Friday regarding her Gringotts proposal, and unfortunately a lot of her critiques reflected exactly what Malfoy had told her regarding the goblins not wanting to cooperate.

"From what I understand about the goblins," Mathilda said, tossing her hair up into a bun and missing several locks in the process, "they really would prefer to continue doing things exactly as they've always done. The next dragon has been selected already and is being transported to the Wales reserve for… training." Mathilda grimaced.

"What?" Hermione jumped. "They are already blinding and torturing another dragon?"

"Well, it has been a year and half, Hermione." She sighed. "They have a business to run."

"What about my thoughts on Auror protection of the lower vaults, or giving house elves new opportunities to work at Gringotts, retrieving items from vaults only they can enter?"

"The goblins won't want wizards involved in their security, and you know better than anyone that house elves can be… swayed, when they are loyal to someone outside." Mathilda closed the folder, and Hermione felt the *flap* like the life being cut off from the project. "I'm sorry, Hermione. The goblins want their beast."

That put Hermione in a foul mood for the rest of the day. Narcissa and she had been penning notes back and forth for the past week, and not even the arrival of the slanted cursive note, inviting her to lunch next week, could cheer her. She wrote back, saying she'd love to meet, and that Monday at noon was perfect for her.

By the time 5:30PM on Saturday rolled around, Hermione was ready for a day off. Especially when Draco walked into Cornerstone whistling.

She scowled at him. "Draco, just because Skeeter *writes* that you visit Cornerstone every Saturday, doesn't mean that you *have* to."

She turned and grabbed his reserved bag, slamming it on the counter harder than she anticipated. She glanced up at him and he shot her a wary look.

"Why, you look positively *feral* today, Granger. Something new with your hair?"

She glared. "Will you be needing this gift wrapped, sir?"

"Naturally," he said. She drew up the ledger and began flipping pages. It had been tucked away for hours due to the slowness of the day before the holiday. "Your meeting with Mathilda didn't go as planned, eh?"

Her hands paused and she looked up at him. "How did you know?"

"I hear things." He raised a brow at her. She frowned, wondering if Mathilda was talking about her with others. Robards, maybe?

"If only your friends could see you now, Malfoy." He follows me. "In Gryffindor red, playing side-by-side with Harry Potter."

"Well, I'm sure they'll see it in the papers, Weasley," I chirp back. I turn to face him. He's prowling, waiting for the attack.

"I'm just sorry you don't have anyone rooting for you in the stands. To see all your fancy tricks," he taunts.

"I don't know," I say, and my eyes drift to her where she's noticed the two of us. "I think I'm pretty well represented today." I look back at him and he's seething.

I can do this all day, Weasley.

He steps into me. I hold my ground.

"I think it's time you found a new bookshop, Malfoy."

I hate that he's still taller than me. And he knows it.

"I quite like Cornerstone Books, actually." I tilt my head at him.

"Don't you have a whole library at home?"

"I do. It's *huge*."

He doesn't miss the innuendo. His nostrils flare.

"I'm sure it's not that big."

"No, it is. Ask Granger," I say. "She's seen it."

His eyes are dark. I see arms ripple as he clenches his fists. That's good, Weasley. Hit me.

"She's been over a few times now," I continue.

He looks at her, a quick tilt of his head, and he steps into me again.

"Stay. Away. From her." Low and a pretty good job at threatening.

"Why?" I say calmly. "You've stayed away enough for the both of us."

He shoves me.

I smile.

"Ireland's a long way away, Weasley." My skin is humming. "I was just keeping her warm for you."

I see the punch coming a mile away. I welcome it.

He cracks across my jaw.

Thank you, Weasley.

Now, it's my turn.

My head swims back to front and I charge him, knocking his feet out, making sure to land hard on him. I hear the air leave his lungs, and I get enough distance to land my fist against his jaw. He pushes at my face, and I get on top of him. I can't see anything but his freckles and blue eyes and then her body under him, running her fingers through his wiry hair, moaning for him.

He hits me hard against my eye. I knock his head again with my fist. I'm about to slam down, break his nose, when two arms pull me back, and I'm tilted away, scrambling to my feet, fighting to get back to him.

"That's enough!" Potter's voice against my ear. It brings me back to the Quidditch field, the grass, the uniforms.

He's dragging me back by my arms. I can see Weasley's blood from his split lip and I almost smile. He's up and running for me, no one to stop him. He gut-punches me.

My vision is black. I hear yelling. I can't breathe in.

My arms are released and I fall to my knees. Then someone is lifting me, throwing my arm over their shoulder and turning me away. I stumbled to keep up with them.

We're in the cabins before I realize it's Potter. He's murmuring apologies about not meaning to hold my arms back, and didn't think he'd sucker punch you, and let's get ice.

"I'm sorry I ruined the game," I wheeze.

I look up, half my vision shut by swelling. He shakes his head. "You two on the same field was a bad idea to begin with."

"You and I do fine," I say.

"Well, yes. I'm a saint."

I chuckle, and it hurts my stomach.

Ginny Weasley bursts through the doors. I ready myself for another Weasley attack.

She takes one look at me and giggles, her hand coming up to cover her mouth.

"Well," she says. "Whose was bigger?"

She cackles; I almost smile.

"Ginny…" Potter whines, his face twisting in disgust.

The rest of our team files in. We'll be rescheduling the match.

I apologize to them. Most of them shrug it off.

I shower slowly, wincing as the water hits my eye. When I'm dressed, Goldstein has a cream for it to help the cut.

Potter waits for me. We exit and there's a small crowd there, but then she's in front of me, eyes on fire.

"Are you alright?" she asks.

I see her take in my face, my bruises. More pity from the Golden Girl. I frown down at her.

"I'm fine."

"Good." She nods at me. She *shoves* me, and it makes me stumble harder than when Weasley did it. I fall against the cabin door. "What the hell is wrong with you?!"

My eyes are wide. "Me?"

Ginny giggled. "Well, I can compile a list for you, of blokes who are single and might interest you."

"Good. Yes." Hermione placed her hands on her hips.

"But generally, you just ask them if they're interested in grabbing a drink, or a cup of tea."

"*I* ask them?"

"Yes, Hermione. It's almost the 21st century, you know," Ginny said. Hermione huffed. "Now, shall I only list the blonde, former Death Eater assholes for you? Or have your interests expanded?"

"No, no." Hermione scowled at her. "I have resolved myself not to think about Draco Malfoy any longer. It's simply a waste of time."

Ginny gave her a small grin. "Good for you."

Of course, that was Monday. And by Tuesday, Harry had invited her to lunch in the café – "they're now serving *almond croissants*, Hermione!" – and they had run into Draco there. Harry, as polite and clueless as expected, invited him to sit with them. She mainly sipped her coffee while listening to the two of them discuss the Quidditch scrimmage this coming weekend. It was Halloween on Sunday, she remembered, and she knew Harry was filling the day to keep his mind off of the anniversaries it represented.

"You'll be at the match, right?"

Hermione stirred her coffee, plucking pieces of her croissant. She waited for a voice, and when no answer came, she looked up and found both boys staring at her.

"What? I'm sorry. Me?" Her cheeks burned.

"Yeah," Harry said. "You'll come to the match on Halloween? I think all the departments are coming out, whether or not their team is playing."

"I—I mean, I could, yes," she stammered. "I'll have work at ten, but –"

"Cornerstone is open on Halloween?" Draco said.

She looked at him and blinked. "Oh, I guess… I guess not."

"Great!" Harry smiled. "We'll slaughter Magical Transportation, and then we'll all go for a drink!"

"Great." Hermione was less than thrilled.

The rest of the week flew by. Ginny wasted no time in connecting her with Rolf Scamander, someone she had a true fascination with, but ultimately no chemistry. They had a wonderful three-hour chat over drinks about everything from her dragon project to the steady extinction of the Golden Snidgets, but when the date was over, Hermione realized they had not gotten to know each other at all.

Her breath caught in her throat. She looked into his eyes and felt he was no longer talking about dragons. Her mind raced and she felt the side counter press against her right hip. He had her pinned again.

"All good down here?" Morty's voice and the squeak of the door. "Mr. Malfoy! What a pleasure again!"

The cool air returned as Draco stepped away from her and she watched his pink cheeks smile at Morty. She checked her timepiece as the two men chatted and saw it was now five past six. Wonderful. She turned her eyes on the pile of books she still needed to file back.

"Granger was finishing wrapping up a gift for me. I do believe I've kept her past normal hours, though. I apologize."

Hermione scoffed. *Apologize*. She felt Draco turn his eyes on her as she pulled her wand and pointed it at the *Open* sign, turning it to *Closed*.

"No problem at all, my boy." Morty grabbed up the stack of books.

"Oh, no, Morty. I can file those—" she tried.

"Nonsense. Finish with Mr. Malfoy here, and I'll get these started." Morty disappeared into the fiction section.

Draco had still not removed himself from behind the counter and now stared down at her. She frowned at him and turned back to the gift he planned to give to one of his girls. She cut the ribbon, pulled it around the book, twisted it up, and tied the ends. She leaned across him, ignoring the way her ribs brushed against his side, and snatched up the shopping bag. She dropped the book in and pushed it into his arms.

"Thank you for shopping at Cornerstone Books," she deadpanned. He raised a brow at her and she pushed past him, bodies touching again, and went to help Morty file the books.

The whole of next week had Hermione pretending not to check the society pages, but failing miserably. There were no other sightings of Draco out with other women, and she didn't know if that made her happy, or anxious. Was Katya the *one* if he wasn't dating the others anymore? She shook herself, and promised not to think of Draco again that week.

"Ginny." She slammed the door to their flat and Ginny looked up at her from the couch. "I'd like to date."

Ginny chewed her grilled cheese, swallowed, and said, "That's very kind, Hermione, but I'm seeing Harry right now. Maybe if we break up?"

Hermione rolled her eyes and tossed her bag on the chair. "I think it's time for me to date."

"Really?" Ginny's wide eyes roved over her face.

"Yes." Hermione stared at her. Ginny stared back. Hermione said, "So, what do I do now?"

"Yes! Why are you giving Skeeter more ammunition?!" She shoves me *again!* "You know the pictures of you two *brawling* will be all over the papers tomorrow!"

I haven't thought of Skeeter and the photographer this whole time, but suddenly they are right behind her, taking a picture of us now.

"And what makes you think that was all about you, Granger?" I scowl, but her eyes are doing that thing again. That fire thing.

"Of *course* it was about me, because *you* can't leave well enough alone!" She's panting, heaving angry air in and spewing acid back out at me.

I roll my eyes at her. She's not nearly as important as she thinks she is after all. "For your information, I've been aching to pop him since the day we met."

"Yes, and I'm sure whatever you said to get him to hit you first had nothing to do with me." She rolls her eyes back at me. "You've been baiting him all weekend!"

Her voice is doing that screechy thing. That thing that isn't attractive at all.

"Baiting him?" I smile. "I sure I don't know what you mean—"

"Oh, please, Malfoy. The *mint?"*

She puts her hands on her hips and I can't help but smirk.

"Those *are* my favorite mints, Granger. However did you know?"

"And you knew he'd be with me when your *present* arrived –"

He'd be with me. My jaw clenches.

"And you're welcome for that, by the way," I say. "Or have you not figured it out yet."

It's like I've physically hit her. Her jaw drops. "'Have I not figured it out!?' Of *course,* I have! Even someone as vapid as your *Tuesday* girl could figure that out –"

"Oh, I was curious, seeing as I received no 'thank you' card –"

"Well *thank you,* Malfoy, for swooping in and *saving* me from my ignorance—"

"It's back to Malfoy, is it?" I watch as her cheeks bloom with heat, and her eyes dance across my face. "I thought we were getting somewhere, Granger."

"Yes, when you're being an absolute *moron,* it's Malfoy," she hisses at me, still panting like I'm making her run a marathon.

"And when is it Draco?" I drawl, looking down at her with careful eyes as she huffs.

"When you're being an absolute *asshole!"* She shoves me again, and I almost grab her arms, pull them to me. I glare down at her and she points a finger in my face. "Don't you *dare* bring me into this petty behavior again."

"I didn't bring you into it at all, Granger. He did," I seethe. It's always going to be my fault, isn't it.

"If you want to hit him, hit him. Don't use me to get him to hit you first."

Well, she has me there.

She marches away, even as Skeeter takes pictures and tries to ask her questions. Weasley's just returning, and he tries to say something to her. At least we're both in the doghouse. I watch as she goes, and I'm breathing deep, half-hard, and watching her hips as she stomps across the grass.

I run a hand down my face, forgetting about my eye, and I wince.

I turn to grab my bag, and Potter's watching me. He snaps out of whatever he'd been thinking, and grabs my bag for me, helping me get it on my shoulder.

"Thanks," I say. I walk away, Disapparating before Skeeter can corner me. I go to a bar.

I wake up the next morning to an owl tapping at my window. My head is splitting, and my eye is swollen shut.

I took a Dreamless Sleep potion at 6PM, and now twelve hours later, I'm finally rousing. Mother laid out a pain potion and a concealing cream last night on my nightstand.

The owl taps again.

I go to my window. The nondescript bird flies in.

A letter. I rip it open. A page of the *Daily Prophet* and a small note. The newspaper catches my eye, and I see that it's today's date. I turn it open.

"THE FIGHT FOR HERMIONE GRANGER'S HEART!"

by Rita Skeeter.

It's the front page. There I am, tackling Weasley to the ground. Like an animal.

I see her in the picture, at the edge of the field, screaming for us to stop. I see her shoving me against the cabins, my eyes drinking her in.

Nowhere in the paper does it say that Draco Malfoy is opening a consulting firm, becoming his own man, and clawing his way out of his father's shadow.

I pull the small note. It's not addressed, or signed, but I know Father's handwriting.

I thought you were announcing on November 1st.

I blink my good eye. It's not a question.

It's an accusation.

No word from him for weeks. Nothing when the Fortescue's pictures were printed. No follow up on our discussion last month.

The Howlers I receive for the rest of the day don't weigh as heavy on me as that one sentence.

She snatched up a gift bag and two pieces of tissue paper, slammed them on the counter and said, "Do it yourself." She grabbed the pile of books to file and headed to the stacks to her right without another glance at him.

Once behind the stacks she let out a silent sigh. Her heart was beating angrily against her chest and her brain worked to figure out what right she had to be so riled up.

After shoving a few books into place, she realized she hadn't heard the door open. She poked her head around the stacks and saw Draco Malfoy behind the counter, pulling at a roll of gift wrapping paper.

"Malfoy!" She hurried to the desk and set the books down again, rushing around the counter and pushing at him. "You can't be back here!"

"You said 'do it yourself!'" he said, smirking.

"Ugh. Give me that!" She grabbed the roll of wrapping paper and moved to the other side of him to lay it out. "You don't want a gift bag?" she whined.

"Well, Katya received that beautifully wrapped gift that you prepared last week, so I can't go giving the rest of them second rate wrap-jobs. Best to be equal with things like this."

"You're incorrigible." She tugged at the wrapping paper, pulled the book out of the shopping bag, and placed it on the counter. Draco still had not moved from his place behind the counter, so now he stood next to her as she tore the tape and pressed it against the fold.

"How's your dragon project going?"

She looked up at him. He was watching her. Again, she had the sneaking feeling that somehow, *he* was the dragon.

"Er… fine." She folded the other side of the book. "I submitted my initial proposal yesterday, so Mathilda will review it and make the necessary adjustments before submitting it to Kingsley – er, Minister Shacklebolt."

"And have you sat down with the Minister, to discuss it?"

She looked up at him, and found that he was less than a foot from her, his entire body facing her, leaning against the counter.

"Um, no?" She frowned at him. "That's what the proposal is for."

He raised a brow at her. "You are close, personal friends with the Minister of Magic, having fought a war with him. If you can't take the man to tea – or coffee – to discuss a passion project, then what good is that friendship?"

She grabbed up the ribbon. "How very Slytherin of you. A friendship cannot be just a friendship. You have to gain something from it, is that right, Malfoy?"

"And how very Gryffindor of you," he said lowly. He stepped into her. "Bravely beginning something without any idea of how to get what you want."

His voice drifted over her right shoulder, and she listened to him complete his trip around her chair.

"I don't know what you're talking—"

"I already *know* about his visits to Narcissa's mother, Miss Granger." He said it like it was supposed to mean something to her. "Getting around the inheritance binding spell." He muttered, "Squandering his future. All for *you*."

He appeared in her sight again, and leaned against the table, crossing his ankles so casually. He examined her. Hermione's mind was racing.

"I don't… I think you've misunderstood, Mr. Malfoy." She cleared her throat and he let her continue. "I don't know anything about Narcissa's mother, and if he was asking for money, for ways around the inheritance, I'm sure it was for the business he's trying to build."

His eyes immobilized her, in the way his son's did, but without the flicker of something else.

"This was years ago Miss Granger. And I'm not talking about the business. I'm talking about the Auction."

Her veins turned to ice. And she felt the blood drain from her face.

"What Auction?" she tried.

Lucius's lips spread into a smile. It was disturbing.

"I will add 'Convincing Liar' to the list of desirable traits for you to work on Miss Granger."

Her heart ricocheted around her ribcage. She struggled to pull air into her lungs as she watched him step away from the table and begin another arrogant stroll back towards his chair. Hermione was still trying to pull together all of this information when he continued.

"Druella can't be blamed for tattling, of course. She came to see me shortly after Draco begged her for the money, asking *me* to show him some pity."

"What money?" She breathed.

"The 35,000 galleons, of course."

There was a gasp, and it took Hermione a moment to realize it had come from her. She looked at her hands. They were shaking.

"Ah," he continued. "So, you *do* know the story." He grinned at her. "I must admit, it took me quite a few weeks to piece together what the money was for. Slave-trading wasn't really my cup of tea with the Death Eaters."

This wasn't right. Hermione balled her hands into fists to keep them from trembling. He told her he would sell her if given the chance. This wasn't… If he bought her, she would have been his in this dystopian future, no profit made. What would the purpose of that be?

And trust me, Granger. It isn't your housekeeping skills that they were after.

She looked up at Lucius, and he was watching her from his side of the table. She gathered herself, and tried to see it from his perspective, seeing as her perspective was giving her a headache.

"So, let me understand this correctly." She set her eyes on him. "You catch your son trying to buy a girl like a common whore, you see a few pictures in the *Prophet* of his 'lust-filled eyes,' and you decide it's time to turn her into 'wife material.'"

He smiled and looked down at the metal table.

"How unfortunate it is that you are so intelligent, Miss Granger. It keeps you from seeing the truth." He placed his hands on the table, leaning down to her. "He wasn't going to *buy* you. He was going to *save* you."

She breathed.

The eyes looking at her matched Draco's. She focused on them, focused on them while her brain worked. It didn't add up.

Lucius stood to his full height again. "Here is my *proposal*, Miss Granger." His voice slid over the word "proposal," like it was a private joke between the two of them. "You will begin shadowing Narcissa at her social engagements. Learn from her, from her mannerisms, from her expressions. She will put you in contact with Madame Michele, a Charms and Etiquette mistress that teaches all pure-blood girls the important manners. Most girls start at age eight, so you will have a long way to go. You will research the Malfoy family history, becoming familiar with the lineage, the famous ancestry, the Manor itself…"

Hermione let his voice wash over her. He continued. He listed several more manners teachers, dance teachers, interior decorating specialists…. She let him speak. She let him speak so she could think.

Her brain ran through the past ten years, trying to piece in this new information should she chose to accept it. *To save her.* It was incongruous. There was not a single moment in the past ten years of her life where Draco Malfoy would have saved her. And he had made it perfectly clear that Malfoy Manor was no exception to that rule. She'd thought by not identifying them that night, he had cared, or wanted them alive, but he had denied that. Hadn't he?

I didn't give a fig about saving the world, or stopping the Dark Lord – or you and your idiotic friends for that matter!

Her eyes glazed over the table top and Lucius's hands as they moved.

"…who will then bring you to tea with my mother. You will not mention your parentage unless it is brought up..."

She thought back, before the war began. To *buy* her, yes. To humiliate her publicly in front of the Slytherin boys who'd won the war. To pass her around like a whore if that was what

suited him. To parade her in front of the remaining members of the Order, proving that the Golden Girl was just as tarnished as the rest.

These were the thoughts that had kept her up since the moment he told her about the Auction six weeks ago. The most valuable slave would not be treated as just a slave or just a concubine.

"…at which point you will begin an account with Madame le Roux who will take measurements..."

She thought back. Was it possible Draco wanted her? There were times now where she could see something in his eyes, something more than teasing, but back then? It's possible he would have bought her to satisfy a curiosity. To hear her virtue being discussed amongst the elder, crueler Death Eaters, or his friends even, and decide that he had tortured her and invested in her over the years – he should be the one to reap the rewards.

These were possible scenarios.

She looked up, and Lucius wasn't done. He walked like his son. Calm and in control of his body.

"… with the ceremony in the garden of the Manor. Reception to follow in the ballroom…"

She thought back. His hand against her hip in Umbridge's office, then shoving her away. His eyes cutting through her at the Yule Ball, as they spun around each other. His voice taunting her, drawling across her ears over the years. The memories that mattered to her, had mattered not at all to him. It was inconsistent. Lucius was bluffing.

Draco would not have sacrificed his inheritance, his future, to save her from becoming another man's slave.

"…You will then—"

"I will not."

He stopped his pacing. He looked down at her. She set her jaw.

"I appreciate the steps you are taking to ensure your lineage and your name are preserved, Mr. Malfoy, even with a Mudblood for a daughter-in-law."

He stood still and cocked his head at her.

"But Draco and I are not engaged. So, I will not abide by your demands."

He smiled at the ground. "'*Draco*,' is it?"

She swallowed. "Yes. Draco. We are friends now. But he was never in love with me and he has no intention of proposing to me. So, you may refrain from embarrassing yourself any further."

Her cheeks reddened as his eyes paled.

"You poor, foolish girl."

"I have no intention of becoming 'Lady Malfoy,' so I will not need your list." She placed it on the table, and stood, turning to the door.

Hermione read over the list twice, eyes tripping over the even scrawl. She folded the page again and brought her eyes to meet him, heart beating fast.

"And what is this?"

"A list." He leaned forward in his chair. "Of qualities in a Malfoy wife."

Hermione sat very still, waiting for him to speak again. When he did not, she tried, "Would you like for me to pass this along to your wife and son?"

"No, you hold onto that, Miss Granger." His eyes never left her face.

"Are you… assigning *me* the task of finding a suitable bride for Draco?"

He lifted a brow at her, just as his son did. He stood from the table, and Hermione kept her eyes on him, keeping her breathing even.

"I am unwilling to part with a single item on that list, Miss Granger." He walked around his chair, and placed his hands on its back. "Except the final one."

Pure-blood.

Hermione brows came together. She opened her mouth, but no sound came out.

"I receive the paper here in Azkaban, Miss Granger. I know the two of you are romantically involved."

Her breath left her in a puff. She turned it into a laugh.

"You know what Rita Skeeter tells you."

"I can see the pictures, Miss Granger. They don't need Skeeter's… artistic interpretation." Hermione tightened her jaw to keep from speaking. "And besides, even if I did not have the proof in the pictures, I have the word of my wife. Who's grown quite fond of you as more than a friend. As a daughter, she told me." His eyes sparkled at her.

Oh, Narcissa. What have you done.

"I apologize, Mr. Malfoy." She looked down at the table to gather her composure before looking back at him. "You have been misinformed. There is nothing romantic going on between your son and me. We're just…" She stopped.

"'Just friends?'" He smirked at her.

"We're barely that."

He raised a brow.

"Yes, Draco has tried throwing me off the trail as well, going on dates with that Bulgarian half-blood every time the two of *you* are pictured together in the paper," he said. She blinked at him and watched as he scratched his jaw. She filed that comment away. "You'll come to learn, Miss Granger, once we are…" – he took a breath – "family… that I do not enjoy games." He began a light stroll around the table, coming around the back of her chair. She recognized it as an intimidation technique. She remained still. "I know that this relationship has been developing for years."

"It was very kind of you to want to meet with me, Mr. Malfoy. I must confess, I'm still shocked that you would give up your weekend this month with your family."

"Well," he said, and his voice was so familiar, but they'd barely spoken in the past. "Narcissa convinced me that it was very important to meet you, Miss Granger. You've become so important to her."

The words were sincere but the intention was not. Again, Hermione had the sinking fear that she would not survive this meeting.

"She's become very important to me, too."

"And you've been getting on with Draco, I hear." His voice lilted. It was such an opposite effect than his son's drawl. It made him sound more interested than he was.

"Yes," she said, unsure of where to go with this. "We both work at the Ministry now."

"That's wonderful." She could tell it wasn't. "I can't thank you enough for speaking at his trial, Miss Granger."

"Of course, sir. It was the right thing to do." Her safest response. Her eyes flickered to the small piece of paper resting between his fingers.

"Narcissa wanted me to thank you for that, and to get to know you better," he said. He sat very tall and still and watched her. "But none of that is why I invited you here today."

Hermione blinked at him. She swallowed. "Oh?"

He pushed the folded scrap of paper to her. She plucked it from the table, and after a nod from him, she opened it.

Graceful
Exquisite table manners
Skilled in hosting
Witty
Charming
Leader amongst social peers
Beautiful
Fashionable
Level headed
Financially knowledgeable
Obedient
Trained in décor
Practiced dancer
Intelligent
Cool tempered
Pure-blood

"I do hope you've memorized it, Miss Granger." She closed her eyes in exasperation. "For the majority of his inheritance is still tied up with me. If I hear that he will be engaging in a relationship with someone who does not meet my demands of a Malfoy woman, I may decide to keep the rest of the money tied up until a suitable partner is found."

She turned to him. "You would ruin his business venture just to spite me?"

"Heavens, no, Miss Granger." His voice dripped. "Everything I do, I do for my son."

She stared at him from across the room, palm on the door.

"You have nothing to worry about Mr. Malfoy. You may keep your last item on your list."

She knocked on the door. The guard opened it immediately and nodded at her.

His voice floated to her. "See to it, Miss Granger."

The guard locked him in and escorted her down the hall, locking every gate behind them. Her feet clipped against the cold stones. Her fingers locked around her wand as it was given back to her. The same guard as before smiled at her and walked her to the entrance. The stone fireplace loomed at her and he unlocked a cabinet containing the Floo powder.

She thought of her bed. She thought of her shower. She thought of climbing under the covers until everything went away, turning off the lights.

The guard tossed the powder, she climbed in, and he stated "Malfoy Manor" for her before she could process it. The Floo swept her away and she landed in the Malfoy library, facing the model of a perfect Malfoy wife.

She smiled as Hermione arrived. "Hermione, dear." She sat in her chair, reading a book and sipping her tea.

Hermione stared at the beautiful blonde woman, head pounding.

Graceful. Skilled in hosting.

"How was it?" Narcissa set her tea down on the end table, in the same spot the diamond ring had rested earlier.

The ring that was being taken to a curse-breaker so Draco could marry a Mudblood. She understood now.

A laugh bubbled out from her chest before she could stop it. She wheezed air back in, and felt her head spin, tears pricking her eyes.

Narcissa changed in a second and she stood. "What's wrong?" And it was so maternal. It was so much like how she wanted her own mother to look at her, that she knew what she had to do.

She had to break up with Narcissa Malfoy.

"Narcissa," she spoke, and her voice cracked. "Draco and I… we don't have a relationship."

Narcissa stood very still, with her hands folded in front of her. Hermione admired how she gave nothing away. She wondered where that fell on Lucius's list.

"Of course, you do, dear." Narcissa smiled, lips closed. "You're old schoolmates, you've survived a war, and now you're becoming friends."

"Yes, and that's all there is," Hermione said, feeling her heart breaking. "I believe I've lead you to believe that there is more going on. And for that I'm truly sorry." She felt her voice crack again.

Narcissa looked down at the rug, displeased. "What did Lucius say to you?"

"He was actually quite in support of this 'arrangement' that you've concocted. He found a way to negotiate for what he wants." Hermione swallowed. "But it's not what Draco wants."

"Did Lucius tell you that?" Narcissa said, lips tight.

"He didn't have to," Hermione said. "We're not courting, Narcissa. And something tells me that Draco has no idea about my meeting with Lucius, or about the ring you're taking in to be altered."

Narcissa gave her a rueful grin. "It's only a matter of time, Hermione. I thought it best to be prepared."

Her pulse jumped, thinking that Narcissa knew something she didn't. But she killed that dream as quickly as it came to her. Narcissa and Lucius had built something on a foundation of sand. Then she remembered Draco's inheritance, tied up with Lucius until he saw fit. No, she needed to end this.

"There is nothing to prepare for."

Narcissa frosted. She bit the inside of her cheek, studying her. Hermione felt so alone here, now.

"I should leave," she said. "Goodbye, Narcissa. And thank you for everything." Her lungs were burning as she turned to the library doors. She was losing her grip, eyes blurring.

Her voice called to her as she grasped the door handle. "You do not wish to marry my son?"

And Hermione laughed. She was about to have a full mental break, she could tell. She closed her eyes, and shook her head. How did things get so turned around? She turned to see Narcissa watching her, calculating. And she heard Lucius's voice.

See to it, Miss Granger.

She knew Narcissa wouldn't leave it alone. She couldn't leave it open, her answer ambiguous.

"No, I do not."

Narcissa remained still. *Cool tempered* and *level headed*. Hermione nodded to her in goodbye, and turned to the doors as the first tears fell.

She flung open the doors, hurrying out, and gasped to find herself facing the bust of Lucius Malfoy, forgetting that it was there. She turned quickly to her left, intending to *sprint* out of this house and almost smacked into Draco, three steps away and hair wet from showering after Quidditch, just as surprised to see her.

Narcissa smiled, seeing through her. "He just wants to thank you for helping rehabilitate Draco's life. And to officially meet you."

Hermione bit her tongue, about to comment that they had met. He was either ignoring her at Flourish and Blotts or casting curses her way in the Department of Mysteries, but they'd met.

Hermione grabbed a handful of Floo powder, tossed it in the fireplace, stepped in and said, "Azkaban Visitor Center."

The image of Narcissa smiling at her holding the bag of powder spun away from her and she landed in a stone room. Three chairs lined the far wall, and metal gates to her left separated the room from a dark hallway. It was still cold, even without the Dementors.

An Auror approached the gates from the other side, and began unlocking them with a series of complicated spells. He grinned at her as the gate opened and said, "Hermione Granger?"

"Yes, hello."

"It's excellent to finally meet you in person, Miss Granger." He shook her hand. "Come with me."

He led her to a small room with cabinets. He instructed her to remove all jewelry or metal objects from her person, and place her purse and wand in a cabinet. He ran her over with a spell to reveal hidden objects, like weapons or secondary wands, and then had her sign an agreement regarding the use of wandless magic.

He then passed her off to another guard, who opened a series of more gates, locking them all behind him. The echo of their footsteps on the stones rattled her nerves, and she began looking behind her every six steps, anticipating someone following them.

They arrived at a normal looking stone door, and the guard told her that she would only need to knock to indicate that the meeting was over and she would be immediately let out.

The guard opened the stone door. And Hermione found Lucius Malfoy, hair pulled back, grey Azkaban robes, hands clasped in front of him, and sitting at a two-person table. There was a scrap of paper on the table in front of him.

He looked up at her and his mouth smiled at her while his eyes did not.

"Miss Granger."

The guard nodded to her and closed the door.

"Mr. Malfoy."

He gestured to the empty chair across from him. She felt the ghost of where her wand usually pressed against her hip.

She pulled the metal chair out, and the scrape against the stone was obscene. She sat, pushed an escaped lock of hair away from her face, and returned her gaze to him to find him watching her. She blinked at him, but he did not speak.

"No, no," Narcissa said, hand on her heart. "It's my fault, dear." She pressed the back of her fingers to her lips. "I should have known..." Narcissa leaned down to her and grabbed her shoulders. "It's not your fault, Hermione. There are... enchantments on the ring, to ward off..."

"Muggleborns." Hermione finished it for her.

"All non-pure-bloods." Narcissa breathed. "It has a bit of dark magic to attract those who might be cursed if they touched it." Narcissa frowned down at the ring, and Hermione looked at a point over the woman's shoulder, heat coursing through her from embarrassment. "That's actually why I'm taking it in today – to have a curse-breaker look at it."

"Again, I am so very sorry, Narcissa."

"Oh, nonsense." Narcissa ran her hands up and down Hermione's arms, comforting in a way that made her miss her mother. "I shouldn't have had it laid out like this. Mippy!"

Mippy popped in. "Yes, Mistress?"

"Mippy, please take the Malfoy ring to my study."

Mippy snapped and the beautiful box floated over to her hands, just levitating above them, and Hermione wondered if the Malfoys had also cursed the ring against thieving house elves.

"The ring is very pretty, yes?" Mippy said, and it took a moment for Hermione to realize that the elf was talking to her. Mippy's eyes were wide as they looked up at her.

"Oh, yes, absolutely." Hermione smiled down at her.

"It belongs to Master Draco now. And he gives it to someone very special soon."

Hermione's heart jumped. If the elf knew that Draco was going to propose soon… The image of Draco laughing with the Bulgarian girl, pressing her up against the side of the bar and his hand squeezing her hip. And Hermione remembered that Katya Viktor was half-blood. And an engagement ring that was meant to be worn on a pure-blood's finger would need to be taken to a curse-breaker…

"She'll be very lucky." Her voice cracked on every word.

"Are you ready, dear?" Narcissa's voice cut through the library. Hermione checked her timepiece and saw that it was 8:43AM. She breathed. Narcissa continued, "We have the library fireplace tied to the Azkaban Floo, so you can pop through right here."

She stuttered a reply and Narcissa produced the Floo Powder. Hermione hitched her bag on her shoulder and joined Narcissa at the fireplace.

"Is there… is there anything I should know? Or…"

"You'll be met by an Auror who will check you in, and walk you through procedures. And you'll meet with him in a private room."

Hermione swallowed. "Alright. And is there anything you'd like me to tell Mr. Malfoy? Or is there anything I should be prepared for?" Hermione felt silly, asking Narcissa for advice on how to speak to her husband.

He looked between her and the open library doors. He stepped forward, taking in the tears on her cheeks and the erratic way she was sucking in air. "What's happened?"

She couldn't stand it any longer. These three people were too much.

"I'm – Draco, I'm so, so sorry for everything. I – I didn't mean any of this." She felt new tears pricking her, and hot embarrassment thinking of how Narcissa would explain this to Draco. How Hermione's stupid actions and uncensored feelings had misled his parents, and almost forced him into an engagement with her. She turned and ran, tearing down the hall, flying past the fireplaces and out into the courtyard.

Draco watched her run. He turned to see his mother, in her library, at the alcohol cabinet.

"Well, Draco," she whispered, swirling a glass of gin. "Your father's managed to ruin everything." She downed it.

"Miss Hermione Granger." Mippy greeted her and bent into a curtsey. "Mippy takes you to the library now."

Hermione smiled despite the curdling in her stomach, and followed the little elf that was wearing only a dress and fuzzy socks. They passed the grey busts of the Malfoy patriarchy, and Hermione avoided Lucius's grey stone eyes as Mippy opened the library doors.

"Hermione, dear." Narcissa stood. "You look lovely."

"Oh, thank you," Hermione blushed. She spent enough time on her appearance to warrant that compliment, she supposed. "Good morning, Narcissa."

Narcissa gestured for her to sit and offered her a coffee. Hermione said yes, and then considered whether caffeine would be a wise choice with the current state of her nerves.

As Mippy produced the coffee cup and saucer and then disappeared, she said, "Oh, Narcissa. I completely forgot that I meant to bring back those books I borrowed." She shook her head. "How silly of me."

"Oh, that's fine, dear," Narcissa waved her hand. "You'll just have to come back soon and exchange them for new ones!"

Narcissa smiled and sipped her tea. Narcissa seemed to think that Hermione would come out of this meeting unscathed, and that settled Hermione's stomach a bit. Either that or Narcissa would have Mippy retrieve the books from her flat after her body was buried.

She decided to take it easy on the caffeine.

Hermione turned to set her coffee cup down and stopped when she saw an ornate golden box on the side table. Its lid was open and the most decadent diamond ring she'd ever seen was resting in the folds of the fabric.

"Is this your ring, Narcissa?"

"At one point." She appeared around Hermione's shoulder, looking down at the ring. "I apologize for having it laid out like this. I need to take it in for altering."

"It's stunning," Hermione said. She watched as the sides of the diamond twinkled with magic. She didn't know much about diamonds or the cut of them, but this ring was remarkable.

"Thank you." Narcissa's voice floated over her shoulder. "It's been in the Malfoy family for generations, passed down to each new fiancée." The word rang in Hermione's ears, as Narcissa continued, the ring glinting. She wondered how many diamonds were set in it. "I remember the day Lucius gave it to me. I was so angry with him that day because of some silly thing he'd said, and I was —No, dear! Don't touch it!"

Hermione jumped. She looked around, trying to find the person who was reaching for the ring and found her own fingers inches away. Narcissa had jumped up and grabbed her arm.

"I—I... I don't know what just happened," Hermione stammered. "I'm *so* very sorry, Narcissa." Her face was hot and she couldn't look her in the eyes.

Hermione nodded. She would need to make sure nothing interesting happened over the weekend, so she would not ruin his announcement again. She supposed that meant that both parties needed to come out unharmed on Saturday.

What does one wear to meet Lucius Malfoy?

She was sure Ginny would have some ideas… if only she'd decided to tell Ginny what she was doing today. Ginny had been preparing all week for an out of town game with the Harpies. She'd been bumped to first string for the winter, and Hermione could see the stress and joy in her during the limited time they'd spent together, so she didn't bother telling her. It wasn't a big deal anyway. Lucius Malfoy wanted to thank her, in person, for speaking at his son's trial.

Hermione considered leaving a note, mentioning the location of her will and the key to her Gringotts vault.

She continued her attempt to plait her hair, while frowning at that morning's Skeeter article and picture. Draco and Katya had gone out again last night. They'd had dinner at a café followed by a few drinks at a classy bar. There were two pictures, one of the two of them talking over dinner – Draco laughing at something she said – and one of them at the Apparition point outside the bar. Draco had her pressed against the brick, his hand on her hip and her fingers in his hair. A much different kiss from the one pictured two weeks back. Skeeter mentioned that they did not Apparate home together. Thank Merlin for small miracles.

Hermione decided that if she could survive today's chat, she could probably survive a few more dates on her calendar, and promised herself to at least follow up with dear Rolf Scamander, if anything. The evening wouldn't end like Draco's had, but at least she'd be getting to know new blokes, training herself for dating.

She looked at herself in the mirror. As presentable as she could be, she penned a quick note to Morty, saying she had an appointment this morning at 9AM, but fully anticipated being there by opening.

Narcissa had suggested that Hermione come over just before so she could Floo from Malfoy Manor, which was already connected to the Azkaban fireplaces. The Floo Network would open precisely at 8:45AM and stay open for precisely three minutes. Earlier in the week Hermione had weaseled out of Harry that they would be having a Quidditch practice Saturday morning, even without Ginny, so Hermione was sure that Draco would not be at the Manor.

She looked at herself in the mirror again. She grabbed her bag and tossed the Floo powder into the fireplace.

"Malfoy Manor."

Mippy was waiting for her. The elf smiled so wide that Hermione almost laughed at the way the expression pulled her face.

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Eighteen

It was the first Saturday after classes resumed, and Hermione's brain needed a break. The Christmas holidays were relaxing enough, but getting used to the Time-Turner again after that break was taxing. That and the boys were not speaking to her. Again.

Between Scabbers and the Firebolt, neither Ron nor Harry felt very inclined to spend much time with her. That was fine. Telling Professor McGonagall about the Firebolt was the right thing to do.

She'd slept in past breakfast, and finding no one waiting for her in the common room, she headed to the library. There was a fiction book that she read at least once every six months to relax or to stimulate her tired mind. Today would be a wonderful day to get lost in it.

She waved to Madam Pince - who did not wave back - and headed to the fiction stacks, looking for the second shelf from the bottom, left side, twelve stacks back. She scanned the second shelf for the green and gold spine. It was not there. She looked to see if some idiot had replaced it incorrectly, but it was not found anywhere.

She approached Madam Pince and asked if the book had been checked out, and after being hushed, Pince told her that it was not.

Hermione frowned. So, someone was currently reading it ***in*** *the library. She looked about. It was the kind of book that very few people would find entertaining. It had no pictures. Hermione smiled to herself. She had suggested that particular book to several people whenever they tried asking the bookworm for a book recommendation. Not Parvati, not Justin, nor a strange girl named Luna had found the book interesting enough. She had caught Penelope Clearwater with the book one Wednesday evening in the library, and after gushing about it, asking Penelope who her favorite character was, did she laugh at this part, etc., Penelope let her know that she in fact "couldn't really get into it" and was returning it just then.*

Perhaps the person who had it had grown bored with it and left it off the shelf. She searched the tables and happened upon her favorite table, occupied by Draco Malfoy, reading a book with a green and gold spine.

Hermione sighed. Life wasn't fair.

Her favorite table. Her favorite book. Her least favorite boy.

She took a seat at a neighboring table and glared at him, hoping maybe he would feel her hateful gaze and do the honorable thing. Leave.

She pulled a book off the shelf to look busy and took out her notebook and quill. She watched as Malfoy flipped a page and his eyebrows shot up.

Damn him. He was actually interested in the book. Her book. She strained her neck a bit to figure out what chapter he was on. It looked like he was about a quarter of the way in, and Hermione figured that he would be getting to the part where the prince is transfigured into a dog. The reactions of the rest of the characters were so absurd and the writing was so precise that it was the funniest two pages Hermione had ever remembered reading in her life.

She glared at Malfoy. He wouldn't find it funny. He didn't deserve this book. The main character was a young woman who lived in the Muggle world and was pulled into a different realm. How would he possibly connect?

She huffed. He would put it down soon. He wouldn't laugh as she did, covering her mouth, giggles bubbling from her as the situation worsened. He couldn't—

He smiled. She watched the grin crack his lips apart, showing his teeth. He caught himself and pressed his lips together. Hermione frowned. Perhaps he was laughing at how awful he thought the writing was, making fun of the author in his head.

A puff of air burst from his closed lips, and he pressed his knuckles to his mouth. She could just make out the corner of his lips, pulling upwards. She'd never seen him smile like that. His smiles were always cruel, more of a smirk really.

His eyes were bright with joy, and Hermione read the book through him. The prince had just been transfigured into a dog, and the Queen laughed, commenting on how much more handsome he now looked. One of the trolls said he smelled nicer too, and then the dog took off, running through the castle, barreling through the feast, confusing the guests, and then the wizard said Hermione's favorite line in the book –

Draco chuckled. He immediately looked up, embarrassed, and turned to find her watching him. She looked down before he could snarl at her. It was so much nicer to see him smile and laugh. She didn't want to ruin it.

She heard him shuffle a bit, close the book, and she peeked as he stood and left the table, taking the book with him. She watched as he checked it out with Madam Pince and left the library.

She stared after him, wondering what she would do now.

Hermione ran from Malfoy Manor like someone was chasing her. She flew through the iron gates that she recognized from "that night," stopping only to test if she was clear to Apparate. When she could not, she ran again toward the top of a hill. Once she tried from there, she popped away.

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Seventeen

From what Hermione understood about visiting privileges at Azkaban, those in medium security were allowed only one visit per month. When Hermione asked Narcissa about this, she brushed it off, saying that next month they were allowed a December visit and an option to see Lucius on Christmas Day, so she wasn't too concerned.

Hermione was. She was very concerned.

With Narcissa's blue eyes examining her over her teacup, there was no option to say no.

On Tuesday, she received a memo from Robards in the Auror Office requesting her assistance with another case. She had to postpone her follow-up meeting with Mathilda until the next day, but Mathilda did drop by her desk to mention that the Minister would be joining them tomorrow. She winked at her, and Hermione hated that Draco was right. Meeting with Kingsley on Monday afternoon had just secured her a project.

She entered the conference room upstairs and found Draco, as expected, examining maps and charts and all sorts of diagrams. He handed her a coffee as she settled in, explaining the case and what it was they would work on. There was no indication that he was at all fazed by the Skeeter article the day before. And there was no indication that he had any sort of opinion about her visiting his father on Saturday.

Hermione ached to ask him, to maybe get advice, to figure out what Lucius wanted. To ask, "Draco, what's the best way to come out of a conversation with Lucius Malfoy alive?"

But perhaps he didn't know about it. And that confused her more.

"When will you announce now?" Hermione asked after an hour of silence.

His eyes flipped up to her, and he answered, "This coming Monday." That was all he said. He continued reading the chart he was on.

"Perfectly nice. I'd never truly met him." Her face turns to mine, finally meeting my gaze, just to deliver, "You're very similar."

It hits me like a blow to the cheek. I feel the muscles of my face react as such.

It's cold in my chest and I think I'll shuffle away now, but then I see the corner of her mouth smile.

She wants to hurt me. She wants to land a punch.

I step in to her, before she can look away from me.

"If I'd known about the meeting, I would have stopped it."

I never wanted you to know. To see what I am.

"My mother likes to meddle in things she has no business in. I apologize that you got wrapped up in it."

I promise I never would have touched you. I would have cut off my arm before touching you.

"I don't know what he said to you, but—"

"Why is your blood on my living room walls?" she says.

And my mind is blank.

This? This is what he told her?

I try to respond and there's no sound.

I had no idea my father knew about Yaxley's letters on her wall.

And he told her?

To prove I was a monster?

Or…?

"Miss Granger?" A voice calls for her. "Are you ready?"

"Quite."

She walks away from me. She feels like she's won. But no one told me the name of the game.

She wanted to hurt me.

But she still wished me good morning.

And she ran from my house, apologizing.

Draco, I'm so, so sorry for everything. I – I didn't mean any of this.

The oak door clicks closed behind her, and I'm alone in the hallway.

Maybe he hadn't told her about the Auction after all.

Maybe it was much worse than that.

She reappeared in her living room. She panted, sucking air in and forcing it out. She dropped her bag and put away her wand. She paced the room, trying to catch her breath.

He wasn't going to buy *you. He was going to* save *you.*

She pressed her eyes closed. She felt the cold of Azkaban on her skin, Lucius's eyes itching at her pores.

It's only a matter of time, Hermione.

Narcissa's warm arms and her friendly gaze. Was it all a game? A plan?

She darted to the bathroom and flipped on the shower. She stripped, still panting, and jumped in before the water had heated.

She scrubbed at her skin under the cold water, shivering. The water ran down her face, mixing with tears starting to drip from her eyes.

So, tell me, Granger. I've been curious. Had events played out differently last spring, could I be 35,000 galleons richer?

She turned off the water and grabbed for her robe, wrapping it around herself. She headed to her bedroom, and collapsed on the bed, wet hair dampening her pillows.

One of them was lying. Draco told her he would sell her. Lucius said Draco planned to save her. Draco hissed at her that she was worth 35,000 to him, while Lucius plainly stated that Draco went to Narcissa's mother requesting 35,000 as a backup plan.

She blinked at her bedroom ceiling. This line of thinking was unnecessary. The Auction did not take place. The 35,000 galleons were hypothetical, regardless of who was paying it. What bothered her now was Narcissa informing Lucius that she and Draco were soon to be engaged.

The tears returned to her eyes. She took a shaky breath. How embarrassing. Every single person knew that she loved him, and every single person wanted them together. Ginny knew. Harry knew. Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy knew. They had their own fan club, rooting for them, lead by Rita Skeeter and Morty –

Morty!

Hermione sat up, gasping. She checked her clock. 10:10AM. She cursed and jumped from bed as a pecking at her window caught her attention. She opened the glass and a small little owl flew in. Hermione grabbed up the note and found Morty's handwriting.

Miss Granger,

I hope you are well. Don't worry about coming in today if your appointment has delayed you. I will take care of the shop in your absence.

Please let me know if you are healthy so I can stop worrying. And don't fret.

Morty

Hermione screamed, crumpling the note. She could not remember the last time she'd been so distressed that she'd missed work, or an assignment, or class. She'd survived a *war* and still

managed to maintain her grades. She was heaving for air again, pressing her palms against her eyes.

Hermione couldn't breathe. She was the most intelligent person she knew. The Brightest Witch of Our Age. And she would always be two steps behind the Malfoys.

She sucked in a slow breath, pulling her hands away from her red eyes. She focused her gaze on her wall, healing her mind, releasing her breath.

She was Hermione Fucking Granger. And she would get answers.

She wandlessly flipped on all the lights in her room. She grabbed a quill and wrote Morty back, saying she was very sorry, but the appointment did not go well at all and she would not be in today or tomorrow. She was perfectly healthy, but needed a day or so. She attached the note to the bird, and when it looked at her, begging for a treat, she glared at it, magic crackling. The bird took off.

She summoned her wand from her pile of clothes in the bathroom. It flew to her and she waved it at the wall facing her bed, removing pictures and mirrors. She pointed it at the chest next to her bed, and up flew all the newspaper clippings Ginny had cut for her, and those she had secretly saved herself.

Starting from the left, at the spot next to her door, Hermione pasted the article announcing Draco's trial date that had come out while she was at Hogwarts for her 8th year. Then Skeeter's "DRACO MALFOY: A FREED MAN" article, she stamped just to the right. She continued until she had a timeline.

As her eyes ran over the articles and pictures, Lucius's face glared at her from the article printed on her birthday. Draco had visited Lucius at Azkaban on September 18, and had walked away upset, according to the picture. He'd asked Lucius about releasing the inheritance, and Lucius had provided "a small amount" according to Draco. The rest would be released on January 1, "contingent on a few things."

Hermione wondered what kind of ultimatum Lucius had given him that day, and if it was anything like the ultimatums she'd received that morning.

She gnawed on her thumbnail as she read through the rest of the article – a habit she'd gotten rid of years ago. Draco had gone on a date with a French girl that night. Something teased at her memory.

Going on dates with that Bulgarian half-blood every time the two of you *are pictured together in the paper.*

What an assumption, Lucius. She scanned over every picture of Katya Viktor, finding "DRACO MALFOY FINDS LOVE." Their first date was just before he started work at the Ministry, before she and Draco were ever pictured together.

She found the second date with Katya. The article was actually published the day of Antonin Dolohov's trial. The day Draco told her about the Auction. He'd taken Katya to lunch the day

She enters the lift and stands with me.

I wait for her to hiss at me or request that I exit at the next floor.

"Good morning."

I blink at her.

Why? How could she greet me?

I'm opening my mouth to wish her a good morning when O'Connor joins us at Level 5. He talks my ear off. He congratulates me on the article. He reminisces about his desires to leave the Ministry. I feel like he's about to list off his special skills when the lift slows for the Atrium, and he starts to exit.

She's going to the courtrooms too. For Jugson.

We're alone in the lift again. Is it too late to say good morning?

"It was an excellent article, really. Skeeter did a wonderful job introducing Malfoy Consulting Group to the Wizarding World."

I'm watching her, waiting.

"Thank you."

"And congratulations on Witch Weekly." She laughs. She thinks so lowly of the periodical that it's barely a compliment at all.

I follow her out of the lift, holding the gate open for her. All I can hear is the click of her shoes against the stones. She stands against the wall I lean on. It's better this way. I don't have to stare at her.

But I still turn my head and watch her. She avoids me, staring at the stones.

"You weren't at Cornerstone yesterday," I whisper, the sound loud in the small hall.

She holds her breath. I wait for her chest to fall on the exhale and it doesn't.

"No, I was ill." She won't look at me. "Was Morty able to help you?"

I wasn't at Cornerstone for Morty. Or for books. I come there for you.

I turn to face her. I have to know the damage. I have to begin to fix it.

"I heard you went to see my father."

She finally exhales.

"I did," she says. "It was very nice of him to want to meet with me."

I watch her. I wait. And nothing. That's all she feels she owes me.

I crack my knuckles. Shove the hair out of my face.

Maybe it is all she owes me.

"And you had a nice visit?"

She won't look at me. Like we've started from the beginning. Like I need to convince her I'm worthy of her eyes.

Surely, you've heard about the Auction, Miss Granger. A bedroom was made up in the Manor just for you, before the war ended. You would have slept next door to him in your pretty cage forever.

A Muggle pub appears before me, and luckily I have just enough Muggle money to get one last drink. I ask for a firewhisky and the man behind the bar raises a brow.

Your son told me about an Auction, but not like that. He said he'd sell me off.

Oh, no, Miss Granger. He would have kept you all to himself. In a few years' time, he would have married a pure-blood girl, and kept you on the side, like the common whore you are.

Someone tries to speak to me at the Muggle pub, and I ignore them.

The only thing I'm curious about, Miss Granger, is how long he would have been able to keep his hands off of you. Sleeping just next door to him. Tempting him. After all, he should get his money's worth.

I slap my money down on the bar, and stumble into the sunlight. Muggle automobiles everywhere, and I just wish I could Apparate.

So, you'll understand, Miss Granger, why I'm so curious as to your current relationship with my son. Narcissa has alluded to your involvement, and I must admit, I thought you had higher standards.

We're not in a relationship. And we never will be.

I'm in an alley. I'm heaving, leaning against rubbish receptacles and letting the firewhisky leave my body. My head is pounding. And I can't open my eyes.

If I splinch myself, then so be it. I need to get out of here.

I pull my wand and send myself home. Minus my shoes.

~*~

Monday, November 8, 1999

My *Daily Prophet* article comes out Monday. It's exactly as Skeeter would have printed it last week. No mention of Hermione Granger or Ron Weasley. Or of any public intoxication yesterday.

I glance over it before heading into the office.

People smile at me. They congratulate me. No Howlers today. Some resumes, which make me laugh.

Potter stares at me when I get to my desk. Like he has something to say. Like he's itching to ask me something. Or maybe hit me.

I'd welcome either.

A few hours later I head down to the courtrooms. Jugson. I've had limited interactions with him, but there's no possible way he was Imperius'd.

I should have taken a Pepper-Up Potion. I probably look as hungover as I feel.

I'm leaning against the wall of the lift when it slows and stops at Level 4. I raise my eyes to find her on the precipice, staring at me.

I wait. Wait for her to hit me again. To spit on me.

before, only a handful of days after Draco visited his father in Azkaban. Her eyes scanned and found the first time Draco kissed her in the papers. It was a week after Narcissa, Draco, and she had sat down at Fortescue's. The most recent date was just last night. She ran her eyes backwards over the timeline and found the last article published about Draco featured the brawl with Ron, and their heated conversation in front of the cabins.

She filed this away. It wasn't much of a pattern, but Lucius still seemed to think that it meant something. He said nothing in that meeting today that wasn't meant to be heard, to be analyzed.

She stared at the article about the brawl from last week. She had questions. She took a quill and wrote notes directly on the wall, drawing arrows, circling words. Her eyes landed on the pictures from Fortescue's. He'd told her not to return home.

Tomorrow, she'd start there.

Several hours later there was a *crackle* and a *whoosh* from the living room. Harry. She'd owled him about twenty minutes ago asking him to pop in after dinner.

"Hermione?"

"Back here!"

Harry entered her bedroom cautiously, and from the way he looked at her, she could tell it was a disaster.

She sat on the floor in front of her bed, a carton of Chinese food she'd ordered earlier on her lap, chopsticks still clicking together in her fingers. She was still wearing her bathrobe, and her hair had dried naturally, which meant it was a tragedy. His eyes took her in, and then cast on the wall.

The Malfoy Wall, she'd named it.

His eyes were wide but cautious as they came back to her.

"What's happened?"

"Not a lot, and yet everything all at once," she replied.

"Did you go to work?"

"I took the day off to figure out a few things." She kept her eyes on the wall, not wanting to see his face now.

"What things?"

"I'm trying to spot a liar. And I need you to fill in a few gaps for me." She clicked her chopsticks together.

"…Alright –"

"What do you remember about that night at Malfoy Manor?"

He was quiet, and she looked up at him. His eyebrows had jumped and he turned to look at the Malfoy Wall. She'd expanded it quite a bit, adding in notes and questions to the printed

articles, but then also continuing the timeline in reverse, working backwards from the first article and writing on the back of the door. Harry was seeing this now, she realized.

"I… I mean, I think I remember quite a lot. What is it that you don't remember?"

She jumped up, taking her chopsticks with her. "Do you remember anyone mentioning anything about an Auction? Or a monetary exchange for prisoners?" She turned to him. "Anything Wormtail or Greyback might have mentioned?"

"An Auction? No, nothing like that. The Snatchers were looking to turn us in for money, I think, but…" He faced her again. "Do you mind if I take your temperature?"

"Yes, I do mind." She walked to the wall and, with her chopsticks, stabbed the picture of Ron and Draco fighting. "Do you know why this fight started?"

He stepped closer to her, a timid smile on his face. "…Because it was someone's bright idea to let Ron and Malfoy on a Quidditch pitch together? Can I get you some water?"

"Ron said that Draco baited him. That if I'd heard what Draco said, I would have punched him, too. Did you hear it?"

Harry took a breath and looked away, which meant he was about to lie. "Er… not really, no."

"Harry Potter, does it look like I'm playing games today?"

Harry took her in. Pink bathrobe, one sock on, hair rising away from her head, dark circles, and still clicking a pair of chopsticks at him.

He sighed and looked away from her. "Well, I guess Ron accused Draco of showing off for you, or trying to score just to humiliate Ron. So, Ron told him to stay away from you, and… they started fighting." Harry looked at the picture, watching as the image of himself came into frame to pull Draco off of Ron.

"And you don't remember what Draco said to him?" she said.

Harry paused. "No."

"Would you prefer to give me your memory of the event? I have a Pensieve here."

Harry rolled his eyes. "It's a little crass, is all."

"Harry, I promise you, it won't even make the list of top ten most shocking things I've heard today."

Harry scratched his jaw, and stepped up to the pictures of the fight. "Well, Ron told him to stay away from you. He said something, like, 'you should find a new bookstore to patronize,' and 'stay away from Hermione.'" The moving picture on the wall repeated itself, starting from the top of the fight. Harry continued, "And then Draco said, 'Why? You've stayed away from her enough for the two of us.'"

She watched Draco's lips move in the picture, standing still and calm. Like his father.

"What brings you here today, Draco?"

I calm my racing heart and say, "There may be a time in the future where I need financial assistance." I look up at her. "And I was wondering if I could come to you."

She studies me. "You know I will always look out for you, Draco," she says. "But to take a large sum from a family member, after your seventeenth birthday…" She squints at me, her cold blue eyes trying to figure me out. "Well, due to the old magic, it will forfeit your right to your inheritance –"

"I'm aware."

Her brows lift. "How much do you think you'll need?"

"About 35,000 galleons."

~*~

Sunday, November 7, 1999

She's not at work on Saturday or Sunday. I swing by Cornerstone both days. Morty tells me she's ill. On Saturday I buy a book to not look too desperate. On Sunday I don't bother.

I can see it all in my head.

Miss Granger. So good of you to stop by.

Mr. Malfoy. I was so surprised by your invitation.

I slog through the Sunday traffic in Diagon Alley, bumping shoulders.

I thought I should meet you in person. My wife is under the impression that you and my son are in a relationship—

No, no. He would tease her. Draw it out.

I thought it was time we officially met. Narcissa is quite fond of you.

I tumble into the Leaky, plopping onto a barstool.

I'm quite fond of her.

And my son is quite fond of you as well.

Oh, that can't be true. He really can't stand me, Mr. Malfoy.

I'm two firewhiskies in. I order a third.

Nonsense. He's fancied you for years. Quite obsessive about it, really.

Tom stops me before my fourth. I try to pay double to bargain for one more shot. He sends me out.

I don't know what you mean, Mr. Malfoy.

Don't you? The lengths he would have gone to obtain you, and you don't know?

I stumble into Muggle London. This is nicer. No one knows me out here. No one knows what I would have done.

Obtain me?

I look up. My grandmother is pouring herself another cup of tea. She doesn't meet my eyes.

Do the Death Eaters know this? Is this common knowledge? Is this even valuable information? My eyes drop to the piece of scone in my fingers.

How does grandmother even know? I look at her eyes. They're on me.

How does she know unless she heard it from…

"That's wonderful news." I smile. She nods.

Grandmother Druella and I used to play a game when I was six or seven. Whenever I wanted more sweets after dinner, or another slice of pie, she would look directly into Mother's eyes, starting a strange conversation about gardening, or the German Minister for Magic, and she would tear Mother's gaze away from the pie or the candy jar until I was safe to slide in and take what I wanted. We even tried this when I was thirteen, playing cards with Father. I swindled him out of fifty galleons that night.

It isn't until this very moment that I wonder if it is Legilimency.

I swallow, and do something I haven't done purposefully since I had my wand pointed at a feeble, grey-haired wizard, clutching to the side of the Astronomy Tower, lowering, lowering – lower my walls.

I'm afraid, Grandmother.

She blinks at me. And sends the thought into me, like Severus does.

Of course you are, dear child.

My throat chokes on a gasp, gurgling. My eyes sting.

I have to pull myself out of her gaze. I look down at my scone, crumbled into pieces by my grip.

"Draco," she coos. I lift my eyes, wet and blurred. "Is your mother safe?"

"For now," I reply. "I have no reason to fear for her immediate safety. She is ever the gracious host." I grab my teacup, hearing the saucer rattle.

I sip my tea, trying to get ahold of myself. I look at her.

It's not us I'm afraid for, I think. *There's someone I...*

Even in the privacy of my own mind I can't say it. A jewelry box sits unopened in its corner.

I think of Greyback, Yaxley, and Dolohov moving through a front door on a quiet street, wands at the ready.

I blink. She nods. She's seen it.

She's Muggleborn.

Grandmother tilts her head, not expecting this. I feel a whisper of her mind reaching out searching for her.

I shut down, slamming up a wall, pushing her out.

She looks down at her tea in apology. I run my hand through my hair, ruining the style.

Harry said, "And then Ron shoved him, I think – yes, right there." He pointed at the picture as Ron shoved Draco. "And Draco said…" Harry trailed off, and the picture continued. Draco's lips moved and then Ron punched him in the face.

"Harry?"

Harry looked down. "Well, I heard him say, something like, 'Ireland's a long way away. I was just keeping her warm for you.'"

Harry shuffled his shoes, blushing. Hermione watched as Draco regained his footing from the punch and snarled as he took Ron to the ground, attacking him.

Hermione laughed. Harry looked up at her while she giggled. "Oh, Merlin. Boys…" She shook her head pressed a thumb to her temple. Harry stood in silence while she watched the whole scene play out again, now knowing the dialogue.

To buy her.

She bit her nail. Watching as Draco treated her sexuality, and coincidently her virginity, like a commodity. It could have been to *buy* her.

Harry ran into frame, pulling Draco off of Ron, and Ron sucker punched him. Hermione winced. Or this Quidditch squabble could have no meaning. Just Ron Weasley and Draco Malfoy finding another reason to hit each other in the face.

"Hermione," Harry said, and she looked at him. "I'll stay and answer more questions, but I'm going to get you some tea, alright?"

"Fine," she said, waving him away.

She heard him pad out of the room and start rummaging in the kitchen for the kettle. She grabbed up her quill and wrote on the wall, *Ireland's a long way away. I was just keeping her warm for you.*

She stepped back and looked at the Wall again. She considered making a graph of To Sell, To Buy, To Save, and marking little ticks under each every time an event or memory supported one. She looked for space on the wall and found she'd run out. She took another step back, taking in her room. This was lunacy.

She felt a headache coming on, and tears prick her eyes. How ridiculous was this? And she'd let *Harry* see her craze?

She heard a *crackle* and *whoosh* from the front room. Had Harry left? Had he abandoned her?

Voices from the front room, and then footsteps. Ginny opened her door slowly, pajamas, slippers and sleeping mask around her forehead. She looked around the room and Hermione blushed.

"The fuck is this?"

"I… I don't know. I think I've lost it." Hermione started sucking in air, about to break.

Harry poked his head around the door. "I didn't know what to do. She's been like this all day it seems," he whispered to Ginny.

"I got it, Potter," Ginny said, taking the tea from his hands.

"You're supposed to be in Istanbul. You have a game tomorrow morning." Hermione tried to pull her hair away from her face and off her neck, getting it into control somehow.

Ginny ignored her and turned her attention to the Wall. Hermione felt the heat creep up her neck as Ginny examined her madness and Harry stood like a guard at the door. Ginny turned to her.

"What did he do?"

Hermione shook her head. "It wasn't Draco. It was Lucius." She heard Harry shift in the doorway. Ginny's eyebrows shot up. "But it wasn't Lucius only. It's all three of them." Hermione sighed and sat on the foot of her bed, facing the Wall.

"How is Lucius involved?" Ginny asked, after she was sure Hermione wasn't going to elaborate.

"I went to see him in Azkaban today." Hermione closed her eyes when there was silence in the room, not wanting to see her friends' reactions to her gullibility. "Narcissa set it up. She said he just wanted to thank me for speaking at Draco's trial, but instead he was drawing up the marriage contracts."

She looked up and Ginny was staring at her with wide, greedy eyes. Harry's brows were drawn together.

"Well," Harry said, "That escalated quickly."

She told them about the list, about Narcissa and the ring. She told them about Lucius's insistence that there was a romantic relationship between Draco and her. And when she got to the Auction, she stuttered, and looked over to Harry. Ginny sent him out of the room, much to his confusion.

"And so, you decided to make a serial killer wall?" Ginny questioned after Hermione had told her the rest. Ginny sat next to her on the bed.

"I just… I'm so tired of being confused and not understanding. I'm trying to understand."

Ginny nodded, looking over the Wall. She turned to her. "Do you remember what was on his 'list?'" She smirked.

Hermione looked at the Wall. She'd purposefully avoided writing the list on the Wall, as she had no intention of abiding by it. But, of course, that meant that she had it running through her head for several hours now.

"Graceful, table manners, good at hosting, witty, charming, social leader, beautiful, fashionable, level headed, financially knowledgeable, obedient, trained in décor, practiced dancer, intelligent, cool tempered… and pure-blood."

"Draco, darling." My grandmother begins to stand.

"No need, *ma chérie.*" I come to her side and guide her to sit back down. She smiles at me. The only grandson. The only *grandchild,* if you don't count…

"I'm so happy you're here." She brushes my hair back. "Getting long." She flicks my nose like she used to.

"I'm sorry we couldn't see each other at Christmas," I say, taking my seat across from her in the parlor. "It's been…" I think of the Dark Lord, slithering through my hallways and the Death Eaters eating my food.

"Inconvenient," she finishes for me. She's scowling at her teacup, and I hope it's directed at the roaches swarming the Manor, not her family. It will make this infinitely easier.

"Yes," I say. "I'm missing a bit of the freedom I used to have…" I check in with her eyes, waiting for her to chastise me for speaking ill of the Dark Lord's plans. "…but I'm trying to accommodate the changes."

She purses her lips, like Mother does, and nods, saying nothing.

"How is your father adjusting?" She sips her tea, watching me. "I was sorry to hear you and your mother had to be without him for all that time."

Not "sorry he was wrongfully imprisoned" or "sorry to hear he failed the Dark Lord." Sorry for me and mother.

"I was at school, but Mother was lonely, I know. I think she much appreciated your letters, and the time she could spend with you, though short."

Her house elf offers me the tray of scones. My favorites are there. I take one, but my stomach is thundering.

"I've grown closer with Bellatrix," I say, testing. She looks up at me with steady eyes. "I've learned much from her."

A small muscle in her jaw moves.

"Do tell her hello," she says. And sips her tea.

Intriguing. And helpful.

She watches me. Knowing that I'm in the middle of a monologue, and still have not hit the climax.

So I dive in.

"While I was at school last year, Nymphadora was there. As security." I look up and her face gives me nothing. The thin skin around her eyes doesn't move. "I didn't get to know her, of course, but… we saw each other."

She sets her teacup down on her saucer, and pats her mouth.

I break a corner off my scone. Prepare myself for the next step.

"She's pregnant, you know," she says.

I stomp up the drive, slamming the front door, and march to the library. Mother is still at the window.

"I'll fix this Draco," she says to her glass.

"You will do no such thing," I hiss. Her lips purse, and she takes a sip. "What was your masterplan, Mother?"

I watch her long neck move as she swallows, still looking out the window.

"He promised to stay out of the way. To allow your business to move forward and to not interfere with the finances any longer. As long as he could meet her."

I laugh. And I make it cruel on purpose. "You've lost your touch, Mother." She shifts her weight. "I already had my deal with him. I had this under control," I spit.

"I know, Draco," she coos. "I wanted to take that burden from you, that's all." She brings her hand to her cheek, cooling her warming skin.

"What did she say."

Mother narrows her eyes at the grounds, her right hand swirls clockwise, her left fingers come to her lips. "I pushed her. It was too much." She's thinking aloud, not speaking to me.

"Mother."

"And the ring was too much…" she whispers.

"Mother!" I'm still standing in the doorway of the library and she's still at the window, the entire room between us. She looks at me.

"She made it clear that the two of you are not in a relationship."

I watch her as she pities me. Naïve, stupid woman. It's a fact, not a death sentence.

"And she made it clear that you never will be."

My eye twitches.

My skin is tight. My mind…

I choose yellow bricks, laying mortar with a small hand tool. The first row is easy. Placing her in a corner and stacking until I cannot see her curls.

My mother watches me. She twists her lips.

It's easier to look at facts now. Now that she is hidden behind a hasty wall of yellow bricks.

She knows.

He told her how I wanted her. How I would have kept her.

He told her the truth about the Auction.

~*~

Thursday, January 1, 1998

My grandmother gave her eyes to all her children. But her hair and her nose went to Bellatrix.

Now that I've met my aunt, it jolts me to see her so thoroughly represented in this older woman I've been seeing twice a year for all my life.

Ginny laughed. "Come on, Granger. What's difficult about those? Several of them come to you naturally, like 'obedient' and 'cool tempered.'"

Hermione smiled. "I'm glad you're here Gin, but I wish you hadn't come. It's late in Turkey now."

Ginny waved her off and said, "Well, from the way I see it, Granger, you have two choices." Ginny stood and pointed at the Wall. "You can take that thing down, get some sleep, and tomorrow, choose to move forward from the Malfoys. Choose to ignore Draco Malfoy and treat him like a co-worker at best. Not your ex-fiancé."

Hermione grimaced, and Ginny continued. "Or, leave it up, sleep in my room so you can rest, and when I'm back on Monday we'll start going through this together, while you ignore Draco Malfoy and treat him like a co-worker and not your ex-fiancé."

Hermione rolled her eyes. And Ginny said, "I'd prefer you choose option one, but I think it's option two. But, either way, you're not to begin looking into any of this alone. Do you hear me, Granger?"

Hermione nodded.

Twelve hours later, Hermione stood on the sidewalk in front of her childhood home, alone.

She could feel the magic humming from just two paces away from the front yard, and knew Malfoy had not been playing with her. Something happened here.

She looked up and down the street, now regretting that she'd come during daylight. She knew none of her neighbors would recognize her anymore, that's why she hadn't erased their memories as well. She'd been gone for so long.

She stepped onto the drive, and felt a buzz course through her. Someone had cast a Muggle-Repelling Charm on the house. And it hadn't been her. That would explain why the house had not been sold or touched.

Moving to the front door, she shielded her wand from view, and muttered, "*Specialis Revelio*." Nothing. There were no hexes or charms waiting for her inside. She took a breath and opened the door.

It was exactly as she expected. Nothing. The end table beside the door where her mother would drop her keys and her father would forget his umbrella was gone. There was a faint outline on the wall where the picture of the three of them in London used to hang.

She closed the door behind her and tried, "*Homenum Revelio*." Nothing. She closed her eyes. There was no hum of magic.

Hermione stepped forward, poking her head around the entrance to the front room. All furniture removed, and the outline of pictures on the wall. She continued on into the kitchen, and found it bare, several drawers left open and the steady drip of the faucet her father could

never tighten. She took the route from the kitchen into the living area, and turning the corner, that was when she found it.

Splashed across the wall above the fireplace where the pictures and greeting cards used to sit, where her mother and she would hang garland at Christmas, were glistening red letters, dripping.

Mudblood,

You can run, but they can't hide.

She shivered. She turned around herself quickly, making sure there was no one lurking behind her. And her eyes landed back on the words, clearly written in blood, the "y" in "they" had dripped down past the scrawl and had just reached the bricks of the fireplace before it dried.

She just received a letter from Monica Wilkins last week. It had said that the two of them were fine and just getting over a cold. They were going snorkeling next week for their anniversary. She knew in her brain that her mother and father had survived, but her heart needed reassurance.

She needed to know whose blood was winding down her walls.

She raised her wand and said, "*Dominus Sanguinem.*" The letters shook and peeled off the wall. They twisted around each other in a little red tornado, heading toward her wand. They spun as they formed a red silhouette, shaping into three-dimensions.

It was a man, and Hermione's heart leapt as she waited for her father's thin jaw line to appear or his thin eyebrows.

The features morphed into a pointed face, with a firm jaw and eyes she knew were grey, and she watched as Draco Malfoy's blood swirled into a visage of himself.

He had been here. And he had splashed blood on her living room walls.

He's scribbling at a notebook of plays and drills when I head to the showers. I don't even bother to dry my hair in my haste to leave quickly before he corners me and talks defensive strategies.

I Apparate to the hill outside the gates of the Manor, feeling the wind lick at the wet hair near my ears. I drop my things in the entryway, tucking my bag and broom into the nook we store coats in at parties. I'm famished so I head to the kitchen.

Down the hall, I can hear my mother's voice from the library. Talking to her elf? Perhaps she has company, but it's awfully early for guests. I should let her know that I'm home.

I'm steps from the library doors when they explode open, and Hermione Granger rockets through them, pausing to look at the bust of my father, before her feet carry her straight into my chest. My breath leaves me.

Her eyes are wide and wet. My mother has made her cry? She's gasping.

"What's happened?"

My hands itch to grab her, hold her still. Run down her arms to her fingers.

"I'm – Draco, I'm so, so sorry for everything. I – I didn't mean any of this," she says. She turns and runs all the way to the fireplaces. Her hair is braided again.

My neck is still warm from the sound of my name. I turn to see my mother, in her library, at the alcohol cabinet.

"Well, Draco," she whispers, swirling a glass of gin. "Your father's managed to ruin everything."

I watch as she tips the glass into her mouth, and my brain wraps around what she just said.

"Father?" The heat leaves me. I feel sand in my throat. "What does he have to do with her?"

She pours herself another. A rarity. This one she sips. She turns to the window. "She went to see him today."

My ribs tighten. "What," I growl.

She shakes her head. "I misjudged—"

And I'm running. I follow her path to the fireplaces. Maybe she's still looking for the Floo powder. And the hall is empty. The front door is cracked and I throw it open, finding a small figure bolting away from the Manor, hair wild and falling out of her plait as she throws open the iron gates.

I watch as she stops, tries to Apparate and then continues running. I stumble down the front stairs, entering the gardens and darting down the drive. She's running for the top of the hill and as I reach the iron gates, she tries again, and disappears. I hang off the gates, gasping.

Father…

There are countless ways Lucius could bring her to tears. But the *best* way…

"And you think responsible adults embrace each other for the cameras to see?" She smirks at me.

"I think getting serious about one woman is a responsible thing. A mature choice." I check in with her.

"Are you sure you're getting serious with the right woman?" she says, winking at me. I breathe. "The more you flirt with Hermione Granger, the more public opinion will shift—"

"If you're not comfortable I understand. We can continue to be seen at dinners."

It's too abrupt. I shouldn't have jumped it. I take a long sip of wine, ignoring her eyes.

"Let me check with Andrei. I will let you know tomorrow."

~*~

Friday, November 5, 1999

I'm thinking of Pansy, actually.

My fingers wrap around Katya's hip, my other hand tracing her arm.

I'm thinking of Pansy and how I really owe her some kind of apology.

Katya smiles at me before I press my lips to hers. She drags her hands up my chest and into my hair, pressing her body against me, and I'm thinking of how I wish I hadn't tricked Pansy into this. Into posing.

Only it's a camera this time and not a bushy-haired prefect.

~*~

Saturday, November 6, 1999

It's a rough morning at Hodgley Field. Ginny Weasley has been promoted on the Harpies, so she'll be bowing out of the Ministry's Quidditch league. I wonder if it has anything to do with some questions of whether Weasleys-who-don't-work-for-the-Ministry should be allowed to play on the Ministry Quidditch league.

Not that I know anything about that anonymous letter.

Goldstein wants to try out Chaser in her absence. He's shit.

I'm watching Turpin, our remaining Beater, try to train a willowy, thirty-year-old witch from the Investigation Department with absolutely no upper-body strength to hit the Bludger with the Beater bat. She's quick on her broom, clearly an excellent Seeker, and I'm wondering about switching and letting her play Chaser just so I can beat some things up on the weekends.

She knocks the Bludger right at me, like she's hearing my complaints. I duck.

She smirks.

Touché.

Potter is clearly getting nervous about the quality of his team. I'll be gone in a month too. Part of me can't wait to get the fuck out of the Ministry with their worthless interdepartmental rivalries, and part of me relishes the competition of it, like at Hogwarts.

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Nineteen

*He had the book at the Slytherin dining table. Around **food.** How despicable.*

He'd had the book for almost a week now, and Hermione laughed at how slow his comprehension must be if he was still trying to finish it. She'd found him reading it during History of Magic on Monday, in the library again on Tuesday, and now Wednesday at breakfast.

She stabbed her eggs with her fork and glared. What if he spilled pumpkin juice on it! She would absolutely tattle on him then.

She watched as he turned a page and realized he wasn't at the end. He was at the beginning. He was re-reading it?? Ugh!

Why would anyone—?

*She stopped that thought, as she was sure **she** had read that same book twice in one week two years ago.*

"Hermione, do you know where Harry's at?"

She looked up and Seamus was calling for her, a few seats down.

"No, we're not talking."

"Oh... alright."

*She returned her attention to Malfoy and **her** book. She could really use that book this week. It had been several weeks now that Harry and Ron had stopped talking to her. Lavender and Parvati had started talking about boys in the dormitories at night, so she either had to silence her curtains to avoid them, or spend more time out. The book would have been the perfect distraction this week. She'd been down to visit Hagrid several times, but there was only so much rock cake one could pretend to eat.*

He turned another page and it must have been an amusing part, because Malfoy would bring his fingers to his mouth whenever he tried not to smile. She'd noticed this yesterday. She watched as Pansy Parkinson scooted closer to Malfoy. If she dare put her grubby hand on her book...

Pansy leaned over him, trying to see what he was reading. He shoved her off. Hermione smiled as Pansy pouted. Malfoy stood from the table, rolling his eyes at her and packed up his things to leave – taking the book.

Hermione scowled. She rose from the Gryffindor table and followed him out. She exited the Great Hall and turned left, finding the hallway empty.

"Why are you watching me, Granger?"

She turned and found Draco Malfoy, one arm clutching her book and one arm pointing his wand at her.

"Are you done with that book?"

He blinked at her. He looked at the green and gold book that he was holding.

"What?"

"You really shouldn't read books that aren't even yours at the dining table. If you spilled even the smallest drop of coffee on the pages, Madam Pince wouldn't let you hear the end of it. Trust me," she grumbled.

"Well, it's a good thing I don't drink coffee." He glared at her and turned to walk away.

"Are you done with it or not?"

"What's it to you, Mudblood?" He called over his shoulder, and continued away.

"You're only allowed to check a book out for a maximum of two weeks!"

"Then you can get it in two weeks!" He yelled at her, turning around. "Unless I check it back out again!" He smirked at her and she huffed, turning on her heel to return to the Great Hall.

Merlin, she hated him!

"DRACO MALFOY: ENTREPRENEUR"

by Rita Skeeter

You know the name. You know the face. You know the hair! What you don't know about Draco Malfoy is what he plans to do next.

But I do!

Draco Malfoy, son of Death Eater Lucius Malfoy and socialite Narcissa Malfoy, was pardoned by the Wizengamot just eight weeks ago and has been working for the Ministry on probation since. But once a Slytherin, always a Slytherin, and his ambitious spirit could not be satisfied at the Ministry.

"I've had a dream of owning my own business. It's not something new, it's something that kept me sane in Azkaban, and it's motivating me forward."

Draco Malfoy sat down with yours truly for an exclusive interview about this new business venture and what it means to him. Continues on page 7!

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief when she flipped open the paper Monday morning. She was tense all day Sunday – even before visiting her childhood home – thinking that someone had photographed her leaving Azkaban the day before. When no pictures or stories could be found in the Sunday paper, she knew there was only one more day that she needed to stay off

"Probably twenty-five, maybe thirty." Theo gives a dramatic yawn. Now that he doesn't have my undivided attention, he's ready for bed. "What's it to you Blaise? You don't have the galleons for them."

"I've got galleons enough. And *I* don't need to worry about my inheritance being bound to my wedding day, like some, Nott." Blaise gives him a lazy smile. "Besides. Me and Draco could split one."

I look to him. His dark eyes are smiling at me, digging into me.

"Who do you have your eye on, Draco?" Theo says.

"No one in particular," I say. "We'll have to see who the Snatchers drag in." I stand, stretching. "Gentlemen. I'm off to bed."

Theo looks like I just stole his exit line, and Blaise looks at me like a crystal ball, finding all the answers he was searching for.

I descend the stairs, resigned to lay awake in my four-poster.

30,000. Plus 5,000 if she's a virgin.

I ignore Crabbe and Goyle's snoring, shutting the curtains around myself.

I can't trust Theo's word. He's not connected. I'll need to do some digging over the holidays.

And hope that she doesn't do anything stupid in the meantime.

~*~

Tuesday, November 2, 1999

I'm tapping my thumb against the table as Katya picks at her salad.

"Why are we meeting without cameras, Draco?" she asks.

I look up at her. She chews silently, her lips pressed together in a delicate way.

"I needed to speak with you," I say. "About the public affection again."

She blinks at me, and sips from her water glass. "Again?" She lifts her brows. "I've have *hate mail* over breaking Hermione Granger's heart from our *last* romp. I've had distant relatives writing letters, edging their way onto the wedding guest list."

She smiles brightly. I stare blankly.

She looks down at her salad. "What did your father say?"

I straighten my napkin.

"Nothing." I push my fork back into place. "He didn't say a word."

I look up at her, and I feel like she's one of the only people in my life who understands what that means. She takes a deep breath. It circulates between us.

I continue, "I need to distance myself as much as possible from yesterday's article. From the convoluted love triangle Skeeter has concocted." My tongue runs across my teeth. "It's juvenile, really. And I'm trying to present myself as a responsible adult here."

"I've heard something interesting."

I look to him. His brows are raised and he's examining his cuticles.

What an irritating little closeted queer.

"Yes?" I take the bait.

He looks around the room again, eyes landing on the sleeping Blaise, then back to me.

"Have you heard about an Auction?" he asks.

A year ago, my eye would have twitched.

Two years ago, I would have taken a deep breath and centered my thoughts to find a lie.

"Yes," I say. "I've heard rumors."

Theo grins. "I'm thinking of asking for a Mudblood for my birthday."

He laughs.

I grin back.

"Or a Weasley," he says. "Make them clean my house. Polish my shoes."

I'm about to make some comment about the majority of the Weasley options being men… who would have limited purposes for *most* blokes, when Blaise beats me to it.

"Could have them working in a loin cloth for you, Theo," says Blaise's groggy voice. He sits up and rubs his eyes. "Better hope they're auctioning off the older two. Infinitely more handsome than the rest." He finds the energy to wink at him.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Theo's jaw tenses. His eyes dart to me, then back to Blaise.

"Nothing, Theo. Nothing." Blaise closes his book and stretches his arms over his head. "I'm *sure* you meant Ginny Weasley. Having her slave for you and bring you meals in bed."

So, Blaise is already aware of the Auction. Or is not surprised by it. I concentrate on emptiness while they bicker.

Theo simmers in his chair. "The Weasley chit is too expensive. Both she and Granger are starting at 10,000 each."

Dolohov's words reaffirm themselves. 10,000 to begin with.

My stomach pulls.

And Blaise looks over at me. Then back to Theo.

"That much?"

"Yeah," Theo pouts. "Too expensive for a Weasley. She'll get up to 20,000 most likely. Ridiculous. Just 'cause she's Potter's girlfriend."

My eyes are set on him. I don't bother checking with Blaise. He's already watching me.

"And how about Granger then?" Blaise asks. He leans back in his chair. "How much is the Golden Girl going for?"

the radar so Draco could announce. Opening the paper and finding Draco's face smirking back at her with Skeeter's title, she knew she was in the clear.

Skeeter continued on page seven, detailing the consulting firm and listing the services Malfoy Consulting Group would offer. Draco was very candid with her, opening up about how important it was to him to separate himself from his father's reputation. She also surprised him in the interview with the news that he had been chosen for the cover of the December issue of Witch Weekly, winning the Most Charming Smile award. Skeeter described his gracious acceptance.

Good. Good for him. This was how it was supposed to be. She may not understand why he was at her house, why his blood was on her walls, but she did know that she'd practically made a deal with Lucius Malfoy that she wouldn't get in the way of Draco's business moving forward. An article in the paper regarding Draco's unlimited potential and future that did not mention her name once was good news.

She sighed. Ginny would be home tonight and she would have to tell her that she went to her home yesterday, alone.

The image of the red lettering ran through her mind, and Hermione shook her head to clear it. Sometime during the war, Draco Malfoy's blood was put on her living room walls. His pure blood. She frowned. She couldn't imagine him spilling his beloved blood for any reason. But the phrasing sounded like him. Like Draco Malfoy at Hogwarts.

She tossed the paper in the rubbish bin and headed out to work abominably early. Taking two days off of Cornerstone had really upset her schedule, and she was itching for the consistency of work.

She wove her way through the already bustling Atrium, took the lifts to the fourth floor, and happily strolled through an empty Magical Creatures office. Once she arrived at her desk, she found a reminder from herself. She had a Wizengamot hearing today. Oh, wonderful.

Johnathan Jugson was appealing his life-sentencing today, claiming that he had been placed under the Imperius curse, forcing him to participate in the Battle of the Department of Mysteries.

Nice try, Jugson. Hermione smiled.

When she heard Mathilda's shoes clicking towards her corner office ten minutes later, Hermione took a breath and met her there.

"Mathilda," she said from the doorway.

"Granger! Good morning!" Mathilda's blouse was one button off, and her hair was sticking out at odd angles. Hermione would almost think she'd just come from a tryst if she didn't already know that this was Mathilda's daily look. Mathilda plopped the files in her arms down on the desk. "You're in early."

"Yes, I wanted to remind you that I have a Wizengamot hearing at ten."

"That's fine. That's fine." Mathilda shook off her coat and tossed it toward the chair in the corner, missing it.

"And I'd love a word, once you're settled in."

"Yes, yes." Mathilda sat in her chair. "I'm settled! Anything wrong?"

"No, not at all," Hermione said, taking the chair across from her. "I heard that Rosenberg is retiring."

"Yes! So exciting for Rochelle! She has seven grandchildren, you know?" Mathilda reached for a quill and knocked the ink pot over.

"I didn't know, actually." She watched as the woman across from her vanished the spilled ink and dipped her quill in, writing *HG 11-8-99* across the top of a scroll. "I wanted to let you know that I plan to apply."

Mathilda looked up at her. "Really?"

"Yes," she said. "You know that I am very passionate about house-elf rights, and I hope you would consider me once the job has been posted."

Mathilda chewed on her lip and sat back in her chair. "It would be a lateral move for you."

"Yes, but a move in the right direction, still."

Mathilda nodded and sat forward, jotting notes on her scroll. Hermione wondered if that was all?

"Rochelle has been at that desk for forty years. Did you know that?" Mathilda crossed a "t" and looked up at her again.

"I didn't."

"She is very like you. Passionate about the house-elves. She turned down every offer at a higher-ranking position over those forty years, because she couldn't tear herself away from them. She was very comfortable." Mathilda clasped her hands in front of her. "I'd hate for you to get comfortable, Hermione."

Hermione blinked at her. "I… I understand. I plan to continue upward as the positions open."

"But only in House-Elf Relocation?"

"I… Well," Hermione swallowed. "I guess my short-term goal has always been Relocation, yes. But—"

"What is your long-term goal, Hermione?"

Hermione opened her mouth. And closed it. Mathilda continued.

"Did you know that Millicent Bagnold worked in five of the Ministry's seven departments before being elected Minister? Scrimgeour started in Transport and then worked his way up the D.M.L.E. before heading the Auror office. Leonard Spencer-Moon worked as a tea-boy in

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Eleven

Sunday, November 16, 1997

The fire in the common room is dying. It's almost three in the morning and I'm considering whether to stoke it.

I haven't been able to sleep for a few weeks. I feel the war coming. The weight of it keeps me awake.

I don't know what Blaise's excuse is, though.

He nodded off an hour ago, sitting across from me, reading his History of Magic homework.

He hasn't been tapped for the Death Eaters. He doesn't have family relations to pull him towards the war. All he has is his mother and her new husband, for as long as this one lasts.

I watch him sleep. I envy him.

The dungeon wall opens, and Theo Nott appears, moving quietly before he sees me watching him.

"What's kept you up, then?" he says, taking note of Blaise passed out.

"I could ask you the same," I hum. "Or should I ask 'who?'"

Theo stops, and before he's allowed himself to blush, he says, "Hufflepuff." He smiles, a tight grin. "She's pure-blood, I assure you."

He flops into a chair, and I decide not to press further, knowing that the only pure-blood Hufflepuff in our year is Ernie Macmillan.

"Anything new to report?" Theo asks. He looks around the room for curious ears – even though it is clear we are the only two conscious occupants of the common room – and asks, "Anything on Potter since the Ministry break in?"

I shake my head. "Nothing from Father."

I look back to the fire. Theo is always trying to get into the thick of things.

But then where would we be? What would she ask me next? And would I answer her?

I let her brain work, and I look down at my paperwork.

Maybe this was the worst of it. Just get through this confession, and we'd go back to the way we were, with books and coffee and Saturday visits.

Doubtful.

I ask, "What other *secrets* did my father spill to you." I wait for her.

"Your father didn't tell me anything about that."

It's like a lightning shock through me. I look up at her and she's considering me.

She continues, "You told me not to go home. So, of course, I went."

I blink at her. So it's a general distrust of me. That's what father's given her. If I told her to turn left, she'd check over her right shoulder first.

A knock at the door and Potter steps in.

"Hey, Malfoy." He sees Granger and he freezes. "Oh, uh… You're helping again?"

"Robards sent for me," she says, like she has to defend her decision to be in this room.

"Er, well. There's been another message intercepted."

He waves a piece of paper in his hand, and I'm so grateful for a lead on this case so that hopefully she can be out of this room tomorrow. She tears the message from Potter's fingers, and I'm reading it over her shoulder before I realize that the scent of her is stronger this way.

"Well, this fits with the Northwest Germanic, but this over here fits the Scandinavian," she mumbles.

"We'd ruled out the Scandinavian. It must be the Germanic."

"But now that we have this, we can't rule out Scandinavian."

I take the message from her as she skips over to her notes.

"Oh," Potter says. "You… made a Wall."

I look up and he's examining the far wall.

"Does she do that a lot?" I ask.

Potter smiles at me, like there's a joke I'll get when I'm older. "It's a recent thing." He shifts and turns back to me. "Are you two pausing for lunch?"

Lunch. Fuck.

It's ten past noon. Katya is probably pacing the street where the telephone booth sits, waiting for me to appear.

I should clean up, stuff paperwork away, and pack up my briefcase. I mark our place by making notes about the recent message.

"Malfoy? Are you hungry?"

Potter, ever the gentleman.

"Thank you, but, no. I have a prior engagement."

"I'll see you after lunch," she says, voice small.

I nod, and continue packing my bag, cleaning the conference room in case someone needs it at lunch. I grab my coat from the rack, tuck it under my arm, and push out the conference room door to find Katya smiling brightly, and Granger staring at me.

My blood stops.

"Draco! Look who I finally got to meet!"

Katya is beaming, and Granger looks a little grey.

She can see, can't she? How similar they are. How they're a mirror image of each other. Granger's skin creamier, and Katya's legs longer, but the same.

"Wonderful." My voice cracks. "Granger, this is Katya."

"I've been gushing. I'm sorry. I just can't believe I ran into her!" Katya grins.

Gushing. Was thirty seconds long enough to spill all my secrets?

Granger is dismissing herself, and suddenly Katya is inviting her to lunch with us.

I'll throw myself in front of a Muggle automobile on the way.

"Oh, that's very kind, but I already have lunch plans," Granger deflects. "Thank you, Katya."

Katya continues to smile and plan and get to know her, and my eyes can't take in both of them anymore. I feel like a potion that's about to bubble over.

There's a muscle in my neck that seizes and I roll my head, cracking the bones.

"I'll see you after lunch, Granger." I ignore the way her eyes follow my hand on Katya's back, guiding her away.

"So wonderful to meet you, Hermione!"

First name familiarity in under two minutes, a feat I've been working on for almost ten years.

On the way to lunch, I have to hear about Granger's Gringotts project and her house elf activism and her beautifully clear skin and do I happen to know what she uses it in her hair because the curls are so *full.*

"Why would I know what she uses for shampoo?" I finally snap.

Katya is quiet for a moment.

I crack my neck again. "I'm sorry I was late. I didn't know you would sneak into the Ministry to find me."

She laughs and says, "I didn't sneak in. I got a Guest Pass." She's quiet as we turn the corner to the lunch spot, then, "Does she work on your floor?"

"No. We were working on a project together."

The storefront of the café is like a beacon, and I walk faster, hoping for silence.

"Do you often work on projects together?"

"Just recently."

She's finally quiet again, and I pull the door handle for her, looking down at her face. She's watching me.

She knows.

I take a deep breath. We walk to a corner table.

It's fine if she knows. We have an agreement. I don't have to lie to her.

As we sit, I remember that there are no cameras. Katya was the one to arrange this meeting. I try to relax and say, "Why did you ask to meet today? Is there something wrong?"

"Yes and no."

I drag my eyes off the menu, and blink at her. "Oh?"

"Well," she says, and swallows. "Our last publicity stunt." The kiss. The second one in the alley. "Andrei wasn't as unbothered by it as he thought he'd be."

"Oh," I say. My forehead wrinkles. "I… er, I can talk to him? I'm sorry."

"Don't be." She smiles, a blush pulling her cheeks. "He…" She laughs. "He wants to elope."

I stare at her. I smile. "Worked like a charm?"

She swats my arm. "I didn't intend to make him jealous!" She brushes her hair back. "But he wants to make it official. We're going to save for a few months, and then get married. And deal with my father later."

I smile, but it's missing something.

"That's wonderful. I'm happy for you." I fold my hands. "But I assume you and I need to end this?"

She nods. "I'm afraid so. We don't need to make it a public thing if you don't want to. We can just… fade."

"That's fine. We can't stretch this on any longer anyway. I think my father knows that this is a sham."

The waitress fills our glasses. I gulp at the water.

"Is everything alright? Is he giving you obstacles?"

"Always," I say, relief flowing through my muscles at the idea of actually talking to someone about all this. "But he and I have an arrangement. I'm opening on January 1st."

I continue. I tell her about my meetings with Mockridge and my upcoming one with Ogden. I tell her about the office space, feeling prouder and more excited than I have in months. She listens. She sips her tea and asks questions and perhaps I should stop and ask her more about herself, but then she's rolling her eyes about Blaise taking lead in Marketing and asking if I truly think he's the right quality for Malfoy Consulting.

"He's quite good, I assure you. An absolute cad, but the youngest representative of wizard-based wineries in Sicily in history." I peel apart my muffin.

"And do you have any charitable work?" she asks.

I launch into the long story, the logistics, the suspects, the leads. I hand her a pile of paperwork to sift through, a stack of scratch paper. She's silent, and I don't dare look up at her.

I go back to the family history of the third wizard as she catches up. After half an hour she stands, back cracking, and pulls her wand.

I recover from my momentary fear for my life as she starts posting the reports and pictures on the conference room wall.

The image I'm examining gets pulled from my hands.

"What are you doing?"

"Trust me. It's very helpful."

She goes to the wall and begins a kind of timeline maybe? We spend the next few hours in silence, the timeline growing, hypotheses added.

But I can't concentrate with her in here. Her scent…

I glance up at her and she's pulling her lip between her teeth, thinking hard. I have to look away.

An hour later I've given up. I cast *Oculus Dolus* and just spend some time watching her read, watching her push her hair out of her face, watching her lips move silently over the words. All while my eyes appear downcast on my reading.

What does she want? An apology?

No. An explanation.

Why is your blood on my living room walls?

Father told her? What did Father know about that mission? What truths did he twist to make her distrust me?

I release the eye focus charm.

"It was a mission. From the Dark Lord."

I watch her take a deep breath and then look up at me. "What kind of mission?"

I consider telling her everything. Telling her about the portkey, the abandoned mill in Cokeworth. The way I approached the Dark Lord in his chair after dinner, asking to let me learn from Yaxley.

But that's not her question.

"The worst kind." I keep my eyes on her, begging her to ask.

"So, after finding an empty house… you decided to do some redecorating?" Her tone is light, but accusatory. Almost like an old joke between friends.

"That was Yaxley's design."

"But your blood?"

"Why spill his own?" I grin, grim and small.

I want to tell her. Tell her that I had a plan, that I was prepared to…

When I get home, I stop by Mother's library. She's reading a letter. She folds it away when she sees me.

"What's that?" I nod to the letter.

Mother takes a breath and says, "It's Cornerstone Books. Something I pre-ordered is ready." She levels her eyes on me, and I shuffle my feet. "Do you have any business in Diagon Alley tomorrow?"

"No," I snap. "Nor will I."

She nods slowly. "Then maybe I should pick it up?"

She's watched me this week. Watched me not bathe, not sleep, not eat. She's said nothing, still smarting from our argument.

"Do they not have a delivery service at Cornerstone?" I say. Her lips twist. "I think it would be best if our relationship with Cornerstone Books remained perfectly professional."

She raises a brow at me. "As you wish."

I turn on my heel and head upstairs. I uncork a Dreamless Sleep potion and fall onto my bed, fully clothed.

~*~

Monday, November 15, 1999

Robards gives me a case first thing Monday and it's the perfect distraction.

He checks in with me at noon and I let him know the progress is slow.

"I can see if Mathilda can spare Granger?" he says, and my eyes snap up to him. "The two of you worked so well together on the other—"

"No, that's fine," I cut him off, shoving my hair away from my face. "I have it under control here. Probably done tomorrow."

A tight smile. He returns it.

"If you're sure…"

"Positive," I say.

The next morning, Granger knocks on the conference room door.

I had forgotten about her for a total of forty-three minutes. It was calming and hollow.

We're staring at each other, and I realize I have a quill tucked between my teeth like an idiot.

"Robards summoned me," she explains.

"I told him I had it under control." This is a losing battle.

"Well, I'm here now."

She moves into the room, places her things down, and with a slow effort, comes to stand near me. I move aside so she doesn't have to be in my personal space. I clear my throat.

"We've made several arrests in Diagon Alley over the past month," I begin, "and while the crimes are different, four of the apprehended wizards have carried runes on them."

"Once we get on our feet, I plan on taking one *pro bono* case per quarter."

She lifts a brow at me. "Hm." She sips her tea.

"What?"

"Well," she begins, looking over my shoulder out the window, "I would assume that one of your biggest obstacles starting out would be public opinion." She checks in with me. "And one of the best ways to show off your company is through charitable work and representation for underprivileged species." She tilts her head to the side. "You could have an entire *branch* for *pro bono* work. For representation of all the people and species that would never before have been associated with the name Malfoy."

I blink at her. A branch is manpower. And salary. And office space. And benefits. And consistent work - consistent *good* work.

I'm staring into my teacup, calculating, when Katya says, "And speaking as someone who's had experience with charitable work, I can tell you that with the right person at the helm, the expenses can all be fundraised."

I look up at her. I smirk. "Katya, if you wanted a job, you could have just asked."

"Oh, no, not me." She laughs. "I'll be quite busy with my own work. But you'll need someone with a reputation. Someone who… when she walks into a room, people will want to throw money at her just to be close to her." She sips her tea and I can hear the words before they come out of her mouth. "Why is Hermione Granger working an analyst job at the Ministry?"

I swallow and look away from her. "She's taking the slow path to Minister, I believe. But she... wouldn't be a good fit for Malfoy Consulting."

"Why not? I thought you were friends now."

I stare at the table and imagine telling Father that I did exactly as he asked, but that a portion of that precious inheritance is going toward Hermione Granger, and keeping her by my side. I almost laugh.

Then I remember her tears, and the way her hair flew behind her as she ran from the Manor. The look in her eyes when she asked about the blood she'd found in her house.

"To an extent," I respond. "But she'd never want to work for me."

"With you."

I look up. Katya is playing with the handle on her teacup. She says, "She'd work *with* you. With autonomy."

I watch her fingers move as I think of the way we work to solve rune cases and dragon egg mysteries and —

"It's a bright idea, Katya, but impossible, I'm afraid."

I pour a bit more tea into my cup. I stir in the honey. I watch the steam.

"Because of your father," she says, with a finality. Like she's known all along.

I breathe deep, and bring my gaze back to her, back to her smart eyes.

"What kind of arrangement do you have with him, Draco?" she asks.

I swallow and press my lips together. "To stay away from her."

She nods.

"That must be very difficult. Especially with the way she looks at you."

My eyes snap to her, and an eager warmth swims into my veins.

~*~

Thursday, November 18, 1999

I don't think I like American accents.

Maybe it's more specific than that.

I don't like the letter "R."

"But the car was parked, like, across the street, so we like, carried our dresses all the way there!"

I wonder if my eye is twitching like my brain is.

Noelle pulls the straw of her drink between her lips and slurps happily. We're about done for the evening, I think. I've already set up the lunch with her father. She's already fond of me. And we're flirting just enough to keep things casual and uncomplicated.

Yes, it's time for Noelle to go home. And stop talking.

"It was so funny! Like, he fell over! Like, in the street!"

I wonder what quiet sounds like. It's been so long since I've, like, heard it.

"Do you want another drink?" I say. "Or, wait, you said you needed to be up early tomorrow to see your grandfather, yes?"

"Mm-hmm. He's an early-riser so I basically—"

"That's too bad. I'll get your coat."

I guide us toward the door, stopping to help her slip on her coat, and just before her arm can slide in, a buffoon bumps her. I really don't have the energy to defend Noelle Ogden's honor tonight, so I'm hoping it's a pure accident.

"Sorry, love!" Aiden O'Connor. And Granger stands next to him. When did she appear?

He's talking about some retirement party when I finally realize that his arm disappears behind her back, holding her close to him.

She's blushing.

I look away from her.

"O'Connor, Granger, this is Noelle."

Noelle shakes O'Connor's hand, and starts dancing in place when Granger introduces herself. Another member of Granger's fan club.

My head hurts.

And it feels like I'm getting everything I've ever wanted. There is a headmistress who truly respects me. Potter is about to get what he deserves. And she's in my arms.

She tries to kick, and I pull her back against me, my arm wrapping further around her stomach and I can't stop my fingers as they stretch, trying to touch more of her. She's so soft against me. She's shaking, and I sigh against her hair, breathing in and trying to place the most delicious aroma. It's her shampoo, or her perfume, or *her* and she's pressed tight against me. I can feel her backside against my groin, her hipbones under my fingers, and her neck is tilted perfectly so that I could press my mouth under her ear if I wanted.

She's gasping for air against my hand, and I catch myself turning my face into hers, about to press against her temple, when Potter yelps at Umbridge's hand pulling his hair back, taking him out of the fireplace.

This is too dangerous. My pounding blood distracts me. I can feel her ribs expanding against mine, and I'm sucking in mouthfuls of her scent, feeling her hair tickle my neck.

I want to press her against the wall again. Let her feel me.

I focus on bricks. Building a sloppy wall. I blink, and when Potter's wand flies through the air, I shove her away from me, giving her to Bulstrode to watch over.

I feel some kind of victory, even as Umbridge refuses my assistance in the forest. The sensation of success doesn't fade even as the Gryffindors overpower us and as we hear about the battle at the Ministry. It isn't until later that night when the Aurors come for Father that I finally wonder what I think I won.

~*~

Tuesday, November 9, 1999

She looks lighter. Maybe I'm imagining it, but in comparison to the weight I've been trudging along with, she seems like she floats.

She meets my eyes in the lifts on Tuesday, and looks away. Like I don't exist.

She's in line in front of me at the café on Wednesday, and she pretends not to notice.

On Thursday, she's carrying a stack of paperwork through the Atrium on her way home, and several papers flutter away from her. Before she can grab her wand to gather them, I sweep them up and place them on top. She keeps her face turned away from me as she mutters her thanks and continues through the fireplace without another word.

She passes me in the Atrium again on Friday and I see her take in the circles under my eyes and my unwashed hair, and before I feel the flush of embarrassment, she turns away.

On Saturday I decide to focus on something else. I meet with a property manager after Quidditch, and he shows me several locations that could be magically expanded and hidden. He recognizes me as Lucius Malfoy's son, and doesn't ask what my price range is.

Umbridge doesn't move. "Peeves, you say?"

"Yeah! We gotta get a move on!" Weasley starts to track back toward the Transfiguration corridor.

I narrow my eyes at him. He glances at me.

"Mr. Weasley." Her voice is thin. "How is it that you know Peeves is in the Transfiguration corridor, when you yourself have just come from the opposite direction?"

Weasley blinks. Idiot.

"Well, mischief travels so fast here," he tries.

Umbridge glowers at him.

Suddenly, the sound of a dozen mewling cats. I jump, lifting my feet high like avoiding mice. There are no cats here. Weasley is doing the same, but Umbridge simply looks down at her wand, where the noise is coming from. Face paling. She turns a glare on Weasley.

"Expelliarmus!"

Weasley's wand flies from his pocket into Umbridge's tiny fist. Ropes explode from the tip of her wand to wrap around his middle, his freckly face wide and scared.

I watch with rapt attention as she advances on him.

"Mr. Malfoy," Umbridge says, handing me Weasley's wand. "Please fetch the rest of the Inquisitorial Squad and meet me at my office."

She grabs Weasley by his hair, forcing him to follow her down the hallway.

This… is the best day of my life.

I dash to the Great Hall, whistle for Crabbe and Goyle, and seconds later I have the pack of them, moving with me down the hall and begging for the story.

Ginny Weasley and Loony Lovegood are setting some sort of diversion. I keep one or two of my crew and set the rest of them to seizing the birds.

Umbridge is just arriving at her office from one side as we come from the other, still dragging Weasley by the hair. She shoves him to the ground and nods to me just before she slips open the door to her office.

I'm right on her tail when she whispers *"Expelliarmus!"* and Granger's wand goes clattering to the floor. She spins in shock, and I'm right there, slamming her back against the wall. My hand claps over her mouth, palm on her open lips, and the force of it all pulls me against her roughly, my face breaths from hers.

My heart is pounding. I can just imagine Umbridge sneaking up on Potter. I spin Granger's slim body around, pulling her back against me again. This time my arm slithers around her waist. Her breath against my hand.

Umbridge reaches for the back of Potter's head.

"Oh, Draco we have to stay now!" Noelle grabs me and I almost shake her off.

The girls and some friends of O'Connor's head toward a long open table. O'Connor follows me to the bar to grab a round of drinks for all his friends, and as he mumbles out loud that he should have asked Granger what she wanted, I turn to the bartender and order her a Butterbeer.

I flip some coins onto the bar, and he's still rummaging for his sickles.

"I got it." Levitating the order of drinks over to our table, I prepare for what looks to be an awful evening.

Granger and Noelle are chatting, which is not my favorite sight in the world.

Noelle asks them questions. Noelle giggles. Noelle sounds like an idiot. And Granger looks over to me, like I've gone soft in the head. I look away from her.

Someone touches my shoulder, and before I can turn and hex them, I hear a familiar voice.

"I'd recognize the back of your head anywhere, mate."

Marcus. I laugh. "What are you doing here, you bastard?!" I jump up and his arms are around me, clapping me on the back and laughing in my ear. I haven't seen him in maybe three years, before he went off on his potions apprenticeship. He finally got his teeth done right.

"Looking for a good time!" He chuckles. "Not that you'd know where to find one of those."

I shove at his shoulder, feeling thirteen again. "How long are you in town for?"

"Another week, then it's back to Brazil. I've been made Potions Master." He beams, his cocky smirk so familiar, it's possible I see it in the mirror every morning.

"Congratulations. We'll need to drink to that!"

Merlin, I forgot what it feels like to have a friend that isn't Harry Potter.

"Marcus, you remember Noelle Ogden?"

Noelle jumps up and hugs him. Over her shoulder, he lifts a brow at me, an approval of sorts, like I've snagged the prettiest witch at the ball. I don't correct him.

But then Marcus's eyes slide over to Granger, and in a moment the phrase "prettiest witch at the ball" twists around my ribs.

"Hermione Granger," he oozes, and I see a blue dress spinning high around her calves, showing her legs. "Aren't you a sight for sore eyes."

"Hello, Flint." She stares at him carefully.

They exchange pleasantries. Noelle sips her drink until it's ice. Marcus asks me about Greg Goyle, and I confess I haven't seen him. I watch Granger out of the corner of my eye, and I see her turn to O'Connor. He says something that makes her laugh. She almost spits out her drink. She turns to look back at Marcus and me, and I look away, back to Noelle as she continues whatever story she's blabbering. I smirk at Marcus, but he's already watching me, eyes flickering over to Granger and back.

I refocus on Noelle.

Marcus starts to dominate the conversation, like he always does. He's telling Noelle a particularly crass story about Millicent Bulstrode and I burst out laughing before he hits the punchline, remembering the look on her face when her fingers turned purple. When he finishes and Noelle cackles, I look up at him and he's looking over my shoulder again.

The ice in Noelle's drink rattles.

"Let's get another round, yeah?" Marcus sets his empty glass down, and nods towards me. I'm only halfway finished with my firewhisky, so I down the rest, and follow him.

I see Noelle turn towards Granger as we leave.

"So, what in Merlin's name are you doing here with Granger?" Marcus smiles.

"I'm not with her." I shove my hair away from my face, the firewhisky burning my throat still. "Noelle and I ran into them. We all work together at the Ministry. And it turns out Noelle is a bit of a Granger fan." I nod back at our table, where Noelle is laughing and talking while Granger listens.

"I think I'm a bit of a fan, too," Marcus hums. My eyes snap back to him.

I recognize the look in his eyes, gliding over her face and dripping down lower. I saw it on him five years ago as he chatted with a few Bulgarians about Granger putting out for Krum. She'd just turned fifteen. I realize Marcus was the same age I am now.

I feel like there are razor blades in my throat as I swallow, and look back to Noelle, silly smile on her face. Maybe Marcus, Noelle, and I can move to a different table.

"How are the women down in Brazil?" I ask, and when I tear my eyes from Granger, he's already looking at me. "Anyone down there catching your interest?"

He shakes away a thought, then grins. "A few. As always." He flags the bartender. "I hear you've snagged yourself Katya Viktor." He smirks at me.

"We're keeping it casual," I say, trying for facetious. He laughs.

"Excellent. Then we can get you laid tonight!" Marcus ruffles my hair, fingers rougher than they need to be. He laughs and slaps me on the back.

After the bartender brings our drinks over, Marcus insists on paying. We levitate all the drinks over and he reminds me of the time we forced Crabbe and Goyle to levitate our pumpkin juice to us every day for a month. I laugh and almost slosh a Butterbeer down O'Connor's front.

Marcus sits across from Granger, and I watch her eyes take in the Butterbeer sliding into her hands.

"Do you not drink, Granger?" Marcus teases. I look to her as she decides what to do with him.

"No, I do. Just slowly." She takes the glass and lifts a brow at him.

I sip my firewhisky.

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Twelve

Thursday, June 13, 1996

My neck is getting sore from all the agreeable nodding.

Umbridge found me sneaking off to the kitchens, so I convinced her that I was just on my way to find her to discuss some of my suspicions. Primarily Gryffindor suspicions.

She's been preaching ever since. I nod my head again, humming in agreement.

"Quite right," I say. "And I'd wager that my father would be in full support of that decree."

She turns her small eyes on me, gleaming, and a clopping down the corridor pulls our focus.

Filch, running with his knees to his chest like always, comes darting by us.

"The poltergeist is messing with the school telescopes. Smearin' ink!" Filch's eyes bulge out of his head. "I'm on it, Headmistress!"

"High Inquisitor," she corrects. She giggles.

"High Inquisitor!" He salutes and prances away. Once he's out of sight around the stairs that lead to the Astronomy Tower, I turn back to her.

"Like I was saying." I push my hair back and she clears her throat. "My father is very impressed with all the work you've done here this year, ma'am. And once the school year is over, I do hope you can come by the Manor to meet him."

Umbridge's eyes sparkle, like I've just offered her the finest cut of meat.

"Umbridge! Er, Headmistress!" Weasley comes to a skidding halt in front of us.

"High Inquisitor," she says.

"Yes, High Inquisitor, or… yeah…"

He casts his eyes to me before returning to the Headmistr—*High Inquisitor.*

"Mr. Weasley?" Her prim voice lances through my ears.

"It's Peeves!" He points. "In the Transfiguration Department – mucking up everything!"

Hermione nodded, and Katya said, "I've been gushing. I'm sorry. I just can't believe I ran into her!"

Hermione was spinning a bit. Where was Harry.

"Well," she started. "It was lovely to meet you Katya." And she shook her hand again. "Enjoy your lunch together."

"Oh, but are you free to join us?" Katya said with wide eyes.

Skilled in hosting. Table manners.

She didn't dare look at Draco. "Oh, that's very kind, but I already have lunch plans. Thank you, Katya."

"We will have to have a proper conversation sometime!" Katya smiled. "I would love to take you to lunch and pick your brain. I am currently working with a charity invested in dwarf and house-elf rights and I would love to hear some of your thoughts."

Oh, fuck off Katya.

"That… that sounds perfect." Hermione smiled. She hated her. She hated her because she couldn't hate her.

She glanced at Draco as he cracked his neck and took a deep breath. He placed his hand lightly on Katya's back.

"I'll see you after lunch, Granger." He looked to her briefly before turning to guide Katya to the elevator.

"So wonderful to meet you, Hermione!" Katya sang.

Hermione watched them walk away, Draco's back stiff and Katya swaying, chatting, smiling, perfect-ing.

She tried to remember which book it was she giftwrapped for her.

Harry appeared around the corner.

"God, where the fuck have you been," Hermione snarled and pushed past him.

"What…?"

They went to lunch in the café. Hermione returned upstairs and went right to work. Draco walked in just after one and she could feel his eyes on her the rest of the afternoon. They made headway on the runes, but would have to work in the conference room again tomorrow.

She returned upstairs to gather her things at the end of the day and ran into Aiden.

"How'd it go? Did you solve world hunger by noon?" He winked at her.

She looked at him. Grinning at her. Open. Honest. Nice.

"Aiden, I would love to go out with you all on Thursday. Tell me where to meet you."

His grin turned into a smile.

"I bet you're taking points from us all in your head," Marcus says. "'Ten points from Slytherin for having more than one drink per hour. Ten points from – whatever-the-fuck house you were in at Ilvermorny – for giggling out of turn.'"

I look for a smaller table, away from her. There's nothing available. And I don't think getting Marcus to leave her side would be easy.

"Were you a goody-goody, Hermione?" Noelle joins. I roll my eyes.

"Oh, she was the worst! Even before she was a prefect she was walking around like Head Girl," Marcus whines. "Tell me, Granger, did you ever break the rules, even once?"

I look up at her and she's focused in on him, like an Arithmancy problem she's anxious to solve.

"I broke the rules loads of times," she says. "But unlike you, I never got caught."

She drinks from her glass. And Marcus smiles. I drink half my glass.

It goes on like this. Noelle giggles. Marcus starts a story or a memory from Hogwarts and then turns to Granger, asking her for her version of events. She turns a stony face on him with clipped sentences. I drink.

Granger turns back to O'Connor. Marcus calls her name. I drink.

Granger frowns at him. Marcus smiles at her. Noelle giggles and slurps. I drain my glass.

"I have to pee," Noelle announces. Marcus and I stand as she leaves the table. Maybe we can find somewhere else to talk, away from the rest of them.

"Do you play much Quidditch?" I say.

"Haven't gotten a chance to." He sips. "But you've been playing with Potter, I hear." He smirks. "Traitor."

I smile. "It's been... challenging," I lie. "He's shit at captaining a team," I lie again. I watch the pride swell in Marcus's chest.

We chat for a few minutes more but I keep seeing his eyes slide past me, looking at something by the bar. His lips tug.

Marcus grabs my arm.

"Oi! Speaking of Quidditch, you remember that time we scared Potter off the field?"

"Yes. And I remember Potter toppling us with a patronus that day."

"No! Did he really? Granger!" He turns to her stool and pouts when it's empty. He faces me again. "Oh, there she is."

My eyes scan the room, just catching curls as they exit the side door.

Curious.

O'Connor is laughing at the bar. Did she ditch him? Her bag is gone as well.

"She wasn't looking too well a second ago," Marcus says, and I hear his voice over my shoulder. "Hope she's not trying to Apparate."

"I…er, I'm sure she's not." I can't take my eyes off the door she slipped through. "Excuse me, I'm going to run to the loo."

Marcus says nothing as I move through the crowd, away from him. She only had two Butterbeers. Unless she'd been drinking at the party beforehand. Why would she slip out?

I press open the door, breeze hitting my neck and sound pouring loud into the alley. She's to the left, practically in trash. Boxes and crates around her, barely standing, holding onto the wall for support.

"Granger?"

Her head swivels to me.

"Malfoy." Her tongue is thick. I see the wand in her hand and I let the door close behind me, moving to her.

"What are you doing out here?" she says, words sloshing.

"About to ask you the same question. I hope you're not trying to Apparate, Granger. You don't look like you're in any state."

A breeze in the alley brings the scent of her towards me.

"Why are you out here?" She blinks with heavy lids. Her pupils are unfocused. She's completely hammered.

"Just how many did you have at the retirement party?" I can't help the scorn in my voice, wondering where O'Connor is, wanting to smack him for letting her get into this state.

She takes large gulps of air. "How did you know I'd come out here? What do you want from me!" Her voice echoes around the stone walls, bouncing around the crates.

Her face is tight, almost afraid. I wonder for a moment if she's even talking to *me*. If she can hear me. Maybe this is an herb...

"What's wrong with you?" I ask. She mumbles something and holds up her hand before I can move closer to her. Her palm is cut, a thick bead of red slithering down her wrist. "You're bleeding."

I grab her wrist, pulling it to me. I'll have to heal it. Maybe *Tergeo* and then I can wrap my handkerchief —

A gasp. Her hand drops her wand and grabs for my throat. She rips her wrist from my grasp and pulls at my collar. She'll choke me. I step back, ready for an attack. Ready for an assault.

Her body flies into me, pressing against me, and dragging a hand through my hair and I stumble further, righting us and preparing to shove her back if she squeezes my throat. I suck in air, feeling my heart pounding.

My hands steady her hips, muscles ready to fight, and she brings her face to my neck, standing on her toes.

"Draco..." A whisper against my skin. Her fingers curl in my hair.

"Hermione Granger." A silky voice.

Hermione turned and found herself face to face with Katya Viktor. She felt rooted to the spot as Katya glided toward her. Katya smiled. Damn her. She was stunning.

"Hello..." Hermione tried to say more but was caught trying to figure out if Katya's eyes were hazel or honey.

"Hello, I'm Katya." White, white teeth. "I've so wanted to meet you." A perfectly manicured hand reached out, burgundy nails. Hermione shook it. "I'm a friend of Draco's."

"I... Yes, hello. I'm Hermione." How idiotic. And her nails were chipped.

"I've been dying to meet you, but Draco says you are so busy!" She laughed and the sound warmed the space. She lacked the harsh accent of Viktor Krum. "But, of course you are! You're Hermione Granger!"

"I… I am."

"I must say," and Katya moved her sparkly purse under her arm as she leveled an intent gaze on Hermione. "I have been following you very closely over the years. All of Durmstrang was so interested in the fifteen-year-old who had caught Viktor Krum's attention!" She laughed and touched Hermione's arm lightly. Hermione felt very stiff, and wondered if this was some kind of spell…

She continued, "But then I kept seeing your name in the papers and you were always doing something wonderful like saving a species, or you'd taken on dark wizards all by yourself and I…" She paused and shook her head. "I'm so sorry, I'm gushing! I've just so wanted to meet you."

Damn her. She was intoxicatingly lovely, too.

"I… Well, thank you. It's nice to meet you as well." She smiled and felt very dull. "I've heard so much about you."

"I'm sure that's a lie!" she laughed. Always laughing. "There's not much to hear!"

Katya pushed a lock of hair behind her ear.

Beautiful. Charming. Graceful.

Just then, she heard the door to the conference room open. She turned, and saw Draco's face at the very moment he realized that she and Katya were meeting. He paused with his hand on the door, coat tucked under his arm.

Prior engagement.

"Draco!" Katya cooed. Her voice was excited without the shrill quality that Hermione's could get. "Look who I finally got to meet!"

She watched as Draco opened his mouth, looking between the two women in the hallway. Eyes neutral, with a smile that didn't pull his cheeks.

"Wonderful," he said. "Granger, this is Katya."

With his eyes still on his notes, his mouth opened. “What other *secrets* did my father spill to you.”

She blinked. He assumed Lucius told her about the blood on the wall. How strange. It was a week and a half later, and Draco was still trying to piece together her conversation with Lucius. Then she remembered he wouldn’t get a chance to ask his father directly until December. One visit a month.

“Your father didn’t tell me anything about that,” she said, and his eyes flipped up to her. “You told me not to go home. So, of course, I went.”

He frowned at her as a knock rapped on the door.

“Hey, Malfoy.” Harry stepped into the room, looking down at paperwork in his hands. He looked up, seeing Hermione there. “Oh, uh… You’re helping again?”

“Robards sent for me,” she responded. She sent Harry a look that said, “I’m fine.”

“Er, well. There’s been another message intercepted.”

Draco and Hermione jumped from their chairs and raced for the pages in Harry’s hands. Hermione grabbed it first and held it in front of her, reading over the scribbles and piecing in the details they’d gleaned from the other messages. She could feel Draco reading it over her shoulder.

“Well, this fits with the Northwest Germanic, but this over here fits the Scandinavian.”

“We’d ruled out the Scandinavian,” Draco said. “It must be the Germanic.”

“But now that we have this, we can’t rule out Scandinavian.” Hermione ran back to the table to start cross-referencing her notes, while Draco plucked the message from her hand.

“Oh,” she heard Harry say. She looked up, and Harry was looking at the Rune Wall. “You… made a Wall.”

“Does she do that a lot?” Draco asked Harry.

Harry looked at him with a smile. “It’s a recent thing.” Hermione looked up at him, and he was giving her a mischievous grin. “Are you two pausing for lunch?”

She saw Draco check his timepiece and she did the same. Ten past noon.

“Oh, er, yes,” she said. “I suppose so.”

Draco quickly returned to his chair, organizing notes.

“Café?” Harry said. And Hermione could see the croissants dancing in his eyes. She nodded and Harry turned to Draco. “Malfoy? Are you hungry?”

“Thank you, but, no. I have a prior engagement.” Draco made a final note and began packing up.

She told him she’d see him after lunch, and left the room with Harry, who rushed off to set down his paperwork and grab his coins. Hermione wandered to Katie Bell’s desk to see if she was still there.

I’m taut. I’m still. Waiting for the joke. Waiting for the attack.

A soft touch on my neck. A moan. And her lips open, sucking.

My lungs won’t operate. My hands are frozen, gripping her hips. She gasps against my neck and kisses my jaw, her tongue pressing against me.

A shiver from my stomach outwards, and the current runs to the tips of my fingers. I squeeze. She moans.

Her chest pressed against me, gasping for air, pushing her breasts into me. My hand slides around to pull her hips tight to me, and my other whispers up her spine, under her hair, her curls tickling my knuckles. My fingertips find her neck, and she groans into my skin, sucking my neck like she’s starved.

This isn’t right. She’s not...

Her hips move, pushing forward.

My eyes roll back in my head. “Granger, what are you doing?”

My arms are shaking, trying to keep from pushing, from moving too fast for her. I feel her lips skim my jaw, and I wonder how close she’ll get. I turn towards her, impatient.

She shoves me, pushing me off balance, and we both stumble. She hits her head against the bricks.

“What did you do to me?” she demands.

Quite the opposite, Granger. I refocus on her, on her question. “What?” My voice is thin, panting.

“Why are you doing this?” Her lip trembles. I feel my arousal fade.

“Granger?”

She’s scared. I’m looking for clues. Her skin is red and overheated, her mouth is open and panting. She still looks like she wants me. And I feel acid in my throat that she’s terrified of it. Ashamed.

Especially with the way she looks at you. Katya had said...

She starts to fall over. I jump to catch her, both hands on her waist. She gasps.

She’s drunk. She’s drunk and doesn’t know what she’s doing anymore.

I take in her dilated eyes, and her gasping lips. Her head drops to the side, like it’s too heavy for her neck.

This wasn’t drunk.

“What’s happened to you?” My voice is loud. I lift her head, and her throat clicks on the air. She groans and the sound drifts through my ears, down my chest and twists to my cock. Her hand comes up to press over mine, holding my palm against her face. She grabs my shirt with her other fingers, twists her head into my hand, and begins sucking on me, right over my veins. Her tongue laps and disappears.

"Oh, god, Draco."

She looks up at my face, her eyes glazed over in lust.

Especially with the way she looks at you.

Would she let me? I could press against her in this quiet alley, push my knee between her thighs, slip my fingers up her skirt. I could lift her, step into her hips, drag her legs around my waist. I could press my lips to her neck, tasting her, drifting to her mouth.

Would she let me?

My hand is still on her waist. I'm dizzy with want. I press my hand beside her head, her eyes staring up at me as she sucks on my wrist.

She's in my arms finally, kissing my skin and clutching me, and begging me.

"Granger..." I breathe against her face. My fingers curl against the bricks.

"Stop! Don't do this!" She releases me and pushes.

I jump back, panting. So close.

I hold my hands up, fingers shaking, hoping she doesn't look past my waist where my cock is straining.

"Why did you follow me out here?"

"I saw you exit."

She stares at me, confused.

"What did you give me?" she hisses.

"Give you?" I narrow my eyes at her. She can finally make coherent sentences but her words make no sense.

"What did you put in my drink, Malfoy?!"

I frown at her. Put in her drink. I open my mouth to say "nothing," to ask her to clarify.

But her behavior. Falling over. Touching me. Kissing me. It was all wrong.

Behavior modification. Lust potion.

Potion.

Marcus. I look to the door I came through. Why would he...

"What is it? How do I stop it?" Her voice brings me back. I look at her just as she starts to fall over again. I move to her. "DON'T TOUCH ME!"

I freeze. I wait for her to right herself.

"Why did you poison me? What do you *want?"* she asks.

I poisoned her. I poisoned her and came out here to... That's what she thinks. And I almost did. Drunk or not, I almost did.

My stomach tenses. I'm going to be sick.

How could I ever think that she would let me?

As he talked, explaining his progress and his current questions, he pointed at piles of paperwork with long fingers and gestured to the runes book, and Hermione was struck again at how good he was at this. How easily he took charge of a room and presented a problem, presented solutions, and presented a course of action.

But he hadn't looked at her once.

After thirty minutes of Draco returning to what he was reading when she walked in, and Hermione starting from the beginning, reading through the notes and reports from the first interceptions forward, she threw down her quill, pulled her wand and turned to the wall at the far side of the room. She removed the "inspirational" pictures and the plaques, pointed her wand at the table and pasted the messages on the wall, in order.

As one flew out of Draco's hand, he said, "What are you doing?"

"Trust me. It's very helpful."

Several hours and dead ends later, the Rune Wall had expanded and now had a life of its own. She and Draco generally worked in silence unless one of them had a new thought. She was in the middle of listing all the different possible translations for one rune set, when she realized that the hairs at the nape of her neck were standing on end. Draco was watching her. She swallowed and continued writing until his voice shattered the silence.

"It was a mission. From the Dark Lord."

She gathered herself before tearing her eyes off the page and looking up at him. "What kind of mission?"

He was leaning back in his chair and if she didn't know any better, she'd assume he was slouching. But she knew Malfoys didn't slouch.

"The worst kind." He clenched his jaw. She didn't dare ask him what that meant.

"So, after finding an empty house… you decided to do some redecorating?"

He swallowed, and she watched his throat move. His eyes cast down on the papers in front of him.

"That was Yaxley's design."

Yaxley. He wasn't alone.

"But your blood?"

He gave the table a rueful smile. "Why spill his own?"

She was realizing she had no idea what "truth" looked like on him. Not that he'd always lied, but she just had no previous conversation to draw upon. But there was something here not being said.

She watched his eyes, followed the path of his straight nose, down to his tight lips, found the tension in his jaw.

To buy, to sell, to save.

As she hopped in the lift she was still trying to decipher Aiden's invitation. Was it a date? Was it a small group? Did she even want to go?

She waved to Katie Bell as she exited the lift with a gesture that said "I'll come by later," and headed to Robards' office.

"Miss Granger!" Gawain Robards stood from his desk. "We're so honored that you would assist us again this week."

Hermione's eye twitched hearing "this week" instead of "today."

"Good morning, Mr. Robards," she said, shaking his hand. "I'm honored to be asked."

"We've got more of those runes popping up, and I'd prefer having those whose minds are still bright with their Hogwarts educations to work through them, then those of us who are thirty years behind or so!" He patted his chest.

Hermione smiled. She could possibly see working for Mr. Robards. They had a good rapport and he seemed to get along well with Harry.

"I must confess, Miss Granger," he continued, "that Mathilda did mention that you are looking into applying for new positions."

"Yes, I am thinking of making a change."

"Well, I hope you keep us in mind. Draco Malfoy's position will be open in December, and we need someone just as bright and analytical to step in."

Hermione smiled and told him she was thinking about it. She still had hope – foolish hope – that she would be directed somewhere other than the conference room at the end of their meeting, but of course, Robards bid her a good day and told her Mr. Malfoy would fill her in.

Hermione dragged her feet to the conference room. She knocked, out of politeness, and opened the door to find Draco standing over the table, creating piles of paperwork on the table, quill bit between his teeth, hair falling into his eyes. He looked up at her and she cursed him. But he was surprised to see her. He removed the quill from his mouth.

"Robards summoned me."

He looked away and scratched his jaw. "I told him I had it under control."

Hermione stood in the doorway. "Well, I'm here now."

She took a breath and moved to set her notes and quill on the edge of the table. Draco clenched his jaw and moved aside for her to join him in looking at the paperwork. He explained that the D.M.L.E. had been intercepting messages passed in Knockturn Alley and other disreputable locations that identified the location of dark object trades or meeting spots. Similar to the other cases she and Draco had worked on, they had begun using runes to communicate to throw off the Aurors. Robards was interested to know if these messages were related, if there was someone "in charge."

I'm about to excuse myself, tell her I'll go get O'Connor when the door opens again and there he is.

"There you guys are!" She closes her eyes. "We're talking about heading to the pub down the street. What do you think?"

I wait. I wait for her to ask him to call the authorities. I wait for her to tell him that I tried to be with her when she clearly had been drugged.

It was so clear now. Slurred speech. Falling over. Stumbling towards me. And I hadn't cared.

"What's going on?" O'Connor prompts us.

Her wand is on the ground between us as well. A snapshot of this moment is all the D.M.L.E. would need. *Former Death Eater Assaults Golden Girl.*

I hear her speak. "I… I had one too many." I look up. She's looking at me. "Draco caught me trying to Apparate home. And I'm in no state." She laughs a hollow sound.

I frown at her. What is she afraid of? Tell him the truth.

"Granger, you're such a lightweight!" O'Connor steps closer to her. She moves her hair back, and I'm disgusted by how debauched she looks, lips red and hair falling and tangling. O'Connor says, "You're cut?"

He reaches for her hand. I jolt, too late to keep him from touching her, from starting this whole thing again.

O'Connor's fingers wrap around her wrist. And the air is still. She doesn't move. She looks up at me, a new wave of anger rolling from her.

"I fell."

Why is it only me?

Marcus did this. His fingers in my hair at the bar, rough and unnatural, pulling hairs.

She's glaring at me still. O'Connor is guiding her away, laughing about her drunkenness. Her wand is on the ground still. She's in such a hurry to get away from me.

"Granger."

They turn. She takes it. O'Connor laughs.

The oaf wraps his arm around her and guides her to the Apparition point, and I wait until they're gone, itching to move. I hold onto the hate in her eyes. I haven't seen it in a while.

I yank open the side door to the pub, and my eyes scan until I find him. People are moving out of my way. Noelle is giggling next to him and I ignore her as she greets me.

I want to tear through him. I want to put my fist through his face, feeling the bones crack. But I should make sure –

He looks at me, grins and says, "That was quick."

I have him thrown against the wall in seconds. "What the fuck is your problem?"

People are scrambling away from me, and I hear Noelle gasp.

He laughs, his fancy new teeth cutting into his lips. “Come on, Draco! Why is it so hard to just enjoy yourself?” He shakes his head, like I’ve declined a smoke. I pull him away from the wall and slam him back into it, listening as his head cracks against the wall. Noelle screams.

“What is it?” I demand. “When does it wear off.”

He winces, and grabs my hands, pulling me off. “Merlin! The fuck, Draco!” He shoves me away. He pulls a vial out of his pocket and I snatch it from him. It has a few drops left. He says, “I made it myself.”

I’ll need to take it home. I’ll need to deconstruct it and find out what mistakes he made, potions expert or not.

“It should have worked.”

I look up and he’s examining me.

“Or,” he says, “maybe she’s just as frigid as we all thought?” He raises a brow. And I slam my fist into it.

He falls against the wall again, and I aim my other fist to break his new teeth. His head smacks back against the bricks and I hear the bartender yelling at us to get out.

“You stay the fuck away from her. I don’t want you to even *look* at her ever again.”

I turn, dodging several blokes who think they can throw me out. I grab Noelle’s arm and pull her with me. Her face is wide and horrified.

“Some things never change, huh, Draco!” He tosses after me. I feel the heat creep up my neck as we exit into the cold air.

~*~

Saturday, April 16, 1994

It was the Firebolt. It had to be.

I had the Snitch. I had it. Then Potter and his fancy broom actually outraced me.

I’m stomping back to the cabins. The entire house of Gryffindor is flooding the field, lifting Potter onto their shoulders.

“What the *fuck,* Malfoy??”

I turn and Marcus is running for me.

“I had it! You know I had it! He outstripped me!” I scream.

“That’s dragon dung!” He shoves me and I fall back, righting myself. I’m shocked he actually touched me. “You were *leagues* ahead of him. The only reason he beat you to it is because you were distracted.”

“Distracted? I wasn’t —”

“I *saw* you! Checking the Gryffindor stands, making sure your *girlfriend* was watching you dive.”

“My —? My what?” My eyes are popping out of my head.

Evan was fine. He was nice. He was quite handsome, really. But she’d considered him… an afterthought. They set up a time to meet up next month when he was in town again, but once the evening was over, she’d already forgotten what date they’d decided on.

Thankfully there had been no paparazzi around for the date. Hermione wasn’t sure which was worse though, Rita Skeeter’s version of events, or Ginny’s.

“And he told Amanda that it went well and he’s excited to see you again next month!” Ginny was pouring tea and forcing Hermione to relive the date Monday night.

“Oh, that’s nice. Yes, it was a lovely evening.” Hermione smiled.

“Lovely?” Ginny’s eyes sparkled as she set down a cup in front of Hermione.

“Yes, lovely,” she said. Ginny waggled her eyebrows at her and Hermione smiled. “I don’t know what you want me to say Ginny! Nothing exciting happened.”

“Well, let’s hope something exciting happens next month!”

Hermione sipped her tea and asked Ginny about the match that coming weekend.

The next day Hermione arrived at her desk to find a memo waiting for her. She put down her bags and opened it, praying.

Prayers not received. Robards wanted her assistance upstairs. Today… was not her day.

She knocked on Aiden’s cubicle wall. He was looking over a file and eating a plum.

“Oi!” He smiled. “The Golden Girl has arrived!”

She scowled at him. “Did you happen to get a notice from Robards this morning?”

“Nope.” He chewed. “Does he want your brilliant mind upstairs today?”

“It looks like.” She frowned at the note. “Well, I will see you later today, I guess.” She turned, heading for the lifts.

“Hey!” Aiden called. “Rosenberg’s last day is Thursday.”

“As in the day after tomorrow?” She blinked at him. “Already?”

“Yep,” he said. “She’s going to be having a little celebration at the café down the street after work.”

“Oh, very nice. Thanks for letting me know.” She tried to leave again, and his voice stopped her.

“Hey, er…” She watched him twirl his quill. “A few of us are thinking of heading to a pub or two after the shindig. Would you want to come with?”

There was something different about his eyes as he asked. She said, “On a weeknight?” and lifted a brow at him.

He smirked. “Come on. Live a little, Granger.”

She blinked at him. “I’ll… I’ll have to see how I’m feeling on Thursday. Maybe.” He smiled at her. “Thanks for inviting me.”

“Sure,” he said. “Have fun upstairs!”

The next week moved slowly. She only saw Draco twice. Once in the lifts the next day, looking exhausted and gaunt, and again on Friday in the Atrium. He caught her eyes both times, and she looked away.

That Saturday at Cornerstone, Morty brought downstairs a large box, letting her know if she found any extra time, he'd appreciate her stocking the new shipment. She opened the box and found the new Mattie McHandry werewolf book.

She closed her eyes and sighed. After stocking the shelves, she would have to notify those who pre-ordered the book. Including Narcissa Malfoy.

She dilly-dallied. She cleaned. She balanced the books. She tried to chat with the hag who stared at her with wide, violet eyes, and then scuttled away. Finally, she wrote to all others on the pre-order list. Once it was getting closer to five o'clock, she figured there was less of a chance that a Malfoy would stroll into Cornerstone within the next hour.

Morty's owl flew back in through the back window, and Hermione attached the very last letter to her leg. She'd written one letter from Hermione J. Granger, friend of Narcissa Malfoy. She'd crumpled that and tossed it. Then she'd written another from Cornerstone, with a post script from Hermione Granger, wishing Narcissa happy reading. She'd tossed that one, too. She settled on a generic letter, just as the last twenty or so pre-orders had received. There was no indication that the letter was from her, except for the fact that Narcissa knew Hermione's handwriting.

She watched the owl fly off and busied herself, peeking at the new book. Fifteen minutes later, Narcissa's grand owl flew in, dropping a note on the windowsill, and waited.

Hermione snatching up the note, praying that it didn't say "thank you, I'll be right in" or "Draco is going to drop by tomorrow."

Morty,

Thank you very much for letting me know that the McHandry book is in. Please send it back with the owl and bill it to the account.

Narcissa Malfoy

Hermione read it twice. The owl clicked its beak at her and she shushed it. It was addressed to Morty, even though she knew Narcissa recognized Hermione's handwriting. It also lacked the "Yours, Narcissa Malfoy" that Hermione knew to be Narcissa's signature. There was truly nothing wrong with the letter, but Hermione still felt like an ex-boyfriend had just asked her to box up his things and mail them.

Ginny forced her out on a date the following evening. One of the Harpies had a brother that was rather fond of books and was currently working on Centaur relations in Germany, and Ginny had managed to set the two of them up on Sunday evening.

He grabs my collar and drags me towards him. "She's not here for you," he hisses. "She's here for Potter."

My blood is pumping. "I —I have no idea what you're—"

"Get your head on straight, Draco, or I'll write to your Father. Tell him that every time Hermione fucking Granger is in the Quidditch stands, you can't keep your eyes on the Snitch."

He shoves me, and I stumble to the side, just as Severus approaches to talk to the team. I gape after him, breathing hard. Severus brushes past me, not bothering to help me up.

I look over to the crowd of Gryffindors. Wood is crying. Potter is holding up the Cup. And Granger is standing on the edge of the crowd with Weasley, jumping up and down.

I don't stare at her. I look down at my uniform, brush away the grass and dirt. I don't.

She's just always reading a damn book in the stands, doesn't take her eyes off it for anyone.

~*~

Thursday, November 18, 1999 - later

Noelle is screaming at me, but I can't hear her. She wrenches her arm from my grasp and stops in the street.

"What the hell, Draco!"

"Let's get you home," I try, reaching for her. She stands her ground.

"What is wrong with you?! *Brawling?"* She waves her hands about, hair tossing wildly. I don't have time for this. I need to get to my potions laboratory.

Possibly Asphodel.

A variant on Amortentia?

Where is the disorientation from?

Noelle is still yelling.

"—I mean, I hope that wasn't some *macho* display! Marcus and I were just *talking.* And besides, Draco, you have no claim on me!"

"Shut. Up." I hiss. "The world doesn't revolve around you. *You* had nothing to do with this. *You* are not important."

She blinks up at me, jaw dropping. I feel guilt, but then I think of Ashwinder eggs...

She glares. She says something about finding her own way home, and I'm so relieved when she marches away. I Disapparate on the spot, not caring to check if any Muggles are watching.

I pop onto the hill outside the Manor. The wind bites at me and I run through the lane, into the front door. I turn down the stairs towards our potions room. I take Marcus's vial from my pocket. There's three drops left.

I heat the cauldrons, and start the process of breaking it down, taking only two drops and saving the rest. I haven't done this in years. Haven't been in the room since before the war. It used to calm me. Now I'm hurried, and practically knocking beakers to the ground.

I was right.

Diluted Amortentia, with a variant on a warming potion. Causes the drinker to overheat, need to go outside...

Sneezewort for the confusion.

Porcupine quills to encourage the euphoria once in contact with the person whose hair has been added.

I cobble together an antidote. Something to ease the warmth, confusion, and euphoria. I add it to a Love Potion Antidote, boiling and stirring counter-clockwise.

I cork it, run upstairs, and out the door to the Appartion hill past our gate. I pop through to a street I'm not supposed to the know the name of, next to a flat I'm not supposed to know the address for.

I push through the front door, and I'm halfway up the stairs before I realize I have no idea how I'm supposed to do this.

The door opens when I'm three stairs away from the landing, and Potter exits, shrugging on his coat. My foot hovers over the next step, and he freezes when he catches sight of me, hand on the doorknob.

He looks inside, and shuts the door, turning hard eyes on me. He presses his lips together.

I swallow. "How is she?"

No response. He looks me up and down, and for the first time in all my years knowing him, it's clear to me that this is the man who defeated the darkest wizard of our time. Twice.

I take a shaky breath. I pull the vial out of my pocket. "If she continues having symptoms... if she's still dizzy or overheated, she can take this —"

He shoves me.

I'm flying backwards, hands grasping for the railing, knees rolling over my head as my back lands against the stairs, righting myself before I continue down. I'm at the bottom of the stairwell, on my ass. I look to the top of the stairs.

Potter's crackling with magic.

"Do you think," he begins, descending upon me, "I would *ever* let her drink anything you brewed for her again?"

"I didn't brew it." It hurts to breathe.

He stops two steps from me.

"Did you touch her? Place your hands on her?"

The pain in my back could be a cracked rib. I have to pull my neck back to look up at The Boy Who Lived.

"I didn't mean to —" I hear my voice, cracked, and wet. He's blurred above me, and I know I'm about to fucking cry in front of Harry Potter. "I didn't know she was..."

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Twenty

It would be another three weeks before Harry's shift guarding the filing room of the Wizengamot Administration Services office. He refused to switch shifts, as it would arouse too much suspicion. And Harry made it very clear that *suspicion* would not be tolerated.

"I would not only be fired, I would be put on trial for this, you know."

"We know, we know." Ginny was practically dancing in her chair.

"Come on, Harry," Hermione said. "We've done worse." She winked at him.

"Yes, but that was for good! This is just… selfish."

"Okay," Ginny said. "You go ask Draco Malfoy what his deal is."

Harry rolled his eyes. He told her that it was possible there would be nothing useful left in the Admin office. Once the memories were examined, and final determinations made from them, they were transferred to the Department of Mysteries. You could only retrieve a memory from the Department of Mysteries with the permission of the Minister of Magic.

"But his trial was months ago," Ginny said. "Will there still be memories of his that haven't been reviewed?"

"Oh, yes," Harry chuckled. "We may have magic, but we're still the government. Everything moves slowly. His memories of the night Dumbledore died probably won't be there, probably examined immediately, but anything else pertaining to upcoming Death Eater trials might still be stored."

Hermione nodded, chewing on the inside of her cheek. What exactly was it that she hoped to find?

"Well, the Wizengamot got to review the memories he provided. Those might have had some answers." Harry chewed, looking down at his plate.

"Memories?" Hermione said.

"Yeah," Harry said with a full mouth. "He provided memories the day he was released. The testimonies and the memories were the sole reasons he got off. Memories either proving his innocence or condemning other Death Eaters." He looked up at them. "I told you that."

"No," Ginny said. "I don't think you did."

"Oh." Harry shrugged. "Well, good. I shouldn't have. Shouldn't *be*!"

"And where are these memories now?"

Harry spun another bite of pasta onto his fork. "Probably in the Wizengamot Administration Services office, filed for review."

Ginny looked at Hermione. She raised a brow. Hermione could feel her heart beating and she didn't know why.

"And," Ginny said slowly, "What security measures are in place in the Wizengamot Admin office? Curses? Passwords?"

"Rotating passwords and a two-Auror shift." Harry wiped his mouth. He grabbed for his water glass.

"And," Ginny said, "When is your shift?"

Harry looked at the two girls over his water glass. His eyes wide, then weary.

He set the glass down, scowling at the table. "Oh, bollocks."

But I can't continue. Because I did know. She was stumbling. And slurring. And when she grabbed for me, I grabbed her back.

I sniff, looking away, breathing into my broken chest.

"She won't talk about it. She just says she was slipped a drugging potion, and tried to throw herself at you," he says. I crane my neck to look up at him, the light in the stairwell a halo behind him. "Did you take advantage of her? Did you—?"

"No," I cough. "Not like that. I didn't... We stopped. She stopped." I wheeze in air. I want to stand. I want to leave. But I don't know how badly I'm injured. And I don't want to find out in front of him.

"You have a love bite on your neck," he says. I stare at him, and bring my hand up to it, and see a bruise on my wrist. "Is that from her?"

"Yes."

I stare at my wrist, like I can see the mark turning purple before my very eyes.

"She's unmarked," he says, voice quiet. "Ginny checked while she helped her get into the shower."

I look up at him, and nod.

Potter pauses, thinking. He leans down and plucks up the vial that clattered to the stairs as I fell. "What is this?"

"It's a mixture. Love Potion Antidote, with something to fight her dizziness, overheating, and confusion."

"She doesn't have any of those symptoms," he says. "She's just crying and vomiting."

That stings. As much as I hate myself now, I'm tempted to never launder this shirt again, so I can keep her smell on it. But she's getting rid of my taste, squeezing it out of her like acid.

I just shake my head. "Okay."

I bite down on my tongue, and start to lift myself up. Potter stands, still two steps up, and watches as I drag myself up to stand.

I can't meet his eyes.

"Broken rib?" he says. His voice is softer.

"Maybe." I start to turn. He pulls his wand.

A diagnostic spell. The two of us stare at the cracked rib. He gestures for me to turn around, and casts a *Brackium Emendo*. My bones pop. I grind my teeth to keep from yelling out.

"Thanks."

I start for the door.

"The two of you..." he starts. I stop. "You're toxic." It's less accusatory. It's sad.

I look back at him, a grim smile.

"You have no idea, Potter."

I leave, sore around the middle, and every place I hit on the way down.

~*~

Friday, November 19, 1999

It's 4AM when I make it back to the front gate of the Manor. I slink up the stairs to my room, and head for my bathroom. The lights bright against the walls, and I turn to find my mirror.

A large bruise against my jugular. Small kisses along my jaw. And a thick mark against my wrist. Split skin from where my knuckle connected with Marcus's face. I pull my wand, to heal them or hide them. And I see red streaked and dried through the hair at my temple. I turn my head to look at it in the mirror.

Her blood, from her hand. The same hand that wound into my hair with strong fingers.

Oh, god, Draco.

I close my eyes. It's ridiculous really, to think that she'd want to embrace me like that. That I let that happen. I start to laugh. I laugh until my sore back hurts. I slip off my shirt and do exactly what I thought I might. I tuck it away in my closet drawers next to a box of newspaper clippings.

I bathe and get ready for the day, heading in at 6AM. I see the bruises on my way out, and the shame they give me is a bit of a comfort. A reminder that it happened.

It's my fault that it happened at all. If I had been more careful around Marcus. If I'd steered him away from her sooner. If I'd concentrated more while searching for the Snitch.

And maybe it will be good for my image to have hickeys on my neck. I laugh an exhausted chuckle.

I take my work into the conference room.

Hours later, the door opens. And there she is. She looks tired. And pale. She shuts the door behind her.

Is she insane? The potion is still in her system.

She stands at the door, holding her head up high.

"I'm sorry I accused you of drugging me last night," she says. I set down my papers, and look down at the desk. "I had… I had just figured out what was happening when you stepped outside. I thank you for coming out to check on me, but I know now that your intention was not to follow me out to… I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions. I was scared."

I nod. I reach for the vial containing one last drop of Marcus's potion that I brought in, intending to do Merlin-knows-what with. I toss it to her, afraid to get within reaching distance.

She catches it, miraculously, and I almost laugh.

"Ashwinder egg, asphodel, and several other things," I say, listing off the research I'd done. "Its effects should be a slow heating process, followed by dizziness and disorientation, and

Harry nodded, and said, "I allowed you to come with me when I returned home."

He stepped back into the kitchen, and she heard a pot bubbling. She stared at the spot he disappeared, thinking of Godric's Hollow, until she heard Ginny's pattering feet lead her back out into the living area.

"Muggle-Repelling Charm. Why?" Ginny resumed her pace.

Hermione shook off the guilt and turned to the ginger. "I… I don't know."

"And you didn't place one when you left?"

"No, I assumed the house would sell," she said, picking up her cup again. "It's possible that the charms I placed on my parents caused them to pack up and leave without thinking of placing the house on the market. I made it clear that they needed to move to Australia within the week."

Harry appeared from the kitchen, levitating three plates of pasta and vegetables. He set them on the table. "Perhaps we could stop talking about the… blood on the wall." Harry nodded to Ginny, who was pacing, cracking her neck.

Hermione's mind brought forward the image of the blood outside Moaning Myrtle's Bathroom. *The Chamber of Secrets has been opened*. The bloody letters Ginny had written while possessed. Hermione had forgotten and had dragged her through this again.

"I'm not a flower, Potter." Ginny scowled at him and sat at the table. "I want to figure this out just as much as she does, so let me help."

"No, Harry's right. We can let it rest for a bit." Hermione grabbed up her napkin and started eating. There was silence.

"What did he say when you asked him?"

She looked up. Ginny wasn't eating. She was scowling at the table.

"Nothing. I mean, it wasn't really a question. It was more of a… punctuation." She smiled. "I didn't expect an answer."

"Do you think he'd tell the truth if you really asked him?" Harry said.

"No," Ginny and Hermione said at the same time.

Ginny stood and paced again. Harry sighed.

"He said he didn't know about your meeting with Lucius?" Ginny said.

"No. He said he would have stopped it if he had."

Ginny rubbed her forehead. "This is maddening!"

Hermione laughed. "Believe me, I know. But let it go, Ginny. Eat."

"I want to know what's going on in that stupid blond head!" Ginny stomped. Hermione smiled.

"It's a shame we don't have any contacts on the Wizengamot." Harry brought his fork to his mouth, twirling pasta.

Ginny and Hermione looked at him. "Why?"

"Why is your blood on my living room walls?"

His mouth had stopped mid-word, and he blinked at her, eyes dancing back and forth between hers. She pinned him with her stare, not giving in. She watched as his jaw clicked shut, and he swallowed.

"Miss Granger?" The portly man poked his head out the door. "Are you ready?"

"Quite." She stepped off the wall and clicked her way toward the oak door, leaving Draco behind.

"Tell me again what it said."

Hermione sighed and rubbed her forehead. She sat at the dining table while Ginny paced the living room, wringing her hands. Harry was cooking dinner in the kitchen, occasionally piping in. She'd forgotten how exhausting "team-research" was. She had to continue to re-tell and re-explain bits and pieces that came so easily to the front of her mind.

"*Mudblood, You can run, but* ***they*** *can't hide.*"

"And how big were the letters?" Ginny changed her pacing path and twisted around the coffee table.

Hermione spread her hands apart, indicating the size. Harry popped his head out of the kitchen to look.

"That's too much blood," Harry said.

"You're telling me!" Hermione laughed.

"No, I mean…" Harry stepped out of the kitchen, sauce spoon in hand. "*Draco Malfoy* cut open his precious skin, split his precious vein, and lost that much of his precious blood? For what? Just to scare you?"

Ginny was nodding and pacing, looking at the floor. It was odd having her here in Ron's place. Usually Ron just sat still, eating, until Hermione figured it out all alone.

"And that was all?" Ginny said.

"I searched the rest of the house and couldn't find any other messages. There were no curses. Just the Muggle-Repelling Charm."

"I need to look at the Wall." Ginny scratched her head and changed her pace to a direct path to Hermione's room.

Harry disappeared back into the kitchen. Hermione picked up her coffee cup, about to take a sip when Harry reappeared, frowning at the floor, arms crossed.

"Ginny might have been out of town, but I was here." He looked up at her. "You shouldn't have gone alone. We're still a team."

Hermione blinked. "I… I'm sorry. I just…" She looked down. He was disappointed. "I wanted to return home by myself."

eventually lust when touched by the person whose hair has been added to the potion. It was Flint."

She glances back at me, like she already knew this. "And he used your hair, and not his own?"

I have to look away from her.

"Marcus has very interesting ways of amusing himself" is all I say. My eyes are on my paperwork again.

"Thank you for coming outside to check on me," she says. "And thank you for not… taking advantage of the situation."

A tight breath escapes me, like a laugh. My lips twist.

"I must have a different definition of 'taking advantage of the situation.'"

"It could have been a lot worse last night," she says.

I hear her leave. I nod at the empty room.

Yes, it could have been worse... if she hadn't come to her senses both times we came into contact.

I would have pressed up against her, pinned her between myself and the wall. I would have turned her face towards me with the hand already on her cheek, claimed her lips, and pushed my hips into her. I would have tasted her, twisting my tongue around hers and opened her blouse, button by button until I could kiss my way down her chest. I would have dipped my fingers beneath her knickers, and forced her to ride my hand as I palmed at her chest, mouth silencing her groans. When her climax ripped from her lips I would have let it bounce around the alley, against the dirty crates and empty boxes, before I tore her knickers off and unbuttoned my trousers, forgetting how much I wanted to lay her down for our first time, looking down on her.

I would have lifted her, wrapping her around me as I sank into her, trapping her body against the bricks and while she moaned from the potion, I would have touched her just before I came inside of her, playing with her clit until she screamed, clenching me, holding onto me, and gasping for me all because of a case of bad timing and Ashwinder eggs.

Potter comes by the conference room at lunch. I stare at him, waiting. He brings over a cup of tea, and sets it down on my desk before heading out. I shake my head at him.

"I heard a rumor once that the Sorting Hat almost put you in Slytherin, Potter."

He turns and nods.

I take a sip. Honey.

"You wouldn't have lasted a day."

"No, I was ill." She stared at the opposite wall, keeping her head high. "Was Morty able to help you?"

He was silent. And she was sure if she looked at him, he would be scowling at her.

So he'd come to Cornerstone the day after she'd fled from his house, refusing to marry him. A voice in her head chuckled at the bare bones of the situation. What had he wanted from her? Another book giftwrapped for another girlfriend?

From the corner of her eye she could see him turn his body toward her, crossing one ankle over the other.

Or maybe to apologize? Or to clarify? Or to confuse her further. Probably the last.

"I heard you went to see my father."

She closed her eyes. Co-worker. Co-worker. Co-worker.

"I did," she said. "It was very nice of him to want to meet with me."

She was about to elaborate. To lie, or to ghost over the truth, or to stick to the forty-five seconds of pleasant conversation Lucius and she had had, but she remembered the blood on her walls. She didn't really owe him anything. She heard Draco's knuckle pop to her right. And the silhouette of him pushing his hair back.

He was agitated. Oh, how delicious.

She kept her eyes straight ahead and said nothing more. He pressed a hand against the wall, uncrossing his ankles.

"And you had a nice visit?"

"Perfectly nice." She thought about examining her nails in his presence, but thought that might be too callous. "I'd never truly met him." She turned to look at him, and with a falsely pleasant look in her eye, said, "You're very similar."

His left eye twitched, and she thought of the paper in her wastebasket at home, adamantly stating how much Draco wanted to distance himself from his father.

The corner of her mouth pulled up even as she tried to stop it. He saw, and clenched his jaw. He stepped forward.

"If I'd known about the meeting, I would have stopped it."

She held his eyes. He was three paces from her, but she could feel the air tightening in the hallway, just like last time.

"My mother likes to meddle in things she has no business in. I apologize that you got wrapped up in it."

An apology? For what? For the unwarranted proposal? For the stress of sitting down with Lucius Malfoy in the first place? For the entire false relationship with Narcissa Malfoy? There were still no answers from him.

"I don't know what he said to you, but—"

When the gates opened and revealed Aiden O'Connor midway through biting into an apple, Hermione decided it was her lucky day.

"Hey!" Aiden mumbled around his apple. "Malfoy, great article today. That's exciting, isn't it?"

"Thank you, yes." His voice was strained. Aiden continued talking, his strongest trait.

When the lift slowed again for the Atrium, and Aiden was still talking, Hermione almost grinned. Almost over.

Aiden stepped out, and looked over his shoulder. "Getting out here?"

"No, I'm heading down to the Wizengamot," Draco said. Shit shit shit.

"Er, same." She said.

Aiden waved, and bit into his apple again as the gates closed and they descended.

She heard Draco take a breath to speak, and she cut him off.

"It was an excellent article, really," she said. "Skeeter did a wonderful job introducing Malfoy Consulting Group to the Wizarding World."

She didn't look at him.

"Thank you."

"And congratulations on Witch Weekly." She chuckled.

The lift arrived at Level 10. He held the gate open for her. She kept her gaze straight ahead, on the oak door at the end of the hall. Their shoes echoed against the stones, and she wondered if he was early or late for his appointment with the Wizengamot. Because she was five minutes early.

Please, don't let them stand here for five minutes, waiting for her name to be called.

He was watching her again. They stopped about three quarters of the way down the hall, roughly in the same spot they'd been the last time they'd shared the hallway.

The last time, she regretted standing across from him, forced to face him and look at him or look at the ground. He stopped and leaned against the wall to the right. She decided to join him on his wall this time, a few feet down.

This was so much worse.

She couldn't see him. She could feel him, feel him watching her.

The last time they'd shared this hallway he'd accused her of trying to free all of the Death Eaters, accused her of creating a Life Debt for testifying for him in Azkaban, pressed her up against this very wall and let hot air hiss from his lips about Auctions and galleons and virginities.

"You weren't at Cornerstone yesterday."

She felt her breath catch in her lungs. His eyes were on her, so she did not move and focused on breathing.

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Twenty One

Wednesday, she and Draco worked in silence for the majority of the day. She stopped at the café for a cup of coffee on her way up, and when she arrived at the Level 2 conference room, she saw Draco quickly vanish the coffee cup he'd brought up with his tea for her.

Thursday, they needed to talk to each other more. They couldn't land on any definite answers on the runes case, so they prepared reports for Robards, listing the possibilities. She headed back to Level 4 with thirty minutes left of the day, hoping for some time at her *own* desk before heading out.

Once she'd settled into her cubicle, Aiden knocked.

"Hey, long time, no see," he said. She smiled, politely. "Are you still interested in meeting up for drinks tonight?"

"Yes, definitely," she said, moving paperwork around. Ginny had slipped a tube of mascara into her bag just for the occasion. "I will meet you over at Rosenberg's party, though. I want to try and get a few things done at my desk."

"Great," he smiled at her. "I'll see you soon then!"

She stared at the spot he'd vacated. It was worth a shot. She might as well see if she could stand him outside of work.

She worked for a little while, listening to people bid each other goodnight, and when she checked her watch it was half past five already. She quickly closed up, making notes, and was glad she was not needed to finish the reports with Draco tomorrow, because this pile was ridiculous.

She conjured a mirror and attempted brushing the black goo on her eyelashes, and then headed out. She arrived at the café after the group had already ordered food. Aiden waved her over and directed her to a chair next to him that he'd saved for her, and she was pleasantly

surprised at how well Aiden included her in conversations, especially the ones she had no interest in.

She sipped on a glass of water, politely declining half of Aiden's greasy sandwich and French fries, and she found herself laughing more, trying to get to know her coworkers better. Aiden rested his arm around the back of her chair, but he didn't touch her shoulders or neck like Ron used to. She always found that so nerve-wracking.

Once the party began winding down, she bid Rochelle a happy retirement, and blushed when Rochelle asked her quietly if she might mind signing something for her granddaughter for Christmas.

Aiden steered her outside with another two Ministry coworkers she recognized and one of their girlfriends. They took a nice walk for several blocks, and Hermione took the opportunity to get to know the girlfriend better. All in all, it was a pleasant evening so far. That was the thought running through her head when Aiden guided her into the next pub, hand resting politely on her back, and managed to knock the shoulder of a blonde girl on the arm of Draco Malfoy.

"Sorry, love!" Aiden paused when he caught sight of her date. "Malfoy! Fancy running into you!"

Aiden launched into a verbose story about Rosenberg's retirement party as Hermione cursed her luck. She looked up at Draco and saw his eyes on Aiden's arm, still curled behind her back.

"O'Connor, Granger, this is Noelle," Draco said once Aiden was finished.

Noelle smiled and laughed for no reason whatsoever. Her blonde hair was cropped short and curled loosely around her face and she had a tiny button nose and blue eyes. Hermione thought she recognized her as one of Draco's tabloid dates in the past.

"Hi! Aiden," he introduced himself. "Nice to meet you." Aiden shook her hand.

"Hi, I'm Noelle." She was American. And vapid. She assumed.

"Hello," Hermione said. "I'm Hermione Granger."

"Oh, my gosh! You are??" Noelle's eyes lit up and she grabbed Hermione's hand to shake it. "This is so cool!"

Hermione's eyes flickered to Draco in time to see him take a deep breath and rub his temple.

Noelle was still talking. "We had news of the war in the U.S. too, and they would always mention the three of you! Ron Weasley and Harry Potter aren't here too, are they?" Noelle looked over Hermione's shoulder, as if she could wish them there.

"Er, no. I'm just grabbing drinks with coworkers tonight."

"Oh, Draco we *have* to stay now!" Noelle turned to Draco and grabbed his elbow. Hermione thought of white teeth and silky brown hair and tan long legs and suddenly was irrationally upset. How dare he do this to Katya. That angel.

Magical Accidents and Catastrophies before moving up to the Muggle Liaison Office and then over to D.M.L.E. for Misuse of Muggle Artefacts."

Mathilda smiled at her. These were all Ministers. *Minister*.

"It is wise, Miss Granger," Mathilda whispered, "to consider other departments as you move upwards. It will only help you in the end."

In the end. What was Hermione Granger's end?

"That is definitely something to think about Mathilda. Thank you."

"I wanted to let you know," Mathilda stood and began opening shelves, pulling files, "that Robards is quite impressed with you."

"Gawain Robards?"

"Yes," she said, dropping more files onto her desk. "Draco Malfoy will be leaving in December – excellent article in the paper today, by the way. Did you get a chance to read it?"

"Er, yes –"

"Well, Robards is looking to make Malfoy's position a full-time senior analyst position." She smiled at her. "He is hoping you will apply."

Senior analyst? That wasn't climbing the ladder. That was chopping off the first few rungs.

"Well, it's definitely something to think about," Hermione said, head spinning.

She thanked Mathilda for her time, and returned to her desk, thinking about the position. She'd get to work with Harry more often. And Katie Bell. But it would have nothing to do with house-elves or magical creatures. She'd just had her first success in current position with the Chimaera project.

She was still frowning, weighing the pros and cons at ten minutes until ten when she called the lift to head down to the courtrooms.

The lift arrived, gates opened and Draco Malfoy was leaning against the wall. Her blood ran cold. She'd forgotten all about him for three hours. How lovely was that.

His eyes held the same surprise and suspicion from the last time she'd seen him – at Malfoy Manor, as she was running. She set her jaw and joined him in the lift. As the gates closed, she could feel him, watching her.

What did he know about her meeting with Lucius? Did he know of Narcissa's plan? Or was he completely oblivious? What did Narcissa tell him after she fled? Did she tell him that Hermione had rejected him? And did that even matter?

Not her ex-fiancé. Her co-worker.

"Good morning," she said. It was overdue. There had been too much silence before she'd greeted him.

The lift slowed to stop at Level 5. She didn't know whether to curse since the ride would take forever if it stopped at every floor, or sigh if that meant there would be others joining them.

He Disapparated, and she was pulled out, back into the small storeroom.

She checked her timepiece, shaking. She had only been inside his memory for eight minutes. She sighed, relieved that she hadn't taken up too much time.

She quickly retrieved Draco's memory, poured it back into the vial, and recapped it. With shaking fingers, she replaced it in the cabinet, and before she could close the door, her eyes caught on another vial.

Malfoy Manor

March 30, 1998

Her hands stilled. The night they were captured. The night Bellatrix tortured her. The night Draco refused to identify them.

She looked back to the door. She had seven minutes. Maybe.

She snatched the vial, tipped the memory into the basin, and was inside Malfoy Manor within moments.

Draco sat in an armchair in the drawing room, reading a book. He was thinner, gaunt around the eyes. Lucius sat opposite him in another armchair.

Scuffling in the hallway. The hallway that Hermione had just run through weeks before. Narcissa entered, leading Greyback and Scabior, a band of prisoners moving slowly behind them.

Yes. This was the moment.

"What is this?" Lucius stood.

Hermione watched as Narcissa, moved toward Draco, asking him to identify them. Narcissa was thin, too. She moved quickly, and with less grace than Hermione knew her to have. Her voice was less silky, and her hands twisted around each other as she stood. Perhaps Lucius Malfoy's list of qualities did not apply to War.

"I can't – I can't be sure." Draco's voice was pinched. Hermione saw herself struggle against the binds, her hair wild. And Draco's eyes landed on the back of her head. He looked away quickly.

She watched as Lucius and Greyback squabbled about who would get the glory of finding Harry Potter, and then Lucius brought Draco back down to examine Harry's face.

"I don't know." Draco moved away from the prisoners and to Narcissa at the fireplace.

Narcissa was talking about the wand found on Harry, and then Greyback growled, "What about the Mudblood, then?"

The snatchers turned the group of prisoners around, and she found herself at the center of attention. Hermione saw the fear on her own face and had to look away.

Narcissa stepped forward, anticipation, identifying Hermione from the paper. Hermione felt betrayed somehow, even though she knew this is what had happened. She watched as Narcissa turned to Draco.

"Look, Draco, isn't it the Granger girl?"

Draco faced the fireplace. His back to the room. He mumbled, "I… maybe… yeah."

Hermione stepped toward him, trying to look at his face. It was neutral, looking into the fire. She looked up and Narcissa was watching him, hand still outstretched, gesturing toward the prisoners. Hermione watched as Narcissa's eyes scanned her son, and she brought her hand down. Narcissa stepped closer to him, and Hermione finally recognized her. Draco's mother had returned.

"—Draco, look at him," Lucius was yelling. "Isn't it Arthur Weasley's son – what's his name?"

"Yeah. It could be." Hermione watched him. Narcissa stepped closer to him, and turned her eyes on the prisoners. Narcissa opened her lips to speak to Draco, and before she could, a voice turned Hermione's veins to ice.

"What is this? What's happened, Cissy?"

This was a mistake. She should exit the memory now. She'd seen what she'd wanted to see. Her time was surely almost up.

Bellatrix Lestrange slithered into the drawing room. Hermione stood frozen as Lucius and she bickered about who was going to call Voldemort. Draco still faced the fire at her side.

Bellatrix had just noticed the sword. She was stunning the Snatchers. Hermione knew what came next. She turned, about to exit, to return to the room with the Pensieve, when she noticed that Draco was shaking. Narcissa placed a hand on his shoulder and he flinched.

"Draco, move this scum outside," Bellatrix said, gesturing to the immobilized bodies of the Snatchers. "If you haven't got the guts to finish them, then leave them in the courtyard for me."

Draco started to obey, but Narcissa steadied him. "Don't you dare speak to Draco like—"

"Be quiet!" Bellatrix screamed. "The situation is graver than you can possibly imagine, Cissy! We have a very serious problem!"

Draco had turned around when his aunt had summoned him. He still stood by the fire, but he now faced the room. The story was now reaching a part that she didn't really care to relive, but she couldn't take her eyes off of Draco. His eyes flitted about the room, not landing on anything in particular.

She heard Bellatrix order Greyback to take the boys downstairs. She turned to see herself standing in the center of the drawing room, being circled by Bellatrix. There was something slightly satisfying about watching this outside of her own body, like she could pretend it was someone else. Lucius had come to stand next to Narcissa near the fireplace, like he was giving

Bellatrix space. Hermione stood with all three Malfoys near the fireplace, thinking what an odd visual it must present.

"*Crucio!*"

She watched as Narcissa jumped and nearly brought her hands to her chest, before returning to her original position. Lucius pursed his lips. Draco's eye twitched, but he did nothing.

She was screaming. She didn't look at herself, but she knew she had dropped to her knees.

Bellatrix growled at her, asking about the sword. She heard her own voice begging. Then the electricity of the Cruciatus Curse again and her voice screaming.

Narcissa swallowed. The curse lasted longer this time. Lucius looked down, displeased. She continued screaming.

A gasp to her right, and Hermione turned to find Draco turning around, facing the fireplace again. He brought his hand up to the mantle to steady himself. His eyes closed, gasping for breath. His shoulders shook as he brought his other hand to his stomach. Eyes pinched closed, like before.

She watched as Narcissa stepped in to him. She moved slowly, afraid of being seen, and whispered, "What would Severus say?" Her voice was gentle, and her hand was on his shoulder, squeezing.

Hermione watched as Draco took a deep breath, released it, and opened his eyes. She watched his wall build, and recognized it this time as Occlumency. Draco turned back around and faced her limp body on the floor, as his aunt dropped to her knees, pulling her knife.

She watched as he remained immobile as she screamed again, this time due to the knife cutting into her arm.

Hermione looked to Narcissa, who had cast her eyes down, then past her to Lucius, watching Draco. He scrutinized his son, looking between Draco and her body on the floor. He had seen him break seconds ago. Lucius sighed, and brought his hand up to his brow, as if of all the people in this room, his problems were the heaviest.

The room started spinning. She was being tugged back.

The Admin Office closet swam back before her. Harry was there.

"Hermione. Time's up!" He was quickly gathering the silvery memory, dropping it back in the vial. She stood watching him, breathing hard. She could still hear her voice screaming and the echo of a gasp to her right. Harry looked back at her.

"Did it work? Did you get your answer?"

She turned to him, looking in his green eyes. She shook her head, trying to put it all together.

"He would have saved me."

He brought his hands away from his face, eyes still closed. He breathed in, slowly. He breathed out, opening his eyes, and he was transformed. She found the face that looked at her over Cornerstone's counter, asking her why she worked there and not Flourish and Blotts. The face that handed her a Butterbeer, sat down next to her, and almost explained to her why she was called the Golden Girl. The face that asked about her date with Rolf Scamander, that watched Aiden escort her off the lifts on his first day, that examined her as she yelled at an elevator full of people that she was not engaged to Ron Weasley. The face she couldn't decipher.

"All clear up here." His voice was smooth as he called downstairs. He turned to exit her bedroom and Fenrir Greyback was in the doorway. She gasped at the intrusion.

"This one was hers, yeah?" The smile on Greyback's face curdled her blood.

"Possibly." Draco replied. He tried to push past Greyback.

"Pity her scent isn't still here." He sniffed at the air. "I'm sure she's sweet. And ripe."

Hermione felt tears of horror spring to her eyes, and had to remind herself that Greyback was dead. She watched as Draco's left eye twitched, and then he continued past Greyback and down the stairs.

As Greyback followed she hurried around him to catch up to Draco. Yaxley and Dolohov were in the living room.

"Nothing down here."

"No scent of anyone. Must have been several months." Greyback's voice from behind her.

"Malfoy," Yaxley said, and Draco looked up at him. "Give me your arm."

Draco looked confused, but stepped forward, rolling up the sleeve of his left arm. The Dark Mark. Hermione had never seen it before on him. Yaxley laughed.

"Not that arm." Yaxley grabbed Draco's right arm and slit it open. Draco grunted in pain.

"What the fuck?" He pulled his arm back. "You dare spill Malfoy blood?" *There* was the Draco she recognized from school.

Yaxley sneered at him. "Don't mean as much as it used to, I hear." Yaxley pointed his wand at Draco's arm, then turned to the wall above her fireplace. She watched as the words appeared. When Yaxley finished, Dolohov laughed.

"Let's go," Yaxley ordered. Fenrir followed him out.

Dolohov stopped at Draco's side as he used his wand to heal Yaxley's cut.

"That's what you get for volunteering, whelp." Dolohov spit on the carpet at Draco's feet. Draco stood still and glared at him. Dolohov exited, and Hermione watched Draco take one last look at the wall, dripping with his blood. He turned and she followed him out.

The other three had Apparated away. Mr. Walters was moving his sprinkler. He gave Draco a strange look before returning inside. Draco glanced up and down the street, then turned back to her house, casting the Muggle-Repelling Charm.

Yaxley unlocked the door with his wand. Hermione thought there would have been more of a performance about it. It was a simple *Alohomora*, not blowing the door off the hinges. The door crept open and Yaxley moved through it slowly.

Hermione didn't understand. They were here to kill two Muggles. There were four Death Eaters here, and they were all ready for a fight. The label on the memory said December 24. Did they expect to find her there, visiting for Christmas? She and Harry were in Godric's Hollow…

She stepped through the threshold after Draco, listening to his breathing. It was just as she had found it when she'd returned – empty.

"Fuck!" Dolohov broke the silence, removing his mask. And then they sprang into action. Yaxley took the route into the kitchen, and Dolohov reluctantly followed. Greyback was sniffing the air in the entryway, but Draco pushed to the left, into the family room and ran for the stairs.

She wanted to wait, wanted to find out what happened to the wall above the fireplace, but knew she had to follow Draco. Follow the blood.

He removed his mask as he sprinted up the stairs – two at a time, like Ron used to do. Her short legs brought her halfway as he stopped at the top. She could hear Greyback behind her, following Draco.

Draco moved left, breathing hard, then turned abruptly as she reached the top of the stairs and she almost toppled herself to move out of his way as he choose right instead. Right, towards her childhood bedroom.

She followed him, and looked over her shoulder as Greyback reached the top of the stairs and turned left, toward her parents' room and the bathroom.

She was breathing hard, afraid for what she'd find, but knowing they'd find nothing.

Draco burst through the door. And she followed him inside. He stepped in, footsteps echoing off the empty room. She could hear Greyback entering her parents' room down the hall, and Dolohov and Yaxley opening cupboards and closets downstairs.

Draco spun around, and inadvertently faced her. Eyes wide, taking in the bookcases that were built into the closet – the reason this room was hers. His chest heaved for air.

And suddenly his eyes closed, his brows pinched, and he was doubling over, hands braced on his knees, catching his breath.

She watched him. Barely able to stand in her empty childhood bedroom, taking a moment to himself, unaware he was being watched.

He stood tall, bringing the heels of his hands to his eyes, pressing, breathing. She'd never seen him like this. And she wondered if this is what Harry witnessed in Moaning Myrtle's Bathroom.

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Twenty Three

She took a breath. The hard covers of the books dug into her palms, and she opened her eyes, staring at the wooden door to the hospital wing.

She should go back. Sit in the common room and just forget she ever had such a silly idea.

Footsteps from down the hall. She would look so foolish standing outside the infirmary clutching books to her chest. She quickly stepped inside and let the door shut behind her.

The mint green curtains were drawn on several beds, and Madam Pomfrey's office light was on. Someone was moaning at the end of the row, and Hermione peeked to find a first year holding his arm, eyes shut tight. She continued down the row, checking left and right. And in the fourth bed on the right, she found him.

His blonde hair was plastered down on his forehead, wet with sweat. His cheeks were pink with fever, and his brows were drawn together, but he was asleep. Relief flooded her veins, now that she wouldn't have to speak with him, to see his snarl and hear his taunts.

She stepped closer and saw that under the thin sheet pulled up to his chest, his pajama shirt was unbuttoned and open, and an angry red crack started just left of the dip in his collarbone, zagging down and disappearing under the sheet.

She gasped, and the sound ricocheted around the infirmary, dancing with the first year's moans. Pressing her lips together to keep silent, she reached and pulled the sheet down slowly. The line crossed his chest, cutting the other direction just under his heart, and sliced down across his belly. It glistened with the salve Pomfrey had slathered on him. Hermione's lip trembled.

"Come to finish the job, Miss Granger?"

She spun, dropping the sheet, and almost dropping the books. Severus Snape hovered at the foot of the bed, robes pulled tight as he crossed his arms. His black eyes studied her.

"I—I'm sorry. I was just… just delivering Malfoy's notes." He raised a brow at her, so she continued rambling. "He missed classes, and I know he's been falling behind, so I- I wanted to drop off a summary of the lessons, and anything in particular the professors said –"

"If you were assigned the task of taking notes for Mr. Malfoy, then what did Miss Parkinson bring by after classes today?" He nodded to a stack of papers and books on Malfoy's side table. Hermione blushed.

"Doodles and love notes, I'm sure." She refrained from sneering, and looked up into his dark features. "But if you, Malfoy's professor, would prefer ***Pansy Parkinson's*** *notes to mine, then I'm sure you believe them to be complete, and my notes – unnecessary."*

Snape's mouth twisted, and his hand shot out, requesting her papers. She blinked and handed over the book and notes. He flipped through her notes, examining them, and suddenly Draco's body seized. His back bowed and his hands pulled into fists. His legs kicked. Snape did nothing, but flipped a page.

"Is… is he going to be alright, Professor?"

Snape snapped closed the book and frowned at her. "Oh, how I love Gryffindor guilt." He turned to watch Draco as he whined, still asleep. "Yes. The counter-curse will need a few days to work its way through him. The dittany will stop most the scarring."

She watched as Draco's fingers clawed at the sheets, but his hands stayed at his sides. His wrists must be spelled to stick to the bed, she realized, and he must have been trying to claw at his wounds. His face scrunched in pain, and she itched to sit beside him and run her fingers across his tight face..

"Will that be all, Miss Granger?"

She jumped at the silky voice, and turned to find Snape dissecting her. Harry told her what it felt like when he entered your mind, so Hermione knew it was not Legilimency.

"Yes," she said, and turned to pass him.

"Unless you would like me to give Mr. Malfoy a message –?"

"No. I – thank you. I will head back to Gryffindor tower." She hurried to the door and flew through it, muttering to herself about foolish ideas.

"He would have saved me."

Harry stared at her blankly. "Okay..." He grabbed her elbow and guided her out of the room. "I don't really know what that means, but we have to go." He threw the cloak over her head and grabbed her invisible arm.

Harry led her out. She could hear her shoes clapping, feel her legs working, but she wasn't sure her brain was firing. She was still hearing the screaming and the gasp.

Harry locked the door with a combination of spells she didn't recognize. Her pulse racing. Footsteps down the hallway, and she gathered herself enough to cast *Silencio* on her feet. Harry leaned in to where he supposed her to be standing.

Hermione threw off the Invisibility cloak.

"You have ten minutes. Fifteen at *most*," Harry warned, before closing the door.

She turned to the cabinet containing current memories under review. She opened the door and found it was enchanted, growing to contain thousands of vials. She would waste her ten minutes just searching!

"Draco Malfoy." She hoped. And very slowly, about ten vials came forward from the depths of the cabinet. They hovered at the front.

She ran her fingers over the labels.

Antonin Dolohov
July 6, 1997
Malfoy Manor
Severus Snape and Lord Voldemort
Re: Alecto Carrow and Amycus Carrow
August 12, 1997
Malfoy Manor
Bellatrix Lestrange
December 23, 1997
Malfoy Manor

Her fingers were greedy to pour every memory in the basin and delve into Draco Malfoy's mind, but she knew she was there for a purpose. Her fingers stuttered over one in the middle.

Yaxley, Dolohov, Greyback
December 24, 1997
Granger Residence

She turned to the Pensieve, making sure it was clear of other memories. She unstopped the vial, dripped the memory in, and lowered her head to the surface without another thought.

She landed in front of her house at dusk. She could hear the Walters' sprinklers to her right. To her left, four masked Death Eaters, all staring at the front of the house.

She looked down. Next to her a white hand clutched a hawthorn wand.

Even though she knew the four men would not find her parents, even though she knew how this story ended, even though she knew they couldn't hurt her, Hermione felt the terror flowing through her.

On a silent cue that Hermione did not understand, the four men moved. Draco brought up the rear, possibly because of his status and age. Hermione figured that Fenrir Greyback was third in line from the snarling she could hear. She distinguished Dolohov and Yaxley by their heights. Yaxley was first, then Dolohov.

Hermione would come upstairs to Level 2 after lunch. She would make sure to be seen by several people, like Katie Bell, Anthony Goldstein, so that if something happened, her presence could be explained. She would wait for Harry in the small empty office just to the left of the lifts.

When Harry took his fifteen-minute break at 2:15PM, he would come and meet her. She would put on the Invisibility Cloak, and they would return together to his post. At 3PM, Rudolf Montgomery, Harry's assigned partner that day, would take his afternoon smoke break.

The plan went off perfectly. She had a minor heart attack trying to get from the small office in front of the lifts to the tucked away Admin office though. Harry bumped into Draco on their route back, and she flattened herself against the wall.

They exchanged pleasantries, and Draco asked about a file Harry was working on. Hermione found it quite strange how the two of them now communicated. When Draco walked away, Harry turned to where he supposed her to be.

"All good?"

"Yes," she whispered.

Harry led her to a large door at the end of the main concourse of cubicles. He held it wide so she could scurry through first. He made sure it locked behind him and led her down a corridor that hadn't seen much upkeep. They passed a few empty offices, the candles becoming more spread out the further they went. Less light.

"Just like the good old days, right 'Mione?"

They turned a corner and at the end of the hallway next to a lantern stood Montgomery. Behind Montgomery was a black door labeled, Wizengamot Administration Services File Room. Montgomery was a pimply twenty-five-year-old. Harry greeted him, and Montgomery asked him how his break was. They began chatting Quidditch, and Hermione leaned against a wall, trying not to tap her toes.

Montgomery finally took his break at 3:04PM. According to Harry, his smoke breaks lasted fifteen to twenty minutes, but he was trying to quit. There was no telling how long his break would be if he decided not to have a cigarette. And it was raining outside.

Harry waited for Montgomery's shoes to stop echoing off the stone hallway. Hermione was sure she heard the wood door open and close, but Harry waited ten seconds more.

He turned to the black door and began reciting several unlocking spells. He spoke the password and the door swung open.

Hermione's heart was racing. Harry lead her through, leaving the door open.

It was a small dark room, decorated like the Department of Mysteries. Black tiles and low lighting. He pointed to a cabinet in the corner of the room, waving his wand. A Pensieve appeared from the bottom shelf.

"Leave when it's safe. I'll come by later."

And Montgomery rounded the corner, tugging at his sleeves. "All good here?"

"Yep. Boring as usual."

The tang of stale cigarettes filled the hallway, and once Montgomery reached them, she slipped past, continuing through the maze she'd memorized.

She reached the main concourse of Level 2, and wound her way through the cubicles. She was having trouble catching her breath and wanted so badly to duck into an empty cube and take off the cloak, but she knew she couldn't just appear out of nowhere.

She zipped past Katie Bell's cube as she munched on a snack, and slowed as she passed the bottleneck near the conference room. The door was open.

Draco sat at the conference table. His back to the door. She stepped in, moving around the table to see him, creeping by his right shoulder and to the other side. His lips were turned down as he studied what looked to be a map.

He scratched his jaw.

She thought of him in her house. On the top of the stairs, he'd headed left first, then chose right. How had he known which room was hers?

She thought of him in her bedroom, bursting through the door, even though the house was empty. What did he hope to find? Or *not* find?

She thought of him in front of his fireplace, shaking, rebuilding his wall after it shattered.

She watched him now as he breathed deeply at the conference room table, sighing. His hair had fallen across his forehead and she wanted so badly to push it back for him.

She had tried to solve the enigma that was Draco Malfoy. And he felt as foreign to her as before.

In response, his eyes snapped up. He turned over his shoulder and looked at the door. He narrowed his eyes, brain working, listening.

After thirty seconds, he stood, and she held her breath. He moved slowly to the door, and she crept further from him. She watched as he poked his head out of the doorway, looking left, then right. He came back in, staring at the ground, thinking.

He looked up at her. She swore he did. But then his eyes glazed over her spot on the wall and he took a breath. He looked out the door again, a frown in his eyes.

Footsteps. "Afternoon, Malfoy!" Robards' jolly voice.

She watched as Draco smiled softly. "Afternoon, sir. Is Granger up here?"

Hermione gasped, and slapped a hand over her mouth.

"Granger? Er, no I don't think so. Did you need her?" Robards' form appeared in the doorway.

"No, no, that's fine. I just thought I'd seen her."

How. What?

"I can call her up. Have…" Robards lowered his voice. "Have things resolved themselves with you two?"

"Er, no. It's still best if we don't work together. Thank you."

Hermione blinked. She frowned at the ground. That would explain why she hadn't been summoned up for almost two weeks. Draco didn't want to work with her after the incident.

Robards bid him a good day. Draco stood in the doorway, eyes glazing. He inhaled again, looked out the door, cracked his neck, and returned to his chair.

She slipped out of the room, racing for the small office to the left of the elevators. She whipped the cloak off of her, gasping for air. She tilted her head toward her body, sniffing. She didn't wear a perfume. And she didn't have body odor – thank god.

The only thing she could smell was her hair. Her shampoo.

He would have saved her, *and* he recognized the scent of her hair.

Hermione sat down before she passed out.

She decided to take down the Wall that night.

It was time. She'd gotten the answers she was looking for when she first put up the Wall. She was just pulling down the newspaper clipping from her birthday – Draco visiting Lucius in Azkaban – when Ginny came home.

She burst into her bedroom, eyes wide with joy and curiosity, and then she deflated. Hermione nodded to her in greeting, and Ginny watched as Hermione placed the newspaper clipping back in her chest.

She didn't know what to say to her.

I was wrong. About everything.

I feel so wicked and guilty, having broken into his mind, into his heart.

I think Draco Malfoy might have cared for me.

I just watched myself be tortured. I can still hear myself scream.

She didn't know where to start.

Ginny took her in and looked to the Wall, now half bare. She frowned at the floor and moved to the other side, to the most recent articles and notes, and began taking them down, one-by-one, in silence until they met in the middle.

She'd finally began speaking to Ginny once the articles were taken down. There were handwritten notes that still needed to be vanished, like a mocking wallpaper. After she'd taken her through both memories, Ginny stared at her with wide eyes.

Thankfully Molly Weasley announced dinner right then. She sat next to Harry and watched Fleur quietly across the table during the meal. She held her spoon just like Narcissa did. She dipped her utensil into the stew, taking small bites, being careful not to spill. Hermione watched, and found herself mimicking the behavior. Every three spoonfuls, Fleur would bring her napkin to her mouth. It was hypnotic. She would have no moisture her lips, but she would still pat them all the same. Whenever Fleur would add to a conversation, she found the exact moment to do so for her voice to be heard. She never had an issue with another person talking over her. Hermione tried to find the trick to that, but it seemed to be an innate trait.

Hermione wondered how much of that was the Veela and how much was the charms mistress.

That Friday was the day Harry had his shift at the Wizengamot Administrative Services office. In forty-eight hours, she would have Draco Malfoy figured out.

Maybe.

She was beginning to doubt herself. Perhaps breaking into Draco's mind wasn't the best way to do this. She flinched at the thought of Draco ever finding out what she and Harry were about to do.

Was she becoming a Slytherin?

She shared a lift with Draco on Wednesday. He said good morning. He was so careful around her now, not looking at her, not touching her.

She watched him as other employees joined them in the lift, and he clenched his jaw, shifting to make space for them, but still finding a way not to touch her.

"You only have one more week left, yes?"

The woman in front of her managed to turn and look at her, but Draco still could not.

"Yes. Next Friday is my last day."

The lift stopped for several people to hop off.

"That's exciting," she said. "Is everything going swimmingly? With the consulting group?"

He swallowed, staring intently at the back of a bald man's head. "So far, so good. We're on schedule to launch January 1st."

"That's wonderful. Congratulations."

The lift stopped on Level 4. She turned over her shoulder as she exited. "Have a great day." She watched as Draco eyes flickered to her, wary and curious. He nodded. And the gates closed.

Oh, yeah. She was *so* doing this.

Harry outlined his plan in perfect detail. Hermione was shocked.

By Tuesday she could hardly make out the bruises on Draco's neck and wrist.

By Thursday she'd forgotten the taste of him.

And on the following Monday, the whisper of "*Granger*" across her ear had finally evaporated into the wind.

On Tuesday evening, she found herself at the Burrow. Bill and Fleur were visiting before they headed out of town for the entire month of December, and Molly was in quite a state, complaining because they had to schedule a weeknight instead of the entire weekend. Hermione was exhausted after work, and wished she could excuse herself from the evening, but Ginny threatened her, practically at wandpoint.

"Oh, no you don't, Granger." She tossed a sweater across her bed, looking for the perfect outfit. "I need you there so my mother will harp on you about Ron. That way she won't harp on *me* about when Harry and I are getting married."

Ginny abruptly began changing her clothes, and Hermione looked away, twitching at the idea of Ginny and Harry getting married. Weren't they all still thirteen years old, sitting at the Gryffindor table, watching Seamus burn his eyebrows off?

Hermione wasn't inside the Burrow for five minutes before Molly asked her about Ron. Apparently he would be home for Christmas Eve, but they had a game on Christmas Day.

"He's told you this, of course?" Molly said, licking a spoon in the kitchen.

"Er, no. We've both been terribly busy."

"Well, of course, you're invited over that evening. That way you two can see each other!"

Hermione watched as Molly wiped her hands on her dress and used her wand to season the stew. She hadn't heard anything from Ron about the two of them, then.

It was a quiet evening after that. Fleur sat between her and Ginny in the living room, which Ginny found rather irritating. Ginny found an excuse to get up, leaving Hermione alone with Fleur.

They chatted for a quite a while about books and house elves – the only topics anyone could discuss with her, apparently. She watched Fleur as she moved, as she talked, and she wondered if she also possessed skills in dancing, interior design, and balancing the financials.

"Fleur," Hermione asked, after a pause, "do you know of a Madame Michele?"

Fleur's bright face darkened. "Oh, yes." She raised a brow in distaste. "I know 'er quite well."

"Oh, did you… Did you take manners classes from her?" Hermione sipped her cocoa.

"I saw 'er twice a week for ten years," Fleur said. "She iz an abominable woman."

"I hear she is the top manners and charms teacher for pure-bloods."

"Oh, yes!" Fleur turned to her, gracefully. "She is ze best! Zat doesn't mean I 'ave to like 'er!" She laughed. "Why do you ask?"

"He lied to you." Her voice was soft, like she was experiencing something grand.

"Which time?" Hermione laughed.

"All of the times."

Hermione looked at her, and Ginny was examining the empty wall again. Ginny stood, walking to the spot on the timeline where Hermione had added the number 35,000 in ink. Ginny traced the number with her fingers. Hermione watched as Ginny's eyes moved backwards. She passed the door, moving to the wall on the left and tracing her way back through the scribbled events of the war. She passed the Battle of Hogwarts, passed Malfoy Manor, and landed on Christmas Eve – 1997.

"He volunteered?" Ginny's eyes on the date.

"That's what Dolohov said."

"*That's* what he didn't want you to know."

Hermione looked to her. Ginny was creating her own timeline in her head. She would look at the Wall then stare at the ground, eyes moving, then back up to the Wall. Ginny spun and turned to her, eyes sparkling.

"So…. He loves you."

Hermione's heart fluttered before she beat it back into its cage.

"He… he was *relieved* that the house was empty. Whether or not that means that he cared about the inhabitants, or that he was glad there was to be no killing that day—"

"The inhabitants? Granger!" Ginny yelled. "He ran straight for your bedroom! Is that not proof enough for you?"

"It's—it's, of course, a possibility! But maybe—"

Ginny put up her hand. "No. No maybes. I won't let you talk yourself out of this." Ginny joined her on the bed, grabbing her hand. "Hermione. Lucius Malfoy was right." Ginny raised a brow and blinked, as if the sentence had pained her. "Draco went to his pure-blood grandmother, asking for 35,000 galleons as a *contingency* plan to save a Muggle-born girl that he wasn't even dating." Ginny sat back, eyes wide. "Merlin, what balls he has."

Hermione's nose wrinkled at her expression, and she stood, beginning to pace.

"I… I understand what you're getting at Gin. I can concede that… that it *seems* as if Lucius Malfoy was correct and that Draco had… some sort of feelings for me." She turned to the redhead. "But that was then. And who knows what he's feeling now."

Ginny groaned and jumped off the bed, opening the chest with the articles they'd just taken off the wall. She snatched one up and held it in front of Hermione's face.

"*I* do! *I* know what he's feeling now!"

Hermione took in the article from their lunch date at Fortescue's. Draco's hand coming up to guide her as she walked across the street. Draco's eyes on her as she and Narcissa talked.

Draco's easy smile and flashing eyes as he dropped her back off at the front door of Cornerstone Books. It seemed like a lifetime ago. How would she ever get back to the ease of that moment?

"But now he's dating someone. *Multiple* someones!" Hermione walked around her bed to place the Fortescue's article back in her chest.

"Well, then go tell him you'd like your name to be added to the waitlist!" Ginny jumped on Hermione's bed, standing tall. It reminded her so much of their last year of Hogwarts that she almost smiled.

A *crackle* and *whoosh* from the fireplace. Harry's voice called out a hello.

"Make some tea, Potter!" Ginny yelled to him. "And open some wine! We have some planning to do."

"Oh, bollocks," Harry muttered from the living room.

Hermione spent the next half hour filling Harry in on the memories. Well, Ginny did most of the talking, putting her own spin on things. Hermione sat at the little table in the dining area, drinking a glass of wine that Ginny had forced upon her.

Harry quietly sipped his tea throughout. Hermione could see the strain on his face, the tightness of his lips as the events of the War were recounted for him. Ginny didn't notice as she charged on, painting new pictures for him. Hermione didn't blame her. She wasn't there. She wasn't in Godric's Hollow on the night Draco and the Death Eaters had tried capturing them at her parents' house. She wasn't at Malfoy Manor, or on the beach. She didn't have the image of Dobby's grave imprinted on her memories like Harry and Hermione did.

"So the task now," Ginny said, and Hermione was pulled from her thoughts, "is to get these two on the same page!"

"Isn't he dating that Bulgarian girl?" Harry said, picking up his teacup.

"Yes," Hermione said. "And she's wonderful."

"Alright, enough of that." Ginny poured her more wine. "Katya Whatever doesn't matter. Harry," she rounded on him. "As a bloke… is it possible to date one girl but be in love with another?" Ginny placed her hands on her hips.

Harry looked back and forth between the two of them, eyes landing on Ginny. "I feel like this is a trap."

"It's not. Answer the damn question, Potter. I know you love me."

"I… Well, yes. It's a rotten thing to do, though."

Ginny smiled brightly and said, "And Draco Malfoy is a rotten person, so great! There it is!"

Hermione rolled her eyes and drank deeply from her glass. She thought, perhaps in the future, she would try to deal with her romantic entanglements without involving everyone.

"So," Ginny continued. "Malfoy wants Hermione. Hermione wants Malfoy. I should think the next steps are quite easy."

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Twenty Two

Hermione had never been more scared to open the paper in the days following the pub night with Marcus Flint. It wasn't until Monday that she finally stopped looking for pictures of Draco pushing her up against a wall.

She thought of Lucius Malfoy, and Draco's inheritance, and prayed.

Harry helped her file a report with the D.M.L.E. about the incident. Or, more accurately, Harry *forced* her to file a report with the D.M.L.E. about the incident. He said if she didn't file the report, he would go after Flint himself.

She filed it anonymously, much to Harry's dismay. Harry told her that anonymous reports were harder to substantiate, and harder to investigate.

"I don't really care one way or the other about Flint, Harry," she said on Monday morning. He'd come to their flat to bring her the paperwork. "I just want this potion brought to the Auror's attention. I don't want this happening to anyone else."

"*I* care about Flint." He glared at her and she looked away. "I want to be the one to retrieve him and throw him in Azkaban."

"I have no proof that it was him. I have Draco's word. If he is brought into this and we are questioned and if it reaches Skeeter's ears…." She shook her head. "I can't… I can't do this anymore. I can't fear the day Lucius Malfoy hears about this."

"This shouldn't be about Lucius Malfoy! This should be about justice!" Harry threw his arms out to the sides, wide and questioning her.

She turned away from him, frowning out the window. It was raining. "Everything is about Lucius Malfoy, Harry."

She stopped, heart beating. "What happened?"

"I guess right after we left, Malfoy went back inside and started wailing on Flint! I guess he was flirting with Noelle or something?"

"Huh. Sorry to have missed it." She smiled at him and went to her desk.

"Well…" Harry murmured. They looked at him.

"'Well' what?" Ginny demanded.

Harry looked like he wished he hadn't spoken. "Well… what was the last conversation the two of you had?"

Hermione blinked. "I… I saw him in the elevators on Thursday. I asked him about his business and told him to have a good day."

"And before that?" Harry winced. Hermione was confused.

"It was the Marcus Flint thing, yeah?" Ginny said, sitting down at the table. "Where he responded to her throwing herself at him!"

"Yes, but…" Harry took a breath. She wished he would just out with it. "Did you not also accuse him of drugging you to… take advantage of you?"

"But she apologized for that. They mended it." Ginny shook her head in frustration. Hermione looked back and forth between the two of them as they discussed her.

"Alright, but it still happened. He knows you think him capable of it."

She felt a rock in her stomach. "No, that's… I mean –" she started.

"Well, let's disregard that because you 'mended' it." Harry stood. Ginny glared at him using her words against her. "And what happened before all that?"

"I accused him of splashing blood on my parents' walls." She looked to the table, resigning herself to what Harry was getting at.

"No, no. He didn't do the splashing," Ginny said. "*And* we now know that's not what really was happening—"

"Yes, but *Malfoy* doesn't know that she knows that, because *that* would ruin the perfect little secret mission Hermione and I just went on—"

"But what does it matter?! She should just bring it up again and tell him that she doesn't believe he would have hurt her or her parents if he found—"

"She can try!" Harry flung his arms out to the sides. "But it won't help that she's already accused him of it, already thinks him capable—"

"I get it, Harry." Hermione frowned at her hands. Harry was right. And it was awful.

"And let's not forget," Harry started, softer, "what happened before that."

Hermione looked up at him.

"What?" Ginny said. "Before that was Lucius Malfoy."

"Before that," Hermione said, feeling hopelessness fill her chest, "I told his mother that I would never marry him."

Ginny opened her mouth to argue, then shut it. She said, "Maybe Narcissa didn't tell him that part?"

Hermione smiled sadly.

"Now, I'm not Draco Malfoy," Harry said. "Thank Merlin," he muttered. "I'm not a pure-blood, Slytherin, pain-in-the-ass. But as a *bloke*…" Harry took a breath and caught her eyes. "I would assume that ship had sailed."

Hermione nodded at her hands, feeling a tightness in her chest.

"Well, then. We'll need to turn that ship back around!" Ginny said quite proudly, clearly not understanding the Muggle phrasing.

How to make Draco Malfoy fall in love with her again. She tapped her quill against the ledger book. This would be so much easier if only she could figure out how she'd managed it the first time.

She leaned against the counter at Cornerstone, watching the hag move listlessly through the stacks. She started doodling a list of ideas an hour ago. *Approach Robards for more projects. Write to Narcissa Malfoy. Kidnapping.*

She glanced at the letter she had begun drafting to him. The second book in the new Lance Gainsworth series would be released to Cornerstone in May. The pre-order list usually started three months before a book was to be released, so writing to him *six* months before, asking if he'd like to be placed on the pre-order list was a bit of a stretch.

No, she would need to find a casual way to maintain their relationship, especially since his last day at the Ministry was this coming Friday. She had no relationship with him outside of the office any longer, so she would need to do something this week, something to keep his interest. Casually.

She raised her gaze out the windows at the cobblestone streets outside, and had to shake herself when she saw Draco Malfoy on the street, taking a deep breath before reaching for the door handle. Had she conjured him?

She looked down quickly, finding her half-finished letter to him on the counter. She grabbed it up and crumpled it, tossing it into the rubbish bin and pretending to close the ledger book and store it when she looked up. Casually.

"Good afternoon." She let her eyes land on him as he ascended the steps to the main landing. She faked surprise. "Oh, hello."

"Granger." He nodded in greeting, and she shivered at the memory of *Granger* across her ear.

"Did you... did you have a book on reserve?" She turned to the reserved shelf, knowing full well there was no book under Malfoy or Black.

"Er, no," he said. She turned back to him, keeping her face as open as possible. "I was... maybe just going to browse."

He was wearing a satchel bag across his chest, looking ever the part of a Muggle college professor. Hermione couldn't decide whether she wanted to laugh or swoon.

He lifted his head when the door opened and locked eyes on her. She shut the door behind her and held her head high.

"I'm sorry I accused you of drugging me last night," she said. He set down the paperwork he was looking through and turned to face her, the entire twelve-person conference table between them. "I had… I had just figured out what was happening when you stepped outside. I thank you for coming out to check on me, but I know now that your intention was not to follow me out to…" She looked over his shoulder and swallowed. "I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions. I was scared."

She looked back at him and he was looking down at the desk. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small bottle. He tossed it to her and, surprisingly, she caught it. There was one drop of a silvery potion inside.

"Ashwinder egg, asphodel, and several other things," he said. "Its effects should be a slow heating process, followed by dizziness and disorientation, and eventually lust when touched by the person whose hair has been added to the potion." He stared at the bottle as she examined it. "It was Flint."

She looked up at him. "And he used your hair, and not his own?"

He swallowed and as his throat moved she saw the bruise on his neck from her mouth. She looked down at his right wrist and saw another.

"Marcus has very interesting ways of amusing himself." He kept his eyes on the papers. She wondered why he didn't use a glamor on his neck and wrist. His knuckle was scraped, too. From the wall?

She pocketed the bottle. "Thank you for coming outside to check on me. And thank you for not… taking advantage of the situation."

He breathed a laugh. It was almost a sneer. Was that funny? Was it an outrageous idea that he would have taken it any further? She felt embarrassed for even mentioning it.

"I must have a different definition of 'taking advantage of the situation,'" he said, giving the table a condescending smile.

She frowned. He felt guilty. She thought of his hand running up her back and the way his mouth almost turned towards her. The way he stepped into her, pressing her back against the brick wall.

"It could have been a lot worse last night." She turned and left him there.

She took the lift down to Level 4. She got to her desk and Aiden popped his head out.

"There she is!" She could punch him. "Feeling better? Ya know, we missed quite a bit of fun last night."

She grimaced. "Really?"

"Yeah! Pub brawl! Malfoy and Marcus Flint!"

said, "Good chatting with you tonight, Malfoy!" and began to steer her down the alley towards an Apparition point.

"Granger." His voice gave her chills. The good kind and the bad.

Aiden turned them around and she saw Malfoy retrieving her wand from between the crates and holding it out to them. She took it.

"Oh ho!" Aiden laughed. "The Golden Girl taken down by a few Butterbeers, huh?" He squeezed her shoulder and turned them back down the alley. She watched her feet as they walked, feeling more in control the further away they got from Draco.

She frowned, tears pricking behind her eyes. Aiden didn't know how right he was. She had let her guard down with the Slytherins. And she'd been attacked.

Aiden had helped her up the stairs, made sure she got the door open to her flat, and had given her a silly smile as he said they should do this again sometime. Hermione almost laughed, or cried.

She shut the door behind her and found Harry and Ginny watching television. They smiled at her. She dropped her bag, entered the kitchen, opened the cabinet underneath the sink and pulled out the ipecac. She pulled her hair back, took a swallow, and coughed over the sink.

She heard Ginny's quiet footsteps against the tiles. She placed her hand on her back and rubbed, grabbing the ipecac bottle and reading the label.

"What's wrong?"

Hermione was gagging and crying and she squeezed the counter as she heaved, regretting losing the taste of Draco's skin even as she hated him.

She stayed up all night, running through the events of the evening and researching love potions. With a clearer mind not muddled with panic, it was easier to surmise that Marcus Flint had something to do with this.

Draco had only touched her skin when concerned about the cut on her hand. Had he slipped her a potion and followed her outside to….

Had that been the goal, he could have made contact with her skin immediately. He seemed just as confused about the effects.

Also, why?

And before the number 35,000 could run through her brain, she amended: Why now? Why in a public place?

She went in to work about an hour late. She headed directly to the second floor, and straight into the conference room. Draco was standing over the table, papers splayed out before him.

"Wonderful." She felt her heart beating in her fingertips. He was here. And she was anxious to keep him. "There's actually… um…" She moved around the counter toward the seating area and stacks on the left. "Quite a few new titles since you were here last."

She led the way to the fiction section, feeling him follow her. Merlin, she had no idea what she was doing.

"There's a new novel out, based loosely on a Muggle book from the 1980s." She stopped at the shelf and tapped the spine. "Dystopian future, marriage law, regulations on bearing children." She glanced up at him and he was watching her face. "In my opinion the Muggle book is better, but no one's heard of it here, so…"

She trailed off and shrugged, moving down the shelves. There were several people milling in the fiction section and a young witch sitting in one of the armchairs was studying the two of them. Hermione ran her fingers over a few spines and saw him follow her.

"And here. Phineas Bourne has tried his hand at *fiction*, frighteningly enough. I haven't had the stomach to sit through it, but Morty told me it's quite a gruesome horror novel, if you're into that…"

She bit her lip, thinking how foolish she must look, leading him through the shop as if he'd never been in a bookstore before. No other person reading quietly had received a private tour of the new releases.

She was in too deep. She should present him with one more book and then leave him to it. She couldn't even look at him, afraid to find that he'd seen right through her.

"The last one I wanted to show you…er…" She turned a corner and thankfully found an empty row. She was desperate to get out of sight of the young witch who knew exactly what she was doing. "Here." She retrieved a book from the bottom shelf. "A new biography on Chadwick Boot. I've written to Terry Boot to see if this author had any sort of claim to the information he provides, but I'm still waiting for his response."

She pulled her eyes from the cover. His gaze was on the book. He looked up at her, a smirk hiding behind his lips.

"I'll take all three."

She swallowed, watching the way his eyes changed colors. "Really? Er… Wonderful." She smiled, trying to maintain her sense of professionalism. "I – I mean… I didn't mean to force these on you." She laughed, and the sound was very odd. "You are welcome to browse, of course."

"No, no," he said, plucking the biography from her shaking fingers. "If Hermione Granger recommends a new book to read, then I'd be a fool not to listen to her."

Hermione watched him flip the biography over, and read the back of it. She didn't remember the last time he'd spoken her first name.

"I'll… I'll grab the others and meet you at the counter then." She pushed past him, her hips brushing against his thighs in the small space. She grabbed the two other books she had recommended, ignoring the way the young witch grinned at the pages of her book.

She headed to the counter and focused on her breathing. She pulled the ledger and began writing as she heard him approach.

"I actually wanted to ask you for something," he said.

She looked up at him. His eyes flickered to the counter. She held her breath as her pulse skipped and her mind raced.

"Anything."

Oh, god. Oh, god, Hermione. Her voice had been light at least, and not darkened with lust or heavy with promise. What a stupid response.

He looked up at her again, face blank. Occlumency. He'd shut her out.

"You are acquainted with Quentin Margolis?"

That was not at all what she was expecting.

"The werewolf leader?" she said, and Draco nodded. "I suppose I am. He's been in the office several times, and after the war he wanted me and Harry to introduce him to Teddy Lupin…" She was rambling. "Why do you ask?"

"I am hoping to take him on as a client. Well, him and his pack." Draco scratched his jaw and looked away. "He's been… unresponsive to the owls I've sent to him. And I'm beginning to think it's my name, my reputation." His jaw clenched. "My history with Greyback."

Hermione saw the shame cross his brow before the image of Fenrir Greyback sniffing the air in her bedroom swam before her eyes.

"I see." She didn't. "Well, Quentin spends very little time away from the pack. It's possible your letters haven't been received?"

"Oh, they have." Draco grinned tightly. "'Unresponsive' was the nice way of saying it, but he's let me know that he has no interest in meeting me."

She nodded, twirling her quill.

"It might be a matter of money. The community may not be able to afford your services. Werewolves have a hard time earning and keeping employment –"

"That's what we're fighting for. Equal rights for werewolves. Anti-discrimination laws."

Her breath left her in puff. "Anti-discrimination laws?" She met his eyes and knew her own were wide. The fight for werewolf rights was a long-time coming, and Kingsley had told her that it was under review for upcoming hearings. But if someone like Draco Malfoy and his consulting group was leading the charge… with real legal counsel…

His eyes roved over her face, and then he looked down at the counter, as if he were embarrassed.

"What is it? How do I stop it?" Her words tumbled again, and she felt her body sliding. She heard him step forward to help—"DON'T TOUCH ME!"

His form stopped. She grabbed for the crates and leaned. "Why did you poison me? What do you *want*?"

He remained silent as the world continued to spin. Her brain worked. The point of the drug would be to take advantage of a "willing" partner. But he'd stopped every time she'd pushed him away.

She looked up at him. He was scowling down at her, his hands clenching and unclenching, his jaw doing the same. He wanted to help her, but she wouldn't let him touch her.

Maybe it wasn't him.

He took a breath, opening his mouth to speak, and the side door squelched open.

"There you guys are!" Aiden.

Hermione closed her eyes and focused on her breathing.

"We're talking about heading to the pub down the street," Aiden said, his cheery voice cutting through the alley. "What do you think?"

She opened her eyes and tried to stand up tall. It was a bit easier. It was clear from Aiden's face that he found nothing wrong with his… "date"… being alone in an alley with another man. She envied that optimism and naiveté.

"What's going on?" he said. And she realized they hadn't responded. She looked at Draco and his eyes were on the ground.

Maybe it wasn't him.

"I… I had one too many." She swallowed, and felt Draco's eyes. "Draco caught me trying to Apparate home. And I'm in no state." She laughed lightly.

"Granger," Aiden laughed. "You're such a lightweight!" His face was sliding in and out of focus. She pushed hair out of her face and heard him say, "You're cut?"

Aiden reached for her wrist. Draco jumped, and she was too slow. He touched her skin. And nothing.

"What happened?" Aiden asked, still looking down at her hand, oblivious to them.

Hermione looked from where Aiden's fingers touched her bare skin up to Draco, to find him looking at her wrist too. If she was only affected by Draco's touch, why would anyone else have done this to her?

His eyes slid up to her, and she glared at him, tears blurring his face.

"I fell."

Aiden chuckled. "Okay, let's get you home, Granger." He swung an arm around her shoulders, and Hermione watched Draco take them in. He looked back at the ground. Aiden

"Why are you doing this?" she said, slowly coming back to sense and remembering that she was alone in a quiet alley with the boy who wanted to sell her… or buy her. And she wasn't sure which was worse right now. And her wand had rolled away.

"Granger?"

And she was slipping to the left again. It was okay. She knew the crates would catch her again. She put her hand out to stop herself, and gasped when she felt Draco's arm come around her waist. It wasn't like before. She wasn't affected by the poison. Maybe it was over?

"What's happened to you?" he demanded. Her head lolled and he must have tried to help her, because suddenly it was all back. The dancing electricity. The burning. His hand was on her cheek, keeping her head up and she groaned and attached her hand over his, keeping him there.

His other hand was already on her waist lightly and she used her free one to grab his shirt again.

"Oh, god, Draco."

She turned her head and began kissing his palm, then lapping at his wrist, holding it to her. She moaned, sucking on the thin skin. She could feel his breath on her face. His hand left her waist and supported them against the wall as he moved closer, and the image of Draco and Katya came to mind. Just like this. Outside of a bar, pressing her up against a wall.

"Granger…" His voice slipped over her like oil.

"Stop!" She dropped his hand and pushed. He released her and she could breathe again. "Don't do this!"

The burning stopped and just before her vision blurred again, she saw him step back, holding both hands up in surrender. His cheeks pink and his breath misting in the air between them.

She leaned heavily against the wall. "Why did you follow me out here?" Her voice was clear at least.

He kept his hands held in front of him, fingers spread. "I saw you exit."

Why did that matter? Where was Noelle?

He wasn't going to **buy** *you. He was going to* **save** *you.*

She shook her head, bouncing Lucius Malfoy's voice around until it was silent.

"What did you give me?" she snarled at him. She began to sweat, a mist hazing her sight, and she knew it would stop if he would just let her touch him again. She squeezed her fists.

"Give you?" He squinted at her. And she noticed that his hair was jumbled from her fingers in the most attractive way.

"*What did you put in my drink, Malfoy?!*"

She watched as he opened his mouth, and closed it. He brought his hands down and stared at the door they'd come from. Then he blurred again and she couldn't watch him.

"I just need an 'in,'" Draco said. "A recommendation."

"Of course." She was breathless. "I'll write to Quentin on your behalf."

"You will?" His eyes burned her. She nodded. "I have… here…" He turned to his damned satchel bag and pulled from it a leather folio file. "Here is the proposal. If you'd like to familiarize yourself with it at all."

She took it from him with greedy fingers, anxious to pour over the ideas and plans in it. "I'll have it back to you on Monday."

He nodded. "Thank you, Granger."

Granger. Whispered against her ear.

She smiled and tucked the folio away, and continued writing out his purchase on the ledger. It was possible the only reason he was buying these three books was because he needed a favor from her. But Hermione didn't have any qualms about that.

With her eyes still on the ledger she said, "Is your team taking you out for a celebration on your last day?"

"Er, no. I don't think so."

She looked up at him and brushed her hair away from her face. "That won't do," she said. "Harry and I will have to plan something then."

His eyes flashed at her. She hadn't seen them do that in forever. He'd dropped his guard.

"You… don't have to."

"Of course we do," she said, grinning. "We'll have to do something truly embarrassing, like print your face on a cake."

He winced. "That must be a Muggle tradition."

"Absolutely." She laughed. Her heart was beating so fast, she felt like she was playing with fire. "We'll do Friday after work? On your last day." She was flying awfully close to the sun and she felt the need to slow down. "I'll have Harry spread the word at Level 2. Bring Katya if you'd like."

Like splashing cold water on herself.

"Or Noelle," she grinned, strained. "Or whoever's on rotation for Fridays." She managed a small laugh as she placed his three books in a bag.

She couldn't even look at him. She could tell he was watching her.

"You'll have to tell me how the horror novel is. I don't think I can get through it," she said. She handed him the bag.

He took it from her and said, "Thank you. For writing to Quentin Margolis."

She met his eyes. "Of course. Anything you need."

He smirked, and she could feel the heat rising to her cheeks. "Careful, Granger," he said, and she watched his eyes sparkle. "I may just take you up on that."

The smile broke on her lips before she could stop it. She bit it back, knowing she looked quite the fool, pressing her lips together and blushing as he turned and strolled out of Cornerstone Books.

She floated through the rest of the day. She floated home. She floated into her bedroom and found two envelopes waiting for her on her bed. Ginny must have grabbed them from the owls that delivered.

One of them was an ivory envelope, with perfect, slanted cursive spelling *Miss Hermione Jean Granger*. The other just said *H.G.* How odd.

She opened the ivory envelope first, recognizing Narcissa Malfoy's handwriting.

Dearest Hermione,

Narcissa and Draco Malfoy wish to cordially invite you to the annual Malfoy New Year's Eve Gala, and official launch party for Malfoy Consulting Group.

There were several other slips of paper in the envelope such as an R.S.V.P. and instructions on how to arrive by Floo, but she was consumed by the "Dearest Hermione" bit.

She smiled at the delicate scrawl. Perhaps things were heading back to normal now. She and Draco were talking – flirting, even – and Narcissa was addressing her with endearments. She imagined arriving in a beautiful dress, getting her hair done, letting Ginny do her makeup, and letting Draco take her up on her offer of "anything he needs."

She was still blushing, biting her lip, as she opened the other envelope, removing from it several pieces.

Her heart stopped and her body shook as she recognized the handwriting. An even scrawl she'd last seen on a scrap of paper against a metal table.

Miss Granger,

I have written to Madame Michele and am I quite shocked to find that she has no upcoming appointments with you.

I have written to Miss Truesdale, Madame Bernard, and Monsieur Dubois, and have found that you have made no attempts to schedule appointments for dance lessons, interior design lessons, or hosting classes.

It was my understanding that you were not romantically involved with my son, and if you chose to become involved, you recognized the qualities that we had agreed you would work on.

As you have no intention of becoming an eligible candidate for my son, I'm afraid I will have to reevaluate my willingness to separate Draco's inheritance from his marital obligations. It's such a shame that this may affect Draco's business plans. I had hoped he would start anew and grow to be quite a leader in this world, but perhaps he is not ready.

Do not embarrass yourself any further by trying to deny it. I have seen the proof with my own two eyes, Miss Granger, and I must insist that you remove yourself from my son's world.

"You're bleeding," he said, and she remembered the sting as she fell forward, palms catching her. She turned her palm over and Draco reached for her, grabbing her left wrist to look at the cut.

The moment his fingers brushed her skin, she exploded.

Magic shot down her arm, into her chest and down to her curl her toes. It was warm and cool at the same time. There was buzzing in her bones, and her blood rocketed through her veins, and she knew something was wrong but it felt so good. She gasped and dropped her wand to the ground as she scrambled to touch him.

She grabbed his collar to pull him closer, fingers sliding up onto his neck, burning as she touched skin, and she must have launched herself at him because she was falling forward into him. He gasped as he caught her, and her cut left hand wound into his hair. *Finally.*

Her toes barely scraped the ground as he righted them, his hands on her hips, and her face was against his neck. The scent of him made her fingers curl and she sighed into his ear.

"Draco…"

She needed more. Her lips found the spot where his jaw cut a beautiful line away from his neck and she kissed him there. His skin was so warm. She needed more.

She kissed a line down his jaw, letting her tongue taste him, gasping for breath, and finally his arms moved.

One hand stayed on her hip, squeezing and moving slowly to press her pelvis closer, and one danced up her back, moving up to her neck. She moaned as he touched her skin.

"Granger, what are you doing?" he wheezed.

Her lips were making their way to his, and one of them was shaking. This… wasn't right. She was burning for him, but how did they get here.

She knew it was the drug. She'd been poisoned and was attacking him with her body and mouth. This wasn't fair. This wasn't how it was meant to happen.

She gathered any strength she had left as her mouth sucked on his chin, his head turning towards her, and pushed him away. He stumbled two steps back and the force of it threw her back as well, landing against the wall, head smacking against the bricks and she saw stars.

Every ounce of her body wanted to reattach to him, but she could feel the buzzing stop, the spinning in her abdomen slowing.

"What did you do to me?" she croaked, her vision blurring again, though she didn't know if it was due to the slight head injury.

He was panting. She couldn't make out his face, her head heavy, and she was glad for the wall behind her.

"What?" he whispered.

She needed to get home. She had ipecac there. She pulled her wand and it dropped to the ground, clacking against her eardrums. She leaned to grab it and fell forward again. Her fingers grasped it and she used the crate to push herself up.

How did this happen? She'd had two Butterbeers. It was in the Butterbeer. Someone had slipped something into her drink.

She needed to throw up. To empty it before it entered her blood further. There was a spell for it. What was it?

Who did this? Who handled her drinks? She tried to remember what the bartender looked like. The streetlamp across from her blurred into two. Would she die? In this alley?

Something was familiar. Something pulling at her. Slipped something into her drink. There was something so… Muggle about it. Why wasn't she dead yet? What was the point?

Date drug. That was the phrase.

Drugged? Who drugged her? The only person to give her drinks tonight –

"Granger?"

The heat left her. As she dragged her eyes to the door to see Draco Malfoy scrutinizing her, she felt a chill like ice.

"Malfoy." She whispered. Her tongue heavy.

He let the door close behind him, and it was silent. It was only the two of them. Her heart was racing.

"What are you doing out here?" she asked, words tripping.

"About to ask you the same question." He looked down at her wand in her hand. "I hope you're not trying to Apparate, Granger. You don't look like you're in any state."

"Why are you out here?" She tried again. Maybe he didn't hear her the first time. She tried to focus her eyes on him as he walked to her but he was blurring.

"Just how many did you have at the retirement party?"

... first right to auction them off to the highest bidder... for whatever purpose they would like.

She felt her heartbeat in her ears, spinning, and her lungs grabbed for air.

"How did you know I'd come out here? What do you want from me!"

He stood in front of her now, two steps away. His face came into focus and he was squinting at her like she was a stray dog he needed to leash.

"What's wrong with you?" he said. He might have taken a step closer.

... for whatever purpose they would like.

She clutched her wand in her right hand, wood indenting her skin, and tried to put up her left, telling him to stop, but she heard the words tumble from her lips and they were jumbled.

Lucius Malfoy

With shaking fingers, she set the letter down on her bed to find several photographs behind it. She watched as she threw herself into Draco's arms in a dirty alley, threading her fingers through his hair and pressing her lips against his neck. She flung that picture across the room and found the image of Draco pressing her against a brick wall as she sucked on his wrist.

She dropped the photos and stumbled to her bathroom, heaving.

She looked around and found Aiden talking with a familiar face, possibly a Hogwarts alum. Draco had his arm around Noelle's waist, chatting with Flint. She decided to run to the loo to splash cold water on her face. And then maybe she'd bid Aiden goodnight and go home.

Slipping off the stool proved challenging, and she blamed that second Butterbeer and her lack of dinner. If only she'd ordered something at the first café, but all the food looked so greasy. She'd heard Ginny tell her once that you never know how sloshed you really are until you stand up, and she was feeling the full effect of that for the first time. She wandered over to the hall with the bathrooms, and found three girls leaning up against the wall, waiting. She leaned with them for a moment, fanning herself. The girl closest to her leaned in to her.

"If you think you're going to heave, you can go ahead of me."

Hermione smiled. "That's very kind, but I'm just so warm. And a little dizzy."

"Did you have one too many? I'm trying to pace myself by standing in line for the bathroom, but usually I'm in your shoes." She smiled a crooked smile at her. Her bangs were too short for her forehead.

"I guess so." Hermione closed her eyes. It felt so nice to lean against the cool wall. "No, wait." She stood tall again. "I've only had two Butterbeers tonight."

"Maybe it was something you ate? Not settling?"

"Right. That must be it." Hermione pushed off the wall. "I'm just going to step out for a second."

The girl said something to her, but she wasn't listening. She was concentrating on walking. Her heels were wobbling underneath her… She looked down at her flats. She wasn't wearing heels.

She found the exit sign in the air, floating above a side door, and pushed her way out, feeling the cool air against her cheeks before her foot missed the step down. She didn't even see it. She righted herself by throwing her hands out and onto the ground, feeling the cement scratch her palms and hearing the door close behind her. She stood tall again and the momentum threw her back against the door. She turned to her left and crept along the wall, away from the exit.

This wasn't right.

She hadn't eaten. It couldn't have been food poisoning.

Poisoning.

Hermione gasped and leaned against the brick. She felt her wand against her hip. Her bag still across her shoulder. Her body was sliding. She tried to stay tall. She was sliding left. Her hand found a dirty crate and kept her up, leaning.

She needed Harry. She needed to…

Where was Harry?

Harry wasn't here.

Noelle proceeded to giggle. Hermione kept a cautious gaze on Flint. She had plenty of comebacks running through her head, but all of them would put a direct stop to this evening.

"Were you a goody-goody, Hermione?" Noelle asked, smiling.

Before she could answer – "Oh, she was the worst!" Flint said, eyes on her. "Even before she was a prefect she was walking around like Head Girl." His eyes were dancing, lightly teasing, but she could see the Slytherin working. She kept her eyes on him, not looking to Draco. He was sitting quietly. "Tell me, Granger," Flint continued, "did you ever break the rules, even once?"

Why was he doing this? He was goading her, but why did it feel like flirting? Her hands tightened on her glass.

"I broke the rules loads of times," she said to him. She picked up her Butterbeer, not blinking. "But unlike you, I never got caught." She sipped. Punctuating and ending the conversation.

Flint smirked. Noelle giggled. Draco shifted.

She spent the next hour in this awkward limbo. She tried desperately to latch on to Aiden's conversation, which he graciously would catch her up on, but Flint kept pulling her back towards him. Asking questions about Harry and Ron, prodding at her to relive disastrous memories from Hogwarts. Draco would frown every time Flint would speak to her and stay silent. Noelle would giggle. She eventually turned her entire body toward Aiden, hoping her physical language said she was done.

Aiden offered to buy the next round, and after declining a third drink she took the opportunity to grab his chair and scoot closer to the girlfriend – whose name she'd already forgotten – and away from the Slytherins. They chatted briefly as the group started morphing. Noelle took a trip to the loo causing Draco and Marcus Flint to stand, like the pure-blood gentlemen they were raised to be, and one of Aiden's friends followed him to the bar. Flint and Draco remained standing, stepping slightly away, laughing. When the girlfriend saw a friend of hers and excused herself, Hermione sipped her drink and began concocting her escape plan. It was nearing nine o'clock, and she wanted to get to work early tomorrow to make progress on her desk.

She shook her head, realizing that she'd been staring at the woodgrain on the bar table for thirty seconds or so, letting her mind run through her tasks for tomorrow. She must have looked quite soused.

The Butterbeer was making her so warm. Hermione finished the last of it and placed her glass on the table, reaching into her bag for a hair tie. She threw her hair up in a bun and discreetly used a bar napkin to pat her neck dry.

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Twenty Four

Lucius Malfoy was very talented.

Hermione thought this while staring out the window of her bedroom. It had begun to rain.

She had finished her gagging and crying, and had stormed back into her bedroom, lights flickering with magic.

She would not put up with this, she had thought. She would not be manipulated like a common school girl. She would write back to Lucius Malfoy, detailing that she had no intention of becoming someone good enough for his son. She and Draco were to start courting, and they would get married – NOT in the Malfoy Gardens, thank you very much – and they would have children and *none of them* would be blonde because it was a *recessive damn trait, Lucius*. And she would ensure that not a single brunette Malfoy cub had any idea how to hold a spoon or balance a checkbook, or ballroom dance, or any of it!

She had paced to her purse, rummaging for a quill and parchment. And that was when she found it.

A leather folio detailing how Draco Malfoy was going to change the world.

She sat on her bed now, staring out the window, the folio open on her lap. She had devoured the whole thing, front to back, and had run her fingers over his delicate handwriting. He had detailed everything, clearly having done his research on the history of werewolves, the current problems, and the failed solutions.

The fifth tab in the leather folder contained a legal analysis. He had found flaws in the existing laws that governed werewolf regulations. He outlined how Malfoy Consulting Group would target these flaws in an aggressive attack against the Wizengamot.

The seventh tab contained hypotheses about how testimony from the werewolf community could strengthen the argument, and how Harry Potter himself could step forward to defend

Remus Lupin and his excellence in teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts. Draco had somehow been informed that Harry learned to produce a Patronus from Remus when he was thirteen, and he planned to use that to his advantage as well.

The final tab was filled with personal notes. She was shocked to see scribbles and bullet-point ideas in his handwriting. Shocked that he would let her see them. One of the ideas was an unformed thought regarding the new Muggle-Born Integration Laws being evaluated by the Wizengamot this spring. These laws would require that a percentage of every private business's staff be Muggle-born, and Draco was clearly in the middle of a thought regarding similar laws that could apply to werewolves. She read through his scratches and scribbles and found the reasoning for leaving this idea out of the full presentation:

Would this be exclusive to werewolves? Or would the other species/creatures want this applied to them – if we represented.

Hermione had stared into space for several moments, imagining other species getting equal representation in the Wizengamot… *if we represented.*

It was all brilliant. *He* was brilliant. And she decided she would do everything in her power to get him what he wanted.

She would write an outstanding letter to Quentin Margolis. She would convince him of the importance of Malfoy Consulting Group, and give her full-hearted support to Draco Malfoy.

She would write to Lucius Malfoy. She would calmly explain that the pictures in question were part of a misunderstanding, a freak incident. She would pledge to stay away from Draco unless a social gathering or business venture called for it. She would inform him of her invitation to Narcissa's New Year's Eve Gala so that there would be no misunderstanding, and let him know she intended on going.

If this was not sufficient for him – Hermione brushed a tear away from her face – she would offer to begin her courses with Madame Michele in January. She would beg him to reconsider withholding the inheritance.

Hermione watched as a drop of rain wound its way down the outside of her window, joining with others and zooming past.

Anything you need.

She used Katie Bell on Monday to deliver the folio back to him. She told Katie to wait until he left his desk, and then place it on his chair. She'd included a copy of the letter she'd written to Quentin Margolis in the front pocket.

She told Harry he needed to organize an after-work celebration on Friday for Draco. Harry looked quite confused as to how to go about doing that, so she enlisted Katie Bell's help with that as well.

"How long have you and Draco been seeing each other?" Hermione asked, and immediately sobered. How had that come out of her mouth?

"Oh," Noelle laughed. "We're not really *seeing* each other." She sucked the melted ice through her straw, and Hermione wondered if Noelle knew about Katya – having been from the states, perhaps she didn't get the *Prophet*. Hermione brought the end of her Butterbeer to her lips. Noelle said, "He's only really after my money." And grinned at her while Hermione coughed.

"Wh-what?" She grabbed a napkin to keep from spitting.

"I mean, not *my* money. My *father's* money." Noelle cackled at the look on Hermione's face. "My father's Tiberius Ogden. He wants him to invest in his company, and join the Board of Directors."

Ogden. That's why it was familiar. Noelle and her brother were the heirs to the Ogden's Old Firewhisky fortune. Merlin, half the table was drinking the stuff.

"Oh," Hermione started. "I hadn't realized…"

"So, Draco's schmoozing us, essentially. We're going to have lunch with my father this weekend." She stabbed at her ice, casually.

"Oh, that's wonderful. Er, I mean… does that upset you at all?"

"Nope!" She laughed. "Draco Malfoy can buy me drinks and take me to parties all he wants! I mean, damn, he's *gorgeous*." Noelle stuck her tongue out at her, and Hermione laughed.

Alright. Perhaps Noelle wasn't so bad.

Draco and Flint returned with a round for the entire table. As they approached, Flint said something that made Draco laugh. *Really* laugh. His face split and his eyes crinkled and the sound boomed. It was lovely.

Aiden and his friends thanked them for the drinks, and she heard one of them whisper, "I had no idea Draco Malfoy was so nice."

A second Butterbeer slipped into her hands, but she hadn't asked for it. She really shouldn't drink it if she wanted any chance of Apparating home. Perhaps they had a food menu at this pub.

Flint took the only open seat at the table – the one across from her and next to Draco. Noelle was giggling next to her at something Draco said.

"Do you not drink, Granger?"

She looked up and Flint was examining her over the top of his glass as he sipped.

"No, I do." She wrapped her hands around the glass. "Just slowly." She met his eyes and a challenge was there.

"I bet you're taking points from us all in your head." He smirked at her. "'Ten points from Slytherin for having more than one drink per hour.'" He nodded at Noelle. "'Ten points from – whatever-the-fuck house you were in at Ilvermorny – for giggling out of turn.'"

Draco looked back at the Slytherin who'd just interrupted her glaring contest, and she was shocked to see his lips part into a huge, honest grin.

"What are you doing here, you bastard?!" Draco stood and gave the bloke a hug. She finally got a good look at his face.

Marcus Flint. He'd gotten his teeth fixed.

She watched Draco as he met with his old friend and Quidditch captain, watching him radiate warmth as they quickly caught up before Draco turned to them.

"Marcus, you remember Noelle Ogden?"

Something switched in Hermione's brain, hearing Noelle's last name. She filed it away for later when Marcus gave Noelle a friendly hug. She didn't have any happy memories of Marcus Flint, and was reminded of this when his eyes landed on her.

"Hermione Granger," he said. Something sparkled behind his eyes, and Hermione wasn't quite sure she liked it. But he wasn't sneering at her, which she supposed was progress. "Aren't you a sight for sore eyes."

"Hello, Flint. How have you been?"

"Well, thank you." He was still staring at her, gaze gliding over her face. "Are Potter and Weasley close behind?" He raised a brow and took a look around the pub.

"No," she said. "I'm on my own tonight." She raised a brow, giving him a look that she hoped said that she could handle herself, even if the ratio of Slytherins had just risen.

Flint, Draco and Noelle started catching up, asking each other about old families, what was Gregory Goyle up to, how's your father Noelle, congratulations on your business Draco…

Hermione felt Aiden lean into her. "Is that Marcus Flint?"

"Yes," she said, bringing her half empty glass to her lips.

"I think he locked me in Moaning Myrtle's Bathroom when I was a first year."

Hermione snorted, finding this whole situation too comical and too taxing. She laughed, wiping her eyes, and shifting to see Aiden smiling at her. When she turned back to watch Flint again, Draco's eyes had just left them.

She followed the conversation with Marcus Flint for a bit, then turned and tried to get an understanding of where Aiden and his friends' conversation had gotten to. She hovered on the edge of each conversation, quietly sipping her Butterbeer, watching Draco's face light up every time Flint made a joke or brought up a memory. When Noelle slurped the end of her drink – like the commoner she was – Draco and Flint offered to get another round. As they left, Noelle turned to her.

"This is fun, isn't it?" Her eyes were wide and starting to glaze from the cocktails. Hermione tried a smile and thought that *Katya* would *never* allow herself to become *inebriated* in front of strangers. She had more class. She was so offended by this girl on Katya's behalf… obviously.

That Monday Witch Weekly printed, with a picture of Draco Malfoy smirking on the cover. *Most Charming Smile!* Hermione laughed. She didn't think anyone had graced the cover without actually smiling.

The article went on, interviewing Draco on all manner of insipid subjects. What his favorite date restaurant was, what he looked for in a woman, what a woman should wear on a first date.

Hermione felt like she'd lost two O.W.L.s just by reading it.

The lifts brought them together on Wednesday at lunch time. She was so tired, staring at her shoes. She hadn't heard back from Lucius Malfoy yet, so she had no idea if this effort of not seeing him, not speaking to him, was even worth it.

She looked up as the lift stopped at Level 6 and the gates opened and revealed him. He was like fresh water. And she had been so parched. He caught sight of her and smiled.

She looked down, leaning against the back of the lift for support.

"Granger."

"Hello, how are you?"

"Well, thank you." He stepped in next to her, and as the lift shot to the side, she felt her hips brush his. "I heard back from Quentin Margolis."

She looked up at him. "And?"

"He's agreed to meet with me next week." He smirked down at her and she smiled up at him.

"That's wonderful news." She felt a blush slithering up her neck the longer she looked into his eyes. "I'm … I'm so happy for you."

"I can't thank you enough, Granger."

She felt the heat of him next to her and was so relieved when someone joined the lift at Level 5.

"I'm just glad you asked me. I'm very impressed by the whole proposal."

Proposal… Why wasn't there a better word.

"I hear there's a party for me at a pub on Friday night," Draco pressed his lips together, pretending to frown.

"Is there?" She asked innocently. "Perhaps it's more of a celebration of you *leaving*."

"That must be it." He nodded, lips twitching.

She looked up at him as he suppressed his smile, staring at his shoes. She wasn't sure if she was allowed to speak to him, much less be this close to him, so she took a moment to drink it in. He must have felt her eyes on him. He lifted his head to look at her as the lift slowed for Level 4.

She turned away, and said, "Have a good day, Malfoy," as she stepped off. She had to work so hard not to call him Draco.

She was just getting ready for bed that evening when she heard a peck at her window. Hermione found herself staring at a plain grey owl outside her window. Her heart pounded as she let it in. It dropped a plain envelope and swooped out.

She opened another *H.G.* letter with shaking fingers. It was short.

Miss Granger,

I appreciate your concern for my son's business affairs. I accept your terms.

The inheritance will transfer in January, providing your social interactions with my son remain limited.

Madame Michele expects you at 8PM on Tuesday January 4th.

Lucius Malfoy

She fumed. He made an appointment for her without any consideration of her schedule?

She took a breath in, remembering that she had just saved Draco's inheritance. She would need to *limit* her social interactions with him, though. That would be easy enough. They were limited before.

I accept your terms. Like they were business partners.

She huffed and laid back on her bed, tossing Lucius's letter to the side.

January 1st couldn't come soon enough.

She didn't see Draco Thursday or Friday. She left work early on Friday, claiming sickness. She told Katie Bell to give her regards to Draco on his last day, but she wouldn't be coming to the pub after work.

She didn't see him that weekend at Cornerstone. She had never been so grateful for his absence.

On Monday, she was dragged into Mathilda's office to discuss her future. The position in House-Elf Relocation would be interviewing in the final weeks of December, but Mathilda still wanted her to apply for Draco's old position upstairs with Robards. Hermione nodded and thanked her, still feeling unsure of what she should do.

As the New Year's Eve Gala drew closer, Ginny dragged Hermione dress shopping. Ginny made an appointment for them at one of the high-end boutiques in Diagon Alley, usually reserved for wedding parties or the true wizarding elite. Ginny used Hermione's name on the reservation and suddenly a timeslot was available.

A salesgirl with shiny blonde hair assisted them, showing them to a private room of dresses only in their sizes. As they browsed the dresses, Ginny reminded Hermione that it was a "Black and White" gala. She'd need either a black dress or a white dress. Or a combination.

"I heard that Narcissa Malfoy ostracized someone for wearing grey to a Black and White gala before. The woman was never heard from again," Ginny said as she held a white dress out to Hermione.

"Yes! Grab a table with us!" Aiden was flagging down the friends they'd walked in with, getting them to push bar tables together. "Malfoy and I will grab a round of drinks."

"Awesome!" Noelle bubbled. "Hermione, sit next to me!" And Noelle took the stool on the end, patting the one next to it. This was… not the night she'd anticipated.

Once a stoic Draco and an animated Aiden had left for the bar, and Hermione settled next to her new best friend, she turned to Noelle and said, "What brings you to London, Noelle?"

"I'm home from Muggle university, visiting family," she said brightly.

"Oh, your family lives here?" Hermione said, unwrapping the scarf from around her neck.

"Yep! I was three during the First Wizarding War, so my dad sent me to America to stay with relatives and go to school out there."

Hermione nodded, not fully interested. "And how do you know Draco?" She tried innocence.

"Oh, our families have been friends for years," Noelle waved a hand, as if this was of no importance. "But you two went to school together, yeah?"

"Yes, we sure did." She looked up and Draco and Aiden were returning to the table. Draco levitated all the drinks, setting them down at each person – even Aiden's friends who he didn't know. Noelle got a frilly cocktail, firewhiskies for Draco and Aiden's two friends, wine for the girlfriend and Butterbeer for her and Aiden.

Aiden was trailing behind him, saying, "I got the next round, Malfoy!" Draco looked like he'd had quite enough of him already, which made her smile. Aiden grabbed the stool on Hermione's right, and Draco sat across from Noelle. An odd little picture.

"So, Aiden, what do you do?" Noelle asked, placing her delicate mouth on the straw of her drink in a way that Hermione found to be both adorable and vulgar.

"Hermione and I both work in the Department of Magical Creatures for the Ministry. We're both specialized in dragons."

"Oh, my gosh, *dragons*! I *love* dragons!"

Hermione raised her brow and took a sip of her Butterbeer.

"Yeah?" Aiden smiled brightly. "Do you have a favorite kind?"

"The blue one!" Noelle said.

Hermione blinked. "The… Swedish Short-Snout?"

"Whichever one is blue. Blue is my favorite color!" Noelle giggled and slurped her drink. Hermione flipped her eyes over to Draco and gave him a look that she hoped conveyed "are you fucking serious."

He met her eyes and looked down at his firewhisky. She was still watching him when a hand dropped on his shoulder, Slytherin ring on the thumb.

"I'd recognize the back of your head anywhere, mate."

She conjures a new page and a quill. She scribbles down in her elegant scrawl a request for herself for tomorrow, December 1.

"Send this off, would you?" She slaps the letter on the credenza and marches to the Floo.

A few hours later I tear apart the return letter addressed to her.

Mrs. Narcissa Black,

Your request to visit prisoner number LM537 on December 1, 1999, has been approved. Please see the attached documents for instruction on arrival and prohibited items.

I scowl down at Ulysses' response.

Perhaps Mother needs more credit.

~*~

Wednesday, December 1, 1999

If I had slept last night, this wouldn't have happened.

I would be awake enough to notice her in the Atrium. I would have swerved and headed to the café first instead of standing there waiting for the lift.

Once I am tucked in and standing against the back wall, she enters and smiles a small grin at me.

"Good morning," I say.

Several others start to fill the lift, and she shuffles to stand closer to me. I pull my arms to my side.

I assume the potion has left her system. Those ingredients were all temporary. But I don't want to risk it.

I remember the way her hips felt in my hands, and I wonder what would happen in this lift, with the Magical Games and Sports staff trapped in here with us. If I touch her wrist, and if the potion explodes in her veins. If she would be able to hold back or if she would force herself onto me, pushing me into the walls, hands dragging down my -

"You only have one more week left, yes?"

I keep my eyes forward, even. I feel her turn to me.

"Yes. Next Friday is my last day." I can make it eight more days. I can.

"That's exciting," she hums. "Is everything going swimmingly? With the consulting group?"

No. I almost laugh. I swallow down the sensation.

"So far, so good. We're on schedule to launch January 1st."

"That's wonderful," she says. "Congratulations." It's almost like she means it. The lift stops at Level 4 finally. "Have a great day," she says to me, turning to smile brightly over her shoulder as she leaves.

I nod to her, feeling more air coming into the elevator box now that she's left it.

Cold air.

I get home as Mother arrives back from Azkaban. I turn to her expectantly. She takes her time pulling off her gloves.

"Stew for dinner?" she asks.

"Sure."

She calls Mippy. The elf takes her belongings and starts on dinner. I wait.

"You will visit your father on Christmas," she says. "Azkaban allows holiday visits as well as the monthly-"

"Yes, I remember."

She nods at me. "You have nothing to worry about. The transaction will happen as planned."

She walks away from me.

"Mother?"

She turns back, and raises a brow. "Unless he wants a divorce. A messy one."

She leaves.

That night at dinner, I ask her for her help with clients and investors. She holds back her Cheshire grin, and I'm thankful that there's no "I told you so."

At breakfast the next day, Mother has a list of potential investors and potential clients. I raise my brow at her and she says, "You never asked."

On Friday, she asks me if I've thought about a charity branch of the consulting group.

It's been constantly on my mind.

"I think it would be important for the company's image to offer more charity work," she says, stirring in her milk. This is the fourth idea she has brought up today. It's like she's been holding back all of this before now, waiting for me to ask.

"I agree, I just think there will be resistance," I say. "I was thinking of starting with werewolf rights. So many of those laws are flawed. I sent a letter and proposal to Quentin Margolis and the North Forest Pack last week, looking for support and testimonials. He told me I could fuck right off."

Mother quirks her lips downward at my foul language. "Did he?" She sips her tea.

"That was the intention." I roll my eyes. "Said they've been doing fine for years without help from the Malfoy family."

"Hm." She looks out the window. "Perhaps the Malfoy family shouldn't be the ones reaching out. Who else is on staff so far?"

I break off a piece of my scone. "Blaise in Marketing, Cuthbert Mockridge in Finances, and Dorothea Bulstrode in Admin. As well as a few –"

"All pure-blood," she states, straightening her knife and fork. I can hear the words before she's even taken breath. "Have you considered asking Hermione Granger if she has any interest?"

"She *has* a job, Mother."

"So did Dorothea before she agreed—"

"I believe Granger will soon be taking my position, working closely with Potter." I crumble my scone into small pieces. "She will be perfectly content."

"Doubtful, darling," she hums. I look up at her. She brings her teacup to her lips and before she sips, she says, "It took her almost a year to pass that dragon project. And she was working from *within* the Dragon Research Bureau." I watch her place her cup back on its saucer. "Perhaps she'd be interested in a part-time offer if she won't leave the Ministry. Give her the opportunity to help the magical creature community."

I stare down at my spoon. "Katya said something similar."

Mother lifts a brow. "Hm. Smarter than she looks." My lips quirk in a smile. "There's no harm in asking Hermione about it, is there?"

I swallow. "Things have gotten worse since she was last at the Manor, I'm afraid. She won't want anything to do with me anymore."

I refold my napkin in my lap, bringing the corners to meet and sliding the edges. Mother is silent. And then:

"You're a snake, Draco. And you've let her turn you into a worm."

My eyes snap to her, and she's standing, throwing her napkin down and calling Mippy to help her with the flower arrangements.

It stings me all day.

I can barely concentrate on the project Robards assigned me as I work in the conference room that day.

I drift off, wondering what it would be like to work with her on projects she's passionate about. Perhaps we'd meet twice a week, or have lunch on the weekends. She'd accompany me to dinners and balls, and we'd sweep the crowds, looking for the right people to talk to about how she wants to change the world. Her eyes would light with the same fire from when she fought for the dragon, and I deprived her of that pumpkin soup, and I could let my hand rest on her back, urging her to push further, to strike, to kill.

I can taste it.

I can smell her.

My eyes blink open. I check the hallway, make sure she's not visiting Katie Bell. Robards confirms that he didn't call her up, but I feel like I've summoned her. The scent of her.

It fades after an hour or so, but I'm still doodling more ideas about werewolves than I am about the smugglers apprehended last week.

On Saturday I stare at myself in the mirror for ten minutes, fussing with my hair and letting my walls fall away. Skeeter and her team left an hour ago. I had my interview for Witch Weekly

I swallow. "I'll be focusing on Muggle relations. Several of our clients will be utilizing our services to transition their businesses into the Muggle world." He stares at me unblinking. "We'll be taking one *pro bono* case per quarter, focusing on those who need legal assistance in the Wizengamot—"

"And the magical creature world?" he asks. "Your history with house elves and werewolves is quite... well-known."

"As is our family's history with dragons." I'm close to losing my pleasant expression.

"Dragons and house elves are not the same." He pulls his coin purse, tossing a few sickles on the table for his tea.

"Oh, no," I say, throwing my hand out. "The tea is on me, Mr. Shafiq."

He drops the sickles and they clatter. "Save your galleons, Mr. Malfoy." He pulls his coat tight around him. "If you can only offer one sponsored case per quarter, cash must be tight."

He brushes past my chair as he leaves. The inside of my cheek bleeds from where my teeth dig into it.

~*~

Tuesday, November 30, 1999

Mr. Draco Malfoy,

Your request to visit prisoner number LM537 on December 4, 1999, has been declined. Pursuant to M.L.C. 8192, Section 4a, a prisoner can decline a visitation request for any reason.

If you represent the legal counsel for prisoner number LM537, please contact the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Administration Services.

Sincerely,

Ulysses Olyphant

Azkaban Visitation Coordinator

What could have changed?

I stare down at the letter from my old pal Ulysses.

What could prompt this behavior? Was this a refusal to sign away the inheritance? Or just simply a power play.

There hadn't been any *Prophet* photos from... last week. In the alley. Nothing for him to see.

Mother comes across me, staring down at the letter.

"Interesting mail?"

I clench my jaw, wondering if I should bring her into this.

"I..." I shake my head. "It's Father."

She stops her task of pulling on her gloves. "Yes?"

"He won't see me. Won't answer my letters."

She rips the parchment from my hands, looking it over. She scoffs.

You and I have several things to discuss as soon as possible. I have been busy cultivating a client base, securing office space, and meeting with potential investors. If you refuse to meet with me, how am I to guarantee the deposit of my inheritance?

See with this correspondence, a request for December 4. Hopefully that is a better time to fit me into your busy schedule.

Your son,

D.M.

~*~

Sunday, November 28, 1999

"Well, it's all very impressive, Draco." Mr. Harding sits back in his chair, squinting at the sunlight coming in through the restaurant windows. "I've never thought about expanding into the Muggle world."

"Muggle fashion is always growing. Usually at a much higher speed than the wizarding world," I say. I can feel my heart thud with the anticipation of closing a deal. "Jewelry - especially jewelry that shines as bright as Harding's - must follow."

"And you have the manpower and skills to transition Harding Jewelers into the Muggle world? We'd need financial advisers, business advisers, marketing advisers–"

"Absolutely," I say. "I'm hiring the best of the best in each of those departments–"

"But will they be experienced in the Muggle world?" he cuts me off, refolding his napkin in his lap. "No offense, Draco, but the Malfoy name isn't really associated with Muggles."

"My staff will be well versed– "

"'Will be.'" His eyes shine at me, bright as his diamonds. "Tell you what, after the consulting firm has been up and running for a bit, and after all your staff positions are filled, reach out again." He brushes his slacks, and stands from the table. "Once you get the hang of it all, we'll talk again."

I bite my tongue as we shake hands.

~*~

Monday, November 29, 1999

"Mr. Malfoy, I admit that I took this meeting as a kindness to your mother."

I nod. "Of course, Mr. Shafiq. I hope I can—"

"But I'm not interested in the Malfoy name anywhere near my finances, personal or professional."

I keep my congenial smile in place. "I'm sorry to hear that, Mr. Shafiq. I hope you'll permit me to say that I understand your concerns, and I will be working very hard to rehabilitate the Malfoy name."

"How?" Mr. Shafiq's mustache twitches. He's not looking for any answers. Just teasing me.

and my photoshoot. Never before have I wondered what a girl should wear on a first date, but now it's running through my mind nonstop. My answer to Skeeter was so pathetic and generic.

Whatever makes her comfortable.

Skeeter raised a brow at me, took me off the record, and said, "Draco Malfoy would accept a woman wearing sweatpants to Le Porte Rouge?"

I winced and rephrased my answer into something more suave.

I pack up the leather folio, and give myself another look. I look very young. And vulnerable. I hate it, but I know it's necessary.

I pass Mother in the dining room on the way out.

"Draco, darling."

I retrace my steps and poke my head in. "Yes?"

"I am addressing invitations to the launch party today. I think having Mr. Potter and Miss Weasley in attendance would be excellent publicity." She looks up at me. "But only if we are inviting Hermione."

I swallow. "I'll let you know this afternoon."

She looks me over, sees my satchel bag and my twitching fingers. She smiles. "Alright."

I pop through to Diagon Alley. I pace the path to Cornerstone four times before finally taking a deep breath and yanking the door open. I find her at the counter, throwing something away and closing the ledger book. She greets me and then looks up, and in the moments before her eyes land on me, I consider telling her I have the wrong shop, apologizing, and turning around.

"Oh, hello." Her eyes brighten.

"Granger." I jerk my head in greeting, climbing the steps to the counter.

"Did you... did you have a book on reserve?" She turns to the shelves. It's all very polite.

I contemplate jumping right in, and not wasting any more of her precious time. But instead I tell her I'll browse for a bit.

"Wonderful," she squeaks. And I worry for a second that it's fear. The tightening of her features, the overly bright eyes. And then she's rounding the counter. "There's actually… um… quite a few new titles since you were here last."

And she's walking away into the fiction section. It takes me an embarrassingly long time to realize that I am supposed to follow her. She leads me to a shelf, and I try to ignore the four or five patrons who glance up at us.

"There's a new novel out, based loosely on a Muggle book from the 1980s," she says, fingers moving over the book in question. "Dystopian future, marriage law, regulations on bearing children." She looks up at me. "In my opinion the Muggle book is better, but no one's heard of it here, so…"

She looks between my each of my eyes, and I wonder if she's waiting for a response. She moves away and I follow.

She shows me a horror book, one she says she wouldn't like and I can't imagine liking it either. But her fingers trace the spine, and her eyes can't look up at me anymore. There's pink on her cheeks and I wonder what she's embarrassed about. She leads me away, and I see her glance at a young woman in one of the comfortable chairs before turning down an aisle.

"The last one I wanted to show you… Here." I turn down the aisle just in time to see her bend at the waist, denims pulling tight across her backside. My eyes are glued to her as she rises, pulling a book off the bottom shelf. "A new biography on Chadwick Boot," she says. And I manage to bring my eyes to her face.

She's rambling about Terry Boot. She's blushing, and her eyes are away from me. Does she know that she's tucked us away from prying eyes, into our own space in the stacks where anything could happen? I look down at her hands, brushing over the cover of the book.

She's never done this. Never shown me things she wanted me to read.

"I'll take all three." I look back her, and she drinks me in.

"Really? Er… Wonderful." She smiles at me, and I wonder how easy it would be to forget Marcus Flint ever happened. Forget my father. She looks down, lashes fluttering. "I – I mean… I didn't mean to force these on you." She laughs, a strangled sound. "You are welcome to browse, of course."

"No, no," I say. I take the book from her, almost brushing her thumb. And I slip back into a different character. Someone closer to who Skeeter thinks I am. "If Hermione Granger recommends a new book to read, then I'd be a fool not to listen to her."

She stutters. She blinks. She goes to collect the other books and she pushes past me, her hips against my thigh.

If she's back to blushing... Back to dark eyes when she looks at me... Brushing up against me...

I smirk at the empty aisle.

I follow her to the counter, trying to remember my plan and trying to work seduction into it now.

"I actually wanted to ask you for something."

I look away from her down to the counter, totally at her mercy. And I feel her eyes on me.

"Anything."

Fuck.

Marry me.

Let me keep you.

Fuck.

If you represent the legal counsel for prisoner number LM537, please contact the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Administration Services.

Sincerely,

Ulysses Olyphant

Azkaban Visitation Coordinator

I blink at the letter. This is a mistake. I pull a new sheet of parchment, and address a second request, this one for December 2nd.

~*~

Wednesday, November 24, 1999

"I spoke with Siobhan Selwyn last night." Mother's voice stops me on my way out to work.

I stare at her. "Yes?"

Her eyes leave the newspaper and turn to me. "She and her sister would be interested in some business advice. They'll be starting a small boutique in Diagon Alley early next year. You should sit down with them."

"That's not really the clientele Malfoy Consulting will be after," I say.

"Oh?" She raises a brow at me. "Boutiques are too small-minded for you?"

"Siobhan's husband is in Azkaban, Mother."

She levels a stare at me. "So is mine."

I open my mouth. I close it. "I mean to say, that I can't be associating with known Death Eaters. I'm trying to distance us from that."

"Business is business, Draco." She sips her tea. "The arrangement doesn't have to make the *Prophet*."

~*~

Thursday, November 25, 1999

Mr. Draco Malfoy,

Your request to visit prisoner number LM537 on December 2, 1999, has been declined. Pursuant to M.L.C. 8192, Section 4a, a prisoner can decline a visitation request for any reason.

I rub at my temples. I take a new parchment.

~*~

Saturday, November 27, 1999

Mr. Draco Malfoy,

Your request to visit prisoner number LM537 on December 3, 1999, has been declined. Pursuant to M.L.C. 8192, Section 4a, a prisoner can decline a visitation request for any reason.

I burn the letter. I take a new parchment.

Father,

Potter is still here. And though I wish for someone else, someone with wide eyes and soft skin, who might even know how to fix this. She'd try a few spells. Perhaps she'd cry over me. And I'd take her hand -

Black. It's so dark in here.

And then Severus. I almost laugh, because that is surely *not* who I wished for.

A song from somewhere. I wonder if she sings.

~*~

Saturday, November 20, 1999

Draco,

I will be unable to keep our lunch date this afternoon. I wish you success with Malfoy Consulting Group, but I feel it is not the right fit for me or for my family.

Tiberius Ogden

~*~

Monday, November 22, 1999

I knock on Robards door.

"Mr. Malfoy! Come in!"

If only everyone could be as jolly as Robards. The world would be a brighter place.

"Morning, sir. Can I have a moment?"

"Of course, of course." He pushes aside his tea and closes a file. "What's on your mind?"

"I... uh... I wanted to inform you that Granger and I had a falling out." I swallow. His eyebrows jump. "Not that we were close to begin with." I smile.

"Oh, I see." He blinks. He doesn't see.

"So, I think it would be best for everyone involved if we could avoid working on assignments together. The less contact, the better," I say.

Robards nods. "Alright. Yes, that's fine." He looks down at his desk. "Is there anything I can do? Do you need any outside problem-solving?"

"No," I say. "It's entirely a personal dispute." The whisper of *Draco* brushes across my ear. "I made some mistakes, some poor choices, and I think it's best for Miss Granger if I keep my distance."

Robards sighs. He nods in agreement.

~*~

Tuesday, November 23, 1999

Mr. Draco Malfoy,

Your request to visit prisoner number LM537 on December 1, 1999, has been declined. Pursuant to M.L.C. 8192, Section 4a, a prisoner can decline a visitation request for any reason.

My blood warms. My mouth dries. And as I wonder who's seducing whom, I build a wall from the top down, like a castle gate lowering. I finally look at her face again. Her neck is flushed. I move forward.

"You are acquainted with Quentin Margolis?"

The tension leaves her eyes and she examines me. "The werewolf leader? I suppose I am. He's been in the office several times, and after the war he wanted me and Harry to introduce him to Teddy Lupin…" She refocuses. "Why do you ask?"

"I am hoping to take him on as a client," I say. "Well, him and his pack." I speak the words I've been practicing all morning. "He's been… unresponsive to the owls I've sent to him. And I'm beginning to think it's my name, my reputation." I look away. "My history with Greyback."

"I see." She busies her hands with the ledger. "Well, Quentin spends very little time away from the pack. It's possible your letters haven't been received?"

"Oh, they have." I grin at the counter. "'Unresponsive' was the nice way of saying it, but he's let me know that he has no interest in meeting me."

The quill between her fingers moves in circles and I watch her dexterous fingers twirl it around, ready to play my hand.

"It might be a matter of money," she says. "The community may not be able to afford your services. Werewolves have a hard time earning and keeping employment –"

"That's what we're fighting for. Equal rights for werewolves. Anti-discrimination laws."

I watch her physically lose her breath. "Anti-discrimination laws?"

Her eyes are wide and she searches for something in my face. I keep my mind closed, and watch as her mind works. Watch as she pieces together what it is I'm trying to do. Something lights in her face and I almost feel guilty, playing her like this. But there's no lie. I'm going to be helping the werewolf community. It's just not for them. It's for my reputation.

And for her.

"I just need an 'in.' A recommendation."

"Of course," she breathes. "I'll write to Quentin on your behalf."

"You will?" I say. She nods. "I have… here…" I fumble with the clasp on my bag, anxious to get the leather portfolio into her fingers. "Here is the proposal. If you'd like to familiarize yourself with it at all."

She stares down at it like I'm handing her the keys to the Hogwarts library. "I'll have it back to you on Monday," she says.

"Thank you, Granger."

She smiles at me. A real smile. And I can't breathe until she looks away, down at the ledger book.

"Is your team taking you out for a celebration on your last day?"

I don't understand the question for a moment. "Er, no. I don't think so."

She stands up from leaning over the book and pushes a curl behind her ear before I can do it for her. "That won't do," she says. "Harry and I will have to plan something then."

I think of the only way I'd ever want to celebrate anything, and it certainly doesn't involve Potter. She's waiting for me to say something, and her eyes flit to my lips.

"You… don't have to," I manage to say.

"Of course we do. We'll have to do something truly embarrassing, like print your face on a cake."

"That must be a Muggle tradition."

"Absolutely." She laughs. And like the smile, it's a true laugh. "We'll do Friday after work? On your last day. I'll have Harry spread the word at Level 2." I watch her teeth drag across her bottom lip. "Bring Katya if you'd like."

She looks down at the books again. I blink.

"Or Noelle. Or whoever's on rotation for Fridays." She laughs. And it's not like the last one, but she's trying to bring up our game - the girl for every day of the week.

Maybe I've been reading her wrong. Always wrong.

Maybe Katya and I should have had a public break up.

"You'll have to tell me how the horror novel is. I don't think I can get through it." She stuffs it into the bag, and I realize she's rambling. The color on her cheeks gives her away.

"Thank you. For writing to Quentin Margolis."

I take the bag from her, and she says, "Of course. Anything you need."

I paste on a smirk, and let my eyes slide over her. "Careful, Granger. I may just take you up on that."

Her lips break into a grin, pink on her cheeks, and she looks away.

And I walk out the door hearing Blaise's voice.

Anyone can be seduced.

And I have been.

I drop by the dining room when I get home, finding Mother working on her invitations. I grab a biscuit from her tray, seeing an envelope addressed to Hermione Granger set aside.

I tap it with my pinkie.

"Send it."

She grins up at me.

~*~

Monday, December 6, 1999

"I'll be completely honest with you, Draco. I have some reservations."

"That doesn't surprise me," I say. I send him a grin.

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Thirteen

Tuesday, May 6, 1997

Perhaps this is right.

Perhaps this is how it always should have gone. With Potter standing over me.

I always assumed the body tried to save itself, but my heart pumps my blood faster, like it doesn't know...

How can the body not know?

The blood is in my throat now, like liquid iron. I cough.

Myrtle. She's screaming. I don't know what for. This is how it's supposed to be. No one will come running for me, Myrtle.

Potter kneels beside me. Everywhere is so wet.

Maybe this is right. Maybe it should be Potter's face - the last thing I see. A handshake he wouldn't take, his arm knocking my hand away from the Snitch, the way she hugs him and holds him close...

It's going to be easier this way. I didn't fail the Dark Lord. Potter killed me. Possibly beginning the war. My mother... she will kill him for this. She'll raze the castle. But Mother will be safe, because I didn't fail.

And I didn't succeed either. I won't be remembered as the boy who killed Albus Dumbledore. That's not how she'll remember me. With luck, she'll remember me as Potter's biggest mistake. I almost smile.

The ceiling is spotting. Perhaps it's caving in? There's a gurgling that I recognize as my lungs, bubbling through my blood.

Hermione found her breath and lifted her own glass, drinking deep as he watched her.

A man in front of her turned to his wife and kissed her, his head now blocking her view of Draco. That snapped her out of it. When she could see him again, he was descending the stage, giving his mother a kiss on the cheek. She watched as he kissed the Greengrass sisters on the cheek, and then Blaise reached for him tapping his own cheek playfully. Draco pushed him away, wrinkling his nose. She watched as an older gentleman approached him, shaking his hand. They spoke briefly, with Blaise by his side, nodding heads. Draco gestured to Blaise and the older man shook Blaise's hand. Draco's first business deal of the new year.

Suddenly Ginny was in front of her, bouncing up and down and grabbing her face, planting a kiss right on her lips.

Hermione sputtered while Ginny laughed.

They stayed for another hour. Hermione made even more acquaintances, dodged Skeeter, and managed to say goodnight to Narcissa before they made their way to the fireplaces without seeing Draco again.

She got to her bedroom, kicked off her heels, and summoned a parchment and quill. She was sweating as she wrote:

Hermione Granger

-The Golden Girl

She folded it into an envelope addressed to *Malfoy Consulting Group, c/o Draco Malfoy*, and sent it without another thought in her brain.

She paced her room for twenty minutes in her white dress, imagining the way the champagne glass had felt against her lips as Draco sipped from his. A lover's kiss at midnight.

She took off her makeup. She took off her dress. She tossed up her hair and pulled on her pajamas. She laid in bed, staring at the ceiling until she heard a pecking at her window.

An eagle owl swooped in as she opened the window, dropping a large manila envelope and swooping out. She picked up the package with shaking fingers and opened the top.

The cover letter read:

Welcome to Malfoy Consulting Group, Golden Girl.

D.M.

She gasped, the weight of it hitting her as she looked at the top of the packet he'd delivered. A contract for her position as a Senior Consultant, overseeing a department called Non-Wizard Relations. Specializing in Magical Creatures and Muggle Relations.

She sat on the edge of her bed. And smiled.

Wentworth tosses back the rest of his Butterbeer, signaling the barkeep for another. I guess we're staying. That's good.

"You have a hard path forward. I don't mean to say that you can't weather it, but it will be difficult. Do you have any companies or individuals on your roster that don't represent the pure-bloods or the wealthy?"

I think it must be his honesty… or maybe the Butterbeer when I say flatly, "Not yet."

He nods, looking down at the table, thinking. "It may take a while for the wizarding world to trust you again."

"I know."

He looks up at me and gives me a weak smile. "Regardless of having the 'Most Charming Smile, December 1999.'"

I roll my eyes. Skeeter's Witch Weekly article came out this morning. Wentworth chuckles.

"I am hoping to kick off the New Year with a project to help fight for equal rights in the werewolf community. I'm already in contact with the North Forest Pack, and I hope to be meeting with them soon."

It wasn't lying. It was optimism.

Our second round arrives, and Wentworth sits back in his chair. "That's a start. I just wish you had more diversity. In your clients and in your staff."

"I hope to gain more staff from our January scouting and hiring. After my Mother's – After my launch party."

"Yes," Wentworth says wryly. "The New Year's Eve party that the ninety-nine percent have never been invited to." He lifts a brow at me.

"Hey," I say, spreading my arms wide. "You got your invitation *this* year, yes?"

Wentworth grins. "Yes, yes."

"It will be rescinded should you say no to the job, of course," I tease.

He hums. He seems to be waiting for something. Waiting for me to give him a good enough reason.

I take a large swallow of my drink, feeling my throat expand around the liquid forced into me.

"I am hoping to bring Hermione Granger on. On a case-to-case basis."

And his face relaxes, brows lift. And there it is.

"Really?" His voice lilts, like a fine wine has crossed his tongue.

"She's working on the werewolf project with me now. And I hope to bring her on for several other cases as well."

"Would she leave the Ministry for you?"

For me.

"For me? Never," I say, smiling into my Butterbeer.

"But for the werewolves, she might. Yeah?"

I look up at Wentworth. He's calculating. His fingers tapping on the table.

He starts asking about my business model, my inheritance, the size of the staff. He throws a few names into the air of people to talk to and I struggle to pick them up without whipping out a quill and parchment. He asks if my father will be involved at all.

By the time both of our drinks are drained, he wipes his hand down his mouth and says, "Give me a few days. I have my wife's birthday this week, and we'll need to discuss a few things." He looks out the window of the pub, then back at me. "And keep on wooing Hermione Granger."

I smirk.

"Will do."

"I'd say the year 2000 is about rebirth. Second chances. I'm starting a little company, don't know if you've heard—"

Blaise let out a whoop and started a clap. The room joined in and Hermione then understood Blaise's purpose.

Draco smiled and said, "And to me, this company is about second chances. It's about achieving goals, dreaming ideas, and creating new paths. I want to assist people. I want to provide support and assistance for their goals, their businesses, their legal battles."

Hermione thought of Quentin Margolis and his werewolf pack. And all of the other species Malfoy Consulting Group could assist. She smiled down into her champagne glass, feeling nothing but pride for her new friend, Draco Malfoy.

"We at Malfoy Consulting Group want to create the law. To change the world." She looked up at him, hearing his words from the balcony. His eyes were already locked on her. Five hundred people between them. "And if like me, you find your cubicle becoming too small for you…"

She swallowed, her heart slamming against her ribcage. He looked away from her and smiled at the rest of the crowd.

"… We're hiring."

The crowd chuckled. The girls with too much makeup and too much cleavage waggled their eyebrows at each other and several middle-aged men smirked into their champagne, thinking of their cubicles. Hermione squeezed her glass, brain firing rapidly.

"And if I've done this right," Draco muttered, shaking his wrist to see his timepiece. "Then we are now at –"

Hermione watched as Draco smiled.

"Ten. Nine. Eight.—"

Several people gasped and checked their watches. The obnoxious gigglers jumped up and down, and couples grabbed each other, ready to kiss.

"Seven. Six.—" The whole crowd joined in.

Hermione was still. She couldn't find her voice as the throng of people added their voices. Draco raised his glass in the air and the entire room joined him.

"Five! Four!—"

She could feel the air entering and exiting her lips, but she felt like she wasn't breathing. Then Draco found her eyes again.

"Three! Two! One!"

He lifted his glass to her as fireworks bounced around the room. He watched her as he brought his glass to his lips.

"Happy New Year!"

shifted until she could see him. “So please allow me to bring to the stage someone who would like to welcome you to the year 2000. Draco Malfoy.”

Narcissa turned to allow him up to the stage. He ran up the two or three steps as the crowd cheered him mercilessly. Hermione clapped, looking around and finding that most of the noise came from young witches in revealing dresses.

Of course.

“Thank you, thank you,” Draco said. “My mother, it seems, left me only three minutes to midnight.” Narcissa shrugged as she descended the stairs. The crowd laughed and Hermione glared at the girls who giggled.

Draco continued, “I think we’re all looking forward to the new year. I, for one, am desperate to leave the 90s behind. They were dreadfully boring, weren’t they?” His voice was light and sarcastic.

Hermione laughed out loud at that, and her eyes searched out the back of Harry’s head while the entire room lurched with laughter. Harry was shaking his head at Draco, smiling, and Hermione was struck by how things can change with just a year.

She looked back at Draco as he was smiling at his own joke. “And nothing terribly exciting happened this year either.” He pushed his hair back from his face in a delightful move that had more than one woman fanning herself. He lifted a brow. “Or did it? You’ll have to tell me, I was in Azkaban for the majority of it.”

Hermione sputtered a laugh and several people almost spat their champagne out, while Draco Malfoy smiled, mocking himself in front of a crowd. Raucous laughter. Incredulous giggling. The man next to her burst an “Oh, ho!” She watched Narcissa purse her lips, still smiling but quietly disapproving of his nonchalance, but next to her, Blaise was covering his mouth, eyes wide, and the Greengrass sisters were looking at each other with open mouths, giggling.

Hermione looked around the room as the entire wizarding world fell in love with Draco Malfoy even more than they already had. What was fifteen months in Azkaban if you had a sense of humor about it? She saw a surly older woman who had scowled at Narcissa Malfoy earlier, raise her fingers to her lips, hiding a smile.

Anyone can be seduced, Granger.

His voice fluttered across her ears as she watched Draco seduce them all. She watched him bite his bottom lip, grinning at his dig at himself. He swallowed and continued.

“No, but truly – it’s been a long and complicated year.” And the crowd quieted, still smiling at him. “It wasn’t long ago that I was the most hated boy in all of wizarding Europe. And I thank you all for giving me a second chance.”

She held her breath as the sound left the room, and the smiles drifted from faces.

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Fourteen

Wednesday, December 8, 1999

I’m dropping off a portkey request for Robards on Level 6 when I find her in the elevators.

I feel myself grin before I can stop it.

“Granger.”

She mumbles a hello, her eyes shifting away from me like a nervous child. We’re alone in the lift, and I don’t bother standing far from her. Our bodies touch when the box takes off.

“I heard back from Quentin Margolis,” I say, and that catches her attention. She turns up to me, eyes bright.

“And?”

“He’s agreed to meet with me next week.”

Her face breaks into a smile. “That’s wonderful news. I’m … I’m so happy for you.”

And again, I imagine this look on her with every success, with every signed contract, with every case won against the Wizengamot.

“I can’t thank you enough, Granger.” I let my eyes relax over her face, drinking her in. The lift slows for Level 5 and I tear my eyes from her.

“I’m just glad you asked me. I’m very impressed by the whole proposal.”

I wonder if I ask her now. If I say, *You know, Granger, you would be a valuable asset to Malfoy Consulting. We could affect true change together.*

Granger, do you really want to work at the D.M.L.E.?

Tell me what you want and I’ll give it to you.

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

“I hear there’s a party for me at a pub on Friday night.” I pout and look to her.

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

"That must be it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I'll get her to talk to me about the consulting firm, mention the possibility of working with giants next, and drop hints to my five-year plan for the house elves. Tell her I'm looking for someone to bounce ideas off of, and would it be alright if I invited her to lunch once in a while. And we might even have a whole branch for magical creature rights, do you know anyone who might be interested?

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

"She's ill."

I look up to find Katie Bell watching me.

"Sorry?"

"Hermione left work early today. Ill."

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

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

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

But I did curse her three years ago with dark magic. So, I decide to let her see through me.

It doesn't truly sink in until the following morning that she missed my party. The party she insisted on. The party she planned.

Draco's wrist snapped up, checking his timepiece. "Er…yes, thanks mate." He gave her a glance, and Blaise stepped forward.

"I'll take care of her, Draco." He winked. "She can stand with me." Blaise offered her his arm, and she took it, cautiously.

Draco looked between them quickly, before nodding, and making his way inside. Blaise and Hermione followed him. Blaise led her through the ballroom and back into the drawing room where a stage had been conjured. A serving tray passed and Blaise took a glass of champagne as the clink of wands against champagne glasses began, echoing throughout the drawing room. Blaise gestured to the tray, telling her to take her own glass so she wouldn't accuse him of handing her a glass again. She grabbed one and sipped, trying to cool down.

"This works out well then." Blaise sipped at his champagne. "I was wondering who I'd get to kiss at midnight."

Hermione looked up at him. He was smirking down her, letting his eyes travel over her face, down her neck. She scoffed at his confidence. He was so charming though.

"Blaise," a voice in front of them. The same Greengrass sister. "Draco needs you."

Blaise laughed a booming sound. "Oh, *Merlin*, he's good!" He smiled and turned to Hermione, picking up her hand to kiss her knuckles again. "Maybe next year, Hermione Granger."

He winked and followed the Greengrass sister.

The tapping of wands against glasses escalated, until she saw Narcissa's white form ascend to the stage. She pressed her wand against her throat as the crowd cheered for her. She smiled graciously, and quieted the group with a delicate hand.

Hermione stood towards the back of the group, just where the ballroom flowed into the drawing room. She could just pick out Ginny and Harry, ahead of her. They held hands and leaned into each other. Hermione decided to stay put, instead of seeking them out.

"You are all too kind." Narcissa's cool voice flowed over the crowd with the help of the amplifying charm. "What a full year we've had." And several people chuckled. "What a full century!" More laughter. "It's such a pleasure tonight to see new friends, and old faces. Of course, some faces are older than others I'm afraid." Narcissa brought her manicured fingers to her temples, tapping her own surfacing wrinkles. Even more laughter.

Hermione looked around as Narcissa continued, thanking everyone. Every eye was on her. She was in full control of her room, her people. Women were smiling, men were gazing, and even those scowling were silently in love with her.

"I told my son I wouldn't take up too much time, so that we could still count down to midnight." She turned and smiled at where Hermione assumed Draco to be standing. Hermione

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

She pressed her lips together as she stared out onto the grounds, and suddenly wondered if her lip color was still there.

"You have a speech at midnight?"

"Yes," he said. He cleared his throat. "'Thanks for coming, best millennium ever,' all that rot."

She smiled. "You came out here to practice, didn't you?" He nodded. "What else are you going to say?"

"Well, a bit about recruitment. Mother invited a lot of Hogwarts, Durmstrang, and Beauxbatons recent graduates. Young witches and wizards who are looking for careers." He leaned his hip against the railing, facing her. "Some elite members of society, too. We're either looking to hire senior positions or take their companies on as clients."

"You're going to steal people away from their high-ranking government and private industry jobs tonight?" she said, smiling at his arrogance. He nodded. "With one midnight speech?" He nodded again, a smirk pulling at his lips. "And how do you plan to do that?" she said with a laugh. "Most of these *elite* people have standing positions or loyalties, lasting relationships." She looked at him and he was already watching her.

"Anyone can be seduced, Granger."

She felt her breath leave her in a silent puff. His eyes were dark and she felt very warm. She swallowed. Her eyes drifted to his lips on their own accord, and she knew she shouldn't be staring at his mouth. She watched him swallow. She watched him step closer to her.

And she turned her head away, back to the grounds, taking a slow breath in. The money hadn't transferred. She shouldn't even be this close to him.

Her lips were dry so she wet them with her tongue and immediately regretted licking her lips in front of him. She blinked and searched the grounds for another topic, feeling the wind brush against her open back, ghosting over the fabric where it met her skin. She shivered. Was it the wind?

"What did my father say to you?" A whisper, his breath floating across her ear.

She gasped, feeling the heat of a finger on her ribs.

A voice from behind them, "Draco?"

Hermione whipped around, and saw Draco's arm returning to his side as they met the smirk of Blaise Zabini.

"You gave me one job tonight, mate," Blaise said, strolling towards them. "'Make sure I'm ready for my speech at ten minutes to midnight.'"

~*~

Thursday, August 25, 1994

"Hadn't you better be hurrying along, now? You wouldn't like her spotted, would you?"

I lift my chin at Granger, and I turn in time to see a flash of fear in her eyes. A spell goes off from the campsite. And she's silhouetted by green.

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

Why, thank you for asking.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Where're your parents?" Potter snarls at me. "Out there wearing masks, are they?"

I turn to him, a pleasant grin. "Well...if they were, I wouldn't be likely to tell you, would I, Potter?"

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

I let them walk past until I can yell after them: "Keep that big bushy head down, Granger."

I see her spine straighten, and she grabs Weasley by his scruff to keep him from coming after me. I'm smiling to myself, watching the fire through the trees, and wondering what kind of knickers Granger wears.

Probably cotton, something so sexless. Perfunctory.

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

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

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

I watch as a tent explodes.

~*~

Wednesday, December 15, 1999

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

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

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

He nods. He sits back.

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

He walks away, without taking my hand.

~*~

Friday, December 17, 1999

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

"I'm thinking of a Non-Wizard Relations branch," I say toward the end of the meeting.

He raises his brows at me. "Like house elves? Goblins?"

"Werewolves, yes."

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

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

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

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

I breathe deep. "No."

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

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

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

"I was thinking Hermione Granger."

"He says he'll transfer portions of it over the next months. The first portion will transfer this Tuesday." He cracked his neck.

Hermione's mouth opened, shocked. Her first lesson with Madame Michele was this Tuesday.

"But enough about that." Draco turned around. He leaned his back against the railing, facing the party, and turned his head to her. "Will you be taking the analyst position with Robards?"

She watched as his eyes danced over her face, feeling the warmth sneaking across her collarbone. "It's a possibility." She watched as his face tensed and relaxed, blinking at her. And it struck her.

He was struggling to build a wall. She noticed his breath moving more quickly than normal, and the stiff way he held himself. His tense jaw.

She turned away from him, looking out at the gazebo again. "There are a few positions open, that I'm interested in. I had two interviews this week."

"They didn't truly make you interview?" he asked, lifting a brow at her. She nodded, confused. "So you sent in the wrong resume again? I've told you before, it just needs to say Golden Girl across the top."

She smiled, thinking of their first chat in the pub, when she'd told him she'd submitted for her job under a false name, not wanting preferential treatment.

"Where else? What other positions?" He sipped at his champagne glass, and she watched as he held it by the stem, between two fingers.

"House-Elf Relocation."

"You don't want to work in House-Elf Relocation, Granger." Condescending, smiling at his shoes.

She turned to him, straightening. "Oh, I don't?" she scoffed.

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

She watched him as his gaze ran over the curtains to the ballroom. "And what is it I do want to do?"

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

He looked back and forth between both of her eyes. He was telling her something. And he'd gotten his wall back in place.

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

He stopped in his tracks when he saw her there, and she was acutely aware that her bare back was facing him as she twisted her neck to look backwards. He looked surprised to see her.

Oh, Narcissa, you sly dog.

She swallowed as he continued towards her. She hadn't seen him since the lifts at the Ministry. That was weeks ago.

"You know, Draco, it's a Black and White party. Your silver accents are truly throwing off the whole aesthetic."

She tried a small smile.

"Ah, but I am the host. I must distinguish myself from the rest of the rabble."

He smiled back at her. She turned her gaze back to the gazebo, thinking that silver would be a wonderful color for a winter wedding…

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

He stepped up next to her on the balcony railing, and she watched as the Slytherin ring on his thumb tapped the stone railing. He sighed.

"Just about. Twice as many people."

"All clamoring to be nearer to the winner of Most Charming Smile, December 1999," she said.

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

She met his eyes. He blinked and turned to the grounds. Something about his face was strained. She tried to put her finger on it but it lacked the ease of their last interaction in the elevator.

So she decided to make it more awkward.

"Where is Katya tonight?" She held her breath and wished for a rewind button.

He kept his gaze on the grounds, and said, "She's in Bulgaria for the holidays." She watched him as his eyes drifted over the pond and the peacocks. Did he also imagine his wedding in the Malfoy Gardens? "She is still desperate to sit down with you."

"Well, I would be open to that," Hermione said. "She's lovely." She watched as the muscles in his jaw worked. "How's the inheritance transfer coming along?" Draco looked up at her at that, and she felt the need to continue. "I remember you saying that your father would release it on January 1st," she said. "Is everything... falling into place?"

She focused on exhaling as his eyes shined at her.

"My father is… being slightly difficult, of course." He looked away and Hermione felt her blood rushing. That bastard.

"How so?"

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

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

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

~*~

Saturday, December 25, 1999

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

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

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

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

A series of images of her under me—

—with me. It's not like I've disobeyed him. There is no ring on her finger. He said I could have the inheritance if I stayed away from her.

I am at the point where I *need* the inheritance.

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

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

"Good morning, Father."

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

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

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

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

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

He smirks, and takes his chair.

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

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

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

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

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

"And I would like to discuss her."

Her face swims in through my mind.

Anything you need.

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

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

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

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

I blink at him. What could he possibly…

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

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

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

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

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

My mother's voice rings in my ears – *And she made it clear that you never will be.*

"Irrelevant." He waves his hand as if he hadn't just opened a door in my mind. "I'm just impressed with the progress the two of you have made."

I glance at the pictures again. Something tickles my mind –

"Are you working with Marcus?"

"Oh, I…" Hermione blushed. "Thank you. I'm sure that's not true."

She pressed the back of her hand to her neck, trying to cool down.

"Are you warm, dear?"

"Only a little. I don't usually wear heels, so I think my legs are working harder than ever!"

"You know," Narcissa started. She stopped and looked around like she was about to spill a secret. "Whenever I host these parties and I feel overwhelmed, I take a moment on my private balcony."

"Oh?"

"Here," Narcissa said. She pulled aside a curtain, and revealed a beautiful entryway to a balcony. "Take a moment to yourself, dear. They will be on you like vultures for the rest of the night."

"Thank you, Narcissa." Hermione smiled at her as she stepped out onto the balcony, wishing they had never parted. "I have to say, I've been quite remiss. I still have your books that I borrowed. Can I owl them back to you?"

Narcissa waved her hand. "Oh, I'd quite forgotten, dear." Her eyes sparkled. "Why don't we set up a date for you to come back and exchange them?"

Hermione blinked at her. She would allow her back? After everything? "I – I would like that very much, Narcissa."

Narcissa beamed at her. "Draco is making a speech at midnight, so make sure to come back inside by then!" She winked at her, and disappeared behind the curtain.

Hermione turned and found she was overlooking the manor's gardens. By the light of the stars she could just make out where the peacocks were sleeping. She walked the ten paces to the ledge, and felt the warming charm on the patio even with the wind. She ran her hands over the stone railing.

The reflection of the moon shone in a small pond to the left, and just next to it a gazebo. She wondered how stunning the view was during the day and then it hit her.

The Malfoy Gardens. This was where her wedding to Draco would be, if Lucius had his way.

Her breath puffed a cloud in front of her, imaging the chairs facing the gazebo. The string quartet that she could faintly hear inside the ballroom would be set up on the shore of the pond.

She hated that Lucius had a lovely wedding planned. And that she couldn't think of a better one.

She spent the next ten minutes or so standing against the railing, running her fingers over the smooth stone while she watched the wind move through the trees, listening to laughter and violins.

A burst of sound from behind her as she heard the curtain move, and she turned over her shoulder to see Draco exiting the party, champagne glass in hand.

Hermione laughed, and feeling a bit reckless herself, said, "Well, cheers to Malfoy Manor! And their newly renovated drawing room!" She clinked her champagne glass with Harry's and Ginny's and then downed it. Ginny laughed, wide-eyed, and Harry gave a "Cheers to Malfoy Manor!" that was louder than necessary.

A flash went off to their left, and Hermione turned to see Bozo chronicling their drinking.

"Wonderful," Harry said, and he smiled at the camera for the next picture with practiced ease.

"Well, no one can say the Gryffindors had a hard time fitting in!" Ginny toasted the camera and downed her champagne. She grabbed Hermione's hand. "Come on, I see Skeeter coming. Let's get another drink."

Ginny lead her through the crowd, ducking under floating trays of hors d'oeuvres and darting around black and white dresses. Hermione giggled as she was lead through the archway into a second room with even more people. They stopped and took in the Malfoy ballroom. It was twice the size of the drawing room, with opulent tapestries on the walls and a brilliant chandelier. A string quartet played in the corner and several couples were dancing in the middle of the room.

"Well, fuck," Ginny said. And Hermione burst out laughing.

Hermione spent the next two hours sipping champagne and hobnobbing with the wizarding elite. She was introduced to several well-known Curse-Breakers whose books she had already read, a handful of Beauxbatons professors and graduates, and the German Minister of Magic. It wasn't until 11:15PM that she realized there was almost a line of people standing around, waiting to introduce themselves. And Rita Skeeter was pushing her way to the front.

As the dragon specialist from Romania was saying goodbye, promising to follow up regarding a special project, Rita stepped in.

"Miss Granger. A few words for the *Prophet* on how the evening is going?"

"Uh… yes, it's splendid." Hermione deflated.

"Oh, Hermione dear, there you are," said a voice to her right, and Hermione was astonished to see Narcissa Malfoy arrive as her knight in shining armor. "Rita will you excuse us, I would love to introduce Hermione to someone."

Before Rita could say another word, Narcissa had turned Hermione and walked her away.

"I don't actually have anyone to introduce you to, I just knew you would want to get out of there." Narcissa linked her arm through hers.

"Oh, thank you," Hermione laughed. Narcissa weaved her through the crowd.

"You look absolutely stunning, Hermione. You're all anyone can talk about." Narcissa squeezed her arm.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I stand. The chair scrapes backwards.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Anything you need.

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

And you never will be—

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

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

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

I suck oxygen into my body.

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

I ignore his quip and say, "Senior Consultant. Managing a new branch for magical creatures."

His lips twitch. He takes a breath and stares down at his thumbs. "You know, Draco, there are other Mudbloods out there that are fully capable of the position, and will clean up your act just as nicely. Ones you don't have such a scattered history with."

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

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

"That won't be an issue. The Ministry has regulations on new businesses regarding sexual harassment and employee conduct –"

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

"I will draft up the Office Romance stipulations and send them to you for approval." I sigh. I stand in front of him, helpless. "What else do you want?"

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

"It won't be a problem," I say. He stares into me, and to prove a point, I feel his mind against my own. I slam my wall up. It cracked at some point in the past ten minutes. Probably when he showed me the pictures, or when I stepped into the room. "I am in complete control of myself."

He brushes against my mind again, and then tears his eyes from me, moving this thumbs in circles. He can't dismiss me. Not yet. I need his word.

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

His lips twist, something difficult in his expression. "Alright."

I feel a spring bounce in my chest.

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

"Ten weeks of what?"

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

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

"Well, maybe I'm just on the slow track." She smiled at him. His eyes sparkled as he smiled back at her.

"And you're engaged to Weasley?"

"Ah, no," she said. "That was a misprint in the *Prophet*."

"See, I don't even read the *Prophet*. I was just assuming."

"Then you assumed wrong." She grinned. He reminded her of Draco slightly, same charm, same confidence.

"And you've become friends with the Malfoys? Lunch dates and the like?"

"I thought you didn't read the *Prophet*." She looked at him over the top of her glass. He quirked a brow at her and chuckled.

He stepped closer to her, placing his hand lightly on her waist. He brought his mouth to her ear to whisper, "Between you and me, Granger, you could do better."

She shivered. Her cheeks warmed, whether from the comment, the champagne, or his hand on her waist, dangerously close to her open back. He pulled back, lifting his hand. He looked at her face with a cocky smile, and Hermione didn't know what to do.

"Blaise," a female voice. She turned to see one of the Greengrass sisters, pretty and smiling. "Draco needs to see you about his speech tonight."

"Of course, he does," Blaise smirked. He turned to Hermione, grabbed her hand, and brought her knuckles to his lips. "We'll speak again soon, Granger." With a wink, he turned to leave.

The Greengrass girl began to follow, then spun back, "Hello, Hermione."

"Hello."

Hermione still didn't know which one she was. The girl smiled and continued away. Hermione sipped her champagne, following them with her eyes to find where Draco was. They turned left around a beautiful ice sculpture in the middle of the room, and she finally spotted a blond head. He was standing with the other Greengrass girl, which didn't help her identify which was which. His black formal robes were lined with silver, and the threads caught the light as he moved. He leaned into Blaise, saying something that put a smirk on the darker boy's face. Blaise responded and Draco scowled. Blaise gestured in her direction, and Hermione quickly looked away and began to pace the room.

Ginny and Harry found her as she was feigning interest in the hanging topiaries.

"Hermione, you look beautiful." Harry kissed her cheek.

"Thank you, Harry. New robes?" She looked him over.

"Yes. Just like you ladies, I wouldn't be caught dead at Malfoy Manor in an outfit I'd already worn." Harry's smile showed all his teeth, and Hermione realized that the Firewhisky glass he was holding could not have been his first. She looked to Ginny and she was rolling her eyes.

Once they were inside, Ginny spotted Harry across the way. She went to save him from whatever conversation he was stuck in, leaving Hermione to take in the new drawing room.

It was completely renovated. It was as if the Malfoys has given the designer the instruction to make this room as unlike the previous as possible. Hermione couldn't even distinguish where the landmarks of the room had been. She could not locate the exact spot she had been tortured by Bellatrix, or the fireplace where she had recently relived it next to the Malfoys in Draco's memories. The phantom pain in her arm stopped tingling.

"Hermione Granger?"

She spun to see a tall, dark man approaching her.

"I thought that was you." He smirked at her, and she then recognized him as a Slytherin.

"Blaise Zabini, yes?"

"The one and only." He glanced her over, and Hermione stopped herself before she crossed her arms in front of her body.

Blaise held two glasses of champagne. He held one out to her, offering.

"I make it a point not to drink anything from a Slytherin, thank you though."

He smirked at her. "Then you'll have no fun tonight," he said, taking her glass back and exchanging it for a fresh one on a passing tray. "The champagne is from the Malfoy estate in Verzenay, France."

She stared at the glass as he placed it in her hands, coming to terms with the idea that the Malfoys not only had an estate in France, but they also had a Champagne vineyard. She recovered and looked up at him.

"I read that you lived in Italy. Are you back or just visiting?" Hermione sipped at her champagne, trying to figure out how to hold her clutch purse and her glass successfully.

"Back," he said. "I will be joining Draco's new business venture in January."

"Oh, congratulations."

"Thank you." He sipped his champagne and watched her as his throat moved. "So," he started. "Tell me, Granger. You're in the Great Hall, Potter has the Elder Wand, the Dark Lord is defeated, then what?"

She smiled at the ground. So casual in the way he described the Final Battle. "I work for the Ministry in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures."

"And are you running the place yet?"

"No, I'm working in the Beast Division, mainly filing reports on illegal smuggling of dragon eggs."

"Really?" He pursed his lips. "I would have thought you'd be on the fast track to Minister of Magic by now."

"What is this contingent upon?" I ask.

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

My eyes dart about the room, considering.

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

"That is correct."

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

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

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

"Be sure to secure her a corner office, Draco."

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

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

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

"Yes, Father," I say, my hand on the door. I wish I could just leave and be done with it, but I hear myself asking, "Anything else?"

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

"Don't botch the proposal, Draco." His eyes glimmer at his private joke.

~*~

Friday, December 31, 1999

Mother's outdone herself.

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

"Narcissa, darling! This place is gorgeous!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Done."

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

"Love focusing on wives. Great."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I haven't asked her."

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

"Yes."

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

"Yes."

At their designated timeslot, Hermione and Ginny stood in front of their fireplace. Ginny had chosen a lovely black gown that she told Hermione was "sweetheart" style. She didn't know what that meant, but she liked it on Ginny.

She grabbed her clutch purse – borrowed from Ginny's closet – and waited for the ginger to hand over the Floo bag. Hermione could feel the air in the room dancing over the open back of her dress, and she already regretted the choice. She was far too exposed.

"Okay, Granger." Ginny turned to her. "Here's the deal. You need to find Draco Malfoy tonight and remind him that he's in love with you." Hermione rolled her eyes. "No, I'm serious here, Granger." Ginny grabbed her arm. "January 1st is three hours away."

Hermione's eyes flipped to the clock. "That's… I mean, Ginny… January 1st doesn't matter. The transfer of the inheritance matters."

"Then ask him when it transfers and then launch yourself on him at midnight!"

Hermione blushed and shoved Ginny off of her. "I will do my best. Are we ready?"

Hermione tossed the powder and stepped through the fireplace to find a completely different Malfoy Manor. Yes, the grand staircase was there, and the beautiful hallways leading to different wings of the house, but there were floating candles, magic snow falling and disappearing before it hit the ground, and at least a hundred people dressed extravagantly.

Ginny popped through just after her and cursed under her breath at the grandeur.

"My god, Hermione," she whispered. "Run back to Azkaban and tell Lucius that you accept all terms."

Hermione rolled her eyes and knocked her with her elbow. Just then she spotted Narcissa welcoming guests into the newly renovated drawing room, and Hermione didn't know if the nausea she felt was due to Narcissa or seeing the drawing room again.

There were house elves – all hired for the evening, Hermione was sure – walking with trays of champagne and Firewhisky, so Ginny grabbed two glasses of champagne for them. Hermione gulped down hers and placed the empty glass back on another passing tray. Ginny laughed.

"Shall we?"

Hermione took a breath and lead Ginny over to the receiving line where Narcissa was shaking hands and smiling with all types of people. When it was their turn, Narcissa turned her eyes on Hermione, and after a pause, she smiled. Hermione's heart beat again.

"Hermione, dear." Narcissa pulled her into a hug. "It's so wonderful you could make it. And this is Ginny Weasley, yes?"

Hermione watched as Narcissa greeted Ginny and they chatted briefly.

"Well, ladies, please do enjoy yourselves. I believe Mr. Potter is already inside. I will join the whole group in just a few minutes." Narcissa clasped Hermione's arm in a very friendly way.

Molly kept trying to leave Ron and Hermione alone together, and the one time she succeeded, Ron broke the news that he was dating someone.

"That's lovely Ron!" She smiled and tried not to feel the tug in her chest.

"Yeah?" He squinted at her, face pinched with anxiety.

"Absolutely. I hope she's worthy of you." She winked at him, and Ron relaxed.

"What about you? Are you seeing anyone? I mean… You don't have to tell me –"

"No, no," she said. "That's quite alright. Er… no one at the moment. I have some big decisions at work in the next week that I'm concentrating on. Gawain Robards offered me Draco Malfoy's old position."

Ron's eye twitched at Draco's name, but he smiled at her. "That would be nice. You'd get to work with Harry."

"Right," she said, turning away. "But the other position that is open is in House-Elf Relocation."

"Oh." He looked at the ground. "That's… wow." He looked at her. "I mean… How would you chose?"

She laughed. "Exactly."

She was glad to have people in her life who truly understood her. They knew her passions and where she wanted to end up.

The rest of the day was lovely. She received several books, of course, and a Molly Weasley sweater. She sent Monica Wilkins some Muggle treats in the post, wishing her and her husband a happy holiday season in Australia.

The following Friday was the launch party and New Year's Eve Gala. Ginny arranged for a team of witches to do their hair and makeup, which made Hermione laugh.

"You *know* how to do your hair and makeup, Ginny! And you know how to do mine!"

"But I want everything perfect! I want to be invited back!"

Hermione shook her head at her. She guessed Ginny found these things just a difficult as she did. Both of them had grown up on the outside somehow – Ginny as underprivileged and Hermione as Muggle-born – and now they were being invited in.

Ginny convinced the hair and makeup team to leave Hermione's face as natural as possible, and to let her hair be down. The hair witch pulled half of her hair up, braiding it away from her face, and curling the runaway curls that lay on her back and against her shoulder. When she put on the white dress, Ginny told her she looked like a Greek goddess. Hermione swatted her arm and went to put on her shoes.

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

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

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

I walk away from him and start running through what I'll say at midnight until Mippy announces that the first guests will be arriving shortly.

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

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

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

I nod.

"Fuck, she looks good."

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

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

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

My eyes are glued to them, but Daphne steps in to me and whispers, "Is he seeing anyone?"

I turn to her, trying to get the image of Granger's bright smile out of my head. She might have been in white... "Daphne. I am not Pansy. Please don't mistake me for someone who cares."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you prepared?" she asks.

"Not really."

"Are you sober?"

"Not really."

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

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

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

Restraint.

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

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

"Ah, but I am the host. I must distinguish myself from the rest of the rabble," I say, smiling.

She looks away towards the gazebo.

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

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

"Just about. Twice as many people."

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

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

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

Restraint.

I cast my eyes on the gazebo. I place her inside of it, and seal the structure shut with ivy.

"Where is Katya tonight?" she asks, and I hear her voice trip over the name. How strange that there is still Katya between us.

I want to tell her about the lie, about the arrangement, but my focus needs to be on getting her to trust me.

"She's in Bulgaria for the holidays." It's not a lie. "She is still desperate to sit down with you."

"Why can't I just wear black?"

"Because *I* need to wear black. Obviously. I can't show up in a white dress. I'd be translucent."

"But… Why can't *I* wear black?"

"You want us both to show up wearing black, looking like we're at a funeral? No, Granger. Think of the overall aesthetic."

Hermione frowned and continued brushing her fingers across the fabrics. One of them was so smooth and soft that she stopped, tugging at the hanger. She pulled the dress from the rest and a luxurious white floor-length gown tumbled from her hands. It was remarkably modest – nothing too revealing in the chest area, sleeveless with gathered shoulders. Hermione turned the hanger around and found the back was completely open, dipping down to what she assumed would be the top of the hips, draping the fabric in a Grecian style. Far too revealing…

"Oh, Hermione. That's *gorgeous*." Ginny tossed the black chiffon dress she was toying with and ran to her.

"No," Hermione said. "But look at the back." She turned the hanger around and Ginny's eyes brightened.

"Perfect!"

Hermione was about to explain that she would much prefer herself to be covered, when the blonde salesgirl rushed in.

"The dress picks the witch, you know!" She grabbed the hanger from her and held it up. "*Exquisite* choice, Miss Granger. Hand-beaded at the shoulders and classically draped." The girl ran her hands over the dress, pointing at the shoulders, fingering the fabric as it flowed from the hanger like water.

"I… I couldn't wear something with an open back like that, I'm afraid."

"Oh, try it on Granger!" Ginny rolled her eyes. "What the harm?"

Hermione huffed, thinking of her beige bra that was firmly strapped across the middle of her back. She took the dress and went into the curtained room. She shucked her jeans aggressively, adamant that she would hate this dress.

She bought the dress. It was stunning. Ginny convinced her that she could wear a different kind of bra that wouldn't show across her back, or she could go braless, to which Hermione firmly disagreed.

They spent Christmas at the Burrow. Ron came for Christmas Day, and although it was strained, Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny had a wonderful time.

It was lovely to see George, and Percy was beside himself with jealously about Narcissa Malfoy's New Year's Eve Gala.

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

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

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

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

"*Silencio*."

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

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

The Cruciatus Curse.

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

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

I let my eyes drift along the walls, hoping…

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

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

I blink, clear my mind, and look over at the three detainees. Lovegood is staring at the picture of the milkmaid, turning her eyes on me with a pleasant smile.

"Perhaps you could give a demonstration."

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

"Of course, Professor."

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

"*Crucio*."

He crumples. The silencing charm is a blessing. But his mouth is open wide.

I release him. He pants on the floor.

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

He cackles. Astoria looks faint.

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

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

I release Abbott, and she shakes, moaning.

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

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

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

"It's alright, Draco."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Severus glances at the room. "To bed."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Severus's hand on my shoulder. He vanishes my sick. He's speaking to me lowly. So low I can't hear over my air, over the screaming. I think I can hear Longbottom screaming too now.

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

It shrinks back.

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

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

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

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

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

"What was that? That thing he did?"

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

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

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

"Since when?" he hisses.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I run the Senior Consultant meeting, explaining the financials without looking at her, answering Mockridge's questions without focusing on her fidgeting hands.

I mention the *Prophet*, remember my part to play in Pansy's charade, and when the meeting is over I carry her back to her office, telling her there's a 10AM waiting for her.

She jumps into action, asking questions, demanding explanations.

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

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

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

I open the first one.

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

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

I open the next.

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

I rub my face and open the next.

"*I LIKE HIS HANDS.*"

~*~

Monday, October 13, 1997

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

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

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

I stop, take a deep breath, set my features, and turn to see Amycus Carrow smirking at me.

"Professor Carrow." I tuck my hands behind my back when I feel them shake. "I apologize, I'm awfully close to curfew."

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

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

I blink and it clears, wet on my cheeks.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I stare at my desk. "Me too."

"Do you need me to try it?"

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

"Probably not."

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

"*Legilimens*."

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

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

I nod. "Good."

He frowns.

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

"She should be along—" Blaise tries.

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

Blaise steps into her, pressing his hand against her hip "That's not how it happened—"

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

"Back the fuck off!" Blaise snarls. I watch as he shoves his girlfriend back, and guides me to the stairs, down into the dormitories, his hand on my shoulder.

He shuts the door. I take off my shoes, starting to dress for bed.

"Are you alright?"

I turn and he's watching me.

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

"Sure."

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

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

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

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

He grins. "I knew it."

He winks at me.

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

I walk back to my office.

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

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

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

I crack my neck.

"—might be a bit of a deal-breaker, but I'm going to broker that when we get there…"

I run through the Love Contract in my head. I didn't think of Blaise. I didn't think he'd…

I thought he knew.

"—full run-around—"

I thought he understood how it would break me.

"Draco?"

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

"Draco?"

"Do you want her?"

This is stupid. This is pointless and obnoxious, and nothing to focus on today of all days.

He blinks at me. "Who?"

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

He chuckles. "Who doesn't?"

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

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

"Draco?"

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

"What's wrong?"

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

"Draco, I didn't mean—"

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, sir."

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

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

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

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

Alone now.

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

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

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

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

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

"You like your office?"

She turns to face me. "I love it." And I can see she means it.

Do you tip office decorators?

"Good."

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

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

Office Relationship Disclosure.

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

She'd asked about the meeting.

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

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Twenty Five

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

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

"Why would I go twice?" he'd mumbled around pudding at the dinner table.

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

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

Hermione blinked, feeling her breath leave her.

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

She swallowed.

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

Pansy smiled against his lips.

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

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

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

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

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

"Draco…"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hermione huffed.

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

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

***Twenty points** for doing her job?*

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

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

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

"You did what?"

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

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

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

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

I watch him head into the vacant office, smirking.

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

"Evening, Granger." My voice croaks.

"Oh, yes, hi."

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

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

~*~

Monday, January 17, 2000

I've had about five Howlers per day since Skeeter printed that Granger would be joining me.

Dorothea, Melody, and Carrie have all offered to review them for me when they come in so I don't have to, but I don't want anything incriminating slipping out.

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

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

I half expect it to be signed M. McGonagall.

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

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

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

I knock on her doorframe. "Granger."

Couch.

It's a couch in the common room.

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

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

I hear her cast a teeth-cleansing charm.

I feel her body against my calf, tense.

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

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

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

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

"Better?"

I nod. I kiss her.

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

~*~

Wednesday, January 12, 2000

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

Mr. Wentworth and Miss Granger have arrived.

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

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

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

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

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

I make my way around, stopping smile at Dorothea.

And finally, I head to Blaise.

"Blaise."

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

Hermione winced. She tried to just say it from the kitchen, while making eggs.

"I… applied for Malfoy Consulting Group."

The slap of Ginny's bare feet against the ground and the scrape of Harry's chair.

"When??"

She cracked an egg, back turned.

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

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

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

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

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

"I won't be Malfoy's lapdog. I will be the Senior Consultant over Non-Wizard Relations." She placed her hands on her hips. And Harry's eyes widened.

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

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

"I – I guess I'll figure that out." She brushed hair away from her face. "But I'll be representing magical creatures, like the werewolf case he brought to me. I guess I'll be arguing in front of the Wizengamot –"

"One of your favorite things," Ginny supplied helpfully.

"Yes," Hermione said. "I'll be able to seek out cases and causes that *I* want to focus on."

"While working under Malfoy," Harry supplied, unhelpfully.

"Yes," Hermione said.

The three of them stared at each other in the kitchen, eggs sizzling behind her.

"I think," Ginny said, "it's an excellent career move…" She said it in a strained voice, lifting at the end.

"But…?" Hermione prompted.

"Well," Ginny looked up at her. "You'll never be able to sleep with him now."

Hermione blinked at her, trying not to realign her priorities. Harry coughed and excused himself to the living room.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Mz 'Ermione Granger?"

"Yes, hello."

"I am Madame Michele."

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

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

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

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

The tiny woman released her hand and smiled up at her. "Please come into my office." Madame Michele stepped aside, gesturing for Hermione to enter.

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

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

"Do ignore ze quill, Mz Granger."

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

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

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

I may throw up later.

But the thought of losing my erection now… Pansy would never forgive me.

I look down at her, finding her light eyes watching my face, her lips pulled tight around my cock as it slips through her mouth. I run my fingers through her thin strands in thanks, and she sucks me hard.

I guess that's nice.

Her lips pop off me, and she takes a deep breath. "Relax, Draco." Raspy. I remember the first time I heard her talk after having my cock in her mouth. I had fucked her immediately.

I close my eyes again as she licks at me. Just get through this.

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

Pansy does again… whatever she did.

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

"Yes," I whisper into the void.

Pansy hums around me.

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

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

Hair tickles my thigh as a tongue slips down, down, taking all of me to the back of a throat. It's *her* curls dancing around her face.

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

Her throat moving around me, begging me to come.

Her breath on me.

Hermione.

I shout, gagging on my voice, and I come down *her* throat as she swallows every drop, like I'm precious to her. Like she wants me to make love to her mouth every day.

A wet *pop.*

I'm boneless on the bed.

She pauses, her fingers on my shirt buttons. I've botched it. She's going to tell everyone that I'm gay or that I'm cheating on her. We're going to argue and she's going to break up with me.

She looks into my eyes, and I'm wondering if I can fake a dizzy spell and pass out. After all, I haven't eaten since dinner last night.

"Just relax then," she whispers. The look she gives me is *sinful* and I'm so glad we aren't going to spend the next half hour fighting that I kiss her back when she presses her lips to mine again.

She moves to my neck, kissing my jaw, my pulse, unbuttoning my shirt, hands sliding across my ribs. I keep my hands on her waist. It feels nice, but there's still not a lot happening in my trousers, and when I realize that's her next destination, I run my hands up to her chest, trying to find some inspiration.

Push-up bra. The damn thing has no give to it. Her fingers are at my waist now, and I try to figure out how to tell her I'm not in the mood again before she can feel it for herself.

Maybe I'll just tell her about my mission. That seems easier than explaining this.

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

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

Her hand wraps around me and I feel her climb onto the floor between my knees.

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

I take a deep breath. Pansy rubs my hip, and I realize her mouth is already on me. I'm getting harder at least.

This will be over soon, and maybe I'll even sleep tonight.

Yes, this could be helpful. I think of sleep. I think of lying in my bed for the past few months, staring at the ceiling. Only a few nights did I reach below my pajamas and find release. I feel my cock slipping into her mouth again, and I think of the last time I'd properly made a mess of my sheets. I'd slept so well that night.

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, er… thank you."

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

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

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

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

"… No?"

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

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

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

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

"Tell me about yourzelf, Mz Granger."

Hermione blinked at her. Madame Michele had folded her hands in her lap, and studied her.

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

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

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

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

"Thank you, Mz Granger," Madame Michele hummed. "You managed to glozz over every interesting detail about yourzelf, focusing only on the 'umdrum."

Hermione's eyes widened. Humdrum?

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

"Yes, thank you."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Is it your mission?"

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

"Watch it, Pansy."

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

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

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

Pansy swallows and frowns at her fingernails.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I don't have the energy for this.

"Not here, Pans—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

~*~

Saturday, October 12, 1996

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Did you hear about Bell?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Of course. Why do you ask?"

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

Hermione's heart dropped into her stomach as she wondered how many times Madame Michele had watched Draco spoon honey into his tea three times. She blushed and looked down.

Madame Michele took the milk back, took her seat again, and fixed her tea. Hermione watched as her hands moved. She didn't have paint on her nails, but her nails were trimmed and squared. Hermione picked at one of her cuticles.

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

She frowned at her.

"Do not frown."

Hermione relaxed her face.

"Mz Granger, why are you 'ere?"

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

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

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

What? When did it begin?

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

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

"Study zis, and return improved."

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

"Your notes."

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

"You work at a bookshop on ze weekendz?"

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

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

Hermione frowned. "Miss…?"

"Truesdale. Your dance teacher."

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

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

She felt her chest grow cold.

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

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

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

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

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

What the fuck was that?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I want Granger," she says.

What a coincidence. So do I.

I look up at her with a bored expression.

"For what kind of torture?"

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

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

"Which is why she'll be perfect." Pansy takes the chair in front of me, dipping into a comfortable position with legs crossed. "I can mold her into what I need."

She waves a hand and a portfolio book appears in front of me, over my paperwork. I sigh and flip open the cover.

Parkinson

The Modern Business Witch

"What's this?"

"My new fashion line." She folds her hands in her lap and waits for me to flip through.

I don't.

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

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

I sigh. "Well, that's easy enough—"

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

I laugh. She maintains her easy grin.

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

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

"I remember." I lift one back.

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

He grins big.

Talkative.

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

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

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

"No."

"Oh."

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

His eyes go round. "*Hermione* Granger?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"Is that a problem?"

"Oh! No! My wife is… a huge fan."

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

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

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

~*~

Friday, January 7, 2000

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Do not wander in another person's sitting room

Hand shaking?

Compliments?

Do not stare out the window like a fool

Do not choose the largest grandest table for only two people

Do not bounce your leg under the table

No need to stand when a woman stands

What in heavens name are your shoes?

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

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

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

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

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

What was it that Lucius wanted?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Do not stutter.

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

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

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

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

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Fifteen

Monday, January 3, 2000

"And over here, Mr. Malfoy," the shopkeeper says, gesturing for me to follow, "we have an exquisite Birchwood set—"

"No," I say. "Something darker." I don't bother following him back. "What house were you in?"

"Hufflepuff, sir."

I roll my eyes at the curtain displays. "Did you ever sneak your way into Gryffindor Tower?"

"Er, no, sir."

Me, neither.

"I want something welcoming, something warm. Something very Gryffindor."

"What about Cherrywood, sir?"

My eyes flick over to the corner where he's pointing. A deep, dark, red-tinted cabinet stares back at me.

"We could match with reds and golds," he offers. "I have carpets to complement—"

"Send me a design."

~*~

Tuesday, January 4, 2000

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

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

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

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

Her list of notes that evening was twice the length.

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

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

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

She at least needed new shoes.

"Hermione Granger?"

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

"Yes, hello?"

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

Hermione's heart beat again once she realized that "Mr. Malfoy" was Draco, not Lucius.

"Oh lovely." She hitched her bag higher on her shoulder. "I'll be overseeing Non-Wizard Relations. Magical creatures, Muggle relations..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Blaise Zabini

Marketing and Public Relations

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

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

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

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

Thinking. Always thinking.

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

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

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

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

Perhaps I scared her. Perhaps she scared herself.

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

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

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

I pace my room, slowly taking off my suit.

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

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

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

What do I do now?

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

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

The only resume I ever asked her for.

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

I scribble a cover letter, calling her the Golden Girl again, and send it all off with my owl.

I'm leaving my study, eyes glazed, trying to recover, and Mother turns down the hall, pulling her earrings out.

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

"Well?" she says.

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

She walked to the far corner, taking in the view from her desk. She gazed down at the Cherrywood and it finally hit her. Gryffindor dormitories. That's what this reminded her of.

She smiled and took a seat at *her* desk, running her fingers over it.

"Hermione Granger: Corporate Sell-out."

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

He smirked at her.

"Corporate sell-out?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Evening, Granger."

"Oh, yes, hi."

He disappeared. She slapped her hand against her forehead.

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

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

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

"Miss Hermione Granger?"

"Yes? Hello?"

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

"The solicitor for the group of solicitors?" Hermione smiled. "You must be the best then." She shook his hand and he tapped his glasses up, grinning.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Alright, yes."

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

Hermione blinked.

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

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

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

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

"Draco?"

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

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

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

"I'll take care of her, Draco." He fucking winks at me. "She can stand with me."

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

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

"Astoria, could you grab Blaise for me?"

She nods and glides away.

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

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

"I don't know."

She nods, pressing her lips together, and steps onstage, graciously accepting her applause.

What would have happened if Blaise hadn't found us? My fingers would have wandered, skipping over her ribs, dipping down her spine. She would have leaned into me? Let me touch her?

And suddenly Mother is introducing me and I'm Draco Malfoy again, only not. I smirk. I wave. I make jokes and nod at Harry Potter in solidarity. I find a way to throw off the fourteen months I spent in a damp cell, doing more damage to myself than Dementors ever could.

And I see her, glowing white against the marble in the back of the room, her eyes deeper than the sea of black fabric between us.

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

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

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

Her eyes move over my face.

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

Perfect. Right where I want her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You're going to steal people away from their high-ranking government and private industry jobs tonight? With one midnight speech?" she demands, voice laughing.

I watch as she teases me, not knowing she's talking about herself. Her lips twist into a grin and she asks me how. How I plan to take her. How I plan to keep her.

"Anyone can be seduced, Granger."

And something happens to her eyes. And she looks at my mouth. And before I can process that what it means, what she wants from me, she looks away, eyes dragging over the gardens.

I've done it somehow. She wants me. She desires me. I feel the air spinning between us, my feet gliding closer, and she licks her lips and I almost reach for her.

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

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

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

She won't stay forever.

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

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

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

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

Hermione blinked. "Yes, alright. And what is it you said about a Love Contract?"

"Oh, yes." And Corban Hartford waved his hand, as if this wasn't the most interesting thing he said in the past ten minutes. "The Love Contract Policy helps to establish some workplace guidelines for coworkers who become romantically involved. We're asking all employees to disclose any current or past romantic relationships with another employee, and if two employees do become involved, to disclose it immediately."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She swallowed. "Perfect sense."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Restraint.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She took a moment to place him in her mind, finding it so difficult to see him outside of a discussion about office romance.

"Mr. Hartford! Hello!" She smiled as he waved to her.

"Miss Granger, I thought you worked here." He grinned as he stepped up to the counter. "I'm looking for a birthday present for my father, and I thought I'd pay you a visit." He pushed his glasses up and looked around the store.

"Well, it's my lucky day then." She pushed the paper away. "Anything in particular? Or just browsing?"

"I'd love suggestions, if you have any." He hitched a satchel bag higher on his shoulder. "He's not a fan of fiction, unfortunately, or else I'd have a few suggestions of my own."

Hermione walked around the counter. "You're a fiction fan, Mr. Hartford?" She led him towards the biographies and non-fiction.

"Yes, absolutely. It keeps my mind off all the law books I've memorized." He shot her a lazy smile. "And you can call me Corban. Don't worry about that Mr. Hartford stuff." He waved a hand away and looked to the stacks.

Hermione showed him to the Mattie McHandry books that she had initially showed to Narcissa. He bought two of them, and they chatted for a bit about how she was liking Malfoy Consulting.

"The article in the *Prophet* was lovely, by the way," he said.

"Oh, thanks." She blushed. She took Madame Michele's advice and took the compliment. "Being on the cover of the *Prophet* was never my favorite thing, but the article turned out nicely." She placed the books in a bag and handed them over. "I hope your father likes the books!"

"Me too!" He gave her a nervous face that she laughed at. "Good day, Miss Granger."

"You can call me Hermione."

He turned to her at the door. "Good day, Hermione." He smiled and pushed his glasses up.

Hermione grinned a bit more after that.

When she got home from work, a letter from Ron was waiting for her. She put down her bag and as she picked it up, Ginny poked her head in.

"That arrived about an hour ago." Ginny hovered in the doorway.

"Mhm." Hermione read over the letter. Ron was questioning her decisions with wording like, "I thought you were taking a job in House-Elf Relocation or in the Auror's Office? I'm completely floored, Hermione."

Hermione read it through, frowning. She looked up at Ginny who was biting her lip.

"Well?"

"I'm just shocked that he hadn't heard yet." Hermione rubbed her face. "It never came up between you two?"

"I wasn't going to tell him!" Ginny danced over to her, grabbing the letter and scanning it. "Oh, nice, Ronald…" she grumbled.

"And Harry never told him? And he didn't read about it last week when Skeeter announced it? Couldn't he have just sent me a Howler with the others last week?" Hermione sat on the edge of her bed. A copy of the *Prophet* lay next to her, and her bedroom eyes stared up from the sheets.

Ginny tried to make her feel better for a bit longer, but all she saw was the picture on the bed of her in a green dress with smoky eyes, with Ron's words dancing in her head.

I guess you really are a Slytherin now, Hermione.

The *Daily Prophet* article must have done something wonderful for M.C.G., because the office was humming on Monday morning. Hermione barely had enough time to set down her coffee before a memo flew in, requesting all Senior Consultants for a meeting at nine.

She prepped her notes, conjured a full-length mirror to double check her work on her face and hair that morning, and headed to the conference room. Wentworth and Dorothea had taken their usual seats from last week's meeting, so she did the same.

Draco and Blaise walked in together, laughing about something. It was sweet, really, to see the two of them behaving as friends, Draco taking a break from his boss personae.

Blaise sat across from her and winked. She raised a brow at him.

Just as Draco began his "good mornings," Corban walked in. Hermione smiled and waved to him. He grinned at her and set his briefcase down at the end of the table at the empty seat facing Draco. She hadn't seen him in the office at all last week, and as she thought about it, perhaps he didn't actually have an office here. Perhaps he was just dropping in from time to time.

She looked up at Draco, prepared for him to start. He was watching Corban. Draco looked down at his notes, shifted his feet, and began.

"Excellent first week, everyone. I think people are settling in nicely. I want to instigate weekly Monday meetings for an opportunity to check in, set weekly goals if necessary, share successes." He turned to Blaise. "Blaise just landed the Chudley Cannons for us last week. Excellent news."

Hermione turned to see Blaise grinning proudly.

"You're making me blush, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco continued, outlining the week. Draco and she would meet with Quentin Margolis on Wednesday about the werewolf project, and then Thursday or Friday they would sit down with Corban to discuss the upcoming steps with the Wizengamot. Mockridge had a few pureblood

families that had hired M.C.G. to work on their finances, and Wentworth was pursuing a few businesses in Diagon Alley.

As he went on, and as the consultants engaged in conversation with him more, she realized she was hearing "Mr. Malfoy" quite a bit. It was strange. A bit too strange for her, but she guessed that calling him Malfoy was better than Draco. It wasn't as if they were friends, anyway.

"And lastly, do be careful with your mail," Draco continued. "The *Prophet* article really put us on the map, but not all publicity is good. I've already dealt with four Howlers this morning."

He scratched his jaw. He looked tired already and the day had barely begun.

He dismissed them, and after she packed up she passed Corban on the way out.

"Did your father like the books? Have you given them to him yet?"

"He… Well, he said thank you." Corban smiled. "He's not big on affection or gratitude… or paternal instincts, really…" Corban laughed down at the table. "So, he liked them enough."

Hermione grinned. "That's wonderful. Well, I'm always available for more suggestions. Let me know!"

"Brilliant. Thank you, Hermione."

He smiled at her and began flipping through some notes instead of packing up, perhaps about to have a meeting with Draco – Malfoy. Malfoy.

She looked up and found him watching her and Corban. He looked away and began shuffling his notes as she left.

She turned out the door and straight into Blaise, who was leaning against the wall. He grinned at her.

"Yes, Blaise?" she bit out, continuing down the aisle towards her office.

"You and Hartford are friends. That's adorable." He followed. "You're like two little nerds who grew up to be attractive."

She coughed to hide her blush, hearing him behind her. "Blaise, if you're into that sort of thing, I'd be happy to introduce you?" she tossed over her shoulder, and caught him smirking.

She rounded the corner and felt the eyes in the cubicles tracing them. Or maybe it was just Blaise, she thought, as Melody gave them a bright smile.

"Walter has your early morning mail, Miss Granger," Melody sang.

"Oh, wonderful. Thank you." She continued on, hoping Blaise would be caught up by Melody's cleavage…

"I'm loving this Modern Business Witch thing, Granger."

No luck. And it struck her that he was walking behind her, so the visual he was commenting on –

"Thank you, Blaise. Now go away."

Hermione rolled her eyes. She leaned on the counter at Cornerstone, frowning at the title. It had... interesting connotations.

She scanned over the interviews of the other consultants, letting her eyes linger on the picture. She looked quite pretty. Pansy's dress was very complementary and the leather vest pulled her ribs in just so. The hair and makeup was spot on.

So it wasn't *her* in the picture that she didn't like. It was just so… sexy. Like a perfect little ménage a trois with the three of them. Just like she'd thought, Hermione's hips were awfully close to Draco's head, and Blaise had leaned forward just enough to bring his chest close to her shoulder.

This was a *consulting group*, not a *strip club* for Merlin's sake!

Hermione opened the paper to find an entire page dedicated to her. She gasped in the middle of the bookstore, and the hag looked at her like she had said Voldemort's name in vain.

The picture of her reading the book on Draco's desk took up almost the entire page. She opened and closed her mouth, wondering if Skeeter had played with the image at all. Her legs looked so long in the heels, and her lips looked so full. She watched her hand turn the page and her lips smirk.

On the accompanying page, Hermione saw a picture of her posing in front of Draco's window, and she recognized the moment when Draco had walked in the room and they had made eye contact.

Real-life Hermione blushed as she watched *Prophet* Hermione's eyes heat. "Oh, god…" She closed her eyes, blocking the image of herself watching Draco watch her. Was she really that obvious in person?

She sighed and read the article. The article completely about herself. Skeeter detailed the duties of the position, thankfully including bits from their interview about which magical creature groups they would be focusing on in the first quarter. Then apparently Skeeter had interviewed the others *about* her.

A pull-quote from Blaise Zabini: "She's as passionate as she is beautiful."

Hermione's eye widened. How ridiculously inappropriate. She scanned the page and found that a girl in the secretarial pool told Skeeter that Hermione was "kind of a hero to her! Everyone at Ilvermorny knew who she was!" Hermione frowned. She didn't recognize the girl's name at all and made a note to figure out which one she was.

At the end of the article, Draco Malfoy was quoted. "What drew me to her was her mind. She's very logical."

Hermione pulled her head back. Logical? Well, yes…

The door to Cornerstone opened and she closed the paper on the pictures of herself. She looked up and Corban Hartford was coming through the door.

"I know, I know. I just don't want to be wearing this *amazing* dress, if my hair and makeup don't match." She gestured down at the lovely burnt orange dress that Pansy had her in. She looked up at Pansy – whose makeup was perfection for this time in the morning – and begged her with her eyes.

"Take it all off." Pansy frowned. "Take the dress off, take the makeup off, take that disastrous pony-tail out. Merlin, Granger, what were you trying to do?"

"I was trying to do the 'power-pony' thing that Tracey did yesterday!" she growled.

"Granger, you can't wear your hair in the same style two days in a row!" Pansy pulled a face at her.

"You can't just give me a closet full of beautiful clothes and expect me to know these things, Pansy!"

Hermione groaned and stomped away to take everything off. When she returned in her bathrobe five minutes later, Tracy and Daphne were in her living room, looking barely awake.

"Oh," Hermione said. "I'm so sorry to be such a pain to you all."

Tracey shook her head, like she wasn't a pain. Daphne didn't disagree with her.

"Alright." Pansy appeared from the kitchen, having brewed them tea. "We are going to do this in front of a mirror for the next three days."

As the girls started in on her, and Pansy went to throw away anything she didn't like in Hermione's closet, she wondered if this was what growing up in Slytherin would have been like. She didn't regret her seven years with the boys, and it was nice to have Lavender and Parvati leave her alone most of the time…

But she felt like this was how a weekend morning in the Slytherin dormitories would have been.

The *Daily Prophet* came out on Sunday morning, sporting the picture of Draco, Blaise and her on Draco's couch above the fold.

Perfect. It was her least favorite of all the pictures taken, but of course it was on the front page of the *Prophet*.

"NEW BLOOD ON THE HORIZON"

by Rita Skeeter

With poise and confidence, Draco Malfoy has started a revolution. He has hand-picked the team, he has secured the office space, he has arranged the furniture! The company that will bring forth major change in the wizarding world has opened.

A self-proclaimed "problem-solver," Draco Malfoy brushes his golden hair aside as he talks to yours truly about his major plans.

He laughed as she reached Walter's desk. Walter stood and heaved a bin up on the ledge of the cubicle.

"What is that?" she asked in horror.

"Your mail," Walter grimaced. He looked inside. "I've separated everything. To the left side of this bucket are the actual work-related letters and packages. I can go through some of that with you later, as I found a particularly interesting letter from the Snidget Society that I'd like to push with you." He tapped the right side of the bin. "But over here, are all your personal letters." He grimaced.

"Personal letters? I shouldn't have personal mail delivered here."

Walter scrunched his nose. "I quite agree. I was very uncomfortable opening everything, so maybe we can try a better system if this continues."

"What kind of personal letters?" Blaise leaned against Walter's cube, looking into the bucket smirking. He'd procured a cup of tea from somewhere.

"Well, some fan mail, some hate mail, a letter from Witch Weekly – apparently you have been chosen to grace next week's cover – but also some proposals from eligible bachelors." Walter rolled his eyes.

"Proposals?" Hermione frowned.

"Really?" Blaise sent a greedy look into the bucket. He raised his mug to his lips.

"I assume if I get any of those in the afternoon mail, that I can chuck them?" Walter said.

Hermione blinked, still not fully understanding the purpose of a *proposal* to an absolute stranger through mail. She looked to Blaise, smirking around the mug, and turned to Walter, raising a brow. "Are there pictures?"

Blaise snorted his tea out.

Quentin Margolis had suggested they meet at a Muggle café instead of coming into the M.C.G. office on Wednesday, which Hermione thought was an odd choice for a werewolf recluse. The North Forest Pack was a peaceful bunch, but apparently so peaceful that they had declined Remus's invitation to fight at the Battle of Hogwarts.

She and Draco popped in to an Apparition point, and walked the several blocks. The silence was… comfortable. But Hermione still hated it.

"I've been meaning to ask you," she began, and she saw Draco twitch his head to her, "what happened to Tiberius Ogden? I was very surprised to hear that the Wizengamot relations position was open."

"He declined."

Hermione looked up at him. His eyes were scanning the street as they stopped at a crosswalk.

"Declined? But I thought things were going so well. I mean to say, from the way Noelle was talking about it."

She remembered a tipsy pixie girl sloshing around the news that Draco was only schmoozing her to get to her father.

Draco was silent. The signal turned, and he stepped off the curb, placing his hand on her back to guide her. She warmed, but focused.

"What did he say when you had lunch with him and Noelle?"

"He canceled." Draco clenched his jaw. "He said he had no interest in the company."

Something was unsaid. Hermione studied him as he grabbed a door handle, and let her enter the café before him. She stopped in the doorway.

"Do you want me to write to him?"

He looked down at her, and his eyes ran over her face. "No, we'll find someone else Granger."

She frowned and stepped through. Draco had also hoped Ogden would invest, if she remembered correctly. What a huge help that would have been…. She turned to him. "What about Noelle? I think I hit it off with her. I could see when she's home next—"

"No." His voice was firm, and his eyes were hard. "Do *not* contact Noelle. Do you hear me, Granger?"

She searched his eyes, trying to figure it out. "Alright."

He swallowed and looked away from her, searching the café to see if Margolis was already set up at a table. Hermione frowned at her shoes – kitten heels, Pansy called them – and tried to think…

Draco and Noelle were out on a Thursday, and they were to sit down with Tiberius on Saturday. So in those two days, he had canceled. What had Noelle said to daddy?

Draco led them over to a couch area where she could just see a large bearded man. Margolis stood as they approached and he gave him a tight smile as they shook hands. After he greeted Hermione warmly, he introduced a second man she had not seen behind him on the couch.

"This is Mason," the gravelly voice announced.

Where Quentin was dark and warm, Mason was fair and cool. He did not stand when he was introduced and made no effort to shake Draco's hand or acknowledge him. He looked to be about thirty, although it was always hard to tell a werewolf's age.

"Can I get anyone anything? Coffee, Granger?" Draco said.

"Yes, thank you."

Quentin asked for a tea and thanked him. Mason looked Draco up and down and asked for a tea, and a ham sandwich, with a side salad with steak. Hermione had the distinct feeling that Draco was being tested.

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Twenty Seven

Madame Michele was quite taken aback to see her in Pansy's clothes that night.

She was even more taken aback when Hermione burst out, "I can't handle this handshake thing! I—I just really can't get around it. I'm at work in a professional environment with *men* who shake hands like *men* and they aren't trying to shake hands with a *lady*. I can't do it and I won't." She huffed. "I'm sorry."

She looked at her feet, embarrassed.

"Az long az you know ze difference, Mz Granger" was her cool reply. She looked her up and down. "You look quite lovely. What 'as 'appened to you."

Hermione reigned herself in. "Thank you, Madame Michele." She added, "You're too kind." She looked down at her dress. "I have become the spokesperson and model for the *Parkinson* line."

"Oh! Mz Parkinzon. What an enchanting girl."

Hermione kept from rolling her eyes. Of course she was.

That night Madame Michele took the opportunity to teach her how to walk in heels and how to treat expensive clothes.

Hermione thought it was the only lesson thus far that she'd found in the least bit helpful for everyday life.

The next morning, Hermione called Pansy in a panic at seven in the morning.

"I'm so, so sorry, Pansy," Hermione said as the tall girl stepped out of her fireplace. "But I tried to do what Daphne and Tracey did yesterday, and I don't think it worked."

Pansy looked at her. "It didn't."

To his credit, Draco didn't flinch. He nodded and went to the counter.

"How is young Teddy?" Quentin turned to her.

"Last I heard, he and his grandmother were visiting Ron Weasley in Ireland." Hermione smiled. Her eyes flickered to Mason, who was watching her lazily. "Mason, were you acquainted with Remus Lupin before he died?"

"I'd met him, yeah."

He said no more. And Hermione could hear Madame Michele's voice in her head regarding difficult guests.

"He was lovely. One of my favorite teachers at Hogwarts and a dear friend," she said. "I assume you are also a part of the North Forest Pack?"

"Yep."

Hermione looked at Quentin. He pressed his lips together and gave Hermione an apologetic look.

Draco returned with three teas and a coffee. Hermione suppressed a smile when she saw him juggling them without magic. He placed a plastic card with a number on it in the center of the table.

"Let's jump right in, shall we?" Quentin said, leaning forward on his elbows. Mason stayed reclined. Hermione reached into her bag to pull her presentation folder as Quentin continued, "Mr. Malfoy and I had a very brief meeting in December. So I do understand the policy changes and the steps your group will take. I told Mr. Malfoy I would think it over, and discuss with my pack—" he gestured to Mason, who was watching Draco – "and we would reconvene."

"Excellent," Hermione said, finding the page she needed. "I've drafted a prospective timeline for the case." She grabbed a timeline for each of them, and handed them out. "I can begin interviews with members of the North Forest Pack as early as February. My Associate Consultant and I can come out to the North Forest, spend an entire week or two out there so that your pack and their routine is not disturbed—"

Mason chuckled. Hermione looked to him, but when he said no more, she continued.

"Once we have testimonials from the North Forest Pack, I can begin reaching out to donors who would fund the case. As Mr. Malfoy said in his previous meeting with Mr. Margolis, the North Forest Pack would not be paying for the services of Malfoy Consulting Group, but a few representatives are welcome at any fundraising parties. Once we –"

"So you'll raise money for Malfoy's business, based on our interviews." Mason stared at Hermione. It wasn't a question.

"We'll be raising money for the *case*, based on your interviews." Hermione pursed her lips.

"And tell me, Hermione Granger," Mason said. "How much does it cost to get a court date with the Wizengamot?"

She blinked at him. "I believe it is a ten galleon filing fee."

"Fundraising parties for ten galleons? My, my. Your business must be further in the hole than I'd thought, Malfoy." Mason leveled his cool eyes on Draco. Draco returned his stare and sat forward.

"The fundraising would cover the costs of research, the trip to the North Forest, the salaries of the staff working tirelessly, accommodations for the pack if they choose to come into London for the case –"

"So, I give you an interview, I tell you how difficult life has been for me as a werewolf and how much I wished I was like the other girls and boys, and you give me a Ministry job? Is that how this works?" Mason said, steering the subject back to the policy. Hermione looked at Quentin, who was sipping his tea silently.

"No," Hermione said, feeling her face heat. "With the testimonials from the North Forest Pack, we will give you the right to *earn* a Ministry job, should you ever be interested in one." She felt her breath coming quicker. "Should any werewolf want a stable form of employment, this policy will disallow any form of discrimination. We will also be arguing for government sponsored scholarships to assist any cubs in their expenses while at Hogwarts, and the school will be required to have arrangements made at the full moon."

Mason held her glare. Quentin cleared his throat.

"I appreciate all you have done, Miss Granger, in preparing for this project, and all the work you plan to do for the werewolf community, but we will need to decline."

Hermione opened her mouth, brow furrowed at Quentin. A small sound puffed from her throat, before she could voice "Why?"

"It might be a bit easier for *you*, Miss Granger, having been in the spotlight all your life, but I don't believe in being bought out for publicity," Quentin said. He turned his harsh eyes on Draco.

Easier for *her*? Hermione frowned at him. She turned to Draco to find he'd gone very still, but held Quentin's eyes.

"That's very unfortunate, Mr. Margolis," Draco said. "Is there anything we can do to change your mind?"

"Can you bring back Albus Dumbledore?" Mason quipped. He smirked at Draco, like he knew he'd just hit him in a soft place. Hermione watched as Draco's nostrils flared but he did nothing else. Mason continued, "Or perhaps you can go back in time and put down Fenrir Greyback, instead of playing house with him for a year."

Draco's jaw clenched, and she felt like she could see the red in his vision.

Hermione swallowed. She directed them to the couch. Hermione felt very stiff suddenly. They had her sit on the arm of the couch. She was being treated much like a prop, she realized. Pansy saw her frowning and approached her.

"What's happening in that brilliant head, Granger?"

"I'm not sure I like this, Pansy. This Modern Business Witch. I really don't think I'm cut out for it." She looked away from her and Blaise was watching them. "I don't like how I'm… being draped everywhere. Like a doll."

Pansy lifted a brow. "Well, that is the world of fashion, Hermione."

"Then I don't think it's *my* world."

Pansy nodded at her, thinking. "Get through this set up, and I'll fix it."

Hermione stared at her, then nodded.

They had Draco sit on the couch next to the arm she was on. They put Blaise behind the couch, leaning forward. She had to cross her legs awkwardly, knowing that Draco's shoulder was right near her hips, and after a few shots, they directed her to place her hand just behind Draco's other shoulder on the back of the couch and lean her body that way.

After that pose was done, Pansy redirected them to the desk. She had Hermione stand two steps in front of it. She placed Blaise and Draco behind her, leaning on the desk. Hermione suddenly regretted saying anything, as now she was front and center. Pansy had her place her hands on her hips, staring proudly down the lens. She felt a power flow through her as the bulbs flashed. Pansy had the boys step out and gave her a book. They took several shots of her leaning on Draco's desk, reading a book. She felt quite comfortable. She smiled up at Pansy.

"Miss Granger, I am *adoring* this style on you. Who are you wearing?" Rita's quill twitched behind her.

Hermione looked up at Pansy. Draco stood just behind her, eyes running over her.

"*Parkinson*." Hermione smirked. The camera popped.

Pansy's lips parted in a slow smile, and Draco's eyes flashed at her.

came over and smoothed her ponytail, bringing her hair over her shoulder. Hermione didn't know how to stand or whether to smile or not, so Pansy placed her hand on her hip and told her to look out the window. Bozo loved it.

As she was being placed in another position, Draco entered, sliding his arm into his jacket. He stopped when he saw her and she met his eyes. The camera flashed. He fixed his collar and continued to Rita, shaking her hand. Rita blushed.

The photographers gathered in Draco's office, and slowly the Senior Consultants filed in. Rita began placing them around Draco's desk, getting them primed for a picture. Tracey and Daphne began running around, making sure the men's hair was in place.

It wasn't until that very moment that Hermione realized. She was the only female Senior Consultant. Yes, Dorothea was a managing director and would be in the same meetings, but she was in a room of men, mostly Slytherins, possibly pure-blood. She felt quite energized by that.

That was until Rita asked her to sit on Draco's desk.

She stared at her. Rita dragged her over to perch on the corner of Draco's very expensive looking desk. She looked for him, to see if he would stop this, and found him talking to Pansy across the room. She felt a pain in her ribs at seeing them together, that she shook away. Draco looked up at her as she slid onto the end of the desk. He said something to Pansy and Pansy smirked at him. Hermione looked down.

The rest of the Senior Consultants were placed around Draco's desk, leaving the chair for him open. Once he took it the flashes started. Hermione smiled, then quickly looked at Wentworth, who was smirking confidently. She looked to Pansy who shook her head at her. No, do not smile.

Hermione left her features blank. That didn't feel right.

"Excellent. Pause!" Pansy said. Hermione was surprised she could take control of this photoshoot like that. Tracey and Daphne went to the men, sweeping their hair the right way and Pansy approached her. "You have to smile with your eyes, Granger." Pansy demonstrated. "Imagine you have a secret."

Which one? Hermione thought.

They started taking pictures again and Pansy grinned at her. Was it possible she'd done it right? The photographers repositioned them all a few times, once having all of them stand behind Draco in his chair. Hermione and Blaise framed him.

Then Rita excused all the Senior Consultants except for Draco, Blaise and her.

"We're going to focus a bit on this next generation." Rita's eyes were gleaming. "The youngest entrepreneurs."

Hermione turned to Mason. "You have no idea what you're talking about." The image of Greyback invading her bedroom swam before her. "Malfoy had no business with Fenrir Greyback that was not forced upon him—"

"I truly don't understand you, Hermione Granger," Mason hissed at her. "He fought against you in battle just two years ago and now you've thrown in your lot with him." He smirked. "The pay must be *excellent* at Malfoy Consulting Group."

Her blood was humming.

"If memory serves, Mason, you did not fight in my war. At least Malfoy had the decency to choose a side."

The conversation stilled. Mason's jaw clicked. She heard Draco take a slow breath beside her.

"You've *severely* misjudged Mr. Malfoy and myself," she said. "What I do here is not for publicity, it's because it's the right thing to do. When I find myself in a position to be of assistance to undervalued people, I do everything I can to help. It's not publicity."

"But it sure makes for an excellent photoshoot," Mason shot at her, then turned his eyes on Draco, "doesn't it, Malfoy?" He smirked. He fanned his hands out in front of his face, reading a headline. "What a team. The pure-blood and the Mudblood."

Her breath caught. And Draco sat forward. "Watch it," he growled, so low that Hermione wasn't sure which man was the werewolf.

"Alright. Let's not descend into dramatics," Quentin set his tea down. "Mason, are you quite done?"

"Oh, please, do stay." Hermione stood and grabbed her bag. "You have your salad and sandwich on the way," she hissed at him. She tossed the folder in her bag. "You know what, Quentin? I will continue on with this case because I *care*, not because I was paid to care. We will fight this injustice without you, and we will win, and we will celebrate, and you can thank Draco Malfoy when your children have equal rights as werewolves." She was too loud for a Muggle shop, she knew. "Come on, Malfoy."

She pivoted and stormed out.

She didn't wait. She continued down the street, heels clacking against the pavement. She was fuming.

They clearly had no intention of working with them and they still took the meeting. Hermione ignored the part of her brain that reminded her that Quentin may have been respectful by declining in person, because Mason had been so purposely *disrespectful*.

*It might be a bit easier for **you**, Miss Granger, having been in the spotlight all your life, but I don't believe in being bought out for publicity.*

Bought out? She huffed, feeling her hair fall out of its clips. She heard Draco's shoes behind her, as his long legs caught up.

They strode in silence, every crosswalk opening for them. She chanced a look to Draco's face at a corner, and saw him frowning at the pavement.

"I'm sorry," she said. He looked up at her. "For them. I'm sorry they don't see you the way I do."

She continued down the street to the Apparition point. After five paces, she felt him lag behind her. She stopped and turned to him. He glared at her coolly, and she frowned, recognizing this look from his Wizengamot hearing months and months ago.

"I don't need your pity, Granger."

She looked at him. His jaw was tight, his hands in fists at his hips.

"You don't have my pity," she said. "You have my respect."

She shook her head at him and turned, reaching the Apparition point first and leaving without him.

The werewolf lunch had soured her entire day. Walter tried to ask her how it went. She was confident that he would be the last person to ask her that question.

At four o'clock she finally just took a book off her shelf and began reading to quiet her mind. Not quite what she was paid for, but apparently she was paid too much anyway.

A knock on her open door and she looked up to see Wentworth smiling shyly. "Bad meeting?"

"The worst." She closed her book. "They couldn't just decline. They needed to decline while insulting my integrity." She looked to her window. "They thought the entire case was a publicity stunt."

"Ah," Wentworth grimaced. "Well, it would have been incredible publicity. 'Hermione Granger Frees the Werewolves.'"

That made her frown. "Don't you mean 'Malfoy Consulting Group Frees the Werewolves?'"

"Oh, no, no. It's all you." He grinned. She knew he was being quite kind but she disliked it after what Quentin and Mason had said. "I must admit, I had reservations about signing on with Draco Malfoy, but once I heard that *you* were on board, it really did sway me."

"Oh, that's so kind," she said. "So, you joined quite late in the game as well?"

"Not too late. Around early December."

She blinked at him. "Early January, you mean?"

"No, it was in the beginning of December. Around my wife's birthday."

She felt a cold weight settle against her chest. "So Draco told you in early December that I'd be joining M.C.G.?" She kept her face light.

Her complexion was perfect. Her eyebrows were darker and more defined, and her eyelids were dark and deep without looking too much like…. well, like a prostitute. Her hair was in a high ponytail, tight and controlled, with curls falling to her shoulder blades.

The dress fit perfectly. She grabbed the vest, unbuttoned it and slid it over her shoulders. It was more of a waistcoat, really. It was a light brown leather and as she began buttoning it up the front, Pansy entered without knocking. Like the close friend she was.

"Oh, Granger." She brought her hands to her lips. Hermione looked down at herself. Had she done it wrong? Pansy continued, "You are stunning!"

Ginny ran in, still adorable in her pajamas and Tracey and Daphne followed, their eyes wide and gleeful. Pansy stopped her from buttoning the vest, claiming that she had no idea how *tiny* she was, and used her wand to size the fabric of her dress closer to her ribs. She helped her button up the vest, telling Hermione to tug at her breasts to get them to lift above the tight buttons. Hermione stepped into the nude heels, and looked in the mirror, Pansy appearing over her shoulder.

"*That* is the Modern Business Witch."

Even Daphne smiled.

Pansy, Tracey, Daphne and Hermione stood in the lift heading up to the top floor. It was a blizzard of activity when the doors opened. Rita was talking to Walter, Bozo was taking pictures of the office – focusing a bit too much on Melody – and another reporter was talking to Wentworth.

Pansy walked past them all, leading her tribe to the back left corner. Draco's office. She'd never seen it before.

It was all steel and leather and hilarious masculinity. It was just about the same size as hers, but instead of a wall of bookshelves, he had a black leather couch next to a singular bookshelf. His desk looked like it was made of stone instead of wood, like an obsidian or dark marble. His office was imposing and sexy. And she thought of how opposite her office was.

He wasn't in the office, thankfully, but Blaise was talking to a reporter, having a photographer dance around him. He looked her up and down as she entered and couldn't even find a comment to make, but he smiled as he continued what he was saying. It seemed Tracey and Daphne were here to check the hair and skin of the others being pictured. Daphne took Blaise to the side to smooth out his complexion with a darker color. Hermione watched the two of them frown at each other, not speaking.

Rita pounced on her at that moment, having followed them into Draco's office. She answered questions on what her role at Malfoy Consulting will be, and what cases she was excited for. Rita shoved her back against Draco's window, and had Bozo take a few pictures of her. Tracey

"I've heard of it, yes."

"It's lovely. You *must* try it. I have a sample."

"Oh, wonderful!"

Hermione stared at the two of them… bonding? Pansy called for someone out in the living room, and then a Greengrass sister was in the doorway too.

"Daph, can I get two samples of Hush Cream?"

Daphne Greengrass was *not* the nice Greengrass from New Year's. She was equally as pretty as her younger sister, but less inclined to smile, Hermione soon realized.

After Pansy and Ginny gushed more about this cream, and Daphne asked her if she knew how to apply it – "Doesn't it just go on your face?" – and Daphne showed her the upward circle technique, Hermione was ushered into the living room, still wearing only a towel.

Tracey Davis was there, setting up a hair station. Ginny played hostess in her pink pajamas, offering coffee and tea and then whipping together a tray of muffins.

Daphne prodded at her face while Tracey pulled at her hair and Ginny and Pansy talked shoes. Hermione sat still and drank her coffee whenever Daphne pulled a brush away. Tracey dried her hair and pulled it back into something she called the "power pony" after she curled it. Pansy had a tendency to ask her questions as Daphne was in the middle of something, causing Daphne to frown at her as she responded.

An idea struck her as Daphne came at her with an eyeliner pencil – what if they were painting her face like a clown, and ruining her hair. What if these Slytherin girls were torturing her to make her look ridiculous for public pictures. Her heart leapt, but then she remembered that Ginny was in the room. Ginny would know if they were.

When the girls were done, Pansy told her to try on the dress she'd laid on her bed. So, at some point, Pansy had entered her bedroom. Wonderful.

She shut her bedroom door behind her and finally took off the towel. Hermione sighed, stomach feeling a bit tight thinking of being interviewed today. And dealing with Skeeter. And Draco. And Blaise and Pansy.

She turned to see an olive green dress laid on her bed, with a vest of sorts on top. A pair of beige heels on the floor. It was… nothing she would have picked out for herself, but she could see how it fit into Pansy's Modern Business Witch aesthetic.

She slipped the dress over her head, liking how light the fabric was and how the long sleeves opened wide at her elbows. The bottom came just above her knees, and she was grateful that it wasn't really revealing or anything like that. She turned to see herself in her mirror and had to take a step back.

"Yes, he said he understood any reservations I had, but here was what he wanted to do, and here was who had signed on to do it with." He smiled at her. "I'm sure you were the deciding factor for a lot of the people here, employees and clients."

She ran her tongue along her teeth to keep from speaking. She twitched her lips into a smile. "Well, thank you Wentworth. That's lovely to hear."

He nodded at her and left her alone.

She stood, buzzing. She paced to the bookshelf to put away her reading and went to shut the door so she could think.

Draco was on the floor, chatting with one of Mockridge's Associates.

How had he guessed she would sign on as soon as early December? Draco hadn't even brought up joining M.C.G. to her until December 31st. It hadn't even crossed her mind.

She watched him lean on the cubicle and roll his eyes at something, smiling.

But he brought by the werewolf portfolio earlier than that. In early December. He traded three books and a smile for a letter of recommendation and slid her a portfolio filled with his notes. Notes that swayed her, notes that piqued her curiosity…

Anyone can be seduced, Granger.

And suddenly she was on the Malfoy balcony again, in a white dress, watching as Draco leaned his long body against the railing and told her what it was she wanted to do with her life. He'd decided it all for her before she'd even thought of it herself.

He laughed at something one of the Associates said, and continued to his office, flipping through something. He felt her eyes on him and looked up at her, and nodded.

She stared back at him.

Quentin Margolis was right. Only it wasn't the money she had fallen for.

"Just to be sure everything is fitting right, see if I need to do any last minute resizing," Pansy said, grabbing her book and standing. "And I'll bring a stylist for your hair and makeup so you won't need to worry about that." She waved her hand and Hermione realized that she wasn't "worried about that" at all. She had not even thought about hair and makeup.

"Alright." Hermione stood to walk her out, feeling a bit dizzy. "Pansy, are you sure about this? I mean, there has to be another person who exemplifies this 'Modern Business Witch.' Someone who's in the papers often enough and – Katya! What about Draco's… er, Katya Viktor?"

Pansy grimaced. "As a model, Katya is signed with certain designers already. And also, I hate her."

Hermione laughed out loud. She bit back her grin, worry scratching at her face.

"Hermione." Pansy smirked at her. "You are the most talked about witch in all of Europe. The most photographed, the most respected… and soon to be the most feared." Hermione blinked at her. "Isn't it time you started dressing like one?"

She didn't get a chance to tell Ginny about Pansy and her crew coming over. She didn't expect Ginny to have the day off. So, when the redhead knocked on the bathroom door at 5:45AM as Hermione was getting out of the shower, Hermione jumped.

"Hermione… Your *friend* Pansy Parkinson is here…"

She wrapped a towel around herself and cracked the door, letting the steam out. Ginny's face was wide, and her hair was a mess from sleep.

"Tell me this is a nightmare?"

Before Hermione could respond, Pansy appeared behind Ginny.

"Hermione, love! So glad you're already showered. What kind of moisturizer do you use?"

She blinked at her. She was standing in front of Pansy Parkinson in only a towel. Ginny was right: it was a nightmare.

"Er… Well there's this Muggle product I sometimes put on my arms…"

Pansy's eyes shifted. "You don't use moisturizer?" Her eyes moved over her face. "Merlin, you've been lucky this far –" And suddenly Pansy Parkinson was pushing her bathroom door open and putting her hands on her face. She felt like she was about to be choked, or have her eyes gouged out. "Excellent pores, Granger."

"…Thank you."

"I've been telling her this for years." Ginny shook her head at her, curls billowing around her head.

"Yes, you really must use moisturizer. Ginevra, have you tried Harper Hoddy's Hush Cream?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As she handed over the slip of paper with her flat number on it, Pansy smiled and said, "Expect me at 6AM."

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

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Twenty Eight

Hermione wished she'd left The Wall up.

She'd finally gotten around to vanishing all the scribbled words just before Christmas, so her room was a blank slate again.

But she really would have appreciated a timeline right about now.

Draco had come into Cornerstone with the werewolf portfolio the first weekend of December, but before that, they hadn't spoken to each other in nearly two weeks – since the Marcus Flint incident.

Hermione frowned at her blank wall. Something must have shifted then. Something must have gone wrong if he had sacrificed his pride to come to her. He had freely admitted that he'd come to Cornerstone to ask her a favor.

Favors, she didn't mind giving. Manipulative publicity, she had a problem with.

Something tugged at her mind…. Something happened with Noelle and her father. And whatever it was, it happened before Draco asked Hermione to write to Quentin Margolis and before he'd started using her name to gather employees and clients.

Hermione bit the inside of her cheek. Draco had been very clear that she was *not* to write to Noelle….

So thirty minutes later, letter to Noelle off with an owl, she sat on the edge of her bed, kicked off her kitten heels and removed her jacket. Hermione dug into her bag to look through the portfolio Walter had drafted for her that day.

Walter was delightfully intuitive, Hermione had found. He'd knocked on her closed door that afternoon, finding her with her head in her hands, and had brought in every piece of fan mail and love letter she'd received thus far this week.

"Whenever my wife is having a bad week, I scramble together all the embarrassing poetry I wrote her at Hogwarts and all her N.E.W.T scores," he had said, shrugging.

Hermione had laughed. "Poetry?"

"Yes, during Professor Bins' class."

"Of course."

He had also brought in the Golden Snidget portfolio he'd been working on, and excused himself to let her read through her pile.

She had young business women writing to her for advice and thanking her for paving the way. She had war veterans penning letters of encouragement and praise. And one letter from a thirteen-year-old girl at Ilvermorny. She wanted Hermione's advice on a niffler she'd found in the trophy room that she wanted to keep as a pet. She also ended the letter with a request for Hermione's advice on how to respond to her classmates' teasing.

By the time she headed home for the day, Hermione had gotten a handle on her feelings about the situation.

She wasn't going to quit. That would be career suicide at this point, and she quite enjoyed what it was that she was doing at M.C.G. She enjoyed the possibilities. But she *was* going to let Draco know that she knew what was going on, and she didn't appreciate it.

And she would do it calmly.

She hoped.

By ten o'clock Thursday morning, she had worked herself up to speak with Draco. She would be direct and concise and honest.

She walked the floor to his office, and found the door closed. It was rarely closed, so he must have been in a meeting. As she approached to ask his assistant when she thought he'd be free, the door opened.

Pansy stepped out. Hermione blinked at her, confused. Pansy smiled.

"Hermione, dear!" She looked her up and down, assessing the outfit for today. "Wonderful, I was just coming to see you."

Hermione smiled and said something polite, all the while distracted by Draco having a closed-door meeting with Pansy. Draco appeared in the doorway, slipping on his jacket.

He met her eyes. For a moment she was fifteen, watching Draco and Pansy disappear behind a tapestry on her way back from the library.

She shook her head, finding the entire situation unwarranted. Pansy looked pristine, not a hair out of place, not a smudge on her lipstick. Just because Draco was dressing himself in his outer layer didn't mean that they had just…

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

Pansy looked at her expectantly.

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

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

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

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

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

Pansy looked into Hermione's eyes with a grin. Hermione blinked.

"Of course," Hermione said. "I'm sure the secretarial pool would be thrilled to be introduced to this line—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You."

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

"Me." Hermione repeated.

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

"Oh. That's… wonderful."

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

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

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

"Did you want me?" Draco's eyes burned into her. She almost laughed out loud at the unintended double entendre.

"I, er – No, not if you're just on your way out."

"I am." He checked his timepiece. "I have a meeting followed by a meeting. Er, actually if you're available for lunch, my client would like to meet you." He pushed his hair out of his face, and grabbed a folder from his assistant. "One of the Honeydukes sellers is suing Honeydukes, and is quite the fan of yours." He looked at the folder.

She frowned. Well, if *this* wasn't the exact problem…

"No. I'm not free." Her voice was a bit firm. She could tell from the way Pansy's eyebrow twitched.

"Alright." He studied her. He excused himself and headed for the lifts.

Pansy turned to her. "Let's talk *Witch Weekly!* They'll be here on Monday for pictures and an interview." Pansy linked their arms, like they were old friends.

"Yes, let's talk. I'd like very much to not be in green for this shoot." Hermione shot her a glance.

Pansy raised her brows. "Really?" She smirked. "So Gryffindor red?"

"Just not Slytherin green." Hermione raised a brow back.

She sat down with Corban on Friday to discuss the werewolf case. There was still a lot to be done, even without Quentin Margolis and the North Forest Pack, but *not* having their support put a bit of a damper on things.

Corban helped outline the legal aspects of the next few months, and the two of them worked on the opening statement for the first day in the Wizengamot in March. Corban was just telling her a story about the strangest day he'd ever had in the courtrooms when Draco knocked on the doorframe.

She looked up at him, still smiling at Corban's story. He looked between the two of them.

"Hartford." He nodded to Corban.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Malfoy." Corban's voice was still cheery from his story.

"How's the opening statement?"

"We're almost done with it, and then I'll send it over to you for review."

"Excellent." Draco looked to her, jaw tight. "Granger, a Mr. Townsend is very interested in the Werewolf Policy." He looked down at the letter he was holding. "He wants to have dinner with us next week to talk about financial support."

He walked it to her desk and she took it from him. "Oh, that's wonderful."

"Tuesday at seven," Malfoy said. He looked between them both, and turned to leave.

Hermione was too busy scanning the letter to hear him. Once his words sunk in she jumped. Madame Michele!

"Oh, I –" But he was turning out the door. "Excuse me," she said to Corban, jumping up and racing after Draco.

"Malfoy." She stopped in the doorway, hand on the frame. He turned. "I – I can't do seven on Tuesday." He stared at her and she felt anxious. "I have … I have a thing."

"Can't you reschedule?" His stare was firm but inquisitive.

"No, I really can't." She looked away from him and toward her doorframe, trying to find a reasonable excuse. "Er… it's … I have this…"

She looked back up at him and it seemed he had followed her eyes as she looked away from him. He stared a hole into her wall, right to where Corban was sitting patiently in her office. His eyes snapped back to her, dark.

He stepped toward her. "If you are postponing this *very* important meeting for something non-essential, I would question your priorities Granger," he whispered. They were steps away from Walter and a few other workers. He stopped in front of her. "I'd hate to think that you'd prioritize a *date* above your Werewolf Policy."

She blinked at him. A date? With Corban? That was a leap…

"I don't have a date," she hissed. "And even if I did, if I say I'm unavailable for a meeting, *I'm unavailable for a meeting,* Malfoy." She narrowed her eyes at him. His burned into hers.

"Fine." He bit out. "I'll ask to reschedule." He turned.

"Wednesday is best for me. I'm unavailable Thursday, as well." She crossed her arms.

"Wednesday is not good for me," Draco began.

"Oh, Malfoy, I'd *hate* to hear that you'd prioritize a *date* above your *company*," she hissed. She rolled her eyes and returned to her office, listening to Draco huff.

She'd managed to piss Draco off again later that afternoon. It was a wonderful day.

While she still needed to speak with him regarding his treatment of her and her name, she couldn't help but smirk and bat her eyes at him when his jaw clenched and he scowled at her again.

A wonderful day indeed.

She was balancing the ledger at Cornerstone on Saturday morning while reading through one of the new releases that had been shipped over. Corban said the author was one of his favorites, but she wasn't fully invested yet. At one hundred pages in, that wasn't a good sign.

"I thought you quit this job."

Hermione's eyes snapped up from the novel to see Draco standing a few feet from the register. His face was cold and his eyebrow lifted at her. She hadn't even heard the door open.

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

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

"Yes." Draco said no more.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dress your best. Brilliant. Hermione tapped her quill.

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

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

"Granger."

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

"You have a 10AM in your office."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No. Should I have?" she said.

He frowned at her and leaned forward onto the counter. "Yes."

Hermione looked into his grey eyes and felt cold. She felt very silly for being caught reading on her shift, so she picked up several books to refile and started for the stacks to the left.

"I suppose I didn't find a logical reason to leave," she said. "You know me. Only 'logical' thoughts in here." She tapped her head with a grin, quoting his "favorite thing about her" and disappeared behind the bookshelf. She heard him follow her, as she knew he would.

She pushed several books to one side on a shelf just above her head as he appeared around the corner. She ignored him. He leaned his shoulder against the stacks and crossed his arms.

"You'll need to put in your two weeks' notice today."

Hermione finished pushing a book into place and looked at him over her extended right arm. "I'll need a better reason than 'because I said so,' Mr. Malfoy," she scoffed.

"You signed a Conflict of Interest Clause."

She paused mid-reach. "Conflict of Interest? How in Merlin's name is a bookshop conflicting with a multimillion galleon organization like Malfoy Consulting Group?" She shook her head at him and moved to her left a few paces to file a large red tome on the third shelf. He followed, standing directly behind her as she faced the shelf.

"This is a public place of business," he said. His voice washed over her right shoulder. It was unnerving to not see him, but feel and hear him. "Any one of our competitors could enter, start a friendly conversation and ask you about your position at Malfoy Consulting. Or worse, the press."

Hermione pursed her lips and sucked in a breath through her nose.

"Besides," he continued. "You have a contract with Pansy. If the wrong person saw what you wear to this bookstore on the weekends, you'd be jeopardizing her career as well as your image."

This spun her around. "And *what* exactly is wrong with what I'm wearing?"

He sneered at her. "Muggle jeans and a scrap of cotton that barely covers you? It's hardly the epitome of the Modern Business Witch."

Hermione's mouth opened to retort, but anger tightened her throat. She didn't dare look down at herself, but she knew that the t-shirt she had on was not revealing in the slightest. She took a moment to take stock and felt the cotton material against her low back and belly, and knew that it was pulled down far enough. She couldn't stop herself when she pulled the last book she was holding toward her chest, like a shield.

"This is what I wear on the weekends Malfoy. I don't see why—"

"I'll have to have Pansy make you a weekend line, then. Because *this*," he looked her up and down, "is disgraceful."

Hermione scoffed. Her nostrils flared. "You will do no such thing. You are in charge of me Monday through Friday, Malfoy. Saturday and Sunday are my days off to do with as I please. I will work at this bookstore as long as I please."

He leaned into her, placing his right hand next to her head on the shelf. Her face was so warm and now he was closing off the rest of the cool air.

"I don't need people gossiping that I cannot pay my staff, Granger. If the world hears that Hermione Granger, Golden Girl," he grinned at her and she scowled, "and Malfoy Consulting's highest profile consultant, still works at her part-time job, they will assume you are not paid enough."

"Then I will set them straight when the reporters *descend* upon Cornerstone Books!" She rolled her eyes at him and stepped to her right to escape. His left arm came up, bracing on the third shelf and her ribs just grazed his arm before she stopped herself. He stepped closer and she felt the shelves creating indents across her back.

"For as long as you are employed by Malfoy Consulting, Granger, you will behave and dress as such. If you would like to go back to working as a Ministry dreg, filing reports and failing to create lasting change for your blessed creatures, be my guest," he said, his breath ghosting over her face.

How dare he. He was starting to sound like his father…

"I am only 'employed' Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, Malfoy. I am free—"

"Oh, I must have missed your resignation on Friday afternoons, followed by your application on Monday mornings then."

"I am only *paid* Monday through Friday. You can only control my whereabouts Monday through Friday."

"And what would it cost to control your Saturdays and Sundays then, Granger?" He quirked his brow at her and sucked in a lungful of air before continuing. "I'm sure I could more than cover the salary you make here."

She opened her mouth and closed it. She wasn't breathing. The heat from his body was suffocating her and she could feel her skin vibrating and her spine aching against the shelves. She chuckled in a way she hoped was condescending.

"I don't *need* more money, Malfoy –"

"Then what is it that you *do* need?" His eyes flashed at her and his voice was hot against her mouth. A lock of blond had fallen across his forehead.

Her lips were dry and her eyes burned as they moved back and forth between his. She released a shaky breath and gasped in the air she could find. His face consumed her field of vision, and she watched as the corner of his mouth twitched upward and his eyes flit toward her lips.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She raised her eyes and found Blaise across from her, watching her. Oh, perfect.

She started flipping through her pamphlet. It held the mission statement, the prose on company objectives, and charts on profitability.

At precisely nine o'clock, Mockridge took his seat and Draco called the meeting to attention. She looked around the room and found that the support staff and Associate Consultants were lining the walls. Several of the young witches in the room had their eyes raptly held on Draco.

"Welcome. Welcome everyone," Draco began. "Thank you all for taking a chance on Malfoy Consulting, and for taking a chance on yourselves." He tapped a knuckle on the pamphlet in front of him. "Dorothea has prepared some wonderful paperwork, that I trust you will go over

"Unfortunately, he's the best."

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

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

"You like your office?"

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

"Good."

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

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

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

Her heart stopped.

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

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

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

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

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

"My…?"

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

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

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

"I was in Romania with the Dragon Sanctuary."

"Hermione? Hello?" Harry's voice called from the front of the shop.

Hermione closed her eyes and filled her lungs. Her eyes opened to see Draco straightening and stepping back from her. He kept his arms engulfing her, so she quickly stepped underneath the arm at head level, patted down her t-shirt and rounded the corner.

"Harry, hi," she said. He turned from the counter. "I was sorting books."

"Hey! I was coming to see if you wanted to grab lunch with Ginny and me." Harry smiled at her, then his eyes slid over her shoulder and she knew that Draco had appeared. She watched as Harry looked back and forth between the two of them, taking in Hermione's flushed face. She didn't dare look at Draco.

"I don't know, Harry," Hermione said. She moved toward the counter and began to keep her hands busy. "You'll have to ask my boss." She shot him a look and Draco scowled at her.

"Uh… yeah. Malfoy would you like to join the three of us?

Hermione snapped the quill in her hand.

"Oh, no," she said. "Malfoy is spending the whole day checking in on his Senior Consultants. He's booked." She slammed a volume down on the counter.

"I should be finished breaking up Wentworth's Wizard's Chest tournament by one," he drawled. Hermione clenched her jaw.

"Great." Harry looked like he wanted to just get out of the bookshop as soon as possible. "So I'll see you both at Fortescue's at one?"

"Sounds perfect," Draco responded, directing his attention to Hermione. She huffed.

"Harry, what's the *dress code* for this lunch? Should I run home first and throw on something a bit more *pure-blood?*" She kept her eyes trained on Harry, narrowing them and sneering like she was speaking to Draco.

"Er… No. I think what you're wearing is fine. If you're comfortable," Harry said. Hermione turned to smirk at Draco. Harry continued, "I mean, do you have jeans without tears in the knees?"

Hermione's jaw dropped and she heard Draco chuckle. She turned to him and his face was split in a huge grin.

"Thank you, Potter. For everything. I'll see you all over there." Draco reached across her to grab one of his damn mints and left smirking.

Hermione headed over to Fortescue's scowling. It struck her as she was leaving that she could possibly be photographed again today, and if so, she would wish that she'd worn different clothes. Not that she'd led Draco know that.

Harry and Ginny had chosen a table a bit further away from prying eyes, thankfully. Draco was just arriving at the same time, so he held the gate open for her with a smirk and she glared at him.

After a bit of small talk, Harry and Draco went inside to the counter to order for them.

Ginny turned to her. "What in Merlin's name has got you in such a mood today!"

Hermione sighed and shook her head. "Malfoy stopped by Cornerstone to insult my clothes."

Ginny gasped. "Not Pansy's clothes!"

"No, no. My clothes. These clothes." She gestured down to herself. "He's upset that I'm still working at Cornerstone, and he thinks I shouldn't be seen in such *disgraceful* weekend clothes." She sipped her water glass. "Then he offered to pay me more so I would wear better clothes on the weekends."

"Did he use the word 'disgraceful?'"

"Yes."

Ginny was quiet. Hermione took her eyes off the street and found Ginny smiling into her cup of tea.

"What?" Hermione asked.

"It's just…" Ginny laughed. She turned to her. "Hermione. I was six when I saw a Muggle girl for the first time. She was wearing the tightest pants I'd ever seen and a t-shirt that showed off her shoulders." She smiled. "I asked my mum if she was a sex worker."

Hermione laughed. "Okay… At six?"

Ginny waved her hand. "I had all older brothers, so I unfortunately heard things… I'm just saying… Muggle fashion doesn't come easy to pure-bloods. It's very difficult to understand when all you're used to is baggy wizarding robes."

"So I look like a prostitute to him?" Hermione raised a brow at Ginny.

"No, no!" Ginny laughed. "I'm just saying… your jeans are awfully tight… to a pure-blood." She grinned. "Which isn't the worst thing in the world." Ginny winked. Hermione frowned.

She heard Harry's laugh and turned to find the boys returning. Hermione was so curious every time Harry laughed at something Draco said. It was unnatural.

Draco placed a cup of coffee in front of her and Harry set their number down on their table.

Once Ginny started small talk with Draco about M.C.G., Hermione had a moment to examine them, struck by how this "double-date" looked. She was suddenly very conscious of Draco sitting on her right, Ginny across from her, and Harry to her left. A perfect little picture.

She shifted in her chair, pressing her lips together and reached for her coffee cup, trying to pick up the saucer with the cup like Madame Michele had taught her. Ginny and Harry were telling Draco a story she already knew, so she tuned them out, setting her saucer down. She looked up to Draco, and he was watching her.

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

She looked up at him. He sat so comfortably on her desk, smirking at her. He was joking, yes? He was… riling her up. She shook her head at him and walked back for more books.

"Unfortunately, Blaise, I already have one of these in place with Mockridge. We've been doing it like Flobberworms for months now."

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

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

"Hmm." She nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Draco leveled his eyes on him. "No."

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

Draco watched him leave the room.

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

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

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

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

"Hi, I'm Melody!" She stood from the reception desk and held out her hand to shake. Hermione shifted the box around and held out her hand. Damn handshake.

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

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

"Brilliant. Thank you, Melody."

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

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

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

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

He smirked at her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She looked away and crossed her arms over her thin cotton shirt.

Hermione received an owl Sunday night from Pansy, requesting that Tracey and Daphne prepare her for her photoshoot at the office the next day. They would be doing several poses, backgrounds, and wardrobe changes throughout the morning, and it would be best to set up in the vacant office next door to hers, seeing as her office was to be the backdrop of the photoshoot.

Hermione was quite exhausted going into the next morning. She dreaded this entire publicity thing, and she hoped she'd be done with it after this *Witch Weekly* article.

She reminded herself that this article was not about M.C.G., it was about her. She could focus the interview on how she was going to affect the wizarding world with the major policy changes. Publicity for the Werewolf Policy and her upcoming projects was perfectly fine. Publicity for Draco Malfoy and his damaged reputation was not.

She arrived at 7AM Monday morning, and found that Pansy was already set up in the office next to hers. She had conjured a changing curtain for Hermione to get dressed behind, and the rack of clothes she'd brought in for the shoot.

Hermione's jaw dropped at the rack. The fabrics and colors screamed elevated fashion. And Hermione couldn't help but notice that there wasn't a scrap of green to be found.

"Pansy…" She couldn't take her eyes off the rack.

"I know," Pansy said, coming to stand by her. "I'm good, aren't I?" She grabbed a dress off the rack. "Try this on. I want to fit it to you before they arrive."

It was a light blue with silver lace laid on top. Something was vaguely familiar about it. Hermione took it from her and stared at it.

"It's based off your Yule Ball dress."

Hermione looked up to find Pansy smirking at her. "Really?"

"Well, you said no green, so I was stuck with so many colors that I hate." Pansy rolled her eyes and shoved her behind the changing curtain.

She began taking off the simple, but professional clothes she had worn in. She was just slipping on the periwinkle dress, when she heard a knock on the door.

"All good here?" Draco's voice.

"Yes, darling," Pansy replied.

"Granger here yet?"

"I'm here," she said. She stepped out from behind the changing curtain, and looked to Pansy. Pansy gasped and danced over to her, to help button the back.

She moved her hair over her shoulder and looked up at Draco in the doorway, suddenly very self-conscious that she didn't have shoes on.

He was looking at the dress with a tight jaw. He hated it. She narrowed her eyes at him. His eyes found hers after taking in the dress, and he blinked, turning away, like he'd been caught.

"Let me know if you need anything," he said. He looked at the doorframe of the office, keeping his eyes off of her. "We've postponed the Monday morning meeting until eleven, to give you enough time with *Witch Weekly*."

That was perfect, actually. Harry was meeting her for lunch at noon.

"Alright, thank you."

He glanced at her swiftly and left. Only then did Hermione realize that Pansy was finishing the last of the buttons, and Draco had essentially just watched her "get dressed." That's why he'd looked away.

She blushed and tried to focus on what Pansy was telling her to do.

"Oh, I hope they pick this one for the cover." Pansy pulled at the fabric with her hands and held her wand in between her teeth in a very un-ladylike way that Hermione found functional and hilarious.

"I love it. I can't even see myself in it and I love it."

Pansy wandlessly conjured a full-length mirror, and then went back to tugging at the embroidery. Impressive.

Even without hair and makeup done, Hermione looked like a queen. She giggled. And Pansy smiled up at her.

"I do love it," Hermione said.

"I love it, too."

"Malfoy didn't." Hermione chuckled.

"Are you kidding? He *adored* it."

Hermione looked down at her. Pansy was aiming her wand at the seams, but she looked to be speaking honestly.

After they'd fit that dress to her, Pansy had her try on a few that were slightly more "Modern Business Witch" than Fairy Princess.

She was just stepping into heels to match a deep red dress with extra fabric that seemed to be for *aesthetic* purposes, instead of function, when Blaise leaned in the door, sipping from a mug.

"The Gryffindor Queen has returned." He smirked. Hermione rolled her eyes. "Lovely work, Pans."

"Thank you, dear." Pansy ignored his presence after that.

"Do we need any help with zippers or buttons, or anything?" He smiled and Hermione shook her head at him, hiding her grin.

"Blaise, darling," Pansy said. "Do fuck off."

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Twenty six

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

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

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

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

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

"Did you want me?" I ask, and try not to wince at my choice of words.

She sputters. I decide to give it a try.

"Er, actually if you're available for lunch, my client would like to meet you," I say. I look away from her and ask Carrie for my files. "One of the Honeydukes sellers is suing Honeydukes, and is quite the fan of yours."

There. A business meeting. And should we make small talk while we wait for the client to arrive, it would simply be a bonus.

"No. I'm not free." Sharp.

I look up at her, and she's frowning. Like she can see right through me.

What a bloody disaster.

"Alright," I say, and before I can send a glare to Pansy or ask Granger why she won't join me, I excuse myself to the lifts, watching my shoes against the carpets.

~*~

Friday, January 28, 2000

I have a letter from a Mr. Townsend. A perfect excuse to see her today.

I head to her office, and I hear laughter from inside. Blaise probably. I knock on the doorframe and find her smiling at Hartford, notes and papers forgotten on her desk.

"Hartford." I greet him and he smiles at me. He doesn't even have the sense to shuffle papers or look busy. "How's the opening statement?"

"We're almost done with it, and then I'll send it over to you for review."

"Excellent." I look at her, still smiling from whatever Hartford had been saying. "Granger, a Mr. Townsend is very interested in the Werewolf Policy." I have to look away. "He wants to have dinner with us next week to talk about financial support." I hand her the letter. "Tuesday at seven."

I watch her eyes skim the words, and decide I should go. They are in the middle of… something, and haven't asked me to join them.

Not that I would want to…

Fuck everything.

I roll my eyes at myself and leave, huffing.

"Malfoy." And I spin to see her, chasing after me. "I – I can't do seven on Tuesday. I have … I have a thing." She looks away, guilty almost.

Tuesday was Mr. Townsend's preferred day. I ask her if rescheduling is a possibility, and she stammers, fumbling her words, trying to explain… something.

Her eyes drift back towards her office, as she cobbles an excuse. And as I struggle to understand her words, I follow her stare. Follow it back to Hartford.

Busy on Tuesday. With Hartford. Not even the decency to ask her out on a Saturday evening, Corban?

She mumbles something but I'm not listening. Blaise was supposed to watch him. Pansy shouldn't have made her so desirable.

And she shouldn't have said yes.

I step closer to her, lowering my voice.

"If you are postponing this *very* important meeting for something non-essential, I would question your priorities Granger," I say. "I'd hate to think that you'd prioritize a *date* above your Werewolf Policy."

She stares at me, caught in a lie. Awful liar, really.

"I don't have a date," she sneers, and I narrow my eyes. "And even if I did, if I say I'm unavailable for a meeting, *I'm unavailable for a meeting*, Malfoy."

The fire sparks in her eyes, and I miss the way she used to call me Draco. Miss the wrapping paper and the Gainsworth novels.

"Fine. I'll ask to reschedule." I turn on my heel to return to my office.

"Wednesday is best for me. I'm unavailable Thursday, as well."

I turn back to her, thinking of the dinner Mother has set up with Siobhan Selwyn to discuss her Diagon Alley boutique. "Wednesday is not good for me."

"Oh, Malfoy, I'd hate to hear that you'd prioritize a *date* above your company," she snarls back, rolling her eyes and disappearing into her office.

I growl and head back to mine.

I pace for twenty minutes, trying to get myself back together. Trying to let go of petty things like Corban Hartford and center my thoughts on my clients. Try to build a wall back up.

I call Blaise into my office in the afternoon, and tell him he needs to try again. Needs to push my thoughts away into corners.

He tries. It's not good enough.

At four o'clock she pops into my office to update me on her branch's finances and we bicker then too.

I can't concentrate for the rest of the day.

There's an address in my rolodex. Someone I'd looked up ages ago, before the war. When Severus had been taking on too much. Had been disappearing from his Headmaster's Office to chase Potter around the woods, and had made it clear that he didn't intend to survive the final war.

Someone in New York.

I pull a blank parchment and quill.

~*~

Saturday, January 29, 2000

The Azkaban guard opens the door for me, and I walk into the small meeting room. My father leans against the side of the metal table, reading the paper.

"Father."

The door closes.

"Draco, how good of you to visit." He folds the newspaper and turns to me.

"I said I would. January and February."

"And here you are, with two days to spare." He levels a scowl at me, then holds up the paper, and I see Granger's dark hair and green dress. "This is excellent."

I blink. I've forgotten how to take a compliment from my father. It's not even my compliment, really.

He continues, "Has your client list increased? Your visibility is surely up."

"I… Yes, I've had strong, positive reactions to the article. To her."

He gestures that I should sit. "And Pansy's work is brilliant. Truly stunning," he says. I nod and take my chair. "She's so much *more* like this, don't you think?"

I clench my jaw. "More what?"

"More prepared. More desirable. And it's lovely to see that ridiculous hair of hers tamed. Not a wild young thing any longer." He sits across from me and I press my lips together, swallowing any comments about loving her wild hair. He smirks at me. "Much more like a Malfoy wife."

I look between his two eyes, searching him, waiting for his game.

He says, "How are things between you two?"

"Completely professional," I say. "She's an employee of mine and there are contracts in place. You told me to show restraint, and I have. I would never do anything to jeopardize the office."

He watches me, and then hums. "And what about outside the office?" A sly smile. "At your little bookstore?"

I scowl at him. "No. She doesn't even work there anymore."

He lifts a brow. "Really?" He leans back in his chair. "Are you positive?"

I watch him. A slow grin spreads across his mouth.

"Yes."

"She was there just last week." He tilts his head at me. "Assisting Corban Hartford with a few top-shelf books."

I feel my heartbeat in my fingertips. I remember her on a ladder, reaching for the high shelves. Her t-shirt stretching away from her jeans. And her skin.

I swallow and look back at him. He grins.

"There's no Love Contract between Miss Granger and Mr. Hartford, correct?"

~*~

"I've had one of those, thank you."

"Really? It's barely ten in the morning."

I peel my hands from my face and push my hair back.

"What are your next steps?" she says.

I swallow and look out my window. "My next step is seeing my father this weekend. He's required my visitation for the first two months, so I'm getting January out of the way this weekend."

"And with her?" she asks, sitting forward. "What are your next steps with her?"

I study the marble of my desk.

"We're working on this werewolf policy—"

"Draco," she cuts me off.

I look up at her. "There are no next steps with her. There are contracts, there are rules," I hiss. "Just because she's wearing different clothes doesn't mean I get to fall into bed with her."

She laughs. "Who said anything about that!" She crosses her legs and smiles. "You get to spend time with her now. 'Business lunches' and the like. You can invite her to events and galas. And," she says, raising a brow, "the next time Skeeter asks you about her, you can compliment her. Without using the word 'logical."

I groan, and close my eyes. Pansy laughs and I look at my clock.

"Speaking of business meetings, I have two today. One starting in five minutes."

Pansy lifts herself from her chair, and says, "Perfect. Invite her to come along with you."

"I… it's not really her department."

"Does that matter?" She shrugs. "Invite her. Let her know how important she is not only to the company, but also to you." She leads us to the door as I consider how I could invite her to lunch with the perfect blend of business and personal reasons. "Draco," Pansy says, stopping with her hand on the door. "If you don't move on her soon, someone else will." She lifts a brow, and I immediately think of Hartford. "I don't know you if you've noticed, but she looks quite good in my clothes."

She winks at me.

"Yes, thank you, Pansy." I grab my suit jacket.

"I mean have you *seen* her arse?" She widens her eyes comically.

"Yes, thank you, Pansy."

She opens the door, laughing and then coos, "Hermione, dear! Wonderful, I was just coming to see you."

I slip my arm through my jacket sleeve, about to call her bluff when I see Granger truly is standing at my door. She meets my eyes and looks back and forth between Pansy and me.

"Perfect," Granger says. "We can go to my office."

I stand on the corner, chewing the inside of my cheek, wondering how in Merlin's name I'd earned it.

The next morning she's in a flowing lavender dress with matching heels and it's possibly the most modest design Pansy has given her and I still have to meditate for a few minutes to calm my thoughts.

I send Pansy a quick note to pop by when she can, and she's climbing through my fireplace as I tuck away the image of the buttons on the front of Granger's dress.

She's folding herself into my guest chair, saying she was going to stop by anyway, and I'm regretting this, but here she is.

"Do you…" I stop, try again. "Could you…" I rake my hands over my face.

She levels her eyes at me. "Draco, are you having a stroke?"

"How does your contract with Granger work?" I mumble through my fingers.

She blinks. "I send her a box every Sunday evening with that week's clothes and instructions on wear. She has free reign to choose the order of her outfits, but I do give suggestions." She waits for me to comment. "Is there something coming up? I already know about *Witch Weekly*. I'll meet with her today—"

"Do you have record of what you're sending? Designs or…" My cheeks flush and I roll my eyes at myself. "This is ridiculous. Please forget this conversation ever happened."

I lean my forehead against the marble desk, clasping my hands behind my head.

"Easy. Because this conversation *isn't* happening," she deadpans. "Is there an issue with the clothes? Is she not wearing them right?"

"Oh she's wearing 'em great," I hum into the desk.

"Then what's the—"

I sit up, eyes away from her. "Can you send me a copy of what you're sending her on Sundays?"

"I don't think they'll fit you, Draco," she says, and I glare at her arched brow. "I don't feel comfortable with you controlling or censoring her wardrobe—"

"I'm just trying to prepare myself. For what's coming." I press the heels of my hands into my eyes. "Get an idea of what I'll be dealing with."

Pansy chuckles. I keep my face hidden.

"Where's the fun in that?" she sings. "It's like I'm giving you a present every morning. Just begging to be unwrapped."

"Pansy—"

"You don't need an itemized list of clothing, Draco. You need a wank."

"I've had one of those, thank you."

"You need a second one."

I push through the lopsided door at Cornerstone Books, and there she is. Like no time has passed. Reading a book behind the counter.

"I thought you quit this job."

She looks up, startled by me. "No. Should I have?"

"Yes."

She blinks at me. And when she snaps something back about "logical thoughts," I try to formulate some of my own. She's in her denims again. Thin cotton shirt. And her hair is back. Down again and running wild.

I follow her through the stacks, stand behind her, stand close to her. I can hardly believe she's real. I thought I'd lost her.

I tell her to quit. She doesn't like that. I pull something out of my arse about a Conflict of Interest, and she can tell I'm reaching.

But this version of her is ours. And she's reaching for books for Hartford. And Lucius is still spying on her here.

She's ignoring me, rolling her eyes and placing books back on the shelves, jeans stretching tight. And I make no sense to myself when I say, "Besides, you have a contract with Pansy. If the wrong person saw what you wear to this bookstore on the weekends, you'd be jeopardizing her career as well as your image."

She spins to glare at me, challenging me. I insult her Muggle wear and she scoffs at me.

"You are in charge of me Monday through Friday, Malfoy. Saturday and Sunday are my days off to do with as I please. I will work at this bookstore as long as I please."

And she ignores me again. Re-shelving. Dismissing me.

I lean against the stacks, pressing closer to her.

Look at me.

She tries to move around me again, and I pin her in.

"For as long as you are employed by Malfoy Consulting, Granger, you will behave and dress as such," I hiss. "If you would like to go back to working as a Ministry dreg, filing reports and failing to create lasting change for your blessed creatures, be my guest."

"I am only 'employed' Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, Malfoy. I am free—"

"Oh, I must have missed your resignation on Friday afternoons, followed by your application on Monday mornings then."

"I am only *paid* Monday through Friday. You can only control my whereabouts Monday through Friday."

That fire in her eyes. Her curls dancing as she tilts her head at me. And I don't want anyone else to have her like this. Untamed.

I'm breathless as I ask, "And what would it cost to control your Saturdays and Sundays then, Granger? I'm sure I could more than cover the salary you make here."

Her eyes flit to my mouth before she laughs and says, "I don't *need* more money, Malfoy–"

"Then what is it that you *do* need?"

Ask it of me and it's yours.

I watch her eyes grow wide, and she looks at my mouth again. And I wonder if there's any universe where she's thinking what I am. Thinking of ways I can give her what she needs. Give it to her here, in our bookshop.

And the one voice I'd never thought I'd hear while this aroused: "Hermione? Hello?"

Potter.

Like a jolt going through me. I step away from her. She collects herself and moves to the front without another glance at me.

Potter gives me a strange look when I emerge from the shelves. He's stuck inviting me to lunch, and despite her protests, half an hour later I'm sitting down to tea with Potter, his Weasley, and my Granger, having accomplished none of the goals I set foot in the bookshop to accomplish. And Merlin knows what those even were.

I wonder if this is what a double-date with the Potters would be like. Except the way she's scowling at me. I wonder if I'm sitting in Ron Weasley's chair.

She lifts her coffee cup, holding her saucer underneath with delicate fingers and a practiced hand as Potter prattles about the Ministry Quidditch league since I've been gone.

Strange. She catches me watching her coffee cup and I look away.

~*~

Monday, January 31, 2000

Witch Weekly comes today to do a profile piece on Hermione Granger. Pansy's set up in the spare office that would have belonged to Ogden.

Once I get in and put my things down I go to check on Pansy.

"All good here?"

She's rummaging through her rack of clothes when she responds, "Yes, darling."

"Granger here yet?"

"I'm here," a small voice from behind a curtain responds.

And then she steps out. A blue dress. With lace. A trim waist and a wide skirt. It's like stepping into a Pensieve.

Pansy squeals, and helps her with the buttons. Pansy sends me a grin.

My jaw squeezes. Now this… this she's done on purpose.

I watch as Pansy Parkinson helps Hermione Granger into her Yule Ball dress, and I'm unsure which witch I'm escorting.

"If memory serves, Mason, you did not fight in my war," she hisses. "At least Malfoy had the decency to choose a side."

I feel a weight drop in my stomach. Simply picking a side isn't decency. I calm myself, tucking away memories of Muggle blueprints and marbles, bloody lettering and sprinklers.

Fireplaces and lightning currents. Strangled screaming. Crashed chandeliers.

None of that was *decent*. None of that was enough.

But here she was. Because it was the right thing. And as the thought crosses my mind, she says it aloud.

"…When I find myself in a position to be of assistance to undervalued people, I do everything I can to help. It's not publicity."

She's fuming, and I'm caught between how beautiful she is and how irritated I am.

"But it sure makes for an excellent photoshoot," Mason responds, then to me, "Doesn't it, Malfoy?" He announces grandly, "What a team. The pure-blood and the Mudblood."

I'm almost to my feet, almost at his throat, when Margolis announces that they are leaving, but then she's standing, snarking back at them, promising vengeance. She stomps out and I'm left with the scowling werewolves. I nod to Margolis and follow her out.

She's halfway down the street, heels clacking against the sidewalk. Muggles move out of her way, turning back to take her in. I catch up to her quickly, watching a few curls fall loose while magic dances down her arms.

Maybe this is what our partnership looks like. Maybe this is fighting on the same side, with that fire directed somewhere else, so I just get to sit back and watch.

We pause at a corner and that dark coil in my chest springs.

Only we're not fighting together. She's fighting *for* me. She's stepping in because the spoiled Death Eater is so misunderstood.

My champion again. Like my trial. Stepping in when no one asked her to.

"I'm sorry for them," she speaks. "I'm sorry they don't see you the way I do"

And how exactly is that? My heart beats and my skin buzzes. She steps through the crosswalk, leaving me behind and I remember her house elves and her dragons. Her werewolves.

Her *undervalued people.*

"I don't need your pity, Granger," I hear myself hiss.

She turns, eyes wide. And I recognize this look, this surprise. From the courtroom corridor.

"You don't have my pity." Her eyes scan me up and down, and she says, "You have my respect."

She spins on a heel, shaking her head, and disappears around the corner. I hear a *crack* that a few Muggles jump at, looking to the street for signs of an auto backfiring.

"And tell me, Hermione Granger," Mason says, and my eyes narrow at the way he slides over her name. "How much does it cost to get a court date with the Wizengamot?"

"I believe it is a ten galleon filing fee."

"Fundraising parties for ten galleons?" Mason sits back, sending me a satisfied smirk. "My, my. Your business must be further in the hole than I'd thought, Malfoy."

I examine him, letting my eyes drift to Margolis, who is looking elsewhere. We've lost. They weren't going to work with us, and nothing today would have changed that. There's no way Margolis would have brought a loose cannon to a business meeting.

I clear my throat and try to at least salvage my pride.

"The fundraising would cover the costs of research, the trip to the North Forest, the salaries of the staff working tirelessly, accommodations for the pack if they choose to come into London for the case—"

Mason cuts me off. He picks apart the proposal. I watch him as Granger handles him artfully. I pity her. She still doesn't know this is hopeless.

"I appreciate all you have done, Miss Granger, in preparing for this project," Margolis starts, "and all the work you plan to do for the werewolf community, but we will need to decline."

She's shocked into silence, and I listen to her throat squeak something while I keep my eyes on the two werewolves.

"It might be a bit easier for *you*, Miss Granger, having been in the spotlight all your life, but I don't believe in being bought out for publicity."

Easier for *her.* Like I've bought her. Something coils in my chest.

I feel her sputtering beside me, so I toss out one more useless statement so we can leave. "That's very unfortunate, Mr. Margolis. Is there anything we can do to change your mind?"

"Can you bring back Albus Dumbledore?" Mason smirks at me. And I wonder which would be faster, my wand arm or his jaws. He speaks again, "Or perhaps you can go back in time and put down Fenrir Greyback, instead of playing house with him for a year."

Playing house. Like when I would come downstairs to find him at our dining room table in my father's chair. Or when I found him sniffing at my mother when she swerved past him near the fireplaces.

Someone's talking. And it's a moment before I realize it's her.

"—no business with Fenrir Greyback that was not forced upon him—"

"I truly don't understand you, Hermione Granger," Mason cuts her off. "He fought against you in battle just two years ago and now you've thrown in your lot with him. The pay must be *excellent* at Malfoy Consulting Group."

It is. Thank you very much. I scratch my jaw and prepare to leave.

I blink, building bricks, laying cement. I tell her about postponing the Senior Consultants meeting and quickly excuse myself to my office.

I sit in my chair, and stare at a blank sheet of paper until I can clear my head. I haven't heard back from New York.

I head up to Melody at the front to see if she has any mail for me from America. And I pass the open door on my way.

The dress is off, thankfully. Tracey and Daphne have started in on her hair and face. Transforming her from the witch at the bookstore to the Modern Business Witch.

I frown when Melody doesn't have anything for me. A half hour later I find a reason to cross the floor again, and find Tracey twisting her hair up.

Tamed, Lucius's voice whispered to me.

Turning her into a Malfoy wife for me.

She meets my eye as I stare across the office, through the open door. I turn quickly to visit Dorothea.

Another fifteen minutes and I'm checking the mail again with Melody. I hear Granger ask Daphne to close the door.

I return to my desk and sit patiently, meditating until Pansy comes to visit me.

"Do you like your present this morning?" She smiles as she shuts the door behind herself.

I sigh. "You know I do." She laughs as she leans her elbows down on the back of my guest chair. "I do have a request…" She lifts her brows at me. "Her hair."

"Her hair?"

"It's not… I mean, isn't her hair a signature look?" I turn to face the window.

"You prefer it down and wild?" she asks, and then a teasing lilt floats into her voices. "Well, Draco, if I'd *known* that all it would take to keep your interest was growing out my hair and getting a perm…"

I glare at her. She chuckles. I clear my throat and say carefully, "Lucius likes it up. He likes that Pansy Parkinson has *tamed* her."

One of her brows slowly inches towards the sky. "He does, does he?" She scowls, pulls herself up tall, and says, "Excuse me."

She exits and I'm alone for a total of sixty seconds before my door is slammed open and a barefoot vixen is screaming at me about her hairstyle. I can't stop staring at her feet as she paces and stomps and tells me off for having an opinion about her clothes or her hair.

"I don't understand why you are allowed to have any opinion on my hair for my photoshoot!"

"It was a suggestion—" I try.

"Keep them to yourself!"

"What is going on with you?"

"Nothing is 'going on' with me—"

"You've been acting like a bitch for days!"

She gasps and steps into me. "Maybe I've just realized that you've been a dick for months!"

She's begging for a fight today. And Blaise is there to stop us, suggest we shut the door. She storms out, and Blaise looks back at me.

"You reckon she's naked under that bathrobe?" he asks.

I frown. "Go away."

I don't hear from the Modern Business Witch again that morning. I'm just starting the Senior Consultant meeting, deciding not to wait on her any longer when she flies into the conference room, hair in an elegant twist, and blue dress on again.

She apologizes to everyone and walks to me. To her *seat*. Walks to her seat.

She glances up through her long lashes and permits me to continue.

To hold a meeting, while she looks like that. While she sits in a chair next to me, looking like a dream.

I clear my throat and continue.

She has a new proposal. And I have to listen to her give a presentation without remembering a blue dress spinning, and lifting to show her knees.

"I want to make sure the Werewolf Policy is fully funded before you start other projects that also need fundraising."

She doesn't seem to understand me. We bicker in front of the other staff, and it's like she doesn't understand what a quarterly budget is.

"Like I said, an excellent project for April. We can send you and Walter out to Somerset in March to start collecting data."

I stand and dismiss everyone. She mutters a curse under her breath, some insult that has Mockridge raising a brow at me.

I follow her back to her office, and maybe we'll have this fight after all.

The door hits me on the way in, and I almost see her grin.

"Why am I even here, Malfoy?" she sneers. I close the door, eyeing her carefully. "You told me you wanted to 'make a difference' and 'change the world.' What utter hogwash."

I try to explain the budget again. She paces the room, and the movement brushes her skirt. Like she's dancing in the Great Hall again.

I place my hands in my pockets to keep from reaching out for her.

Her hands go to her hips and she's interrupting me: "Are you punishing me?"

"Punishing you?"

"Yes, because I haven't quit Cornerstone?"

Oh, she is pushing *all* the buttons today.

I feel her eyes.

"Declined? But I thought things were going so well. I mean to say, from the way Noelle was talking about it," she says, and I focus on getting us to the café as quickly as possible. I guide her off the curb, resting my hand on her back for a moment longer than necessary.

She asks about the lunch Tiberius and I were supposed to have. I'd managed to block that entire family from my mind.

"He canceled. He said he had no interest in the company."

Finally to the café and I open the door for her, ending the conversation. Maybe I can guide her inside, let my hand rest low on her back again—

She stops in the doorway and turns to me. "Do you want me to write to him?"

I almost sneer at her and her philosophy that all problems could be fixed by a simple correspondence from the Golden Girl. But I catch myself as I remember how we got the meeting we're currently walking into.

"No, we'll find someone else, Granger."

She frowns, and I should have guessed that this would open a door in her mind.

"What about Noelle?" she says, and I flinch. "I think I hit it off with her. I could see when she's home next—"

"No." Merlin, if she wrote to Noelle… There would be a mess to untangle. That flighty bird would spin her own version of events and push Granger into a full investigation. I look directly into her eyes and say with an interesting imitation of my father, "Do *not* contact Noelle. Do you hear me, Granger?"

I watch as her eyes flick back and forth between each of mine. "Alright."

I fall into her deep brown pools for a moment longer and then retract, realign. Margolis is already here, even though we're ten minutes early. He's on the comfortable couches I saw on Monday with a man I don't recognize. I straighten my cuffs and lead her into the café.

Margolis actually shakes my hand this time – although my fingers may need to be reset – but his associate doesn't bother to stand. Mason, as he is introduced. I offer to order the drinks, and *Mason* decides to test me by ordering not one, but two entrees.

I nod, without comment, and head to the counter. I successfully handle the Muggle money and return to the table.

Granger jumps in. She has a presentation with her, which… I don't know why I doubted she would. I focus on my tea instead of her trim nails flipping through the pages, listening to her voice take lead, take dominance.

I catch myself staring at her jaw when Mason interrupts her, asking about the fundraising. I raise a brow at him. So, he's here to be difficult.

"You know," I say, leaning back on the desk like me and the Howler are old chums. "I'm not a fan of the makeover either, if I'm honest, Weasley."

"IF I FIND OUT THAT *ANYTHING* UNTOWARD IS HAPPENING AT MALFOY CONSULTING GROUP, IF YOU'RE USING HER OR IF YOU HURT HER, I'LL MURDER YOU, MALFOY."

The Howler descends into flames. And I feel very alone in my office.

I open the other three waiting Howlers all at the same time, and just sit on my couch, listening to the din.

Just as I begin the 9AM meeting, Corban Hartford walks in late. I don't mind. And then she waves at him. And he smiles back. Like they're friends. Friendly.

I blink, tucking that away for later, and look at my notes again.

Later that afternoon, Blaise lets himself into my office, drops on the couch and says, "Where do you know Hartford from?"

I look up at him and he's got his eyes narrowed.

"He was an associate of my father's solicitor. He was fired for having too many morals."

"Hm," Blaise says. "Well, I've got my eye on him. Don't worry."

I almost ask, about what? But I remember this is Blaise. And he already knows. And if *I* saw Hartford smiling at her, then he already knows more.

~*~

Wednesday, January 26, 2000

We have the meeting with Margolis today, and I feel no more confident than I did last time. But At least I'll let Granger take the lead on it.

I swing by her office at noon, delighted to find Blaise elsewhere. Perhaps doing work.

"Ready?"

"Yes!" She's standing from her desk, capping her ink, and giving me her bright eyes.

In a cream skirt suit, hugging those hips. I look away before my eyes linger on her calves.

We share a lift downstairs with two of the interns headed to lunch, thankfully. It's not until the street that we're alone. We Disapparate and begin our walk through Muggle London.

The only reason Margolis would have chosen Muggle London as a meeting spot would be to throw me off. But I have her with me. And also, I swung by this shop on Monday, checking the menu, scoping the tables, examining the workers.

So… joke's on him.

"I've been meaning to ask you," she says, interrupting my judgment of the floppy-looking Muggle we just passed, "what happened to Tiberius Ogden?" The name shakes me. "I was very surprised to hear that the Wizengamot relations position was open."

"He declined." That's it. That's all there is.

She screeches at me again, and I step into her. "Granger-"

"Why am I even here Malfoy?! At Malfoy Consulting?" Her hands fly out wide.

"I wanted the best –"

"You said everyone needed a second chance, but I guess you weren't talking about magical creatures. You were talking about the Malfoy family and their reputation."

She pokes me hard in the chest. And I think of Mockridge's judgmental eyes as she insulted me moments ago.

"Watch your tone, Granger."

She can talk to me like this at the bookstore. Even at the Manor, over a bowl of pumpkin soup. But not here. Not when she's been costumed as the Modern Business Witch, Senior Consultant.

She couldn't be both.

"I'm glad I could really 'round' out your senior staff, Malfoy," she hisses. "My god, without me you wouldn't have made your Mudblood quota." My eyes twitch at the word. "How would you have ever changed public opinion of the Malfoy family without one? Isn't that right?"

She's burning. Something so violent I haven't seen it since September. Since Gainsworth. Shoving a book into my chest and demanding that I read it. Or maybe before that. Reaching back to third year, with her palm connecting with my cheek.

She's rambling, blazing. Calling me out for having an all-male staff. Suggesting that her only worth to me is that she's Muggleborn and female.

"Stop. Stop there, Granger." We have to go back. We have to start over.

"No, thanks. I'm not quite done." And she comes to stand in front of me, eyes on fire, blue dress spinning. "I'm assuming that the most important quality that I bring to this team, seeing as it clearly has nothing to do with my relationship with the magical creature community, is that I am Hermione Granger, *Golden Girl*. Were you hoping I'd spread a bit of that golden dust around, Malfoy? I admit, it makes for excellent photo shoots with your pal Skeeter!"

She shoves me. And I clench my fists to keep from grabbing her. She's too close. And she's dressed in Pansy's clothes. Not at all the girl I want. I want the curls. The jeans.

"Is that it, Malfoy? Is it nice having the Golden Girl to show off, to headline your Daily Prophet articles? Well if it's not my blood status or my gender, it must be my *celebrity*."

She shoves me again. And I *try*. I try to put her back in her box. Try to breathe deep. Try to walk out.

And I'm struck again by the idea that there's two of them. One elegant Modern Business Witch with long lines and smooth skin, begging me to ravish her. And one Golden Girl, with fire and wit, burning to take over the world and fight me every step of the way. And I'll always be betraying one with the other.

Her eyes are bright, wet. And she screams, "Or maybe, I'm only here to play dress up with Pansy! Is that it, Malfoy? Giving a doll to your fucking *girlfriend?*"

She shoves me again, and I have to touch her back. Have to know if she's really here. I snap up her wrist, and tug her close to me.

"Don't. Touch me." I warn her. I look into her eyes, telling her things will change. If you push me any further, I'll snap.

She heaves air against my lips, hair falling from the perfect twist. This brazen witch begging for me to snap.

And maybe I can have both. Maybe it's not betrayal. Maybe they're the same. And I can have them both.

She reaches her hand back and slaps my chest again.

And I pull her to me, breathing her into my lips, fingers grabbing for her twisted hair. It's the same. She's both of them, and I can have her. She asked me to.

And a long-imagined theory blossoms to life when she opens her mouth to let me in.

She tastes like coffee and sin.

I'm ten minutes late to my 3 o'clock meeting.

~*~

Sunday, January 23, 2000

Mother wakes me up with the paper, going on and on about how *bloody gorgeous* – excuse my language, darling – Granger is in the *Prophet*, and how lovely Pansy's designs are, and would I like to invite Hermione over for dinner sometime to celebrate how smashing everything is going?

I stare blankly at the docile kitten in the paper, trying to reconcile her long legs and smooth curls with the ferocious girl in my dreams. Trying to wrap my head around this strange guilt, like I'm cheating on Hermione Granger every time this new version arouses me.

~*~

Monday, January 24, 2000

Ron Weasley sends me a Howler on Monday morning. And I have a complete mental break when I realize I'm agreeing with him.

"—HAS NO BUSINESS BEING PHOTOGRAPHED LIKE THAT. LIKE SOME MUGGLEBORN WHORE FOR YOU AND YOUR PURE-BLOOD FRIENDS—"

"Yes, yes. I know," I whisper, pacing the length of my office as the red envelope bellows from my desk.

"—SHE HAS A SOFT SPOT FOR YOU. ALWAYS HAS. AND WHILE I CAN'T EVEN IMAGINE WHAT YOU'VE DONE TO DESERVE IT—"

"Mm-hmm. I'm with you."

"—IT'S NO EXCUSE TO USE HER LIKE THIS. LIKE SHE'S NOTHING MORE THAN A PAIR OF LEGS—"

"Right. Because she's the Brightest Witch of Our Age—"

"—BRIGHTEST WITCH OF OUR AGE—"

"And for what purpose?!" I spin towards the letter as it screeches. "Why does she need to look like that to work here, eh?" I ask.

"—NOT EVEN SURE WHAT IT IS YOU'RE SELLING AT THAT COMPANY OF YOURS—"

"Yes! Yes!" I point at the Howler. "Exactly, Weasley! Exactly!"

"—BECAUSE IT SEEMS TO ME LIKE YOU'RE SELLING SEX."

I clap my hands. "Yes! Why are we marketing it like this? We're not even *selling* things, Weasley!"

"SHE IS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WITCH IN THE ENTIRE WORLD, AND SHE WAS STILL THAT SAME WITCH TWO WEEKS AGO, BEFORE YOU AND PARKINSON GOT YOUR HANDS ON HER—"

"Lovely idea for the shoot Pans." I cross my arms in front of my chest, and try to discreetly cover my flushed throat with a hand on my chin. Perhaps I can physically push a moan back into my mouth if it slips out.

"She's agreed to three months."

My dry throat bobs. And Rita has her lean against the desk with her book, ankles crossing.

"And how'd you manage that?"

"I told you. I can be very persuasive."

"She's not cut out for your world, Pans," I say. "It's no offense to you, but she hasn't been trained for it. You spend three hours on her hair and makeup today and I promise you, tomorrow she'll arrive with today's hairstyle and a poor attempt at Daphne's contouring." I watch as they fix her hair, twisting a curl from her ponytail to lay flat on her chest. I press my thumb against my lips and mutter, "This isn't Hermione Granger."

Pansy is quiet for a moment as we watch her turn a page in the book, camera flashing.

"I think you underestimate her."

"Miss Granger!" Rita calls. "I am *adoring* this style on you. Who are you wearing?"

I watch as Granger's eyes meet Pansy's, a smirk tugging at her dark lips, and she lifts a perfectly arched brow.

"Parkinson." She grins. Like she's won a game of wizards' chess twelve moves before anyone will realize it.

And something thick twists inside my chest, dropping low, and swirling, licking at me.

She meets my eyes, still smirking. And I let myself have one moment to drink her in. From the arches of her feet in the delicate heels, up her ankles and curving around her calves, lingering on the knees I've longed to press open, imagining the shape of her thighs, swooping wide around her hips and dipping back in to her tight stomach, lifting toward her full chest and the swell of her skin there, and finally sliding up her clavicles to her long neck.

The camera flashes. And I blink it away.

~*~

Wednesday, January 19, 2000

She wears an orange dress. I never liked the color orange. But it's growing on me.

At least her hair is down again.

~*~

Friday, January 21, 2000

I'm relieved to find that she's in trousers today. Until I see how well they fit.

At lunch, I make excuses to Carrie and pop home for a cold shower. Only the temperature never turns all the way down. My hand leans against the stone tiles. The sway of her hips against my closed eyelids.

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Seventeen

Friday, January 13, 1995

She's at my fucking table again.

There's one spot in the library that is tucked away enough to discourage people from ever finding you. It's also got the perfect table. It doesn't shake, it doesn't have annoying curse words etched into the wood.

There's sunlight from one of the few windows on the north wall that hits the book pages just right.

I haven't sat at that table in *months* because of her.

She's practically climbing into the tomes in front of her, hunched over in her seat, and scribbling notes on Potter's egg.

Merlin forbid Potter himself do the work. All the other Champions weren't assigned a clever witch to figure it out for them.

I frown at her profile again, watching as she flips the pages quickly.

She hasn't kept the hair from the Yule Ball. Her fuzzy curls are back, circling her head like a strange collar. And whatever she'd done to her skin to make it look smooth and dewy has been washed away.

She stretches her arms above her head, and sets down her quill, swapping it for a berry-blue Sugar Quill. I raise my brow, judging her obscene taste in sweets. If she wants a lolly from Honeydukes, she should try the Raspberry Raspy. It buzzes in your throat and changes your voice for half an hour. Or the Chocolate Cherry Bomb. More expensive. She probably can't afford that.

She leans back in her chair, pulling her book into her lap to lean against the table, and reads carefully, lips pulling around the tip of the Sugar Quill.

She'll get blue lips from it. Idiot.

Blue lips and a blue tongue.

I watch as her cheeks hollow out, sucking, popping the quill from her lips absently as she reads. Her eyes widen and she reaches for her parchment, scribbling a few words while her eyes scan the book. She jumps when she realizes she's been trying to write with the Sugar Quill.

I smile. Stupid little cow.

She pops the Sugar Quill deep between her lips, holding it there, and grabs her writing quill.

Lips pressed tight around the blue sugary feather. Pursed forward, popping her cheekbones.

Strong lips.

Blue lips.

Not thin like Tracey Davis'. Or smart and wide like Pansy's. Just… blue. And soft.

And I wonder about her blue tongue, and if it's strong too. If she knows how to use it yet. If Krum's taught her. If she's let him kiss her and taste her blue lips yet.

Maybe the only way she knows how to kiss is now through Krum. Sloppy and wet and harsh. No finesse from the Bulgarians.

She'd have to learn how kiss better after Krum. She'd have to soften her blue lips and let someone taste her sweet blue tongue, let them press into her and lick at her small teeth. And bite down on her bottom lip and suck the sugar from her.

The Sugar Quill pops from her mouth, the echo of it ricocheting off the library walls.

She looks up and right at me. I narrow my eyes automatically, and she looks down, rubbing the blue sugar away.

~*~

Monday, January 31, 2000

Maybe if I keep pressing my mouth against hers, she'll kiss me back.

If I don't let her breathe… she'll have to open her mouth at some point.

I feel bile in my throat. This is a mistake.

I press my mouth to hers again.

She doesn't want this.

But I concentrate on the feeling of my hand in her tightly wound hair, drinking this in for as long as she'll let me.

How do I explain this to her after she's slapped me. After she's glaring at me, scared and unsafe.

I'll stop now. Just once more. I memorize her lips beneath mine, fingers twisting in her hair. My other hand squeezes her wrist, and I drag my lips across hers one last time—

"Yes. She's beautiful and she knows it." Pansy smirks at me. "And so does everyone else."

I roll my shoulders back and take a breath. I need to turn away from the sight of Hermione Granger hopping up on my three thousand galleon desk and crossing her legs.

"Your mother would approve, I'd say." Pansy shrugs.

"Don't talk about my mother right now."

"Why not? I hear thinking about one's mother is the perfect way to squash unwanted thoughts."

I glare at her and she smiles back.

"Mr. Malfoy," Rita sings. "We'll have you in the chair now."

Rita takes me by the arm and sits me down, brushing my hair back more than necessary. When she walks back to the front of the room, I raise a brow at Tracey. She runs over and fixes whatever Skeeter did.

The pictures start. And all I can focus on is *not* letting my eyes drift to the left, where a lithe body is perched on shapely hips, leaning back on a small hand.

I *can't* get hard in the middle of this photoshoot. There is… no possible way.

When we pause and rearrange, I refocus. This is about the business. Selling the consulting group. We'll have a beautiful woman on the front page, because that's marketing. But any other stray thoughts about keeping her on this desk indefinitely, or leaning back in this chair as she crawls her way towards me, or slowing popping the buttons on her vest as she lays across the marble top—

A camera flashes.

Rita repositions us. She and Blaise are on either side of me. Then she has her sit once, knees turned in towards me, torso twisting towards the lens.

This is fucking torture.

At least the scent of her is covered with some foul hair product.

We're on the couch before I know it. It's just Blaise, her, and me. She leans behind me, breasts inches away from my ear, and I know if I turn to look at her I'll get an eyeful.

"Miss Granger? Lean down closer? Move your hand over there? Yes. That's right."

And I can feel the heat of her at my temple. I stare down the lens imagining the tunnels of Severus' eyes.

Then I'm watching Pansy and Rita position her around my office. Standing in front of Blaise and me. Reading a document. Standing next to my chair.

Belonging.

"You haven't said if you like the look yet." Pansy's at my side.

I press my lips together as they give her a book to hold, and then tell her to bend over my desk, green dress pulling tight against her backside.

better idea of the lines and curves of her stomach, and the deep pools of her eyes that stare straight into me, digging into my mind and begging me to let her out of her box.

A bulb flashes, and she blinks.

I fix my collar and shake someone's hand. I let Daphne apply some kind of powder to my face. And I look back over at her.

Pansy's done this. She's done this for revenge.

She's put her in Slytherin green, something I will never forgive her for. And the angles of her cheekbones pop in the sunlight when she's got her hair pulled back like that. It makes her look harsher, older.

"Draco, darling." Rita is in front of me. "A few words for the *Prophet?*" The quill dances behind her head. I nod. "What drew you to Hermione Granger?"

The sex.

I clear my throat and ignore the figure near the window, speaking lowly.

"Er, what drew me to her was her mind. She's very… logical…" Ridiculous. "A true… asset."

Blaise appears over Rita's shoulder, smirking at me.

I glare at him.

"Asset. Yes," he says. Rita turns, opening the conversation up to us both. "And of all the *assets* she brings to the table," Blaise hums, "I'd say the most impressive…" He holds his hands in front of his chest like he's grabbing for an idea. Or like he's about to say her tits. "Her passion." He smiles at Rita. "She's as passionate as she is beautiful."

Rita's quill quivers.

"Well said, Mr. Zabini." Rita tucks a curl behind her ear, touching her neck in an obvious way. The woman needs a shag.

My eyes drift back to where Pansy is tugging at the arms of the green dress and Tracey is twisting a curl.

They've done something to her hair. Constrained it. I hate it.

"Well, I can say, Rita," Blaise continues jovially, "that Draco is truly looking forward to having Hermione Granger under him."

I close my eyes. Breathe deep.

"Not under." I smile. "I think of my Senior Staff as equals."

"Right you are," Blaise says. "I doubt a woman like Granger would stay in a position like that for long."

His eyes sparkle. I scowl. "Rita, darling. Shall we get started?"

She flutters away, placing everyone around my desk. Pansy floats to my elbow, straightening my cufflinks.

"*That* is the Modern Business Witch?" I whisper.

She opens her mouth, and I groan into her, angling her head just how I want it. She draws a quick breath from my lungs and then I'm pressing into her, tasting her tongue and dripping my desire into her like honey.

Her hand curls against my chest and I'd never considered her hands. Never known what she would do with them. Never imagined she could touch me back.

I breathe harshly against her mouth, and drag her backwards by her head. I need…

I need…

She squeaks, and I scrape my teeth over her lips. She gasps and I can hear myself moaning.

If she'll let me, I need…

She bumps against the desk, and I drag my hand from her hair, down her neck. I need her knees open.

If she'll let me.

My hips so close to hers.

What will she give me?

This dress. I can ruck it up to her waist. If she doesn't protest I can go to my knees for her, show her what it's like for me to want her like this.

The pressure of her hand on my ribs, and if she touches me again I'll snap. Just unbuckle and push inside.

I wonder about her hands then. Will she hold onto me?

She sighs a dreamy breath against my lips and I take her hands off me, pressing them back on the desk.

Please stay.

She lets me lap at her tongue, pressing into her mouth and swallowing her sounds. I wonder if she'll let me press her close, feel how hard I am and gasp.

I push her knees open.

This dress. This fucking dress. I run my hands down her stomach, nipping at her, never leaving her mouth.

I don't want to hear her stop me. I don't want to have the memory of her voice telling me "no."

I wonder how much she'll give me. Could I lay her down on her desk? Would I be able to watch her face as I enter her, just looking down at her when we press together, fingers sliding over her legs.

Or should I just make her come? Drive her insane with it so she only wants me forever?

My mouth is ravenous at the thought. Devouring her. And she's kissing me back. The best feeling.

Her fingers on my jaw suddenly. Not pushing me away, pressing to hold me to her. Like she wants me.

My hips snap. I grab for her thigh, pressing her hips close to me.

Going to grind her into this desk. Going to fuck her so slowly she'll beg me for it. Going to fuck her with my tongue until she's screaming, dragging her fingers through my hair—

"Hermione, you ready—?"

I drop her. She scrambles to sit up on the desk, wiping at her mouth.

Potter is here. For lunch.

"I can come back later."

"No!" And she's saying it with me. Like she knows I wouldn't have stopped. Like she knows Potter just saved her from me.

I'm dizzy as I push past Potter, keeping my eyes on the floor and keeping my hands from choking him. I'm aware that the entire floor staff is watching me as I cross to my office. Such a long walk. Why did I do that? She should have been next to me. With a door between offices.

I'm still half-hard in my trousers, and I pray to the gods that no one is looking. We didn't silence the room. Everyone could hear yelling… and I'm trying to remember if she moaned too loud, and I have to close my eyes when I relive those sounds…

I get to my office and I shut the door. I silence the room.

"FUCK!"

The leather couch blasts open. Foam and fluff spraying like blood. The Tiffany lamp my mother gave me as an office-warming gift shatters.

I feel my head heavy as I struggle to bring in air, and I place my hands on my knees, bending and breathing.

A knock on my door. I squeeze my eyes. I want it to be her. I don't want it to be her.

"Mr. Malfoy." Blaise. "Is this a good time to discuss the Cannons?"

No.

But he's helping the image. Business as usual. I lean against the wall near the door. With a wave of my hand, the door clicks open just enough. He pushes himself through and shuts it behind him.

"My couch…" Like I just ate his last chocolate frog.

I pace across my office, trying to breathe. Trying to figure out what possessed me.

Her hot eyes and flushed cheeks, that's what.

It's no reason to… No excuse for…

"What are you saying?" Blaise stops me.

Have I been speaking out loud?

"I kissed her."

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Sixteen

Tuesday, January 18, 2000

I barely get a second to myself on the day of the *Prophet* shoot. Inviting six different periodicals to the office to interview and photograph M.C.G. was… an ambitious idea. And Rita is now pouting that she's not the center of attention.

I've spent all morning in the conference room talking to different journalists about current projects, future expenditures, and then – abruptly – about Katya and Granger.

"Why Hermione Granger?" a sly auburn-headed witch asks, quill at the ready.

Love, I've been trying to answer that question for myself for years now…

"She's the best," I brag, lifting my brows at her. "I wanted the best."

She grins and says, "Her relationship with the Magical Creature community must have helped, yes?"

"Absolutely—"

"Mr. Malfoy," an older gentleman covering a business magazine cuts in. "What do you most look forward to in your relationship with Miss Granger?"

I blink at him.

The sex.

And before I can answer with those exact words, my assistant Carrie pokes her head into the conference room and says they're ready for us in my office. I jump up, grab my jacket, and lead the way.

There's a witch standing at my office window that could give Granger a run for her money. Long legs and dark curls.

It's the flare of her hips that finally clicks with me. And my throat is dry as I drink in the sunlight bouncing off of her neck and chest, the waistcoat clinging tight to her ribs, giving me a

My eyes on the expensive carpets and how my shoes tear across them as I pace.

"I'll have to check who had that in the office pool." Blaise chuckles.

"Don't—Don't laugh at this. This is… What have I done?" I lean against the wall, dropping my head back, sucking in air.

"Draco, relax," he says. "You've just taken it to the next level. Not committed a crime."

Haven't I though? Did she want me to kiss her? To lay her down on her desk and fuck her like a tawdry romance?

Did she want any of that?

"She'll quit," I wheeze into the room. "She's going to walk. And I'll never see her again."

I listen to my gasping breath, listen as Blaise mutters a *Reparo* to sew my couch back together. I feel him leading me to it, forcing me down, pushing my head between my knees.

Black spots in front of my eyes. Blaise is talking to me, saying something. His hand on the back of my neck.

"… kiss you back? Think, Draco… apologize and move on… some women may take it as a compliment you know—"

I sit up pressing my hands into my eyes and focus on counting bricks in a circle. I build them up around myself, building me into the tower. Ivy grows around it, locking each brick into place, twisting and growing, sprouting.

I open my eyes.

"I have to go."

Blaise hesitates. "Alright…"

I stand and walk to my door. I poke my head out. "Carrie," I hear my voice. "Contact me immediately if I receive post from America. I'm going out. Gone for the rest of the day." I shut the door before she can even grab a quill.

"America?" Blaise asks.

I grab my coat, reach for the Floo powder.

"Draco—"

"Do the interviews for me, will you?"

I'm stepping through the fireplace and calling out to the Ministry before he can say another word.

~*~

Tuesday, May 7, 1996

It's so cold. Does it have to be this cold?

"Don't think about the temperature, Mr. Malfoy."

Severus sits across from me. A jewelry box between us.

I've never seen Severus sit cross-legged. It's… humanizing in a very disturbing way.

"Why, Draco, you'll make me self-conscious," he teases.

"Get out of my head if you don't want to know what I think."

He frowns at me. Or I assume he does, because I'm not allowed to look away from the jewelry box. I can see the reflection of my shoes in the antique mirrors lining the sides. Brass at the corners.

I let my eyes rove over the edges, memorizing it in a way that I could rebuild it blindly.

I hear him. A small voice in the corner. Behind a door.

Envision the inside of the box.

My eyes take in the velvet inside. Navy blue. Older and fraying, worn down in places. The box has been used. I lean my consciousness forward, taking in the inner wall closest to me, the one I can't see with my normal eyes.

Also blue. Less worn away. Softer.

I lean in further, falling inside. A blue velvet lined room.

I reach my hand out and place it on the wall, watching the velvet threads shift directions, memorizing the path of my hand.

I spell my name with my pointer finger, large as my head.

And without him telling me to, I erase my name, walk to the corner of the box, and in letters as large as my chest I begin to spell –

H E R M I O N E

Evenly across the wall. Blue velvet memorizing her name, the pattern sinking into the fabric.

I hear him again, from above me. Outside of the jewelry box. Like a puppeteer. And I am the marionette.

Step out of the jewelry box. Take only what you need.

I push myself up to the edge, like a swimming pool. The blue velvet laps at my heels, swaying as I disturb the waters.

I sit on the ledge. Take only what I need.

I guess I need my mother. And my father. Sometimes I need Blaise and Pansy. I don't really need Crabbe and Goyle but –

And then memories splashing at my calves in the blue velvet. My first broom. I was four. Maybe five. Meeting Vincent. He'd laughed at my impression of the Minister of Magic even though he had no clue who Fudge was. Blaise on the Hogwarts Express, asking me if I'd just go ahead and kill myself if I was sorted into Hufflepuff.

Pansy in the Hospital Wing, holding my slashed arm. Theo and Milicent Bulstrode forced to kiss in Spin the Bottle in second year. First day of Potions class, and Severus awards me house points for being brilliant. A bobbing hand in the air, brown hair swishing as she waits to be called on—

forced hers to stay on the desk. She poured this frustration into his mouth, lapping at him and using her teeth lightly. He groaned and she found her knees being opened. His leg pushed between hers and moved her left knee outwards. He stepped in.

His left hand released her right, after giving a little push, telling her stay there. He carefully placed his hand on her waist. She moaned. He squeezed her lightly.

His tongue was doing such lovely things to her and her breath was coming in gasps in between mouthfuls of him. His body was pressing into hers and pushing her into her desk. She wanted to touch him. She removed her right palm from the desk and brought it up to his jaw, her little fingers on his neck and her thumb near their mouths.

At the contact, he gasped and his left hand slid down to grab her hip, pulling her toward him, connecting them, and his upper body started pushing her backwards.

A knock at the door she barely heard and a "Hermione, you ready—?" was the only warning they had before Harry stepped into the room.

Draco jumped away from her, turning away from the doorway. Hermione straightened and wiped her mouth.

Harry stood with his mouth open mid-word, with his hand still on the door knob. Harry's eyes moved back and forth between the two of them.

"Is it –" she tried. She cleared her throat. "Is it lunch time?"

"Er, yes," Harry said. "But I can come back later."

"No!" Hermione and Draco both said in unison. Draco finally turned to face Harry, tightened his jaw, and said "Potter," as he exited. The air was suddenly lighter.

Harry just stared at her, eyes wide, and a small smile growing on his mouth.

"God, Harry, don't," Hermione said, covering her face with her hands.

"I wasn't going to say anything!" He laughed.

She shoved his chest with her hands. He was so stiff she wanted to *move* him somehow. Make him fight her. Of course, he did not even sway, but she did see that his breath was uneven now. Good.

"Is that it, Malfoy?" she continued. "Is it nice having the Golden Girl to show off, to headline your Daily Prophet articles? Well if it's not my blood status or my gender, it must be my *celebrity*." She pushed his chest again, and again nothing changed. She could feel everything rushing inside of her body, waiting for him to break her.

"Or maybe," she snarled, "I'm only here to play dress up with Pansy! Is that it, Malfoy? Giving a doll to your fucking *girlfriend?*"

Her right hand shoved his chest as hard as she could and she realized her eyes were blurring. Before she could pull her hand off of him, his snapped up and grabbed her wrist, holding it between them, so tight it might snap.

He lowered his head to hers, sent fire into her eyes and hissed, "Don't. Touch me."

She glared into his face, took her left hand and slapped his chest with it.

His free hand shot up, grabbed the back of her head, and pulled her face to his. And he kissed her.

And she was immobilized. Eyes open. A groan poured from his throat into her lips.

Her wrist in his hand, her head tilted up, and her breath lost. He placed open-mouth kisses against her lips, peppering her, and his breath hot.

He was kissing her. And she was doing nothing. She gasped at the realization, and his fingers dug into her twisted hair, tilting her head so he could taste her.

She closed her eyes, swaying into him as he attacked her mouth, gasping for air. His fingers were still so tight on her wrist and her left hand was stuck between them on his chest. She curled her fingers on his shirt and he gasped. She tried chasing his mouth, letting her tongue taste him.

He stepped into her, and she had to step back before she toppled. His hand still caught in her complicated hair, he pulled her head back gently, leading her backwards.

His mouth left hers briefly and she almost opened her eyes to ask him what was happening, but he heaved a breath in, throat clicking around the air, before attaching to her again. He kissed the side of her mouth, moving his lips across hers in small movements. She was burning. She couldn't wait for him to take her again. She was forced to step back again.

Her backside hit the edge of her desk and his body pressed into hers. He was solid and warm. He was attacking her mouth again and spinning the most delicious sounds into her. She felt him take the hand on his chest and then place both hands behind her on the desk. She leaned backwards into them, and his hands smoothed across hers, planting them down, keeping them from moving. She wanted to move them. She wanted to touch him anywhere. Feel his chest, run up his arms, and oh how she wanted to track her fingers through his hair. But his hands

No.

I have to leave that behind.

Take it.

I frown into the pool of blue velvet, but listen to Severus.

Watching my mother and father kiss at New Year's Eve when I was six. My father telling me I could have a glass of the 500-year-old scotch on my birthday. My father reviewing my marks and asking if I was below anyone. My father with his hand on my shoulder, pushing me forward – *My son, Draco. My heir.*

I take these memories. I take the rest with me. I stumble whenever I come across a bushy-haired buck-toothed Muggleborn Gryffindor, but Severus tells me to take her.

The Yule Ball. And I'm dizzy watching her dance. I push that back into the waters and Severus says nothing.

On top of Pansy, and closing my eyes, imagining her beneath me. I blush with Severus this close, but he says nothing and lets me slide that back into the blue velvet.

We wade through everything. The Dark Lord in my drawing room. I want to leave it behind, keep his red eyes away from me. But then he'll be down there with her. So, I bring him out.

Every meeting with Severus is left in the box. The waters getting thin.

I'm at present. Severus gestures to the floor in front of his desk, tells me to sit cross-legged. He asks if I've brought the box.

The waters shift, and then I'm back at the Yule Ball watching her calves, watching her bright perfectly-sized teeth. Watching Krum. I try to push it back into the velvet lining, but Severus brings it forward again.

We cut the evening into pieces, bringing some out and leaving some. I think I understand the trick, the way to leave her in the box, but then he's bringing her smile forward. And the partner dance. And the way her hand wouldn't touch mine, her bright eyes, my heartbeat.

My heartbeat.

My heartbeat.

We sever it.

My flushed skin. Her rising chest, pulling tight across her breasts.

They pour into the box. And we take the rest.

Pansy's beneath me. And the thought of longer hair. Curls. Wider hips. The closer I am to coming the more we cut away until just the memory of losing my virginity to Pansy Parkinson after the Yule Ball splashes out of the jewelry box.

I'm sweating by the time we reach yesterday, when I almost bumped into her outside the Great Hall. Her lips parted and my eyes dropped to them before I could sneer.

Her lips float through the velvet, lining the sides, kissing her name that I've written with my fingers like it was her skin.

Snap!

I blink. And I'm in the classroom, on the floor with Severus. He's closed the lid of the box.

My eyes are seeing lights as I try to breathe, try to focus, try to remember what day it is.

He stands, fluidly. I try to follow and fall back to my knees, sweat pouring from my temple, gasping for air.

He lifts the box from the floor, and I feel a sense of terror that he'll destroy it.

It's mine. Those are mine.

He extends the box to me. I take it and meet his eyes.

His brow is damp, but he looks the same, unaffected, unembarrassed.

"It gets easier," he says, and sweeps from the room.

~*~

Monday, January 31, 2000 - later

I haven't been to New York City since I was a child. Mother wanted to shop on Fifth Avenue. It was the first time I had been exposed to Muggles – No-majs. Whatever.

The emergency portkey I'd spent two hours and several hundred Galleons acquiring dropped me off near the pier in the afternoon sun. I walked the block to 679 West 24th Street and stand now on the doorstep of a brownstone.

I ring the bell, waiting on the steps. A few minutes later, the door pulls open to reveal an old woman, with long white hair in a dressing gown. Her makeup impeccable, and I wouldn't know that she was 97 by looking at her. She doesn't look a day older than sixty. Her large green eyes look me up and down, a smirk forming on her pink lips.

"Sugar, I'm too old for you." She winks.

"Queenie Goldstein?"

She smiles slowly at me. "I would have responded to your letter sooner if I knew you'd just show up. I'm not able to help you, Mr. Malfoy."

She starts to shut the door, and my hand shoots up to the jam. "Please, Ms. Goldstein—"

"It's Kowalski, please. There's nothing left of him but his name, honey."

"Mrs. Kowalski," I try. "I just need an hour."

"You don't need an hour, you need a shrink—"

"I can pay you."

"You can't solve everything with money, Draco Malfoy. You need to put those gorgeous lips to work and speak to *Miss Granger*, not me."

I feel it like a lightning bolt, shuddering through me. I never said her name. I never said it was about a girl.

"Are you punishing me?" She placed her hands on her hips and raised her brows at him. She must thank Pansy later for today's heels as they gave her much needed leverage in height.

"Punishing you?"

"Yes, because I haven't quit Cornerstone?"

His eyes flashed at her.

"Or maybe because my weekend clothing is unsuitable to you? If I allowed you to 'own' my weekends, like you asked, would the Snidgets have a fighting chance?" she screeched.

"Granger." He stepped into her, like she was a feral cat that he was cornering.

"Why am I even here Malfoy?!" She couldn't bring her volume down as much as she tried. She knew she looked crazed, and her hair was falling out of the beautiful twist Tracey had pulled it into. "At Malfoy Consulting?"

"I wanted the best –"

"You said everyone needed a second chance, but I guess you weren't talking about magical creatures. You were talking about the Malfoy family and their reputation." She shoved her finger into his chest in a move she found particularly childish, but she couldn't be bothered to care. He stood very still and did not even sway from the force of her push, which aggravated her further.

"Watch your tone, Granger," he grit out, nostrils flaring. He pulled his hands out of his pockets and clenched his fists at his sides.

She persisted. "I'm glad I could really 'round' out your senior staff, Malfoy. My god, without me you wouldn't have made your Mudblood quota." His head twitched to the side so slightly. "How would you have ever changed public opinion of the Malfoy family without one? Isn't that right?"

He narrowed his eyes at her and she knew she was in dangerous waters. She was overstepping the line but she couldn't stop. She started a small pace back and forth, for show.

"Or possibly I am here to be the *female* member of the Group. Couldn't truly operate without one of those, what with all the pesky equality laws the Ministry has been putting into place –"

"Stop," he cautioned. She saw the tension ripple through his forearms, up his shoulder blades. "Stop there, Granger."

"No, thanks," she quipped. "I'm not quite done." She stopped her pacing and planted herself not two steps from him. "I'm assuming that the most important quality that I bring to this team, seeing as it clearly has nothing to do with my relationship with the magical creature community, is that I am Hermione Granger, *Golden Girl*," she spat at him. "Were you hoping I'd spread a bit of that golden dust around, Malfoy? I admit, it makes for excellent photo shoots with your pal Skeeter!"

"Respectfully, I'd like to begin now. The species is almost extinct as it is."

"Do you have a client who will pay consulting fees or would this project need to be fundraised?" He looked up at her, and his eyes were unreadable.

"It would need to be fundraised. The Sanctuary did not indicate that they would be able to pay –"

"I want to make sure the Werewolf Policy is fully funded before you start other projects that also need fundraising."

She scowled at him. "I *can* multitask, Malfoy."

"But would it be beneficial to both projects to have your focus split?"

Her face was heating, and she felt all eyes in the room on her. She took a breath to bite back at him, and he cut her off.

"Like I said, an excellent project for April. We can send you and Walter out to Somerset in March to start collecting data." Draco stood, and buttoned his robes. "Thank you for your time. Dismissed."

She could feel her blood boiling. She turned and stomped her way out of the conference room, muttering, "Bloody idiot."

Hermione couldn't remember the trip back to her office, but it was clipped. She stormed through the half empty desks of her team, watching as people jumped out of her way, all the while ignoring the click of dragon leather about ten paces behind her.

She wandlessly shoved the door to her office open and once through, tried to slam it shut. She heard the door hit Draco on his way in and almost smiled.

"Granger-"

"Why am I even here, Malfoy?" She rounded on him. He closed the door to her office while keeping his eyes on her. His jaw tight. She continued, "You told me you wanted to 'make a difference' and 'change the world.' What utter hogwash."

She turned from him and stomped to her desk.

"Like I said, Granger, it isn't in the budget for this quarter, but starting in April –"

"What bullshit!" She turned from her path to her desk, retracing her steps back to him in the center of her office. She tried not to use such Muggle phrases around pure-bloods, as they usually did not pick up on the sentiment, but her mouth was moving faster than her brain as her blood pumped through her like a dam had been released. "By April the species could be extinct!"

"That's an exaggeration." He placed his hands in his trouser pockets and leaned back on his heels. He frowned at her, looking the picture of nonchalance, but his tense jaw gave him away. "You'll be able to accomplish just as much in two months with a much larger budget –"

I stare at her, throat trying to make words. I have no security. No walls. If the Dark Lord was alive and in front of me, he'd already know about her.

There's a jewelry box somewhere, but I can't even visualize it.

Her eyes drift over my face, reading me, and she says, "You're a pretty young thing. Is it really so bad to be in love with another pretty young thing?"

My mouth opens and I can't squeak out the words. But then she smiles and steps to the side, inviting me in. I thank her, removing my coat and hanging it on the coatrack before she can take it from me. She leads me through her brownstone, dropping me into the parlour and taking my tea order.

"Honey, if you have it, please."

She's already holding the honey, and I realize she probably doesn't need me to respond to any question she asks. She can see it in my mind before I speak it.

"Actually," she says, "I prefer to hear your words." I blush. "It's very lonely only hearing your own voice. I welcome the conversation."

I nod, spooning in the honey, and look around her sitting room. A fireplace with pictures of a younger Queenie Goldstein with a portly man in France. The two of them a bit older in front of the brand-new Empire State Building.

How long has she been alone?

"Twenty years."

I look to her, and she's mixing milk and sugar cubes into her tea. She's not even looking at me, but she can dive into my mind. Severus couldn't do that. Only the Dark Lord.

"The dark wizard Grindelwald too." She looks up at me and I glance away, embarrassed by my thoughts. "I'm sorry. I'm doing it again." She sets her spoon down and looks at me kindly. "Why are you here, Draco Malfoy?"

I hesitate, wondering if I should think things. What I should reveal.

"Just talk to me," she says. "Like we're old friends."

I swallow, and stall by sipping my tea. Merlin… American tea is just—

"Awful, I know," she hums.

I smile at her and begin.

"I trained to be an Occlumens when I was fifteen. Severus Snape tutored me in Compartmentalization and Separation, and then my Aunt Bellatrix Lestrange taught me the rudimentary methods without knowing I was already proficient." I look at her. She's watching me while trailing bony fingers on her saucer. "I'm losing control more often. And I need a Legilimens to push me, to strengthen my walls."

She nods, looking down to my fingers, and they twitch under her eyes.

"Why don't you go to your grandmother?"

My heart swells in my chest. "Do you know her?"

"No," she says, and I realize I've thought about her at some point. She's read her from me. She's right on the surface.

"I…" I don't really know how to explain to her. To tell her about the stroke when she'd read in the paper that her favorite daughter and grandson had been sent to Azkaban, only a month after reading about the death of one daughter and her only granddaughter.

Queenie Goldstein nods and tilts her head. "You keep that hidden."

I blink at her. "I suppose I do."

"I couldn't read that stroke from you until now. Did you pack that away?"

I peel back the wallpaper in a drawing room about this size, with tea and scones and inheritance. A woman with my mother's eyes and Bellatrix's nose sips at her tea and asks me how much I'll need.

I blink, taping the lilac wallpaper back up with scotch tape. The last time I saw her before the stroke. To ask for money for an Auction that never happened.

"Hm."

I look back to Queenie Kowalski née Goldstein. Thirty years older than my grandmother but just as youthful.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I didn't mean to pry." She sets her tea down. "You feel guilty asking for the money, but she probably loved to see you anyways."

I lean forward, elbows on my knees and hand my head in my hands. I press my temples, remembering my training. Trying to breathe and remember how to push something back into place.

"It's alright that you haven't visited her since the stroke. Some people can't handle—"

"Stop." My fingers dig into my skull, like trying to drag the memories from my temples. I stand, and pace over to her fireplace. There's a few Christmas decorations she hasn't put away yet. And I wonder if she has anyone to help her.

Thankfully, she doesn't answer me. I stare at the portly man. Her husband. "Kowalski?" I ask.

"Jacob."

I nod and stare at the two of them in France. He looks dazed.

"He was a Muggle," she says.

"Muggle-born?" I ask, fingers resting on the frame.

"No."

I frown. A Muggle and a witch in the twenties.

I hear the clinking of a teacup, and she asks, "Why do you still need Occlumency?"

I resist turning to her. I can pretend she can't hear me.

She waved him off and pushed past Blaise, ignoring the stares of the entire floor as she marched past them back into the office with Pansy and the girls.

"Alright," she said. "Tracey, continue."

Tracey raised her brows. Pansy turned away, smiling.

Hermione was exhausted by the end of the interview with *Witch Weekly*. She had worked so hard to keep the questions away from the vapid silliness of the magazine, but it was so difficult. She had managed to promote the work on the Werewolf Policy, and place a few suggestions on where she thought house-elf rights were headed, but primarily she had to discuss why her favorite color was blue, and what her favorite subject in school was.

The photographer got some lovely shots of her in her office, at her bookshelf and behind her desk. Pansy's clothes were a hit, and they fell head-over-heels for the periwinkle dress. Hermione found time to mention to the interviewer how much she appreciated the *Parkinson* line for its blend of the Muggle and the Magical, and Pansy smirked at her.

It was five past eleven when they finished with her. She ran to the board room, still in the periwinkle dress and heels, and apologized when she interrupted Draco in the middle of his opening. She then had to walk all the way around the table to Draco's left.

"You look lovely, young lady," Mockridge said as she passed. She blushed.

"Oh, thank you." She looked up at Draco. "Please, go on."

He was looking down at the table. He swallowed.

Draco continued, outlining that week's goals. There would be interviews that week for the Wizengamot Relations position, and Draco hoped to have it filled by the following week. Wentworth updated them with his success with the Diagon Alley businesses. He would be dealing with corporate restructuring for several of the chain locations, which made Hermione wonder if George would be interested in any assistance like that. She'd have to ask him.

When it came around the table to her, she updated them on the Werewolf Policy and then handed out a packet to everyone on the Golden Snidget project she was passionate about. It didn't bother her one bit that no one else prepared packets for this meeting.

"Essentially, the Snidget Sanctuary in Somerset is requesting our help. The breeding rates have dramatically decreased this season, and the Snidgets in the Sanctuary aren't living long. They want to be able to release Golden Snidgets into the wild, and to have the crime of poaching Snidgets or using them in unofficial Quidditch matches increased to a felony charge."

She looked around the table as they flipped through her paperwork. Draco's jaw clicked.

"This is an excellent project. I'd say you can start on this next quarter, once the Werewolf Policy is underway."

She blinked. He kept his eyes on her paperwork.

Hermione stood, tossing her notes across the room. "If you're too afraid to stand up to that entitled git, then allow me." She strode to the office door, threw it open and marched out in her bathrobe, barefoot, face half made.

She ignored the stares and open mouths as she made her way to the office at the opposite corner of the building. Draco's door was open, so she didn't even knock. She turned into the doorway and found him reading something intently behind his desk.

"This is the hairstyle for the photoshoot today." She gesticulated wildly to her head, and he looked up at her. He blinked and his eyes took her in from the top of her head to her bare feet. "Didn't know it needed to be *cleared* with you, but this is it. "

"Did you really just parade through the office in a bathrobe?" He lifted a brow at her.

"Yes. Yes, I did." She placed her hands on her hips. "And I'm thinking about doing it *more* often because it's damn comfortable. And the next time you have input on my hair or my clothing, keep it to yourself."

She turned to march out and he threw his reading onto his desk, standing.

"Granger, what is wrong with you?"

"Wrong with me?" she hissed. "Nothing is wrong with me. I'm trying to do *my* photoshoot this morning."

"In *my* office, so calm down!"

"Actually, the photoshoot is in *my* office –"

"That I paid for!" He yelled.

She stamped her foot and pressed her lips together, keeping any quippy remarks about how *she* actually was the one *paying* for this office by *securing* his inheritance!

"I don't understand why you are allowed to have any opinion on *my* hair for *my* photoshoot!"

"It was a suggestion –"

"Keep them to yourself!"

He walked around the desk. "What is going on with you?"

"Nothing is 'going on' with me—"

"You've been acting like a bitch for days!"

She gasped. "*Maybe* I've just realized that you've been a *dick* for *months!*"

He scowled at her and she could feel her breath coming in uneven gasps.

"Hi, hey," a tentative voice said, and Hermione turned to see Blaise leaning into the doorway with wide eyes. "I'm just gonna close this door…" He reached for the handle slowly. "And silence the room, okay?" He looked between them both. "Something one of you should have done already," he said, like addressing children.

"Don't bother," Hermione said. "I'm done here."

"Granger –"

"I'm losing control. Making choices that aren't me. Giving in to… more basic urges."

She chuckles. "You're twenty."

"I'm nineteen."

"Even more delicious."

I smirk at the mantle, and I know she hears it.

"Why do you need to be in control?" she asks.

My brows pull together. I think of M.C.G. and the role I play there. I think of the games I play with my father. I think of her lips.

"What else is there?"

She is silent. I let her drift through me.

"It's a shame you had to learn Occlumency at such a young age," she says, and I immediately think of Severus. Of a classroom and a bookbag on my shoulder and the dark twist of fear in my gut – *If the Dark Lord finds out—*

I blink and Queenie continues, "The years a teenage boy should be expressing their feelings. Giving in to those 'urges.' And you were left to fight it every step of the way. I've met some good Catholic boys less restrained than you, doll."

"I can't tell if that's a compliment."

She hums.

It feels better like this. Facing away from her. Keeping a separation.

"Voldemort is gone, sugar. So, who are you protecting her from?"

Me, I think for her. I swallow. I search for the reason, landing on a million small ones. Ones she can see.

"She doesn't want me. A relationship," I correct. "She told my mother that she will never be mine."

I hear the tap of manicured nails on an armrest. "Maybe because you weren't the one askin'."

I frown, shaking my head. "I won't recover. If she won't…" I pace. "I kissed her today with no provocation—"

"Oh, she was provoking you plenty—"

"And I'll do it again. It'll drag me under. I can't—"

I choke, and just open to her, letting her see things. See my desires. See her under me, surrounding me. See her thighs around me as my lips suck at her chest. See her in my bed, scratching at me. See her on her knees in my office, unbuckling me. On all fours with me behind her. In the bathtub with my fingers inside of her. Legs and arms clutching me as I push into her.

I slam the wall back up, heat flushing me. I turn to her guiltily, and Queenie conjures a fan, cooling herself off while smirking at me.

"You can come over *anytime*."

I smile weakly. "It's too much," I whisper.

She closes the fan. "Because you held yourself back for the last four years. The years you were supposed to be feeling this way. It's like you're going through puberty all over again."

I run a hand down my face. "I have my own business. I'm an adult now. I can't be acting this way. And my father…"

I feel her inside and I shut her out quickly. She lifts a brow.

She presses her lips together. "So, what do you want to do? Push her into a corner like your grandmother until she's not even a passing fancy? That won't last."

"It's lasted me this long."

She looks away. "I don't agree with your methods, sugar. It's a band aid. It'll come off. You're so wrapped up in her," she says. "You won't have much left after that."

I swallow. "That's fine."

She sighs, considering. I ask her in my mind. I let her see the meetings I've been distracted in, the incident with Noelle. I open up the scene with my father, when I begged him to let her work at Malfoy Consulting. Begged him to let me keep her.

She frowns, and gestures for me to sit. I take the chair, and let her stare at me.

The clock ticks on the wall.

And after a while, she's inside, whispering:

Envision the inside of the box. Blue velvet, isn't it, sugar?

~*~

Monday, December 22, 1997

It takes me far longer than I care to admit to figure out where our kitchen is. In the Manor, I speak aloud the name of an elf and they appear, I ask for what I want, and it is given to me.

But I don't want a trail.

I finally find the large room with small tables and stools, elf-height. I grab a few things from the fruit bowl and find a slice of bread. I look at the knife that rests on the counter, wondering if…

Maybe just before the mission on Christmas. That way if I don't come back…

I pad through the drawing room, past the grandfather clock. Three in the morning.

I cast a silencing charm on the heavy door, and tug it open, heading down the stone steps I used to tumble down as a child. Before we needed a "dungeon."

I light my wand, feeling a twitching in my blood. And there, on the stones, hair as light as my mother's, curly as my aunt's. She could pass as my sister.

She hasn't been given a bed or a blanket, lying on the ground, curled into herself. I'll have to bring that tomorrow.

She turns over, waking at the light. "Hello, Draco."

Hermione smiled. Blaise pursed his lips, holding back a smile, and was about to say something back when Tracey and Daphne pushed through the door. Tracey muttered an "excuse me" and continued in, but Daphne stood, waiting for Blaise to move for her.

Hermione watched as the smile dropped off his face. His jaw tightened as he moved out of her way, and continued on. Daphne frowned at his retreating back and then finally entered.

Before she had any time to think on that interaction, Pansy was unbuttoning her, and conjuring a bathrobe for her to sit in while they did her hair and makeup.

While Daphne layered on her face, and Tracey started twisting her hair into a complex style, Hermione asked if Walter could bring her work to do. She felt very foolish getting paid to sit and have her hair and makeup done.

People kept walking by the open door, and after seeing Draco across the way for the third time, she finally asked Pansy to shut the door.

Pansy was in and out for the hour. She was a restless person, Hermione realized, and she couldn't sit and just chat. She needed to be constantly in motion.

She'd been gone for ten minutes or so when she came back in, face set.

"Alright," Pansy said, rounding Hermione's chair and examining her. "We are doing Hermione's hair down today."

Tracey scoffed. "You're joking."

"Not at all." Pansy pursed her lips.

Tracey threw down the pin she was placing in Hermione's hair. She'd just spent thirty minutes on this lovely, complicated style and now she had to take it out because… because why?

"Is *Witch Weekly* here?"

"No, not yet."

"So who wants it down?"

Pansy batted her eyes at her. "Draco suggested –"

"Oh, no thanks." Hermione sneered. "Tracey, please keep going." She folded her arms and set her stare.

Pansy and Tracey looked back and forth between each other. Daphne smirked into her makeup palette.

"Er… I think what Draco means, is that you should look a bit more like the Hermione Granger we all know for this photoshoot. I agree with him a bit –"

"But this was Tracey's design for this shoot." Hermione raised a brow. "And it's lovely."

Tracey blinked. Pansy's lips pulled into a grin that she suppressed. "Well, how's about we compromise. Do half up, half down?"

When it came to her, she handed out two packets.

"Walter and I have been working on revising the Golden Snidget proposal, adjusting the budget, and laying down a more workable timeframe to hopefully move up the project into this quarter instead of next –"

"I thought I already shot this down."

Hermione looked at Draco. His eyes were still dead.

"You did. That's why we revised it. For your review."

He closed the packet, opened his mouth to speak, and she cut him off.

"Which means you take it, you read it fully, you think on it, and you come back to me with a decision," she said.

Her neck was warm. She thought she saw a flicker of life in his eyes, but it was gone before she could think on it. She took a breath.

"The next project I wanted to present is truly Walter's idea, and I think it's wonderful."

She went on to describe the Muggle-Born Integration Program, taking them through the packet. Once she was wrapping up, she turned to see Wentworth grinning, Mockridge glancing over the financial analysis, and Blaise doodling on the pages… as expected. Draco was frowning at the front cover. She finished, and he spoke up.

"So, this is the third project of your branch that will be fundraised, having no direct income from specific clients?"

She kept from rolling her eyes at him. "Some Muggle-born families may very well be able to afford the program's fees, but yes, I have projected needing a sort of 'scholarship fund' for the Muggle-Born Integration –"

"So, again, your department's spending will be putting us in the red, without a projected future income for any of your projects."

She met his cold eyes, trying to keep the heat out of her own.

"Isn't that the point of fundraising?"

"Three projects at the same time?"

"The Muggle-Born Integration Program won't even be needed until closer to July, when Hogwarts letters go out. That's definitely to begin next quarter."

"This is a business, Granger." He sat back in his chair, and his nonchalance irked her. "You are only trying to spend money instead of thinking of the profitability of your branch. While all of your causes would, of course, gather excellent publicity for M.C.G. –"

"Isn't that what I'm here for? Public opinion?" she shot at him.

Blaise lifted a brow, suddenly interested.

She definitely saw a fire in Draco's eyes that time. He clicked his jaw shut. And the fire died.

"Keep thinking of ideas that will increase profitability."

She took a deep breath. Draco dismissed the meeting. And she moved as calmly as she could back to her office.

Part of her knew he was absolutely correct. She knew better than anyone about this company's financial situation. But how much longer could she work only on the werewolf project. She was bored with the work she was doing, and her relationship with Draco had her on edge at all times.

This was becoming… impossible.

On Tuesday afternoon, she crossed the office floor, folded piece of paper in hand. She approached his secretary – whose name, she was embarrassed to admit, she still didn't know – and checked to see if he was in a meeting.

The girl told her no, eyes shifting to the side, but he'd asked not to be disturbed unless it was of huge importance.

Hermione nodded, and knocked on his door.

A moment's pause.

"Come in."

Hermione took a deep breath and opened the door. He sat behind his desk reading through Wentworth's proposal from yesterday's meeting. He leaned back in his chair, comfortable. His eyes flipped up to her, then back down to the paperwork.

"Yes?"

She shut the door behind her. He looked up at her again, eyes flickering between her and the closed door. She swallowed.

She walked toward his desk, fingers playing with the one-page letter she'd written up. She had chosen the outfit Pansy had penned in for Friday, but it was her favorite of the week. Flowy, knee-length navy skirt with a grey button-up. She wanted to get a chance to wear it. She had her hair pulled into a sleek ponytail, controlling the curls like Pansy taught her.

She placed the letter on his desk. "I wanted to…I need to give you my notice."

He stared at the letter and clenched his jaw.

"I've started to feel uncomfortable here and I don't think my comfort will improve over time. My work is starting to be affected. I had unreal expectations coming into this company, and I don't think it's going to work out. So I am giving you my two weeks' notice."

She clasped her hands in front of her, and bit the inside of her cheek as she watched him remain still.

"No."

She blinked at him. "No?"

"I do not accept." He returned to the paperwork in front of him, not sparing her a glance.

Hermione felt heat flushing her neck and she pursed her lips, biting back a few choice words.

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that. I will gladly train my replacement. But my last day will be February 25th. I'll work until the end of that week, and leave that Friday."

He cracked his neck, tossed Wentworth's proposal across his desk, and stood from his chair. Her heart pounded. He looked up at her and his face was bored but his eyes were on fire.

He walked around his desk, grabbed up the folded paper she'd placed at the edge and opened it. He stood three paces from her, leaning on the edge of the desk. His eyes flew across the words.

"It doesn't say anything in here about your boss sexually harassing you." He looked up at her, scowling.

She swallowed. Oh, so they were going to talk about it now? "No. That is not my intention –"

"And what *is* your intention, Granger?" He crumpled the letter and tossed it to the side. He gripped the edge of the desk behind him, lifting his chin proudly. His cheeks were pink. "What is it you want?"

"I… I want to resign. Clearly." She shook her head at him, not understanding.

"You'll resign if I don't… what?" He tilted his head at her.

"If nothing," she laughed. She studied him. Jaw tight and knuckles turning white. "This isn't blackmail, Draco –"

"*Draco,* again." He stood tall, stepping off the desk. Now only two paces from her. "It's been *months* since I've heard that." She heard one of his knuckles pop and her breath left her. "I think the last time was in an alley, whispered into my ear as your fingers gripped my hair—"

She gasped and stepped backward.

"—or maybe it was on my balcony, you in a white dress, smiling at me like you knew what you were doing –"

"What are you talking about, Malfoy—"

"Nah-ah! Can't take it back now. It's *Draco,* again." He stepped toward her, eyes flashing, breathing uneven. She stepped back, cursing the heels. Her chest was heavy and she felt like he'd let all the air out of the room. His eyes were dead seconds ago, and now they were burning.

"Do you *want* me to make a sexual harassment claim?" She laughed, shaky.

"I *want* you to be honest about why you're leaving, Granger." He stepped forward again and she wished she could stop herself from retreating. "Brave little Gryffindor Golden Girl, let me kiss her, and doesn't know how to take it back."

She laughed even as she stepped backward again. "*I'm* the one who wants to take it back??" His grey eyes danced over her face, spots of pink high on his cheeks as her back landed against the wall. He had her pinned, again. Always pinning her. She snarled at him, "*Draco Malfoy,* calm

She had his secretary check his schedule for Friday and find her an opening. While she would truly love to discuss the manipulative use of her name, the current atmosphere was a bit too… volatile for that discussion.

She wanted to give Walter an opportunity to pitch the Golden Snidget idea again. He also had two other portfolios he'd been working on, and one of them was quite interesting. He had drafted a proposal for Hermione and her branch to start a consulting service for Muggle-born families entering Hogwarts, giving counsel to the parents and starting a bit of a "catch-up" program for the students.

Hermione loved it. It was exactly the kind of work she would be interested in. She thought on Arthur Weasley showing her parents around Diagon Alley, watching her father become overwhelmed and watching her mother's awe. She would love to assist Muggle-born families with the transition process.

About thirty minutes before the impromptu meeting, Walter came into her office.

"Just got this," he said, waving a piece of paper. "We'll have to reschedule next week."

She frowned as she took the page from him. It was a memo from Draco's secretary, apologizing that Draco was actually unavailable for their 3PM.

She had just watched the girl check his schedule a few hours ago, finding that time slot open.

"Oh, well." Walter shrugged. "I'll keep polishing it and we'll try again next week." He left.

Hermione wandered over to her doorway, and leaned against the frame. Draco's door was closed, and there was a light on.

Did he really have a conflict? Or did he just cancel their one-on-one?

The weekend was slow. Nothing terribly exciting happened at Cornerstone, and she found herself wondering if she should think about giving it up. And then she found herself wondering if she should keep working there just to spite Draco.

On Monday the *Witch Weekly* issue came out. They had chosen the periwinkle dress for the cover, and several other poses and outfits filled the center pages. Hermione was quite pleased, and she got a lovely note from Pansy, letting her know how excited she was.

She stepped out of the lifts on Monday and almost stumbled to see Draco at the front desk, reading through something while Melody opened mail. He turned to head back to his office, and his eyes landed on her.

She nodded at him and continued to her office, trying to shake off the dead stare he had given her.

At the Monday Senior Consultant meeting, she brought in Walter's proposals. It seemed that Wentworth had followed her lead from the week before and had drafted his own packet to pass out to everyone, proposing his next steps for acquiring more businesses in Diagon Alley.

Mr. Townsend and Draco argued over the bill, which she thought was adorable. When she stood from the table to use the restroom, both men stood for her. How precious.

When they left, shaking Mr. Townsend's hand and scheduling a follow up meeting at the office next week, Draco gestured for her to exit before him.

She didn't realize how accustomed she was to the feeling of his hand on her lower back, guiding her, until it was gone.

Draco, Blaise and she sat down on Thursday morning to discuss the interviews from earlier that week.

She triplicated her notes from Tuesday and handed a set to each of them. The woman who Hermione felt the most strongly about was Blaise's least favorite, of course.

"But I do want to share with you one of her answers. It was quite impressive really," Hermione said, flipping through the notes. "Ah, here. We asked 'name a time you had differences or a misunderstanding with a co-worker and how the two of you resolved the issue.' And she said that she likes to come at problems from multiple viewpoints. She'll take a moment to try to figure out where the person is coming from, put herself in their shoes, and accept the fact that she may be wrong."

Hermione looked up from her notes to find Draco looking directly at her. She blinked. She hadn't see his eyes since Monday, since right before he kissed her. They were hot then, and filled with promises.

His eyes were neutral and even now. She watched for any of his facial ticks. None.

"Er," she started, "She also said she treats every situation in the office as 'business, not personal' and knows that office friendships must be sacrificed at times for the good of the client."

She looked up again and Draco's eyes were still on her. The same.

"She was dreadfully boring," Blaise whined. "And I felt personally attacked in the whole 'not everyone is going to be friends' part of it."

"Alright," Draco said. "I'll keep her in mind. Blaise and I will do the interviews today, so that he can properly compare and contrast all the candidates I didn't get to see." He stood from the table, picking up her notes.

Blaise would do the interviews today? She frowned. Blaise who didn't take a single note and judged people on their appearance? She opened her mouth to argue and Draco left the room.

She huffed.

and collected, never mixing business and personal, kissed an employee and now wants to be *punished* for it."

His arms came up to the wall on either side of her. He stepped impossibly closer, and she could feel his chest against hers.

"Are you gonna punish me, Granger?" He pulled his bottom lip between his teeth, and she could make out a smirk begging at the corner of his mouth.

She shivered. This was… not what she had intended. She could feel his breath in her mouth. She waited, feeling him sway into her and ebb away with every breath. She tilted her head back, waiting. His breath was heaving.

She found his eyes, dark and flashing, and waiting. Waiting for *her* to kiss *him*.

Goddamn him. She stood on her tiptoes, in her heels, and caught his lips with hers. He chased her mouth and murmured a "fuck" as he connected their hips. She gasped and he pushed into her mouth.

She heard herself moan, and one of his hands grabbed her waist, as he ground his hips against hers. The other moved to her neck. He grunted, and reached up, grabbing her ponytail, ripping the band from her hair.

"Never do this..." His voice was hoarse against her neck as her hair fell around them. He sucked on her neck and she shivered.

She felt him running his teeth along her skin, and she let her eyes drift close. His hand at her neck threaded through the hair behind her ear, curling his fingers against her scalp. She pressed her lips together, but the groan still poured out of her.

He gently pushed her knees apart with his right thigh. He was moving slowly on her lower half but ravishing her on her top half. She was gripping his arms, not sure what to do. She was panting. His knee came between hers, softly. Opening her. She could feel the hand on her hip starting to gather the material of her skirt, pulling it up.

She bit her lip. This was heaven. It was everything it was supposed to be. She felt his thigh rising higher, connecting with her center and she moaned, realizing that this was what she'd seen him do to Pansy in the Hogwarts corridors. This was what she'd dreamed about as a sixteen-year-old, what she'd wondered about.

She moved her hips against him, and electricity ran through her body as she came in contact with his thigh. She did it again. And again.

"Oh, god," she moaned and her hands slid up his shoulders and grabbed his hair. Perfect. She felt a tremor go through him and she pulled at his head, pulling him back from where he was attacking her neck. His lips were swollen and his breath caught when he saw her face. She reached up with her mouth again and he kissed her, running his hand down from her neck, down her chest, barely grazing her breast and she groaned against his mouth.

She felt the top buttons of her shirt opening, and the fabric of her skirt scraping against her thigh as his fingertips finally found skin.

He was going to have her naked in minutes and she wouldn't stop him. He wanted her, and she wouldn't stop him.

"You're driving me insane." He wheezed against her lips, eyes closed, pressing his forehead to hers. His right hand was rubbing circles on her upper thigh where the skirt had been pulled, his left was dipping into her shirt, reaching for her breast.

"Sorry..."

He chuckled, squeezing his eyes closed, biting his lip. He brushed against her breast, the fabric of her bra pushing against her. She gasped and he grabbed her thigh, pulling it up to his hip. She teetered on one heel, barely able to stay upright when she was on two.

His fingers roamed across her outer thigh, rounding down toward her backside, finding the fabric of her knickers. He kissed her. His fingers dipped under, and she snapped her eyes open.

He'd know. Soon he'd… be able to feel it, right? She panicked. As if he couldn't already tell by the way she could barely touch him even as he undressed her.

This was something you warn a person about, right? Even if he already had guessed…

"I'm… I…"

He kissed her mouth again, sighing into her as he pulled her bra cup down.

"Wait, wait." She gasped. "I'm … you were right...to assume, before. About the five additional."

"What?" he whispered, his fingers growing closer to her core.

"It would have been 35," she said, blushing.

"35?"

"35,000." She gasped. His fingers stilled on her skin. His eyes snapped open to hers. "I'm…I haven't…"

His mouth was open and panting. He squeezed his eyes shut, dropping his head on her shoulder.

"How?" It left his body like a laugh.

She didn't know if she was to respond.

"I wanted you to know, before…"

Then she felt him remove his hand from her knickers. And it was like ice water.

He left his head on her shoulder, breathing mist on her neck, and placed his hand against the wall by her neck. He pulled his other hand out of her shirt.

He dropped his knee from where it had been pushing against her, rubbing her perfectly, and she almost whimpered.

Hermione pressed her lips together. She felt a bit nauseous.

"He was an excellent apprentice. Mighty fine potioneer."

And it clicked. Marcus Flint had brewed that potion himself. He'd been an apprentice to Mr. Townsend, who had dedicated his life to helping people by making potions. How terribly sad. She sucked in a breath and tried to breathe the tension out.

"That was so kind of him to recommend the Policy to you," she said. She smiled and heard Draco's knuckle pop on her right.

She took the opportunity to steer the conversation back, and away from Marcus Flint. The waiter came and took their order. From her cursory glance as the menu's prices, she was quite glad Draco was here to cover the bill.

Once the waiter disappeared, Mr. Townsend took his napkin off his lap.

"Excuse me, I'm going to find the restroom."

She felt cold dread twist in her chest. Oh, Mr. Townsend, please don't do this…

Every step he took away from the table tightened her stomach more and more. Hermione didn't dare look at Draco. She reached for her wine glass and almost knocked it over. She righted it and brought it to her lips.

She placed it down on the table. She waited three seconds and brought it back to her lips.

She could hear him breathing next to her.

"How was New York?"

She looked over at him. He was staring at the salt and pepper shaker. She saw his jaw tighten. Then release.

"Excellent."

He didn't look at her. And she was almost grateful, not sure what she would do if he turned his eyes on her.

"A potential client?" She ran her eyes along his jawline, resting her gaze on those lips.

"No," he said. He cleared his throat. "Personal appointment."

"Oh," she said. "Sorry, I didn't meant to pry—"

He shook his head at the salt shaker, implying that she wasn't prying.

"Blaise and I handled the interviews." She wished they could just sit in silence but apparently she wasn't going to let them. "Some excellent candidates."

He nodded.

"Will you be in the office tomorrow?"

"Yes."

Mr. Townsend returned. And she could breathe again.

They had a lovely rest of the evening. Her dinner was delicious, Mr. Townsend kept the mood light, and he even pledged half of their fundraising goal. She was shocked.

have an account with this restaurant that she could charge this to? She looked around. This *was* a wizarding restaurant, right? She didn't have her Muggle credit card on her.

She tucked her worries away, resolving to excuse herself to go speak with the maître d' later on. She turned her focus on Mr. Townsend, who was a very pleasant man.

They chatted about Hogwarts and books, slowly working their way towards werewolves.

It was ten minutes past seven when she decided it was time to start the conversation without Draco. She had just begun to discuss their current progress with Mr. Townsend when a familiar voice froze her own.

"So sorry to be this late."

She looked up to find Draco Malfoy, smiling lightly at Mr. Townsend. She watched as Draco apologized, and Mr. Townsend stood to shake his hand. She was stuck, deciding if she should stand as well. Was that necessary? Damn you, Madame Michele. Why did she never learn anything useful?

He looked excellent. Beyond excellent. He looked delicious.

Hermione blinked and grabbed her water glass as Draco took the seat next to her, across from Mr. Townsend.

She watched him make small talk, trying to neutralize her expression. He smiled, and worked with his hands, and ordered Firewhisky – wizarding restaurant after all – and played the gracious, but late, host. Hermione watched him. And she tried not to watch him.

Once the conversation swayed back to werewolves, Draco gestured for her to take lead. She realized he had not looked at her once.

She blinked at him and turned to Mr. Townsend, starting up where they left off. She worked through the timeline of events, and their current struggles. Draco would chime in every so often and she managed to only shiver once at his voice.

Draco ordered a few appetizers for the table, and Hermione took the time to look over her menu. They strayed away from the Policy for a bit as Mr. Townsend chatted with Draco about mutual acquaintances, and Hermione read the menu.

"And Marcus Flint! You were close with him at Hogwarts, yes?"

Hermione flinched. She took a breath and looked up at Mr. Townsend. He was smiling, as if the memory of Marcus Flint was bright and happy.

She looked over at Draco just in time to see him smile and say, "Yes, he was my Quidditch captain for several years." She had to look closely to see the strain around his eyes.

She picked up her wine glass.

"Marcus was actually the one to tell me about the Policy." Mr. Townsend smiled, and Hermione drank deeply. "He said 'Geoffrey, have you heard what Draco Malfoy and Hermione Granger are up to?'" Mr. Townsend – Geoffrey – chuckled.

He wasn't going to continue. Because she was a virgin. He didn't want her because she was a virgin?

She opened her mouth and no sound came out.

"I'm sorry," he whispered into her shoulder. "Things went too far."

She swallowed, tears pricked her eyes. This wasn't fair. She'd waited. She'd only dreamed of him. She hadn't bothered with anyone else, and now he didn't want her for it?

He lifted his head and placed his hand on her cheeks, lightly.

"Don't leave." His grey eyes moved back and forth between hers. "Don't resign." He swallowed. "I'll be better. We'll go back to how it was… before. I won't ignore you or treat you any differently because of this."

Back to before. Back to co-workers after this. After tasting it.

"Don't leave." His thumb brushed across her lip.

She could have nothing or she could have something. But he wouldn't give her everything.

"Okay."

The girl looked at his schedule. "No," she said. "It's still on there." She looked up at her. "I think the portkey is scheduled for this evening, just before."

Hermione blinked at her. "Portkey? Oh, is he… out of town?"

"Yes, he's in New York City. He scheduled a meeting out there." The girl smiled up at her, twirling her hair.

Hermione couldn't find words for a moment. A rare problem. "Would you be able to gather any notes he has on the Townsend meeting? I'm afraid I'm underprepared and I was hoping to meet with Malfoy today to catch up."

"Absolutely," the girl said. She pulled a sticky note and started writing. "I'll send over the file."

"Thank you," she said, turning and wandering back to her office.

New York City. The only American she could think of was Noelle, and she really didn't think he'd have a meeting with her after his insistence that she not contact her. Besides, she was pretty sure Noelle's university was in California.

Who was in New York City?

She arrived fifteen minutes early for the dinner meeting with Mr. Townsend. She had fully prepared for Draco to not show up, just in case.

The hostess showed her to the table, and she was relieved to be the first one there.

She had read all about Mr. Townsend that afternoon. He was a half-blood widower in his late sixties who had gathered a small fortune from a potion-making business. He was quite outspoken about the Wolfsbane Potion being made available to those who could not pay for it.

At five minutes to seven, one of the hostesses showed a grey-haired man to her table. Hermione stood, smiling.

"Mr. Townsend?" She reached out her hand, confident that Madame Michele would approve of this.

"Yes. Hello, Miss Granger." He shook her hand and gave her a warm smile. "I'm quite pleased to meet you."

"Likewise, Mr. Townsend." She took her seat again. "I'm so honored that you wanted to meet with us regarding the Werewolf Policy. Mr. Malfoy should be here, but I know he's been away on a business trip." She gestured to his empty chair.

The waiter took their drink order. Mr. Townsend ordered a scotch and Hermione took a cue to order a glass of wine.

And it was at that moment that she wondered if this dinner was to be on Malfoy Consulting's dime. She blinked at the white tablecloth. She wondered if she had enough gold with her to cover this, and then later get reimbursed. Is that how business dinners worked? Or did Draco

He grinned at her. “Because it’s ‘the right thing to do,’” he said, and popped another piece of bread into his mouth.

She nodded and he smirked. She could feel her face heat, so she watched him pull his sandwich apart. Such an interesting way to eat…

“What’s the deal with you and Daphne?”

His fingers paused, and she looked up to see the grin disappear from his face. She felt like she was asking too much, suddenly.

“We… used to date.” He looked down at his sandwich, placing his pulled piece back down.

“Oh,” she said. “Difficult breakup, I presume?”

“Aren’t they all?” He gave a small smile, before it disappeared.

She thought she could read guilt on his features, and she imagined what it would be like to be in a relationship with Blaise Zabini, the most incorrigible flirt she’d ever known. She took a stab in the dark.

“You cheated on her?” She kept her face nonjudgmental.

He snapped his eyes to her, and she was wrong. He pressed his lips together.

“The opposite, actually.” Blaise swallowed, folded and scrunched his wrapper, stood, and excused himself.

She closed her eyes, tossing down her fork, remembering that she should never presume anything about Slytherins. They were far more complicated than she’d ever imagined.

She and Blaise finished the interviews, and she drafted up her notes for Draco. There were more interviews scheduled for Thursday, which she assumed Draco would be present for.

Madame Michele was a terror that night. Nothing Hermione did was correct, and the list of notes for her to work on was outrageous. It was her fifth lesson. She was now halfway done and she didn’t feel like she was learning anything, or growing.

If Lucius Malfoy *really* wanted to torture her, he would have scheduled a test at the end of all of this.

On Wednesday, she repeated the steps from the day before. She layered on her clothing, her makeup, and her thick skin, and prepared to face Draco that day.

But he was still out of the office.

She approached his secretary around ten.

“Will Mr. Malfoy be in today?”

“I don’t believe so.” The girl looked up at her from her magazine, trying to slip it under some paperwork.

“Alright,” Hermione said. “Er… Has he cancelled the meeting with Mr. Townsend tonight?”

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Thirty

He had bruised her. Marked her.

Hermione stared at the love bite on her neck, her hand pulling her hair back.

Claimed her.

She let her hair fall. She considered not covering it, remembering that he hadn’t covered the marks she had left on him, but it still didn’t make sense to her why he’d left them.

Then she thought of what people in the office might think if they saw. What Blaise might say…

She covered the love bite with a charm, and then even further with makeup.

She stood in the elevator up to M.C.G. on Wednesday morning, running through her head all the reasons she had tried to quit yesterday.

Her projects were getting shot down.

She wasn’t getting the support she needed to pursue her ideas.

She was bored with the current project she was working on, and it was the *only* project she was allowed to work on.

Her boss was ignoring her and treating her like a nuisance.

Her boss was using her as a means for publicity.

She had a volatile relationship with her boss that had an unpredictability that had started to give her stomachaches.

She decided to leave out any sexual harassment claims from this list, due in part to the fact that she would hate to sound like a hypocrite. He kissed her first. Then she kissed him second.

She shook these thoughts from her mind before it could ask *Who would kiss third?*

The lift doors opened. She raised her eyes from the floor, steeling her expression, and her gaze landed on Draco, standing at the reception desk.

Her stomach twisted.

She watched his eyes lift to hers from the paperwork he was reading. He nodded in greeting and took a deep breath, calming. She wouldn't have noticed it a week ago, but she felt like she'd been synchronized with his breathing now, the way his exhale pushed into her mouth on her inhale –

She stepped out of the lift, not knowing what her face was doing, and turned right to walk to her office. He fell into step with her.

"Morning," he said.

She looked up at him and found a hand extending a coffee cup to her. She blinked at it. It was a to-go cup, with the name of a coffee shop around the corner.

"Mr. Townsend wants to come in to go over paperwork tomorrow. Finalize things."

She took the coffee cup from him, forgetting manners entirely and saying nothing in thanks. "Okay."

"Is just before lunch alright?"

"Yes." She stared at the cup in her hands. He could have checked her schedule with Walter.

They reached her door.

"I have some ideas for the remainder of the fundraising that we can go over when convenient for you."

She looked up at him. His face was still, eyes grey and neutral, but he wasn't cold like before.

"Excellent," she said.

They stood there for a moment, in front of her office door, staring at each other, before he nodded and turned to walk back to his office. She might have been mistaken, but she could almost see his eyes slide over her neck before he turned away. She brought her free hand to her bruise, and her coffee to her lips as she watched him walk away. Perfect ratio of sweetener to cream.

Which "before" did he mean, when he said they'd go back to before?

Not an hour later, once Hermione was settled and finally invested in her work, did he come again.

"Granger."

She jumped at his voice and double-jumped when she looked up to see him in her doorway.

"Yes?"

"Are you free?"

She blinked at him. "Yes?"

He entered her office and her heart stopped when he started closing the door… but then he left it cracked, a sliver of the rest of the office visible.

"Mm-hm." Blaise played with the sleeve of his robes.

She gazed over his shoulder, mind working. Why was he out? Was he sick? Was he avoiding her? This was a business for Merlin's sake, he needed to be here!

"The first one is at eleven. Will you please do them with me? If you don't, then I'm likely to hire the first good-looking woman who walks through those doors."

She scowled at him, knowing he was telling the truth. "Fine.

Hermione spent the next thirty minutes reviewing the duty statement and the submitted applications.

She and Blaise set up in the conference room, deciding on a list of questions that they would take turns asking. Blaise didn't seem like he was going to be taking notes at all, so Hermione resigned herself to be the note-taker.

After the first two interviews, Blaise had one of the interns bring them lunch in the conference room. Hermione wasn't really a big fan of using interns like that, or using company funds like that, but Blaise rolled his eyes and said he would pay out of pocket.

She was poking at her salad, moving the croutons around when Blaise spoke up.

"Why did you speak at Draco's trial?"

She turned to him. He was watching her, picking at the bread on his sandwich.

"It was the right thing to do." She was getting tired of those words….

He narrowed his eyes at her. "And what does that mean?" He pushed a piece of sourdough between his lips.

"I… didn't think it was fair, what the Wizengamot was charging him with. He was the only student going through trial and –"

"He was the only student to try to kill Albus Dumbledore."

She looked up at him. He chewed, watching her.

"And he failed. He lowered his wand. Harry saw it."

Blaise lifted a brow at her. "So that explains why Harry Potter testified," he said, and she waited for the "but…"

"When we were captured by Snatchers – Ron, Harry and me – we were taken to Malfoy Manor," she said, looking down at her salad. "And he refused to identify us." She stabbed at a tomato. "I don't think that type of person should be locked in Azkaban."

The image of Draco turning from her tortured body, the sound of his gasp –

"And if it was someone else?" he said, and she looked to him. "Say if it had been Gregory Goyle who had been asked to identify you. And he said he wasn't sure."

Blaise's eyes were sparkling, and in that moment, she knew. She wasn't fooling him one bit.

She swallowed. "I would have testified for Goyle then, had the Wizengamot chosen to try him."

asked what it felt like, and where his hands were, and what do you mean "noises," and would you have let him?

Ginny had to be up at 5AM for practice, so Hermione finally let her drift off, apologizing to her. Hermione got about an hour of sleep.

She dreamt of the balcony overlooking the Malfoy Gardens. She stood at the railing, looking over the pond. Draco approached her from behind and she turned to see him in his black robes with silver accents, and she looked down at herself to find her white gown from New Year's.

He smiled at her and took her hand, and when she looked up, they were standing in the gazebo. She had a bouquet of silver flowers in her hand. She turned to see Ginny in a blue dress, reaching to take her flowers for her.

She woke up smiling at Ginny's ceiling, bed empty, the sound of the shower running. Then she cried.

She got it out of her system.

No, she didn't have all the answers. No, she didn't know what challenges she would face today with Draco. But she put on her purple dress, her matching heels, hid her dark circles and marched into the office.

She could feel her heartbeat in her ears as the elevator doors opened. But then Melody smiled at her, bid her good morning, and she gained her focus back.

She got to her office, and almost shut the door behind her, but realized she had no reason to. She left it open, feeling vulnerable, but at least she would be able to see or hear him coming.

The first hour of her day was quiet. Walter brought in her mail and Hermione responded to several letters. She tried her best not to jump when she heard footsteps, or the rumble of a male voice.

Blaise entered her office, pouting. She looked up at him and watched him throw himself in her guest chair like a child.

"I don't want to do the interviews. Please do them for me?" He frowned and rubbed his hand over his face.

"The interviews for the Wizengamot Relations position?" He nodded. "Why are you conducting them?"

"Because Draco didn't want to reschedule them – sorry, *Mr. Malfoy.*" Blaise rolled his eyes. "Will you do them with me?"

She frowned at him. "Why are you in charge?"

"Beats me!" Blaise slouched down in the chair. "He told me to do the interviews while he was out."

Hermione stared at him. "Dra—Malfoy's out of the office today?"

Oh, thank god.

"Alright," he said, walking to her desk, pushing his hair back. He tossed something – some paperwork – on her desk and took one of her guest chairs. "Let's go over this."

Hermione had the horrifying thought that the portfolio he'd just tossed on her desk contained the Love Contract or the Conflict of Interest or any number of unpleasant things.

He scooted his chair forward, and opened the portfolio.

"The Snidget Sanctuary," he said, running his eyes over the paper. "Have they provided actual numbers of decline, or just estimations?"

He looked up at her, and blinked quickly, like he was clearing his vision.

She took a moment to figure out what exactly was happening before she cleared her throat and responded, "Those are estimations based on last year's decline."

"So, the first thing would be to send our people out to get actual numbers, based on this year, and also, projected decline for the next year." He looked down at the paperwork, and Hermione finally put two-and-two together. It was her Snidget proposal, with notes scratched all over it.

He'd reviewed it.

"Your revised timeline and projected budget is much more workable than your first, but to cut costs dramatically, I'd like to send only Walter out to Somerset." He looked up at her to gauge her reaction.

She could feel herself about to pout –

"He could go out as early as next week," Draco said. "But if you go with him, you'll start to miss several important dates and deadlines for the Werewolf Policy."

Hermione clicked her jaw shut. *This is what compromise was, Hermione…*

She didn't like it one bit.

"Yes," she said. "If we can start as early as next week, then that would be wonderful."

He nodded at her. "I still think setting the court date in March is too ambitious." She pursed her lips. "I anticipate that the Wizengamot will be quite fed up with us by the end of the Werewolf Policy proceedings, and to jump on them with another project not weeks after our first might cause some backlash."

"But they should be impartial," Hermione said, frowning. "They should look at each case as separate entities."

Draco raised a brow at her. "They should…" His *but they don't* didn't need to be said.

He shifted in his seat, trying to cross his legs unsuccessfully. He looked down at the chair.

"I'll need to get you better chairs. These are awful." She watched him move to a different position.

"I like these chairs."

"You must hate your guests, then."

"I don't have guests, really," she said. "The only person who sits there is Blaise."

"Oh, then we'll leave them." He grinned up at her.

She met his eyes, warmer than usual. She was unsure what it was they were doing. Her lips twitched at his joke, but she didn't understand where this part of him was coming from.

She decided to move the conversation back to the Snidgets. "So, we'll plan on April for a court date?"

Draco nodded. They moved on to discuss her fundraising goals.

"I think it would help to get the Golden Snidgets case into the public view," Draco said. "Not a lot of people know their history, or their relation to Quidditch. We could get more eyes on their case with some assistance from the handful of Quidditch players we know." He looked at her carefully.

She raised her brow, pondering the idea, and suddenly said, "Oh! I wonder if I could get in contact with Viktor!"

Her brain started forming around this plan, thinking of how interesting it could be to have a Quidditch spokesperson, someone to interview. She looked up to Draco and found his lips tight.

"I was referring to the Weasleys, but, yes," Draco said, rubbing his jaw, "Krum could be useful, too."

Oh, of course, Ron and Ginny. She hadn't really spoken to Ron since he wrote her that nasty note a few weeks back.

"What is it you're thinking?" she asked.

"I think going public with the project might help," Draco said. "Get Skeeter to do a write-up. Even see if Lovegood's paper would be interested."

Hermione nodded. This was wonderful. "You know who else was really quite interested in the Snidgets? Rolf Scamander," she said. "He would probably love to bring attention to this as well."

She looked up at him with wide, excited eyes, and saw him still, clench his jaw, then release it.

"Wonderful." He stood. "Go ahead and make some initial contact, and make arrangements for Walter to head out next week." He grabbed up his notes and headed to her door.

"Thank you, Draco." She bit her lip as soon as it left her mouth.

He turned to her, nodded, and left.

Later in the day, Walter brought in her mail. He continued to separate the personal letters from the business ones, trying not to read through the personal ones once he was able to distinguish between the two. He gave her an interoffice memo that let everyone know that the Governors of Hogwarts were hosting a Valentine's Day Ball that Saturday night, and all of

Hermione opened a packet of soy sauce.

"Was it sweet? Or... slow?"

"No. I'd use the word aggressive."

Ginny nodded and bit down on her egg roll.

"Did he tell you how he felt, or were you able to connect—?"

"We were arguing."

"Hm." Ginny turned on the TV.

"Groping?"

"Not really, no."

Ginny snapped the fortune cookie in half.

Ginny left her alone after dinner. She lay in bed that night, twisting and punching her pillow until finally she gave into her restless mind and just let it run.

What would she say to him tomorrow? Did she *have* to say anything?

Perhaps this co-worker thing was a bad idea. Maybe she'd write to Mathilda and see if her position had been filled yet.

She still needed to chastise him about using her name to start up the company.

Why did she have to touch him after he asked her not to? Why did she do that?

What was her outfit tomorrow? Was it too revealing? She'd need to check.

She'd touched his cheek, and he'd grabbed her hip. He'd started to push her back, down onto her desk… then what?

What did Harry really think?

What were the actual legal ramifications of that Love Contract. She'd need to check.

Would it happen again? Or would it never happen again? Which was worse?

How would she sit in a board room with him, talking about werewolves and Wizengamot trials.

She wondered if she kissed like she was a virgin…

She climbed into Ginny's bed at 3AM. She started from the beginning.

She told her about her discovery that he'd used her name to garner respect and business deals. She told her about the dress, and the hair, and the Golden Snidgets, and finally the kiss.

Ginny gasped in all the right places, and groaned at Draco's stupidity, and giggled at Hermione's insolence. She pried the details from her, making Hermione blush and stumble. She

to hear that the project was delayed, but Hermione told him they should continue to move forward with it as much as possible.

She stayed thirty minutes later than normal, just to avoid seeing anyone as she left. There was a light on in Draco's office. She could see it flooding under the door as she pressed the button for the lift. The lift took forever to arrive and Hermione felt very vulnerable, out in the open. She counted the seconds, eyes flickering to Draco's door, praying it wouldn't open while she was standing here.

The lift arrived with a loud *ding* and she winced, jumping in, and punching the "door close" button twenty or so times.

She Apparated home, and walked the few blocks to her building. She turned the lock on the building's exterior door, and looked up to see Ginny sitting on the stairs to their floor.

Ginny jumped up, eyes wide, one hand on the railing and one hand at her neck.

Hermione stopped. She blinked up at her. The door closed behind her.

Ginny blinked back.

Hermione opened her mouth and no sound came out.

Ginny twitched her head, trying to hear her.

Hermione looked over Ginny's shoulder, her eyes distant. She closed her mouth. And looked at the stairs.

Ginny took a breath. And stopped. And looked at the wall. Another breath—and stopped.

Hermione pressed her lips together.

"Who kissed who?"

"Him. He kissed me."

Ginny nodded, trying to read her.

"How was it?"

"It was —it was... Yes. Good. It was... Yes."

Ginny crossed her arms. Then dropped them. "Shall we get Chinese tonight?"

"Yes. Excellent."

Ginny hung up the phone with the Chinese place. She turned to Hermione.

"So he... I mean..." She frowned. "Harry said there was a desk involved?"

"Yes. Desk. Yes."

Ginny nodded. She bit the inside of her cheek.

"Was there tongue?"

"Yes."

Ginny nodded and Hermione started washing dishes.

M.C.G. had been invited. She rolled her eyes at it, despising the celebration of Valentine's Day just as much as the actual day. Harry would be out of town this weekend visiting Ginny at her match in Canada, so she couldn't count on either of them to go with her to this thing.

She started flipping through the fan mail and personal letters first, and landed on a beautiful burnt orange envelope with loopy scrawl across the front.

Miss Hermione Granger

Hermione frowned at it. She flipped it open and her eyes grew wider and wider.

My dearest Hermione!

I am just finally back in the U.K. from the holidays, and I would love to take you to lunch! I need to congratulate you on all your success with Malfoy Consulting Group!

I've been dying to pick your brain on a charity I'm beginning back home. Please let me know if you are free at the end of this week!

Love to you,

Katya

Hermione dropped the letter on her desk, and ran her hands over her face.

Are you fucking serious.

Thursday evening, Hermione's dance class took a surprising turn. A familiar tune played out of the gramophone, and Miss Truesdale announced that they would be working on the French Waltz that evening.

The French Waltz, coincidentally, was the only pure-blood dance Hermione knew. It was the one she'd learned for the Yule Ball, memorized and practiced – desperate to not embarrass herself on Viktor Krum's arm. The one in which she'd momentarily spun around Draco, hands not touching, and therefore, the one she had ingrained in her head for the past five years.

Not that she told Miss Truesdale this. She simply nodded her head as she was shown the formation, and how to count a waltz, and how to stay on the balls of her feet. She turned the wrong way few times just for show, but by the end of the lesson, Miss Truesdale had a small look of satisfaction lifting her features.

That night, she let herself into her flat, feeling like there was nothing she'd rather do than just lay down, read, and fall asleep.

Harry stood from the couch as she entered.

"Oh, hello."

"Hey, Hermione." He rubbed his palms on his trousers.

"I thought Ginny was in Canada?"

"She is," he said, scratching his ear. "I let myself in."

"Oh." She set her purse down, and kicked off her heels. "What's wrong?"

"Er, nothing's wrong." Harry pushed his glasses up and started to twist his fingers around themselves. "Can we sit?"

Hermione stared at him. What had she done? Was this about Draco? Was he finally telling her his opinions? Was someone hurt? Had something awful happened?

She sat at the dining room table, legs feeling quite wobbly. Harry sat across from her. He took a deep breath, and the words came tumbling out of his mouth.

"I'm going to ask Ginny to marry me."

Hermione felt her brows lift, but that was the only part of her moving. She couldn't feel her heart beating, or her lungs expanding. She stared at him.

Smile. You were supposed to smile when this happened.

Hermione smiled. She giggled. "Harry!"

Harry's worried face evaporated and he grinned at her.

"When!?"

"Monday," he said. "Valentine's Day."

She brought her hands to her mouth. "Why were you so nervous to tell me?"

"I dunno," Harry laughed. He rubbed his eyes. "You're the last person on my list – besides Ginny, of course – and I'm just so relieved that it's half done now."

The last person…

"Who else?"

He looked down at the table. "I went to see Arthur this week. And last weekend, I went to Ireland."

To see Ron. Hermione nodded. He went to a different country before seeing her. Then she remembered the awkward and horrifying lunch date they'd had last week, when he'd walked in on her and Draco. He'd asked her to lunch that day. But unfortunately, Hermione had made it all about her.

She bit her cheek. "Which of those conversations was harder?" She laughed.

"Ron, surprisingly." Harry nodded his head. "He's well, by the way."

"Excellent."

"He's… Well, he's seeing someone." Harry looked up at her. Hermione swallowed.

"Yes, he told me at Christmas."

"Yeah," Harry said. He scratched his face. "I met her. She's really nice."

Hermione took a slow breath. "That's great."

Harry looked back at her. "Anyway, I'm glad you know about me and Ginny." Harry smiled.

Hermione nodded, smiling as brightly as she could. "Do you have the ring on you?"

Harry blushed and pulled the box out of his robes.

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Twenty Nine

She had signed the Love Contract less than three weeks ago, and she was already letting him lay her down on her desk and ravish her.

She swallowed, rapping her nails on that very desk, and let her gaze blur at her bookshelves across from her. She tapped her quill against a parchment, creating little blots and blobs.

Would he have done it like in the movies? Sweeping her ink pot, her picture frames, her texts all off the desk so they crash to the floor, and then press her down. Maybe they'd laugh about it.

She blinked and shook her head, clearing the image.

She couldn't tell who had felt more awkward about lunch, Harry or her. It was the quickest and quietest lunch they'd ever had. Harry had asked for the date the day before, so she had thought he had news to tell her or some funny story, but he just sat and watched her eat. Watched her think.

She kept her door closed the rest of the afternoon, and every time someone knocked, she jumped. Hoping it wasn't Draco. Hoping it was.

Dark thoughts slithered into her distracted mind throughout the afternoon. What if Harry hadn't walked in? Would she have let him… completely? She hadn't ever…

Did Draco know? He had assumed, back during the Auction. He had asked for 35,000 galleons, thinking that extra 5,000 to be necessary.

Another 5,000 would be added on if it could be proven that you were 'untouched.'

She closed her eyes, sneering at herself and her stupid, dark thoughts.

Walter checked in on her around 3PM, asking about the Golden Snidget pitch in the morning meeting. Hermione had completely forgotten about that part of her day. He was disappointed

I can't wrap my head around the idea of kissing her, and leaving it there. Of letting her go to bed alone after taking her to dinner.

What was she waiting for?

"I wanted you to know, before…" She trails off.

Before I took her against a wall. Before *I* took her against a wall.

She was waiting… for something. Or someone – the thought slices me – and I was about to fuck her against a wall at four in the afternoon.

I slide my hands away from her, dropping my thigh from her warm center. I can't look at her or else I'll forget everything and just slip inside of her.

"I'm sorry," I hum against her skin. "Things went too far."

I'm out of control. I never would have fucked her against a wall. Not for our first time. Or our only time. It's been too cold inside.

Compartmentalizing was not the best course. It was like a dying of thirst. Who could blame me for drinking so quickly.

I think of how this started and suddenly my hands are on her face.

"Don't leave. Don't resign." She can't leave after this. "I'll be better," I promise, panicking with her lips a breath away from mine. "We'll go back to how it was… before. I won't ignore you or treat you any differently because of this."

I don't have bricks. Or a box. And it's painful to look at her like this, knowing she can see me. All of me.

She hesitates, staring into my eyes. I try once more, "Don't leave."

She can't leave. It will be empty all the time without her.

I could go back to bookstores and giftwrap. It was a slow ache, but it was mine.

She won't let me have her. Her soul or her body. And I can't be happy just kissing her like this. I'll never stop. But it was like that before. There was no chance of it when she was my Saturday girl.

It was going to hurt either way. Might as well not drag her under.

I memorize her face like this. So close to mine. Her breath on me. And her lips… pink and abused. I touch her one last time, my thumb across her mouth.

"Okay," she whispers.

She'll stay.

I release her. And step back.

Hermione grinned and nodded and laughed and giggled and asked how he was going to do it, would he be romantic or spontaneous, how did Arthur react, what restaurant were they going to. She listened to him and the weight in her stomach became heavier and heavier.

Harry was getting married, Ron was dating a nice girl, and Hermione was playing grab-ass with Draco Malfoy once a week.

Friday morning, Hermione stared at her planned outfit for that day, and frowned. There was something slightly off about it. It was like the colors didn't go together, or maybe it was the hem of the skirt.

She thought about calling Pansy over to figure out what was wrong with her, but she was in Italy, designing a Debutant Ball dress for the daughter of the Italian Minister of Magic. It was a big deal for her, and Hermione didn't think "lunch date with Katya Viktor" qualified as an emergency.

Draco met her with coffee again, like he had on Thursday morning as well. It seemed like this was going to be a habit. He would take the fifteen seconds they had to pace to her office door to fill her in on anything pressing, any meetings they should take, and then leave her at her office, staring after him as he headed back to his own.

She escaped from the office at ten minutes to noon, and headed to the only wizarding café near the M.C.G. office. She'd never been there but Katya said it was "to *die* for."

Katya was early. Earlier than her, which was hard to do. She stood from the table with a bright smile and silky arms and enveloped Hermione in the friendliest hug she'd ever had from a stranger.

Well. It didn't seem Katya knew anything about Hermione's kisses with her on-again-off-again lover…

"My dearest!" Katya pulled back from the hug and gripped Hermione's upper arms. "You look splendid!" Katya's eyes ran over Pansy's outfit for today, and Hermione bit back some comment that Madame Michele would describe as "not taking a compliment."

Katya ran her fingers over the fabric on Hermione's shoulder. "Oh, I wish Pansy Parkinson would build for me! She is so talented!" Hermione almost laughed, remembering Pansy's distain for the Bulgarian girl. Katya continued, "And, of course, the clothes are nothing if the right witch is not in them!" Bright white teeth. And then Katya's hand was touching Hermione's face lovingly.

Hermione figured out a way to thank her and slither out of her grasp so they could sit, getting the attention off of her.

They chatted a bit about their holidays, ordered drinks from the sweet old witch who ran the place, and fixed their tea and coffee the way they liked it. Katya, she observed, used exactly the

right amount of milk and the right number of sugar cubes, as suggested by Madame Michele. Her spoon did not clink the cup as she stirred. But then again, neither did Hermione's.

"Oh, I'm so glad we had the chance to catch up! I've been *dying* to sit down with you ever since we met – well, before that!"

Hermione was struck with the same thought she had when she'd seen Katya in the papers with Draco: She smiles too much.

"I'm also glad we got a chance to really meet each other," Hermione said. "Will you be in town more often?" Hermione couldn't stop herself as the next words poured out of her. "At least through Monday. Valentine's Day?"

"Oh, no!" Katya pouted. "I leave for Bulgaria tomorrow. I won't be back until March at the earliest."

"Oh," Hermione said. She raised her brows as innocently as possible. "I would have thought you'd be spending Valentine's Day with Draco."

Why, Hermione. Why.

Katya waved a manicured hand, and said, "Oh, there was no need for that. We ended our arrangement a few months ago." Katya brought her teacup to her lips, hovering the saucer just below in a way Madame Michele would approve.

Hermione's eye twitched as she watched her. "Arrangement?"

"Yes, the dating thing." Katya set her cup and saucer down, taking a look around the shop.

Hermione stared at her. Perhaps there was a Bulgarian-to-English translation issue at work here?

"Do you mean you broke up?"

Katya looked at her. "Broke up?" She seemed just as confused as Hermione was. Then it was like a light went off in Katya's head. "Oh! How strange!" She laughed. Hermione thought this was no laughing matter. "I thought Draco would have told you, since you're so close."

Hermione waited, ignoring her own confusion about Draco and her being "close."

Katya continued, looking at Hermione with kind eyes. "Draco and I had a relationship for the papers. We weren't actually involved." She leaned back. "I'm surprised he never told you."

Hermione clenched her jaw. "As am I!" She bit out a laugh that sounded a little hysterical. "I'm afraid I still don't understand."

"He needed an exciting and desirable social life once he left Azkaban, to rehabilitate his image. So, we had an arrangement." Katya shrugged and flagged down the waiter.

They ordered and Hermione simmered. Once the waiter had left, Hermione turned to Katya. "I don't mean to be blunt, but didn't you feel used?"

"Oh, no," Katya said, smiling. "In fact, I think I got the better end of the bargain some days."

I pull my lips from her, heaving.

"You're driving me insane," I confess against her lips, pressing my forehead to hers while I concentrate on getting inside of her shirt.

"Sorry…" she whispers.

Like she doesn't know. Like she's completely blind to the sight of her own arse in these skirts and curve of her waist.

It makes me laugh. I should show her. Should touch her and show her what it's like to be me.

I reach inside her blouse, barely unbuttoned, and find soft skin covered with lace. She gasps a pleased sound and I need to be inside of her. Need to hear her gasping for me.

I heft her thigh up over my hip, bringing my hips closer.

Need to touch her.

I'll make her come. Make it good for her and she'll never want to be parted from me again.

I'll press my fingers inside of her and squeeze at her breast, kiss her breathless and thumb at her clit and make her beg me to let her come.

My fingers are dancing on the edge of her knickers, slipping under the lace, searching for the warmth. The moisture.

"I'm… I…"

I love you too.

I kiss her again, pouring my want into her, and finally touching her breast, the edge of her hard nipple beneath my fingers.

She's mumbling, trying to slow me down. But I can't stop my hands, so close. I can feel her wetness already, beckoning me closer, inside.

"… five additional."

"What?"

"It would have been 35," she whimpers.

She's not making sense. Or maybe I'm the delirious one.

"35,000."

Freezing me. Like coming up for air after drowning.

She's a virgin. Five thousand additional Galleons if she was pure.

I open my eyes to see her nervous, dazed.

"I'm…I haven't…" she mutters.

I think of Weasley. Of Krum. Fucking McLaggen and O'Connor. Scamander and Hartford.

These boys – men who wanted her. Who touched her and kissed her even.

"How…" I lean my head down on her shoulder.

I have to touch her. I have to—

Her hair. I need—

It's up again. Off her neck. I reach up, and drag the band out of her hair, pressing my nose behind her ear. I can smell her there. Where there's no hair product.

She should never do this. Never keep it from me.

I kiss her there, on her neck, where she smells the most like her. And I need to return to her mouth. Need to keep her lips occupied so she won't stop me. But her skin, her pulse pounding. My fingers threading through her hair, holding her close, and I can't get enough of her neck. The sounds she spins into the room. The way her breath catches when I suck.

Maybe she'll let me. Maybe she would have before.

I press my knee between hers and they fall apart so easily, like she's been asking me for years to open her.

My fingers curl in her hair, scratching her scalp, and my teeth drag along her neck. She turns her head, giving me more room.

My hand squeezing her hip, clutching her, dragging up her skirt. The thighs I'd wanted for years suddenly in my hands. I press my leg up, pushing against her and she moans again. I lick at her shoulder.

She shifts her hips forward, pressing her center against my thigh, and I feel her throat drag in air under my lips. She cants her hips again, and I'm holding myself back from pushing against her.

Once more, and she's moaning "Oh, god" against my ear, dragging her fingers through my hair.

My cock twitches, knowing her body already. Knowing her hips and the warmth of her hands in my hair.

She pulls my head back and I can't breathe when I see her like this, this close. Her eyes dark, lips open for me, panting against my face. Her hair tangled down around her neck. And I need to lay her down. I need to kiss down her body.

She reaches up with her lips again and I can't breathe until we're kissing. I have to have more of her.

And she'll let me. She wants this.

I don't know what I've done to deserve her.

Her tongue is pressing into my mouth and I drag my hand down her neck, scraping down her chest. Need her skin. Need her breasts in my hands.

The thought rocks me. I shake as my cock presses against her. I scramble my fingers on her skirt until my fingertips have her skin. My other hand trying to unbutton her.

I'm gonna come in my trousers.

Hermione watched Katya. This woman who she had respected and hated and envied, and Hermione begged her to please explain.

Katya looked around, lowered her voice and said, "I have a fiancé in Bulgaria." She pointed to a ring that Hermione hadn't noticed. It was plain, yet lovely. "He's a Muggle."

Hermione's eyes snapped to her, waiting for the punchline.

"My father… He doesn't approve." Katya frowned at the table.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at her. "I'm sorry, I thought your mother was…. I had heard that you were half-blooded."

"She was Muggle-born. She was still a witch. My father sees a difference."

And like that, a vacuum had sucked all the confidence out of this girl at the mention of her father. Her posture slouched and she bit her lip. Katya looked up at Hermione and shook it off.

"I needed a pretense. While Andrei and I saved our money, I needed a reason for my father not to set me up with the Durmstrang graduates, or Undersecretary to the Bulgarian Minister of Magic." She rolled her eyes. "But now Andrei and I are eloping next month." She smiled.

"So… Andrei was alright with this arrangement?" Hermione tried to keep the judgment out of her voice. She tried. "You kissing another man for the papers?"

Katya laughed. "The first time was easy. But the second kiss, he did have a bit of a problem with." Hermione listened to her laugh bounce around the café as she remembered the image of Draco pushing Katya against the bricks, hands in her hair and on her hip. Katya's voice broke her out of it. "But Draco asked permission. He said he needed something more, just once."

"Why?" Hermione's voice was quiet. She knew the answer, but she desperately needed to hear it.

Katya batted her lashes as her, casting her eyes to the side quickly, then back to her. "For his father."

Hermione swallowed, hearing the words she had memorized…

Going on dates with that Bulgarian half-blood every time the two of you are pictured together in the paper.

Hermione felt ill. The waiter placed her salad down in front of her, and Katya began rambling about the charity she would be starting that year. Hermione kept to one word responses, not trusting her voice.

As they left each other, promising to keep in touch, Hermione turned and said, "Oh, Katya?"

The girl turned, hair moving in slow motion behind her.

"Did Draco ever give you a gift? A book, giftwrapped?"

Katya blinked at her. "No. I don't remember anything like that."

Hermione's blood boiled as she smiled at the Bulgarian girl. She waved a jaunty hand and spun on her heel, marching back to her office.

The lift doors opened, and Blaise was leaning at the reception desk, flirting with Melody. When Melody saw her exiting the lift, she straightened and her smile disappeared. Blaise turned to Hermione and said something, but she ignored him, headed to the back office on the left.

His door was ajar, so she didn't bother asking the secretary anything. She marched in, closing the door behind her.

He looked up at her, and she could see his eyes flicker towards the closed door. He swallowed.

"Yes, Granger?" He looked back down to his paperwork.

"I just had a very interesting date."

Draco's eyes snapped to her. He looked her over head to toe. "Oh?"

"With Katya."

He held her eyes. "Oh." He gave a tiny shrug. "Didn't know she was in town."

She fumed. She pulled her wand from her robes, and muttered, "*Silencio*."

"Don't—" Draco clenched his jaw. "Please don't silence the room."

"But I want to yell at you." She hissed.

"If I know the room is silenced and the door is shut, this will be harder for me," he bit out, color rising in his cheeks.

She almost lost her breath, but that shivering thread of rage in her won out. She returned the sound to the room, and took a breath.

"Where are the books?"

He stared at her. "Books?"

"The books—!" She stopped herself, and adjusted her volume. "The giftwrapped books."

He shifted in his chair. "If they were gifts, then I'm sure I gave them away—"

"Katya never received a book. She told me today." Hermione paced a bit. "I giftwrapped books for your *girlfriend* and now she's *not* your *girlfriend* and never *was* and she never received the books!" She lowered her voice. "I want to know what happened to them."

He studied her, lifting a brow. "You're truly upset about those books?"

"Yes!" She adjusted her volume. "I'm *livid* about the books," she hissed. She made up for volume by beginning to gesture wildly.

"Did I not purchase the books?"

"Yes, you did —"

"So after the transaction, was I not free to do with them whatever I please?"

She glared at him, watching him steeple his fingers, elbows on his desk.

"I spent valuable time and effort wrapping up those books for *Katya*, and now I hear that *Katya* never received those books. So, I want to know what the point was!" she whisper-yelled.

"I'm sorry," Draco began, with that touch of superiority that had her fuming, "I was under the impression that gift-wrapping at Cornerstone was a service provided to the customer." He

She blinks rapidly at me and says, "What are you talking about, Malfoy—"

Don't you dare.

"Can't take it back now. It's *Draco,* again."

Maybe this is what she wants. She misses the chase. She longs to be the siren in the waters, watching me circle her until I'm under the current.

She steps back, creating more space between us and that really should be a sign that she doesn't want me closer. I step in.

"Do you *want* me to make a sexual harassment claim?"

"I *want* you to be honest about why you're leaving, Granger." There's a fire in my blood. And it consumes my skin like a dry forest. "Brave little Gryffindor Golden Girl, let me kiss her, and doesn't know how to take it back."

She laughs at me, and the sound shivers my spine.

"*I'm* the one who wants to take it back?" Her back lands on the wall and I step closer still. "*Draco Malfoy,* calm and collected, never mixing business and personal, kissed an employee and now wants to be *punished* for it."

And maybe she has me pegged. Because I had this under control four minutes ago. Four minutes ago, she was nothing to me but a name carved into the velvet lining of a jewelry box.

My arms press against either side of her head, closer and closer, and for the first time I realize that Potter was the one who stopped us. Blaise was right. She never pushed me away.

So, I push my luck one step further.

"Are you gonna punish me, Granger?" The words course through me, and I bite my lip before I can ask her to.

She trembles, and I almost wrap myself around her. I breathe into her, and she tilts her face up to me.

Fuck.

Oh, fuck.

She'll let me.

I sway into her, and stop. I need her to tell me this time. I need her to decide.

I watch her roll her eyes, and I'm afraid that's the end of it before she's suddenly on me. Her mouth pressing to mine.

And it was her choice.

She kisses me. And I'm drowning in blue velvet.

I moan into her and press against her. Her lips open and I taste her again, pushing into her mouth, and pushing my hips into hers.

She moans. And maybe I've heard it before. Maybe she made noises before. Maybe she did want this.

My head spins, calculating. It's been dry and cold inside of me for six days. For six days I haven't felt anything. Haven't thought of her. Haven't looked at her. Haven't touched her. Haven't kissed her.

And she's still leaving.

She's finished speaking. Waiting for me.

"No."

She sputters, "No?"

"I do not accept."

And maybe that's all that needs to be said. Maybe she'll quietly retreat.

I must have forgotten her amongst all this emptiness.

She persists. She names the date of her last day. Like clock counting down until she's gone. But she could just leave and walk out. She didn't have to give notice.

She wants something from me. I can give it to her and she'll stay.

I stand and grab the letter, feeling her eyes on me. They're warm.

I lean on my desk and skim the words, trying to read between her lines.

What does she want?

What's different? The kiss.

I look up at her and it feels like I haven't seen her in weeks. Like I could drown…

"It doesn't say anything in here about your boss sexually harassing you."

Her eyes widen, and maybe that's it.

"No. That is not my intention—"

"And what *is* your intention, Granger?" I toss away her letter. It's meaningless. "What is it you want?"

Tell me.

I've been asking her what she wants for weeks now. And she won't tell me.

"You'll resign if I don't… what?"

She laughs, and I should be offended. I should scowl and hiss back at her. But her teeth…

I clench my fingers around the desktop. Her perfectly-sized teeth. And a blue dress spinning.

"If nothing. This isn't blackmail, Draco—"

Like diving into a pool.

"*Draco*, again." I'm closer to her somehow. "It's been *months* since I've heard that." I could touch her if I'm Draco again. No. "I think the last time was in an alley, whispered into my ear as your fingers gripped my hair—"

Her lips fall open and I swim toward her.

"—or maybe it was on my balcony, you in a white dress, smiling at me like you knew what you were doing—"

smirked at her. "I wasn't aware one needed to declare the recipient upon requesting giftwrapping."

Her jaw dropped. Her eyes narrowed. "You know what, Malfoy?" she hissed. "Now that you mention it, giftwrapping is *not* a free service. It actually costs two sickles." She leaned her hands on his desk. "I had forgotten about it because no one else has ever been *idiotic* enough to ask for a *book* to be wrapped!"

Her volume had risen, so she took a slow breath while she glared at him. He remained in his chair, holding her eyes. Then he reached into his robes pocket, pulling out a pouch.

"Two sickles, you say?"

She gasped. "Don't you *dare* try to *pay* me."

"I'm not paying you, I'm paying Cornerstone."

"I don't *want* you to pay Cornerstone!"

"Then what do you want?!" His voice had finally soared above a normal volume. He threw his hands out to the sides and his cheeks were pink.

Hermione looked at him from the other side of his black marble desk, chest heaving, and for a moment, she wondered if this was why he hadn't moved from his desk yet. Usually at this point in the argument, he had her pressed against a wall…

She took a deep breath, taking one step back from his desk. "I want to know," she said, "what the point was."

She watched as he took an even inhale, and said, "It was a way to spend three extra minutes with you."

She met his eyes, heart thundering. The grey in them was warmer than usual. She took a slow breath.

"Anything else, Granger?" He blinked and his eyes were back to neutral. Not cold, but not warm.

Her cheeks were hot, and she looked down at his desk. "No. Yes, that's all." She kept her eyes down. "Yes, alright," she stammered and headed towards the door. She felt like there was something else she needed to yell at him for...

"See you tomorrow."

She stopped at the door. "Tomorrow's Saturday."

He lifted his eyes to hers. Neutral. "The Governors' Ball."

She blinked at him. "I wasn't… I'm not going."

He narrowed his eyes. "Did you not receive the memo?"

"I—" she started. "It was an offer, not a necessity!"

He tapped a knuckle on his desk. "As a Senior Consultant and one of the major forces behind Malfoy Consulting, you are expected to be there."

Oh yes, *that's* what else she wanted to yell at him for. She placed her hands on her hips.

"Don't you mean as the *Golden Girl*, I'm expected to be there?"

He looked at her. "Excuse me?"

She stepped toward him. "I was hired to be Senior Consultant over Non-Wizard Relations, not the face of Malfoy Consulting Group."

"What are you going on about, Granger—?"

"I know about Wentworth," she snapped. She lowered her voice, moving away from the door. "You used me to get Wentworth to sign on – and countless others, I'm sure! Told him I would be working with M.C.G. before the idea had even entered my head. I know you used my name and my reputation to enhance your own, just like you used Katya and I'm sick of it," she hissed.

"I might have said I was offering you the position," Draco said, raising a brow, "but I don't remember telling Wentworth you had signed on."

"But you didn't –!" She stopped and whispered, "But you didn't offer me the position. You toasted a champagne glass at me." She crossed her arms.

"Same thing." Draco waved his hand, narrowing his eyes in confusion.

She huffed.

"Listen, Malfoy. I'm happy to defend you to those that don't believe in you, or write letters of recommendation. I'm happy to stand up for this company and what it represents. And I'm happy to help you make a mark in this world, but don't you dare assume anything about me without asking."

She sucked in a breath. There. It was done. She looked at Draco, and he was pressing his lips together.

He stood from his chair and stepped toward her, a slow pace around the desk.

"The only thing I *assumed* about you, Granger, was how ridiculously undervalued you were at the Ministry." His eyes were hot again, and she stepped to the right, hands grasping for one of his guest chairs as he advanced. "I *assumed* the Ministry would destroy you like it destroys all dreamers. And I *assumed* that you could do better."

Steady breath. Stepping to the side of the guest chair, putting it between the two of them.

"You came to me with the werewolf project, knowing I couldn't resist—"

"I came to you with a project to lure you to me, yes. To make you see what you could be capable of. What *we* could be capable of." He stepped closer, stopping at the chair. "But I don't give a fuck about the werewolves."

She should snarl at him, berate him for being a hypocrite and single-minded.

Instead, she shivered.

I feel her eyes on me, but they don't burn any more.

Mr. Townsend mentions Marcus Flint and I feel her twitch. I am angry. But I don't concentrate on why.

When he leaves us at the table alone, she babbles. And the melody is familiar.

On Thursday I sit down with Blaise and Granger to discuss the interviews. I can tell she wants to continue the interviews today. But I choose Blaise. Blaise asks me about New York and I say the weather was nice.

She tries to meet with me on Friday, and I cancel.

Witch Weekly prints a cover of her in periwinkle dress, smiling smartly.

My eye twitches. And I toss the paper across the room like it's burned me.

I meditate that evening, skipping dinner. Mother is concerned, but I tell her in a flat voice that there's nothing to be concerned with.

On Monday, I take my mail from Melody and I can't get my feet to cooperate. I should move back to my office. But's 8:57AM.

I open a letter, reading it. And the lift doors open. I should have left. I look up and she's there, coming through. She nods at me and I watch her walk away.

"Can I get you something, Mr. Malfoy?" Melody asks.

I don't respond. I walk away.

At the Senior Consultant meeting she tries to push the Golden Snidgets again.

"I thought I already shot this down," I say to her. And she looks at me. I feel heat.

"You did. That's why we revised it. For your review."

I open my mouth to protest and she snaps.

"Which means you take it, you read it fully, you think on it, and you come back to me with a decision."

Her eyes burn now. And I think I see a bookstore. But then it's gone.

She tries to start another project and I shoot her down. Something bubbles beneath the surface as she fights back.

On Tuesday, there is a knock at my door as I'm reading a proposal Wentworth brought in yesterday.

I look up and it's her. She's shutting the door.

Her skirt is too short. I blink and look down at my paperwork again.

"I wanted to…I need to give you my notice."

She places a letter on my desk. Folded in threes. Barely a paragraph long explaining why I won't be seeing her any longer.

And my chest cracks in two. And where the wind rattles through my ribs, filling the empty spaces, it blows across blue velvet.

She grins. "Yes. You *do* see it. You used to be an orange. It wasn't pretty. But now you're a deep blue navy."

"Like velvet," I say.

"Mm-hm. Velvet inside of something… A box."

I watch with held breath as she bites down again, crunching.

She's a Legilimens. She must be. A rare form. Something strange. I'll need to ask Severus. But first I need to get out. Before she sees more than a blue velvet lining.

But I have to ask.

"What color are you?" I say, still one foot on the stairs.

She smiles. "I don't know. I can't see myself."

She looks down at her arms, looking for pinks and blues. So small. Like a bird. A bird in a cage.

I need to get her out of this dungeon before the end of the war. Before the Auction. She shouldn't have to live through that.

She's wiggling her feet, examining herself for colors.

I look her up and down and say, "You're all of them."

She looks up at me. She smiles.

"Goodnight, Draco. Thank you for dinner."

~*~

Wednesday, February 2, 2000

Queenie Kowalski works with me for four hours. Then I come back on Tuesday and we spend twelve. I have tea with her on Wednesday, and she has a sad look in her eyes I can't interpret, but she does me the favor of trying to find her for a few moments.

I try to pay her, but she says, "Mr. Malfoy, it's been years since a boy as beautiful as you spent any time with me. I'd feel like I should be paying you." She winks at me.

I smirk back in the way that I am supposed to. She stops me on my way down the steps.

"If your grandmother is a true Legilimens…" she says, hand on the door, "she's probably been waitin' to speak to somebody, honey. Go for a visit, will ya? It can get lonely inside."

I blink. I feel like I'm sad. Maybe I am.

The portkey lands me in my office. I take a look about, change my robes, and exit the office to the street, Disapparating when I can. I appear outside the lovely wizarding restaurant Carrie had set up for us.

I don't pause. I open the door and speak with the hostess. Her eyes dance over me, recognizing me, drinking me in. I do the same to her.

She leads me to the table where Hermione Granger sits with Geoffrey Townsend. He stands, shaking my hand and I make my apologies. I settle into my chair across from him.

He saw it, and his eyes flashed at her, like they used to.

"You... You shouldn't have told people I'd be heading up this branch without knowing for sure."

"I *created* this branch for you," he whispered, and she watched his eyes flicker over her while she tried to catch her breath. "There would be no Non-Wizard Relations branch of Malfoy Consulting without you. It was tailor made for you and only you. To give you exactly what you wanted."

His knees were touching the chair, and she gripped the back of it, holding it between them like a shield. Her lips were dry. She wet them and regretted it as his eyes slipped downwards.

"Next time," she whispered, "ask me if I want it."

Her words slipped through the space between them like mist. She watched him breath them in, and she was suddenly unsure what it was they were even talking about. But she watched him nod once, and she felt the air shift, like they had an understanding.

He sucked in a deep breath, and she watched the heat in his eyes dissipate. "I would like for you to come with me to the Governors' Ball." He swallowed. And she kept from biting her cheek at the phrasing of his request. He continued, "There are several people attending who will not only be great connections for Malfoy Consulting, but also for you personally."

It was her turn to swallow. "I- I have nothing to wear."

A small smile lifted his lips, and he took a step away from the chair. "I'm sure we can get Pansy to whip something up."

He crossed back to his desk, away from her. She still gripped the back of the chair.

"She's in Italy. She's —" Hermione took a deep breath, now that he was away from her. "She's on a project."

He stopped, remembering. He cursed under his breath. "You honestly have nothing at home?"

"I mean, if it was socially acceptable to wear the same dress I wore to New Year's…"

This was not the thing to bring up, clearly. She watched him turn to her, eyes hot. He quickly looked her over before looking away.

He cleared his throat. "Where did you get that dress?"

"It was... a small shop in Diagon Alley. I don't remember the name."

"Desrosiers?" he asked, crossing to his fireplace.

"I think so, yes." She watched him toss Floo powder into the fire and call out for "Desrosiers."

A thin woman with long grey hair popped her head through the fire, and her wrinkles pulled tight as she smiled brightly at Draco. She greeted him like an old friend, and suddenly, Draco was speaking French to her.

She'd never heard a more delectable sound.

Hermione gripped the back of the chair again. His voice dipped and flowed over the foreign words, and Hermione tried to catch on, but couldn't. He gestured to her, and scooted to the side.

"Mz Granger!" The woman gasped. "Yes, mademoiselle, I 'ave your measurements." She continued speaking French to Draco. He responded and then they were laughing about something. Hermione frowned.

They wrapped up, and the woman kissed the air. She disappeared. He stood from the fireplace.

"They'll send your dress directly to you by tomorrow afternoon. It's close enough to your New Year's dress without being too close."

He crossed back to his desk, and grabbed up his quill to write a note.

"Send me the bill," she said.

He chuckled. "Sure."

She narrowed her eyes at him, not entirely convinced. She watched him write, bent over his desk, hair falling into his eyes. He said nothing else to her, so she took her cue to leave.

She headed for the door, barely reaching it before he spoke out.

"What is different about your partnership with Pansy? She is riding on your coattails just as much."

She turned to him. "It's completely different."

He dotted an "i" and looked up at her. "How?"

"She … I'm getting something in return. It's helping her image as well as my own."

"So, you're not getting enough from our relationship, Granger?"

She had no idea how he managed to suck the air out of a room with only a few words and his eyes.

"That's not..." She looked away from him.

"I'll give you the Snidgets."

Her eyes snapped to him. He put his hands in his pockets. He continued, "Let's move up the court date."

"I don't... You're not..." She stammered as he watched her.

"Or the Muggle-Born Integration Project? It's approved," he said.

She blinked at him. She opened her mouth. And closed it.

He continued, "Or whatever pet project you want. It's yours. Fully supported."

Her heart beat wildly in her chest. She didn't know how she got him started on a negotiation. He started walking towards her, slowly. She wished she still had that chair...

I nod at her. "Lovegood." I wait for her to scramble back. To beg me to release her. To ask me not to hurt her.

She smiles and says, "Can't sleep?"

What a little loon.

"I brought you a bit of food. Have they been feeding you?" I hand her the bread and fruit.

"Thank you," she says. "They were at first, when Ollivander was here. But since they've taken him I think they've forgotten." She bites into the apple and studies me. "Your dungeon has a nest of Nargles." She points. "There. In that corner."

"Right," I say. "I'll get right on that."

"I have my necklace on, so they leave me alone." She fingers the cork on a chain and takes another bite of the apple. "How are your classes so far?"

Why do I even bother. She's clearly lost it.

"They're… good. I don't think you'll be returning to school though, Lovegood."

She shrugs. "I didn't think so."

"I'll try to bring you food when I can. There's a large mission on Christmas. I may not come back, but my mother will look after you."

She chews her apple, and watches me. As if she isn't a prisoner. "You've changed a tad, haven't you?"

I blink at her. "I suppose we all have."

"You used to be cruel," she says. "You're a different color now."

I narrow my eyes at her. I've spent too long down here, and she's probably delirious with hunger.

I nod at her, saying goodbye.

"Like a navy. Deep like velvet."

My feet stop on the first step. I hear the crunch of an apple, and I feel my heart pounding. I turn to look back at her. "What did you say?"

"Your color is navy blue now."

I stare at her, waiting. "Oh?"

"I see people in colors. Don't you?"

"Not really, no."

She bites down again, chews slowly and says, "For instance, Harry is a green, like his eyes. But I mainly see it from his heart. Lavender Brown is actually neither lavender nor brown." She smiles. "She's a light pink. Parvati's the same." She twists the apple rind. "Hermione Granger is a blue, like sky blue but…"

"Periwinkle," I finish.

He let that hand trail down her stomach, rounding her hips and pulled her knee up slightly, and it was like he slid in deeper. She wasn't that big of a fan but she got to watch his face and hear him grunt.

That was more better.

She watched him, his eyes pressed closed and his breath pushing out, and the sweat darkening his hair. Every few thrusts he would drag his lip into his mouth and release it on the next thrust. She liked that.

She was just getting used to the rhythm, starting to count the thrusts when his eyes drifted open. She watched her breath move his hair.

"Can I go faster?"

His voice was low, and raspy, and everything she wanted. She nodded. He snapped his hips, and watched her reaction. She pressed her lips together, and nodded that he could continue.

He brought his forehead down to hers again, and lowered his upper body down on her. He grabbed the leg that was around his hip, and held it there as his hips moved.

That was… better.

At least she could feel his chest against hers, her breasts rubbing him.

Then the hand that held her leg to him slipped around, and in the little space he had, he touched her again.

That was best. Yes, that was the best.

She groaned as she pushed against it. She almost wanted it to stop, so she squeezed quickly, and Draco's rhythm stuttered. He found it again, just in time for her to try squeezing again. He groaned and got even faster. And his fingers played with her even faster.

She felt sweat between their bodies, and she was starting to gasp. This was best. This was sex and it was best.

The hand that propped him up, holding him above her, starting winding into her hair. She felt a slight tug, and his lips her on her neck, his hand between their bodies, and his fingers in her hair.

"Fuck…" he whispered.

And she moaned. And he slipped, and worked her harder. She was at the top, and she stared at her chandelier, and she bit her lip, and he pressed a light kiss to her cheek.

And she groaned, letting her mind close and her body open.

She grabbed at his back, and he snapped his hips and she cried, and squeezed him. He slowed as she fell apart, and once she was coming down, she opened her eyes and he was watching her.

She swallowed, and smiled. And he snapped his hips against her four more times before he groaned and tremored.

She watched his face, his jaw open and his eyes squeezing shut. He dropped his head onto her chest, and breathed out, the air hot against her skin. One hand was still gripping her hair, and the other tight on her hip. His body was heavy against her, and she slowly ran her hands from his shoulders, across his back and up into his wet hair, repeating the motion over and over like waves.

She wondered if maybe they slept like this. Then she felt his lips brush against the top of her breast, his tongue flicking out to taste the sweat on her chest. Then he shifted and slid out of her.

That was an odd feeling.

His arms shook as he pushed himself up, kneeling over her. She remembered just how naked she was as he took one last look at her before standing, and offered his hands so she could sit up.

They got dressed. Well, he got dressed, and then he transfigured a robe for her out of her torn dress. He found a pot of Floo powder on the mantle, and after she'd given up the search for her underwear, she joined him at the fireplace, holding her shoes.

"If you're planning to go back out there," she said. "You'll need a look in the mirror first."

His hair was a mess, his face was flushed, and her lipstick was all over him.

He nodded at her. "I'll make excuses for you."

Hermione nodded, imagining all sorts of things.

Granger had to leave. She's gotten well and truly shagged and now she needs a rest.

Please excuse Granger, she's looking for her underwear.

She looked up and he was watching her. He stepped into her, and kissed her lightly on her lips. She swallowed, and he tossed the powder into the fireplace. She stepped through, and muttered her location.

She watched his eyes swirl away from her as the flames licked at her.

She stepped out into her living room. It was late.

She dropped her shoes, turned, and went to Ginny's room. She was asleep.

Hermione sat on Ginny's bed and shook her shoulder.

Ginny's eyes opened slowly. "Hey. Did you have fun."

Hermione stared at her.

"I need you to teach me the Contraceptive Charm."

Ginny was suddenly wide awake.

The hand still on her hip started tugging at her knickers, sliding them down, and she lifted her hips to help him.

She was wheezing in a particularly unattractive way, but he didn't seem to care. She reached down to help him with his underwear, but he was touching her again. She threw her head back and stared at her favorite chandelier in the history of chandeliers.

He pushed a finger inside of her and she hummed. Then he worked a second in, and she closed her eyes, pressing her lips together. She could feel his breath on her neck and he started moving his hand.

His fingers were thicker than her own, and the pressure was good. Too good.

"Draco, please. Please, please." She opened her eyes and found him watching her. "No more of this, please."

"Shh." He breathed across her face, hushing her as she whimpered. "Trust me."

He moved inside of her for a few strokes, opening and twisting, then pressed against her sweet spot and her mouth opened in a moan.

"I'm ready, I'm ready." She gasped. And she released the cushions where she was gripping them and grabbed at his hair, bringing his face to hers. She began kissing him, begging him, and he pulled his hand away, ridding himself of his underwear.

She felt him at her entrance, and she opened her eyes to look at him. He pressed his forehead to hers, and she nodded.

He pushed inside of her, and it was tight. She bit her tongue to keep from saying so. She squeezed her eyes shut, a pinching and pressure, and why did people do this?

She grit her teeth together, and felt him release a breath across her face. She opened her eyes, and Draco's eyes were pressed shut, jaw tight. If it was hurting him too, maybe they should stop? And then she saw his jaw release, and recognized the raw pleasure on his features. And she was the one giving it to him.

He opened his eyes to look down at her, and they were hot, and she shivered. "Okay?" he asked.

She nodded.

He pulled back and entered her again, slowly. The pinching pressure was still there, but now she got to watch his face, as he pressed his eyes closed. The third time, he bent his head forward and kissed her, letting his tongue wander into her mouth and push and pull at the same time as his hips.

That was better. Her hands were on his shoulders and she let her nails dig in.

He let one hand come up and palm her breast.

That was better too. She got to feel some of that electricity again, and it calmed her.

She sucked in a breath, and her breasts touched his shirt. She wanted to step backwards, give him some space, but she held her ground. She looked up at him, craning her neck at the small distance.

His lips were parted, and she heard him breathing as her breasts brushed against him with every one of her inhales.

He moved his hands to the buckle of his belt, knuckles sweeping across her belly. She gasped. His lips quirked.

She heard the harsh sounds of the metal, and the buttons of his dress pants slipping through the holes. She kept her eyes on his, finding herself breathing faster just to feel the caress on her breasts.

One of his knuckles continued to brush her stomach as he unbuttoned, lower and lower, feather light. She licked her lips. He swallowed.

Out of the bottom of her sightline, she saw his hands come to his waist, and slowly he pushed his pants past his hips. She heard them thud to the ground, and she pushed on his stomach, falling with him as he tumbled backwards to sit on the couch. She placed her legs on either side of him and attached to his mouth as her fingers grabbed for the rest of the buttons of his shirt.

He groaned against her, and she could feel the fabric of his trunks against her thighs. His hands came up to her hips, squeezing and running his fingers across her softly.

She finished with the last of his shirt buttons and pulled the shirt open. She placed her hands on his stomach, and he gasped. She pushed her tongue into his mouth and he tilted his head back. She shoved the shirt down his arms.

She moved her knees outward, trying to get closer to him, and then brought her hips down to his.

They gasped together, sucking the air between them. She could feel him hard against her center, and she knew she was wet and warm. She closed her eyes, pressed her lips together, and rolled her hips against him, feeling him press right against her. Sharp pleasure ran up her spine and he grabbed her hips, letting out a tight sound.

She ran her hands up into his hair, and moved again. His hips chased her but then his fingers were pressing bruises into her hip bones, and he was holding her still.

"Draco, please."

He reached up, holding her to him, and turned them until she was on her back again, with him pressing against her on the chaise.

He breathed against her face and she looked at him while he pressed his eyes closed.

They snapped open, and he looked at her. "Are you sure."

"Yes," she rasped. "Yes, yes, yes."

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Eighteen

Wednesday, February 9, 2000

I'm waiting for her with coffee. Like I used to.

The lift doors open, and I focus on the heat under my fingertips, not tucking *her* away, but closing the lid on my desires. Like before.

I tell her about our meeting tomorrow, walk her to her door. I watch the way her eyes drink me in.

We're done. Stopped talking. I watch her eyes float across my face, and I wonder if she remembers it like I do. If she thought about me last night.

I wonder if she's ever touched herself while thinking of me.

I should leave.

My eyes drift to her neck, hoping she left the picture I painted on her skin.

But of course, she's covered the love-bites.

Back to before.

Like we didn't happen.

~*~

I wanted to visit her after lunch to discuss her proposal, go over my notes. But I can't wait even an hour. Once I'm seated in her awful chairs, sitting in front of her, I feel like I can breathe again.

We negotiate until I can give her everything she wants.

I try to make jokes about her chairs that land flat, and I watch the way her eyes flip away from me whenever she's had them on me for too long.

"I think it would help to get the Golden Snidgets case into the public view," I say. "Not a lot of people know their history, or their relation to Quidditch. We could get more eyes on their case with some assistance from the handful of Quidditch players we know."

I'm already regretting bringing up the Weasel, but then—

"Oh! I wonder if I could get in contact with Viktor!"

Viktor. What joy.

"Krum could be useful, too."

I try to relax my jaw, discussing the promotional campaign with her more, when she's suddenly bringing up Rolf Scamander as well. I have to remind myself that neither of them have been in bed with her.

She thanks me as I leave her office, and I guess that's enough.

I cross the floor to find Blaise waiting for me at my door. I nod to him. He follows me in and shuts the door.

"You've returned to us."

"Pardon?" I sit in my chair.

"You were gone a for a week. And now you're back."

He's being witty. Like my Occlumency was a vacation. Or a death I've returned from.

I'm not amused.

"Yes," I say.

"What prompted your return," he says, fiddling with the papers on my desk, eyeing me.

"It wasn't sustainable," I say, dismissing him.

I can't share with him again. I can't talk about kissing her like we'll be doing it again.

~*~

Friday, February 11, 2000

I put several of the interns on researching the guest list for the Governor's Ball. When one of them – Tommy? – comes in with their analysis, I find several people who we could connect to, who Granger could impress.

Dr. Henry Flanders – Attending Healer at St. Mungo's

-Expert in magical neurology, memory, motor function.

-Hogwarts class of 1965 – Ravenclaw

-Oxford class of 1970 – Experimental Psychology

The list goes on. Tommy is very detailed.

But my eyes linger on *memory.*

Then my door is opening, and Granger is stomping in.

Merlin. What have I done now.

She shuts the door. And my fingers curl on my notes. "Yes, Granger?"

When she floated down, Draco was still watching her. Cheeks pink and sweat dampening his hair. His mouth was slack open and he panted. She could see his tongue running over his bottom teeth.

He withdrew his hand from her and she bit her lip to keep from moaning.

She sat up. And he pulled back to let her. She slipped her dress off her shoulders and tugged until she could pull her bra off and toss it to the side. As her arms came back, she saw him lick his lips, and place his left hand on the backrest of the lounge for support. She reached up and began unbuttoning his dress shirt. Such fine material.

He sat still, watching her undress him, and she felt his eyes eating her alive. Topless, and undressing him.

She was halfway done before she saw it. A faint jagged line starting at his collarbone and zagging down his chest. She pulled the right side of his shirt back and found where the line cracked under his heart and ricocheted down his stomach.

Sectumsempra.

He snatched her hands off of him, grabbing her wrists. She looked up at him and his jaw was tight, looking away from her. He took a calming breath and turned her right hand, kissing the inside of her wrist.

She let him kiss her arm two more times before she threw herself at him.

She smacked her teeth against his and he grunted. She pulled back, bringing her hand to her stinging lips. He laughed. And the sound bounced around the room, warming her.

She tried reaching up again, but the remains of the dress were slipping under her. She huffed and tossed her legs off the chaise, standing and shoving the dress down to the ground. She reached back and pulled off each of her heels, and it wasn't until she turned to come back to him that she realized she was in front of him in just her knickers. And he was fully dressed still.

Not that it bothered him one bit. She watched his eyes run down her body, and her arms twitched to come up across her chest. She kept them down.

"Take off your trousers."

She could hardly believe the words had tumbled from her lips. Neither could he, apparently. His eyes widened and darkened all in one breath. He looked at her and breathed deeply.

"I mean…" she said, sounding a bit more like herself. "That *is* where we're going with this, yes?"

She stood before him on the couch. He was still on his knees, where he had been before she stood and took off her dress. He smiled darkly at her, and in one fluid movement he stood, right in front of her in the very little space between her and the couch.

"That's why you stopped us. Last time."

"*I* stopped us?? *You* stopped us!" She started to sit up, and he leaned back on his heels.

"*You* said you had never – So I pulled away!"

"Yes, I *remember*." She snarled at him. "But I never asked you to stop!"

His brows came together and his mouth opened. He looked so young. Then his grey eyes turned dark.

"If you don't tell me to stop, then I'm going to take you, Granger. Right here on this chaise lounge."

She shivered and gasped.

"What are you waiting for."

She felt her cheeks blush at her brazenness, just before he shoved at her shoulders, her back landing on the cushions. He leaned over her, eyes taking her in. Then he brought his hands to the front of her dress and ripped it down the middle. She gasped.

"What are you —?"

"I'll buy you a thousand dresses," he said as his lips caught hers. And her pulse jumped at the promise.

She had just started to wonder how she would be *leaving* the governor's mansion, when Draco slid his lips down her cheek, sucking a path over her collarbone, and trailing toward her left breast. Her bra was useless as Draco pressed an open-mouth kiss against her over the fabric. She clutched at his hair, pressing him closer, and brought her leg up to move against his hip.

His fingers started gathering the material across her legs, pushing it up to her waist and he reclaimed the path he'd found earlier, circling closer to her core. One of his fingers dipped underneath and found her precious sweet spot immediately. She bucked her hips and cried and Draco ran his teeth along her the top of her breast.

He started a torturous rhythm against her core, swirling and rubbing and Hermione closed her eyes and felt *everything*.

She was rising, and she didn't notice that his mouth had left her chest until she heard him speak.

"Look at me."

She opened her eyes and found him watching her. She barely had enough time to be embarrassed at what she assumed her face had been doing before he swirled her again and twisted his hand, pressing one finger inside of her.

She gripped the arm of the chaise lounge behind her head and fell apart.

She slid her gaze to the chandelier above her, watching the many crystals spiral out from the center and continue to dance into space.

She gasped and shook and squeezed her thighs together, holding him inside of her.

"I just had a very interesting date."

I look up at her again. "Oh?" I hadn't thought when I'd given her coffee this morning that she looked so smashing because she had a lunch date.

Why would she tell me this.

"With Katya."

Oh.

"Oh." I look back down to the list. "I didn't know she was in town."

I hear a whispered *"Silencio"* and my heart screams.

"Don't—Please don't silence the room."

"But I want to yell at you." Fuck, she's so cute.

I breathe deep. "If I know the room is silenced and the door is shut, this will be harder for me."

What a mess. I hate this "openness."

She looks at me like it hasn't occurred to her that I want to fuck her into my desk. She blushes. And I feel disgusting for saying it out loud.

She counters her spell, and turns back to me, still fuming.

"Where are the books?"

"Books?"

"The books—!" she yells, then whispers, "The giftwrapped books."

Of all the things I've done in my life… all the lies I told, all the people I've hurt… I should have known she'd lose her shit over those books.

"If they were gifts," I try, "then I'm sure I gave them away—"

"Katya never received a book. She told me today," she says. "I giftwrapped books for your *girlfriend* and now she's *not* your *girlfriend* and never *was* and she never received the books! I want to know what happened to them."

So, Katya told her about the ruse. The way she keeps hissing the word "girlfriend" reminds me of our bookshop. Of the way she used to read about my dates in the paper the next day.

"You're truly upset about those books?"

"Yes!" she screams, and then hisses lower, "I'm *livid* about the books."

"Did I not purchase the books?"

"Yes, you did—"

"So, after the transaction, was I not free to do with them whatever I please?"

She looks like she wants to strangle me. And although the fantasy has crossed my mind—

"I spent valuable time and effort wrapping up those books for *Katya*, and now I hear that *Katya* never received those books. So, I want to know what the point was!"

Her logic is unsound. Which means her emotions are in the way. Which means she *feels* something.

"I'm sorry," I say, not sorry. "I was under the impression that gift-wrapping at Cornerstone was a service provided to the customer. I wasn't aware one needed to declare the recipient upon requesting giftwrapping."

Her jaw drops open, like I've cursed her cat. "You know what, Malfoy? Now that you mention it, giftwrapping is *not* a free service. It actually costs two sickles." She leans down against my desk and I have to force myself to stay seated. "I had forgotten about it because no one else has ever been *idiotic* enough to ask for a *book* to be wrapped!"

Her eyes are hot, and burning into me. She wants me to fight her back, wants me to test her. But if I push too far I'll forget myself.

I reach for my coin purse. "Two sickles, you say?"

"Don't you *dare* try to *pay* me."

"I'm not paying you, I'm paying Cornerstone."

"I don't *want* you to pay Cornerstone!"

"Then what do you want?!"

I can feel the fever running up my chest, into my neck, like lava about to overflow.

Her chest is heaving, her eyes on me. And I'm begging her to say it. Tell me you want me.

She steps back from my desk, like she knows we're in dangerous waters.

"I want to know what the point was."

But instead it's me who has to admit it. She won't move until I do, I realize.

I breath into my mind, breathing through the cracks in my bricks. "It was a way to spend three extra minutes with you."

Her eyes are so deep, waiting for me to take it back. Waiting for me to ruin it.

She blushes, like I've complimented her. And I suppose I have.

I feel my skin buzzing, my mind open. If she continued, if she asked me something else I'd answer her.

It hurts. I pull back.

"Anything else, Granger?"

She stammers, pulling away from me, looking at her shoes.

"See you tomorrow," I say, looking back at the guest list, letters blurring together, keeping myself from begging her stay, but she's confused.

I look up, reminding her of the Governors' Ball.

"I wasn't… I'm not going."

Not going? "Did you not receive the memo?"

"It was an offer, not a necessity!" she hisses.

"Oh, god, Draco."

He bit her lip, a stinging pain. He quickly pulled away. She pressed her tongue against the sting. "I'm sorry," he mumbled, attaching to her neck again as he continued to play with her through the silk.

She brought her hands up to his sides, feeling his muscles shiver. She wanted him on top of her, pressing against her. Why was he so far away?

"More. Please, Draco."

He shivered and huffed against her neck. She moved her legs, bringing her left knee up, feeling the silk slide down her thigh toward her waist. Her knee pressed against his hip and he started to move. He lowered down on her, pressing his chest against her and she sighed.

"Better?"

"Yes, god."

She could feel his hips against hers, could feel him, hard against her.

He kissed her, and she shifted under him and he gasped. She loved it. She did it again and he pulled his mouth from hers.

He slipped a hand between their ribs to touch her breast again. She moaned and then he rolled his hips and she yelped, clutching his shoulders.

"Tell me when to stop," he whispered against her mouth and rolled his hips again.

The third time she met his hips with hers and cursed. He slipped. He shivered and groaned. She brought her hips up again but he was still.

"I can't… I need to…"

He was pulling away and she was terrified. He lifted his hips away. Then he leaned over her again, and she could feel his hand on her left hip, slipping under the silk.

She sighed, and he kissed her neck again. She stared at the chandelier and his fingers followed the line of her knickers, coming closer.

He touched her over the fabric, and she turned her head to bite his ear. She felt his breath on her neck, as he touched her again.

"God, please, please, please," she panted.

"Tell me – Tell me when to stop."

"Why are you—" she moaned as he touched her again. "Why would you stop? What's wrong?"

He looked down at her, cheeks pink and his brow was moist. "If you want me to stop… If you want to stop—" He was panting, his eyes flashing at her.

"Why the fuck would we stop!"

She caught her breath as his eyes moved across her face.

"Because… because I'm a virgin?" She licked her lips. "Is that why?"

She wound her hands up his lapels, behind his neck, and into his hair, pressing her chest into his. His lips moved over hers and his hands slipped across the silk, down and around to grab her.

He walked them towards a door, pressing her against it as he opened it. She tumbled into a small sitting room. She gained her balance as the door closed, and then her back was pressed against it.

He was panting against her face and she heard herself gasping for air. His grey eyes were dancing over her, and she felt his hand tracing her ribs through the silk. She felt his forehead against hers.

She could see a fireplace, chairs and couches.

"Did you know this sitting room was here?" She looked at him suspiciously.

"Granger, *you* led me down this hall, not the other way around." He leaned in, hovering his mouth close to hers. "But, yes, I've been here before. My mother and I had tea on those chairs just last month."

"I miss your mother."

"Let's talk about her later, shall we?"

She smiled and pressed her lips against his. She still had her hands tangled in his hair, and she took the opportunity to pull her fingers through it. He groaned, and his hands squeezed her backside, and bringing her closer to his hips.

"Tell me what you want." His breath misted over her lips, his hands running along her torso, sliding closer to her chest. One hand grazed her breast and she gasped.

"Everything."

He dropped his head onto her shoulder and groaned.

Then she was being lifted. She gasped, his arm wrapped around her waist and took her off the door, turning them. She grabbed his shoulder, and he walked them into the room. She had a moment to take in the fireplace, the arm chairs, before she was falling, landing on a plush chaise lounge. The back of the lounge rose on her right side, the fireplace on her left.

She found her breath again just before Draco sat up and started removing his jacket.

Oh, god, please.

She was panting by the time he lowered down on her. The chandelier above them twinkled, and lit his hair perfectly, just like she'd always dreamed.

"Tell me when to stop."

She almost laughed at that, but then he was kissing her again. He knelt above her, both knees to the one side of her, and one hand braced on the lounge, while the other moved from her hip up to her chest again. She gasped against his lips when he squeezed her breast, running his thumb across her.

I could shake her. "As a Senior Consultant and one of the major forces behind Malfoy Consulting, you are expected to be there."

Her hands go to her hips, and I know whatever comes next is going to be good.

"Don't you mean as the *Golden Girl*, I'm expected to be there?"

She doesn't disappoint. "Excuse me?"

"I was hired to be Senior Consultant over Non-Wizard Relations, not the face of Malfoy Consulting Group."

"What are you going on about, Granger—?"

"I know about Wentworth," she interrupts.

I stare at her, trying to catch up. She accuses me of using her, using her name to land Wentworth. A conversation over Butterbeer floats through my memories, and I suppose I did mention her to Wentworth when he asked me for a reason to sign on. But that's… that's not…

"I might have said I was offering you the position but I don't remember telling Wentworth you had signed on."

"But you didn't—!" She remembers to keep her voice down. "But you didn't offer me the position. You toasted a champagne glass at me."

"Same thing."

"Listen, Malfoy," she begins, and my eye twitches at my surname again. "I'm happy to defend you to those that don't believe in you, or write letters of recommendation. I'm happy to stand up for this company and what it represents. And I'm happy to help you make a mark in this world, but don't you dare assume anything about me without asking."

She dips her chin at the end. Like she's made her point.

She thinks I *assume* things about her. About her value and potential. And I'm only angry that she doesn't assume them herself.

She thinks I want her for her name? For her titles? She thinks I want the Golden Girl by my side, when all I've ever wanted was her.

I refuse to stay seated like some child she can scold.

"The only thing I *assumed* about you, Granger, was how ridiculously undervalued you were at the Ministry." I round my desk, moving toward her. And she does the smart thing, placing a chair between us. "I *assumed* the Ministry would destroy you like it destroys all dreamers. And I *assumed* that you could do better."

"You came to me with the werewolf project, knowing I couldn't resist—"

"I came to you with a project to lure you to me, yes." I step closer, only the chair between us. "To make you see what you could be capable of. What *we* could be capable of." I'm stumbling too close to the truth, but I can't pull back now. "But I don't give a fuck about the werewolves."

She trembles, eyes on fire. This fucking chair. I should be pressed against her already.

She mumbles, trying to keep her moral high ground. "You... You shouldn't have told people I'd be heading up this branch without knowing for sure."

I want to laugh at her. It was never about the branch.

"I *created* this branch for you," I hum, eyes dipping over her neck and chest as she draws ragged air. "There would be no Non-Wizard Relations branch of Malfoy Consulting without you." She swallows and her throat flutters. "It was tailor made for you and only you. To give you exactly what you wanted."

And I wonder if I give too much away, but then she licks her lips.

"Next time," she whispers, "ask me if I want it."

And there's so many things I want to ask. So many things I already *should* have asked.

Can I kiss you.

Can I touch you here.

Can we continue.

I wonder if she feels as out of control as I do. She needs me to ask. She needs to give.

Like I never asked about fucking her against a wall. I wasn't going to wait for her to give it to me.

Ask her.

And a breathy New York accent swirls inside my head. *Maybe because you weren't the one askin'.*

"I would like for you to come with me to the Governors' Ball."

There. That wasn't so hard, sugar.

I continue, "There are several people attending who will not only be great connections for Malfoy Consulting, but also for you personally."

She looks at me like I've asked her out on Valentine's Day. And I hope that's what she's thinking. Terrified that's what she's thinking.

"I- I have nothing to wear."

Relief shivers over me. "I'm sure we can get Pansy to whip something up." I smile, walking to my desk so I can send her an owl.

I suddenly can't wait to hear what Pansy has to say about this development—

Until she reminds me that Pansy is away in Italy. I'm sure she told me, but…

"Fuck. You honestly have nothing at home?"

"I mean, if it was socially acceptable to wear the same dress I wore to New Year's…"

She chuckles, and I remember her skin in that dress. The way the fabric draped over her hips, teasing. Could she wear it again, and be on my arm? My hand on her back as I weave her through the crowd, fingers tracing patterns on her skin.

I look away, trying to remember what we're talking about.

"I'm exactly where I planned to be. Just as I had planned to be here the last time we danced to this song."

She stopped, back where she started. Her pulse buzzing. He couldn't mean…

She watched as he smirked at her, eyes flashing, then turned back to his original partner.

"Herminy?"

She turned, eyes glassy, and saw Viktor reaching for her. She took his hand just as the next movement started.

She couldn't breathe. She couldn't—

She stepped on Viktor's toes and he grunted. She let him lead her, twirling, and she let her eyes search for Draco. Trying to spot him amongst the dancers.

Viktor bowed. Was the dance done? It just began. She bent her knees in a most inappropriate curtsey, and told him she needed a drink and would be right back.

She turned, ignoring the Bulgarian voice asking if she would like him to retrieve it for her, eyes running over the crowd.

She couldn't breathe. She put her hand to her stomach, feeling the gold silk, and turned down a quiet hallway.

For years, she'd dreamed about how fate had brought them together for only a moment at the Yule Ball. She'd thought of the way he'd looked at her that night, wondering what it was he was thinking.

She heard her heels click. And then the snap of dragon leather.

She wasn't ready. She… What did he mean?

She heard the dragon leather faster.

"Granger."

She stopped. She was at the end of the hallway, and he was just behind her.

"I didn't mean to… scare you or…"

She heard the frustrated sound of him pushing his hair back. She wanted to look at him but didn't trust herself.

"When did this start for you? Please, tell me," she whispered.

Silence. And she was terrified. Maybe that's not what he had meant.

"Fourth year."

There was panic in her chest, and joy swirled around it. She turned around, and his face was as terrified as she felt.

"I win." She smirked at him.

He blinked at her, confused.

She closed the gap between them, and his eyes darkened.

"Oh, you stupid bint." He reached for her, and she almost laughed as he kissed her.

"I get to help Magical Creatures and Muggle-borns." She took the plunge. "There's a project I'm working on now that might be of interest to you…" She looked up at him through her lashes and saw he was still with her. "Do you know of the Golden Snidgets?"

Ten minutes of light conversation and Hermione had Viktor eating out of the palm of her hand. He nodded at everything she said, and agreed with every injustice against the little birds. She told him she was thinking of contacting him, to see about some publicity, and he was thrilled at the thought of hearing from her again.

She was about to mention another boring fact about the Golden Snidget population when the string quartet behind her started a new movement. Hermione turned to look, recognizing the tune, and when she looked back, Viktor held out his hand.

"Dance vith me again, Hermyown?"

She nodded, and placed her hand in his. He led her onto the dance floor, joining other couples. They faced each other, and Hermione was so glad she had just gone over this dance with Miss Truesdale.

The French Waltz began to play.

Viktor bowed, keeping his eyes on her.

She smiled at him, and curtseyed back once it was the lady's turn. She thought Miss Truesdale would be quite proud of how deep her curtsey was.

She stepped into Viktor's arms, one hand on his shoulder, the other in his hand, and they waltzed. He pressed her to him as he lifted her, the silk heating against her skin, and she giggled when he set her down.

This was easy. It was so easy to dance with Viktor Krum, like no time had passed. Like there wasn't a war and Cedric Diggory was still alive, and Sirius and Remus and Snape and Fred and Dumbledore. They turned around each other, and then she followed what she remembered, turning right to meet the gentleman two couples away.

And her heart stopped when it was Draco Malfoy. Again. Smirking.

The same dance. The same song. The same partners.

His eyes flashed at her before he bowed, just like he had five years ago. When he straightened, she smiled, chuckling under her breath. She curtseyed as well as she could.

"What are you laughing at, Granger?"

She rose and met his eyes, smiling. "Coincidences."

He held up his right hand. She brought hers to his, but did not touch him, just like she hadn't five years ago. Only now for so many more reasons.

"I don't believe in coincidences," he said. They began the turn around each other.

"Oh, really?" She smirked back at him, thinking if he only knew…

I ask her about that dress. She thinks maybe it was from Desrosiers. Luckily, Narcissa Black has an account there.

I'm at the fireplace on one knee calling for Madame Desrosiers. She pops through, making small talk before I ask if she remembers styling Hermione Granger.

Her eyes brighten, and I tell her I need it done by tomorrow. She doesn't bat an eye, knowing that I'll be paying double for it. I tell her she can make it similar to the white dress, and she says in French, "You want more décolletage, no?"

I chuckle and shake my head at her, telling her to do what she thinks I'd like the best. She winks at me. And asks me for the color.

I say gold before I can stop myself.

She sends me kisses in goodbye, and I stand to make a note for Carrie to follow up on the bill on Monday.

"They'll send your dress directly to you by tomorrow afternoon. It's close enough to your New Year's dress without being too close."

"Send me the bill," she says.

I laugh. She would never pay this much for a dress. And yet the feeling of buying her something, of making her feel special… I could do that every day.

But she would never accept that from me.

But Pansy gets to give her things, and pretend she gets nothing in return.

"What is different about your partnership with Pansy?" I ask. "She is riding on your coattails just as much."

"It's completely different."

I finish my note and look up at her. "How?"

"She… I'm getting something in return. It's helping her image as well as my own."

Getting something in return. And I wonder how much more I can give her before there's nothing left of me.

"So, you're not getting enough from our relationship, Granger?" I can't believe she needs more from me. More to prove myself. To prove that she can have anything she asks. "I'll give you the Snidgets," I say. "Let's move up the court date."

I've surprised her. She's stammers her way through a response and I give her another.

"Or the Muggle-Born Integration Project? It's approved."

We'll figure out the logistics later. Now the only thing I care about is how speechless she is, how astonished she is that I can give her the things that she wants.

I'm in over my head when I say, "Or whatever pet project you want. It's yours. Fully supported."

She's breathless, and I imagine this is the equivalent of giving a woman a diamond necklace, and then a box of matching earrings, and then the tennis bracelet. But Granger will never want those things, as much as I want to give them to her. To see her wear them every day while women look on in jealousy and men's eyes slide over her sparkling body.

My feet have carried me closer to her. And she watches me with open lips.

"But you'll need to realize that it's not Draco Malfoy they'll want to see at these galas and fundraisers and dinner parties. It's Hermione Granger, activist, war hero, Golden Girl. You'll need to use that celebrity to get what you want."

I'm in front of her now. And I almost ask her if we can continue. If I can have her again.

She blinks up at me with thick lashes, and in a low vixen's voice, says, "You may need to teach me how."

The things I could teach her.

"We can start tomorrow night," I hum.

She nods, looking at my lips, like we're sharing thoughts. Like she's also imagining my mouth between her legs, *teaching* her.

Teaching Hermione Granger. What a quick learner she'd be. Like with everything, she'd excel far past my instructions. Creating new ways to make me come, new ways to cross my eyes and shake my legs.

My hands curl in my pockets. I swallow and step back from her.

"Your Bulgarian will be there tomorrow." I watch her brows raise in surprise.

"Viktor? At the Governors' Ball?"

"Mm-hm. You can talk to him about the Snidgets. Try to get his support."

She looks down, brain working. "Wonderful."

"A few other people who I think you could get on your side for any of your causes," I say. "I can introduce you."

"Okay."

And I can't wait to roam the ballroom with her at my side, meeting people and whispering in her ear.

"See you at seven."

After she's left, I call Madame Desrosiers again, asking for a redesign of my suit for tomorrow.

~*~

Saturday, February 12, 2000

Blaise looks ridiculous. But he's confident that he'll get laid tonight, so I guess that's all he needs.

"Granger." Blaise's voice pulled her to look back at him. She pressed her lips together, trying to keep them from trembling. Blaise raised a brow, and smirked at her.

"I meant you."

She blinked at him, as his full lips split into a huge grin. His eyes crinkled. And he snorted.

"Oh…" She felt her cheeks warm. "Oh, no. Er, Draco and I aren't…"

Blaise laughed. "Oh, you're in so much trouble, Granger…"

"No, I mean… What I meant to say was –"

Blaise bent over, hands on his knees. His laugh was booming around them.

"That's not… um…" Hermione stammered.

Blaise stood, wiping the tears from his eyes. "Merlin, I'm glad I clarified. The first girl in a gold dress you ran into would have been Avada'd on the spot!"

Hermione felt how hot her face was and she shook her head at him. "I didn't mean …."

"Best of luck tonight, Granger." Blaise clasped her shoulder. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do." He winked at her, and left her sputtering.

Hermione found Draco a bit later, across the room speaking to a wizened and grey man. They were turned in to each other, having what looked like a very serious conversation. Before she had an opportunity to wander that way, she ran into several people that she had met at the New Year's Gala. She spent some time catching up with them.

She was just turning to excuse herself from a particularly boring conversation, when her eyes landed on Viktor Krum, standing three paces from her, waiting to speak with her.

His eyes lit up when she saw him. He smiled and she couldn't help but to smile back.

"Herminny," he said, and she threw her head back and laughed at how things never change.

He reached for her hand, and brought it to his lips. He hadn't aged a day it seemed. His hair was still short, his neck and shoulders still broad, and his eyes were still kind. He wore deep red robes, and when he pulled his lips away from her hand, she could see that his eyes were deep brown, like she remembered.

"Viktor, how are you?" She smiled.

"I am vell." His eyes danced over her face. "You are still beautiful."

She blushed. "You are still playing for Bulgaria, yes? I know a bit more about Quidditch these days because I know so many more Quidditch players!"

"Yes. I play your Ronald Veasley in two veeks." He looked back and forth between her eyes at Ron's mention, then continued. "You are vorking vith Draco Malfoy?"

"Yes," she said. "I am heading up a branch for Non-Wizard Relations."

"And vat does that mean?" He grinned.

She was elated that they had just secured the funding for the Werewolf Project. She was confused at how they had done it, but she felt slightly giddy.

As Slughorn grabbed the attention of a passing gentleman, Draco leaned down to whisper in her ear.

"I need to speak with Horace about something, but this gentleman here is the youngest Hogwarts governor. He's also Muggle-born."

She looked up into his grey eyes, and nodded. This was her opportunity to discuss the Muggle-born Integration Program with someone who could actually support it.

Draco shook the governor's hand, and stepped to the side with Slughorn – hand sliding across her back as he moved away, thumb grazing the skin – as Hermione introduced herself. She watched out of the corner of her eye as Draco asked Slughorn a question, and the older man's eyes opened wide and he nodded erratically. Slughorn escorted Draco away, and Hermione refocused on her discussion with the Hogwarts governor.

Twenty minutes later, as she was saying goodbye to the governor, promising to be in touch, Draco had still not returned. She set her empty champagne glass down on a passing tray and turned to see that the dancing had started in the middle of the ballroom. She edged her way toward a pillar, and searched the room for someone familiar to talk to.

"*Merlin*, what a sight!"

She turned to see Blaise approaching her, running his eyes over her dress, her hair.

"Eyes up here, Blaise." She pointed at her face.

"An impossible request."

She looked him over. He was wearing a pink suit. She blinked at him, amazed at his nerve.

"Someone's in the Valentine's Day spirit," she said.

He leaned with her against the pillar and said, "Well, I assumed most single women would be in red for the Ball. I wanted to make sure I matched for the pictures."

She grinned. "And how are the prospects? Anyone caught your eye?"

"Besides present company, you mean?" He winked at her. "There's not enough singles here," he whined, looking out over the dancers. "A few here and there, but I don't even have my proper wingman. Even *Draco's* here with someone."

She felt her blood run cold and the smile drop off her face. She looked at him, searching wildly.

"What?"

Blaise kept his eyes on the crowd. "Some gorgeous model in a gold dress."

Hermione frowned, trying to suck in air. That's why he was in gold accents. To match a different girl in a gold dress. Why would he…? Was he with her now?

She turned to scan the dance floor, looking for gold.

The ballroom is luminescent, silks and lights all coming together beautifully. Skeeter has already gotten her claws into me, but after some expert flirting, I escaped without truly answering her question about if I had a date tonight.

I don't know.

I've spotted several potential clients that I'll want to talk to this evening, but my hands are sweating, so I don't want to introduce myself now.

I'm waiting for her.

I'm fiddling with my timepiece when I feel the need to look up, like there's a string tugging on me whenever she's near.

A witch in a gold dress stands at the top of the stairs and I glide to the bottom of them. She smiles at me, gathering her dress to descend.

Madame Desrosiers deserves a tip.

I drink her in, ankles appearing under the hem, soft silk slipping over her curves, a bodice fitted and open, delving neckline drawing my eyes to her delicate breasts. I finally move back to her eyes and she blushes.

Eyes on me.

Until a bulb flashes, and Rita Skeeter has drawn her from me. She's four steps away, one foot off the stair, and Rita asks her if she has a date tonight.

She looks to me, anxious.

And maybe this wasn't the start of something. Maybe if she had to define it, it wouldn't be a date.

That's fine. It's more than fine. What we have is more than fine.

I step away so Skeeter can't see me. Can't connect us again. I'll find her later. We don't have to walk the party together, as a team, as a couple.

"I will refuse to answer that incredibly invasive question, Rita, but if you'd like to photograph me walking away with Draco Malfoy, feel free," she sings.

I look up at her, heart pounding, and meet her smirk as she glides down the last few stairs, slipping her hand into mine as the camera flashes.

Like she's mine.

I steer her away from Skeeter, towards the champagne, lifting two glasses.

She's smiling softly, content.

I should compliment her dress. Her hair. I lean in to tell her she looks beautiful, even though that word is meaningless with her looking so good.

And Horace Slughorn is suddenly here with us, splashing his brandy on the marble. He kisses her cheek, and I lift a brow.

"Miss Granger! You are a *vision*, my dear!" To me: "And my favorite Slytherin – don't tell Mr. Zabini."

He chuckles, and I shake his hand. "I wouldn't dream of it."

He proceeds to "collect" us into his Slug Club, and I bite my tongue to remind him I refused to join in sixth year. I need him tonight.

And just like that, he's guiding us toward a woman who works exclusively with the small werewolf population in Germany.

I press my hand to her back, like I used to. Lower, much lower than before, and her muscles twitch under the silk.

From there, Slughorn escorts us over to someone else. If I don't recognize their name, then I must have decided that they aren't worth knowing. But Granger is glowing under the introductions, shaking hands with the vampire bravely and asking her own questions without Slughorn.

I watch the way her mouth moves, her teeth white and flashing. I let my palm drift higher as she shifts, finally kissing the skin of her back. I watch the shiver run her shoulders, skin pulling tight as my fingers brush lightly against the top of her hip.

Like she's mine.

She licks her lips when I do it again, eyes concentrated on the vampire, and I dip my eyes to her breasts to watch her nipples pull tight, aching.

I pull my eyes away, smiling at whoever we're talking to, feeling my cock harden, aching.

Slughorn steers us away, and I'm about to separate us from him to find a quiet corner where I can ask if she minds if I suck on her neck for a while when he runs us into one of the people I intended to find tonight.

Rhett Buckworth. Philanthropist. Retired politician. But most importantly, Townsend's Hogwarts-rival-turned-reluctant-friend.

Thank you, Tommy, for this most helpful information.

Slughorn does the introductions, and I don't even flinch when Buckworth calls me "Lucius's boy," because I'm so looking forward to this.

"Tell me, Mr. Buckworth, do you still keep in touch with Geoffrey Townsend?" I ask. And I feel her look to me in question. He confirms, and I say, "Granger just had a meeting with him last week."

She blinks up at me, pretty eyes trying to figure me out.

I'm *teaching* you, Granger.

I navigate her through the conversation, even daring to press on her back, pushing her to talk more. She follows my lead, playing innocent so well. Because she is – she has no idea what we're doing.

"Granger just had a meeting with him last week," Draco said. Hermione blinked at him. Was he not there at dinner as well? Draco looked down at her and gave her the smallest nod that she couldn't dream of interpreting correctly.

"Is that right?" Mr. Buckworth said. "He always loved beating me at Quidditch in school. How is the old fellow?"

Hermione turned to Mr. Buckworth. "He's wonderful. I had a lovely meeting with him." She felt Draco's hand on her back, pressing slightly. She gave it a whirl. "We were discussing my current project, the Werewolf Policy. We're taking it to the Wizengamot next month, trying to get equal rights for employment and education for werewolves. Mr. Townsend was so generous – he pledged a considerable amount to our fundraising goal."

"Oh?" Mr. Buckworth said. And Hermione watched the man's lips twist and his eyes narrow. Had she said something wrong? He continued, "So Geoffrey is still throwing his money around, is he?"

Draco chuckled next to her. Hermione felt like she was missing something. Was she not supposed to bring up the fundraising?

"How much did he pledge?" Mr. Buckworth asked, eyes squinting.

Hermione blinked at him.

"I think just about half of the goal," Draco supplied, looking down at her like he needed confirmation of his facts. The glint was still in his eyes, and she recognized it. She'd seen it before on him. It meant he was winning.

"Of course, he did," Mr. Buckworth muttered. He looked at a spot over Hermione's shoulder, then brought his eyes back to her. "At your next meeting, you tell him that his old pal Rhett matched his donation." He looked to Draco. "*And* he sent a lovely fruit basket on Monday morning."

What… what just happened.

Draco chuckled, saying something about Mr. Buckworth's generosity and shook his hand. They made some kind of joke about how Draco's favorite fruit was those chocolate-dipped strawberries, and Hermione felt Draco's thumb brush across her skin again. Like praise.

Slughorn pulled Mr. Buckworth's attention with an old story about flobberworms, and Hermione turned to Draco's shoulder.

"I have no idea what just happened," she whispered.

"You just secured your fundraising for your first project, Granger." His voice washed over the top of her head and down her neck.

"I… I didn't do anything, though."

"You were perfect."

He was teaching her, like he'd promised.

higher when they were speaking to the vampire novelist, letting his thumb brush across the bare skin in a way that could be purely accidental, but made every hair on her body stand up and shake.

"Ah! Mr. Buckworth!" Slughorn's voice pulled her out of her thoughts. "Mr. Buckworth, come meet my friends here."

A broad man about her grandfather's age approached, extending his hand to Slughorn. She felt Draco shift next to her, and she glanced at him quickly to see that he was focused solely on Mr. Buckworth.

"Mr. Buckworth, you know my friend Draco Malfoy, yes?" Slughorn gestured to Draco with his brandy glass. Hermione thought she maybe felt a drop land on her foot.

Buckworth looked to Draco. "Lucius's boy. My, my. You've been making quite a splash!" Buckworth smiled and shook Draco's hand.

At Lucius's mention, Hermione checked in with Draco, waiting for his eye to twitch or for his feathers to ruffle at being called "Lucius's boy." Draco grinned. And shook his hand enthusiastically.

"Thank you Buckworth. My father talks about you very fondly. And you, of course, know Hermione Granger?"

She felt a slight push on her back, and she was stepping forward to shake hands with a friend of Lucius Malfoy. For the second day in a row, the sound of her first name from Draco's lips paused her brain processes.

"I don't know if I've had the pleasure!" Mr. Buckworth's smile was kind, and she appreciated that his eyes didn't rake down her body like so many of the people she'd been introduced to this evening. "Rhett Buckworth, Miss Granger."

"A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Buckworth. Do you know Horace from Hogwarts?"

"Er, yes and no." Mr. Buckworth chuckled and Slughorn giggled into his brandy. "Despite being a terrible student at Hogwarts, I worked with Horace after my time there, working with potions and the like."

"Oh, wonderful," Hermione said.

"Tell me, Mr. Buckworth, do you still keep in touch with Geoffrey Townsend?"

Hermione looked to Draco. He had a glint in his eye that she recognized, but it was so faint that she was sure no one else would see it.

"Geoffrey?" Mr. Buckworth leaned his torso in, like he hadn't heard correctly. "My! I haven't seen Geoffrey in years! Mighty fine potioneer, wasn't he, Horace?"

Slughorn mumbled something into his glass.

Buckworth pledges half, and a fruit basket.

"I do love those chocolate-covered strawberries, Mr. Buckworth." I smirk and shake his hand. He laughs boisterously.

She's blinking at the two of us. I run my thumb across the dip in her back. *Ten points to Gryffindor*.

"I have no idea what just happened," she whispers.

Slughorn distracts him for a moment, and I lean in, breathing in the scent of her, brushing my lips across her ear.

"You just secured your fundraising for your first project, Granger."

"I… I didn't do anything, though."

"You were perfect."

I'm about to turn us away so I can whisper more praise into her neck when I catch sight of an older gentleman hanging about the edge of the dance floor.

Dr. Flanders.

I don't take my eyes off him as I whisper to her, "I need to speak with Horace about something, but this gentleman here"—I gesture to my right—"is the youngest Hogwarts governor. He's also Muggle-born."

She looks up at me, understanding.

I introduce myself to the governor, leading to her introduction, and as I leave her I can't help but dance my fingers across her skin, hopefully burning the memory of me there.

"Horace," I say, taking him side. "Do you know a Dr. Flanders? He was at Hogwarts in—"

"Yes! Yes! Henry! I think he's here tonight!"

"I would love to speak to him."

And Slughorn delivers me to Dr. Flanders, leaving us to talk in private.

I spend thirty minutes with Dr. Flanders, explaining the case without giving particulars. He is a very optimistic healer, but tries not to show it. We make a date for him to come into the office to discuss more.

I can feel my skin humming when we part. If I can give her this…

No. That's not what this is about. It's… the right thing.

I found a solution to a problem, and how she thanks me for solving the problem is not the focus.

I spin to find her among the crowd, and it's easy to do. She glows.

I move to claim her again, but then I see the person she's talking to is Krum.

He's found her unattended. I had hoped I could prevent that.

I grab another glass of champagne while he smiles down at her, watching her mouth. She touches him – placing her hand on the broad plane of his shoulder. And I roll my own back, standing tall.

I pace the edge of the dance floor, watching them. Watching her gesture and smile, her eyes blazing. And watching his dull attention rest on her chest. She can't be daft enough to not notice.

There are couples on the dance floor. And I need her to look at me again.

I pace to the violinist as they finish the minuet, and I ask him politely if he would consider the French Waltz. I slip him ten Galleons. He sniffs in annoyance, but nods.

I cruise the edge of the dancers, watching as her eyes light up at the strings. I wonder if she still remembers it. Krum holds out his hand, making her laugh, and I watch like a predator as they join the circle of couples. I grab a blonde girl – fuck, maybe it's the same blonde girl from five years ago, who knows – and flash my smile at her.

"Do you know the French Waltz, love?"

She nods greedily as I force us into a position two couples away from them.

I watch as Krum bows to her, forgetting myself and bowing quickly to the girl. Granger curtseys back at him, a smooth dip of her legs that flows with the silk on her hips.

She slips into his arms, smiling up at him, and I pull the girl into me, waiting.

Waiting.

After an eternity, she spins out, landing in front of me. I smirk at her.

She stops dead where she is, and I know that she remembers. Maybe she plays it over in her head like I do, wishing we could have been partners all night.

I bow, keeping my eyes on hers. She chuckles, and I smile back at her.

She curtseys, like she's been practicing.

"What are you laughing at, Granger?"

Her eyes are mine again, only mine, and she says, "Coincidences."

I hold my hand up to hers, wondering if she'll touch me. Wondering if she's learned her lesson about touching me.

She places her hand a breath away and watches my face as I spin around her.

"I don't believe in coincidences." My heart thunders. Do I dare?

"Oh, really?" She smirks at me, shaking her head like I couldn't possibly know what she's thinking.

"I'm exactly where I planned to be," I say. "Just as I had planned to be here the last time we danced to this song."

And it feels like the brick wall in my mind hasn't crumbled. It feels like I've climbed it. Looking down from the top at what my life could have been.

She continued descending the last four steps, lifting her hand from the railing and slipping it into Draco's outstretched hand.

His fingers were warm as they slid across her palm, and the camera flashed. He tucked her arm around his, and turned them as she stepped off the last stair, heading away from Skeeter, and it was at that moment that Hermione realized that Draco's white suit was embroidered with gold thread.

She grinned down at her shoes, and Draco steered her to a tray of champagne glasses with strawberries at the bottom. He handed her a glass, and just as he turned to say something to her, a familiar voice caught her ear.

"Miss Hermione Granger!"

She turned and found Professor Slughorn sloshing toward them, his glass of brandy slopping around the edges and his cheeks ruddy.

"Professor!"

She barely had time to take him in before he was pressing a light kiss to her cheek. Oh, my.

"Miss Granger! You are a *vision*, my dear!" He turned his eyes on Draco. "And my favorite Slytherin – don't tell Mr. Zabini," he whispered.

"I wouldn't dream of it." Draco smirked, and shook his hand.

"I knew it, I said," Slughorn hiccupped. "I knew that I had chosen an excellent bunch for the Slug Club that year! Wildly successful consulting firm containing not one, but *three* of my students!"

Hermione pressed her lips together, keeping herself from mentioning that Draco had other things on his mind that year…

"Oh!" Slughorn burst. "I want to introduce you to someone, Miss Granger." He started turning away from them, gesturing for them to follow. "She was before your time at Hogwarts, but she would be an excellent contact for you."

They followed, Draco slipping her arm from his elbow, and placing his hand on her lower back.

That was so much worse. The silk was cool against her skin but heated immediately upon contact with him.

She mingled and spoke with Slughorn's friend. Thirty minutes into the evening, Hermione was surprised at how Slughorn had tossed them about the room, introducing them to four people who would all make excellent resources or clients for Malfoy Consulting. Hermione sipped her champagne and found a new respect for Horace Slughorn.

Throughout all the introductions, Draco kept his hand on her back. She couldn't tell which was worse – toward the beginning when he had his palm so low on the curve that she could feel electricity running in all directions every time she moved, or when he'd brought his hand slightly

He shook her hand and introduced her to his wife. The woman shook hands like Madame Michele liked, and Hermione reciprocated.

"I'm honored to be here tonight. Thank you for inviting Malfoy Consulting Group."

"Of course, of course!" He patted his chest with pride. "We are so excited to see what young Mr. Malfoy and yourself achieve."

She nodded politely, noting that he picked out only her and Draco from the whole of Malfoy Consulting.

He continued, "I believe Mr. Malfoy is already inside. Please enjoy yourself tonight, Miss Granger."

She smiled and stepped under the canopy of drapes, following the silks toward an entrance. She found herself on the second story of a large ballroom, counting twelve chandeliers lighting the room. Before her, the staircase split, rounding down the two sides to pour into the ballroom.

She was just wondering to herself if the purpose of the two staircases was aesthetic, or if there was a proper staircase to enter from, when Draco appeared at the bottom of the staircase to her right.

And it was decided.

She placed her hand on the railing, letting her other gather the silk material at her hip to keep from tripping, and stepped off the landing. She kept her eyes on him. He wore a white suit and a smirk.

He let his eyes wander down her form once before returning his gaze to her face. She felt a blush running up her neck before a flash went off to her left, and she turned her head to see Skeeter and her photographer set up in the middle of the two staircases.

"Miss Granger! You look stunning!" Skeeter screeched. "Tell me, do you have your eye on someone special this Valentine's Day?"

She stopped on the staircase, and blinked at her. She opened her mouth, make a squeaking sound, and closed it.

She turned back to Draco, still watching her, four stairs away.

How *mortifying*. Was this a date, or wasn't it?

And it was *her* decision in that moment?

Draco looked down. She watched him shift backwards, like he was about to step away from the stairs. From her. Step out of the way, and remove himself from the moment.

Hermione turned to Skeeter. "I will refuse to answer that incredibly invasive question, Rita, but if you'd like to photograph me walking away with Draco Malfoy, feel free."

Rita's eyes grew wide and greedy. She saw Bozo lifting the lens quickly, and Hermione turned to find Draco's eyes flashing at her.

She understands me. The way her mouth opens, and her body freezes. I know she understands me. She understands that even then I wanted this.

I smirk at her and spin away, not bothering to return to my partner, just watching Granger from the side.

She looks for me. She spins in a circle and then Krum is there. Even then she looks for me.

I smile, watching her want me.

But then she's stumbling, stepping on toes, and I watch her chest heaving.

And the smile melts away from my lips.

She's… terrified. She's hyperventilating. Because of me.

I pace the floor, closer to her, and watch as she thanks Viktor and moves away from the dance floor. No longer looking for me. Running from me?

Because I confessed. Because I opened myself and she saw who I've been for five years.

I chase her.

She's clicking away down a quiet hallway that I recognize from when I was here with Mother.

She speeds up when she hears me. But I can't stop. If she's afraid of this—I have to fix it. I have to go back.

I shouldn't have—

I can't lose her—

"Granger."

She finally stops. She won't face me. I can hear her breathing.

"I didn't mean to… scare you or…"

I push my hand through my hair. I'll say I was joking.

Wouldn't that have been funny, Granger? If five years ago I wanted to dance with you so badly that I forced my way in, that I took it from you?

"When did this start for you? Please, tell me." Softly into the air.

I can still take it back.

What, Granger? You never thought about me? Even once? And a wink at her.

"Fourth year," leaves my lips. Like Veritaserum seeping into my veins.

I shouldn't have danced with her. Now, or then. I shouldn't have assumed I could steal her attention from Krum. From someone she wanted. I don't deserve her eyes on me.

And then she turns around, looking at me.

"I win." She smirks.

Something she's won. Her eyes are kind as I try to piece together her question.

When did it start? She's won because it's been longer for her…

She steps into me, coming closer, offering herself to me.

Have we been dancing with each other all these years, without knowing?

"Oh, you stupid bint," I say, reaching for her, and she smiles against my mouth as I kiss her.

Just the same as before. Perfect.

My lips press into hers, finding a slower rhythm than before. A slow dance, as she wraps her arms around my shoulders, hands sliding behind my neck, and my fingers slip to her hips, spreading wide across the silk.

She presses her chest into mine.

I have to touch more of her.

She's surrounding me, pulling me under. And there's no use fighting the current.

I slide my hands down, lower, letting her cheeks fill my palms, delicious silk between us.

She lets me.

I walk us to the sitting room, holding her against the door while I fiddle with the handle. She breathes against my neck, and holds my head close.

The door gives and she's gone for a second as we fall inside, like teenagers looking for a closet.

I shut the door, turning us to press her against the wood. I feel her breasts against my chest. Soft and pressed flat. Will she let me see them? Touch them. Taste them.

I trace her side, finding her ribs against the silk as she breathes. I press my head to hers, and stare into her, pour into her my thoughts and wants.

I could stay like this forever if this is all she'll give me.

She's looking into my eyes, waiting. Then she's checking the room, behind me.

"Did you know this sitting room was here?"

I roll my eyes. "Granger, *you* led me down this hall, not the other way around." I need to kiss her again. "But, yes, I've been here before. My mother and I had tea on those chairs just last month."

"I miss your mother."

"Let's talk about her later, shall we?" I tease, and she smiles. A true smile.

Like I know the secret to her lips. How to make her smile.

She kisses me, pulling me down to her, and she drags her fingers through my hair, sending shivers down my back. I need more of her.

I reach for her arse again, because she already let me do that. My fingers squeeze her close.

And I imagine slipping inside of her, my hands on her cheeks, pulling them close to me on every thrust. Or bending her over one of these couches, and watching my cock slip in and out, hands on her arse, pushing her down into arm of the couch.

I pull my lips from hers, letting my thoughts drift back into place.

I can't have that.

She made it clear.

Tracey came over to wave. Ginny lifted her brows. "Oh, hello." Like it didn't bother her one bit.

"Alright, did you need something, Ginny?" Hermione felt her face flushing, and knew Daphne would be able to see it as she started applying her makeup.

"I was just popping in to let you know that I'll be home later tonight. Tomorrow's match is rescheduled due to weather," Ginny said. "But it looks like you won't be home!"

"Oh, alright. I'll see you when I get back then," Hermione said, aching to take off the dress.

"Have fun! Don't do anything I wouldn't do." Ginny winked at her, and disappeared.

Hermione closed her eyes. When she opened them, Tracey was looking over at her, hiding a smile.

"So. Up or down?"

"Er… Would up be best? Or is down alright?"

Hermione could hear a voice against her ear, whispering *Never do this* as he ripped her ponytail out. She looked up at Tracey, and it was like Tracey heard it too.

She smirked. "Let's do a little bit of both."

Hermione changed out of the gold dress, returned to the chair in the living room in her bathrobe, and let the girls continue. Daphne started applying her concealer, and Hermione tried to keep her face from flushing.

Daphne pulled back, looking down at her.

"Granger, are those love-bites?"

Hermione looked up at her, mortified as Daphne stared at her neck.

She popped through the fireplace at seven o'clock. The hall at the governor's mansion was just as large as Malfoy Manor, but instead of marble and snowflakes, she found warm tapestries and fluttering hearts.

She joined the receiving line, heading toward an entryway with swooping drapes, tied back with vines and finished with low lanterns.

Hermione realized she didn't have an invitation. Or an escort. At the New Year's Gala, she'd been sent an invitation and had even brought it with her, in case Narcissa needed to see it. Now she was just wandering toward a candlelit opening with a group of people, with nothing but the memory of a memo on her desk.

As she approached, she saw there was no list, and no one checking invitations, but she also had no idea who was standing at the entrance, shaking hands. He was a grey-bearded gentleman with kind eyes, and his considerably younger wife hung off his arm like a purse.

"Miss Granger!" the man said. He smiled brightly at her and Hermione decided to smile back.

"Er…" Hermione stammered. The dress was similar to the New Year's Gala white dress. Ginny had made her wear her hair down that night, even though the witch styling her suggested up.

"What's your dress like?" Daphne asked, as she mixed some goo together to match her skin tone.

"It's gold. And floor length."

"Will you go put it on?" Tracey asked with wide eyes. Daphne looked like she more wanted to make sure she was matching her makeup tones, but Tracey looked quite giddy.

"Er… yes…"

Hermione went to her room and slid into the gold dress. She hadn't tried it on yet. The silk was cold against her skin, and it was cut very much like the white dress. She was planning on transfiguring the color of her New Year's shoes to gold so she could wear them with this dress too.

She came out of her room. Tracey gasped. Daphne appeared over her shoulder and sent her a very Slytherin smirk.

Hermione stepped into the living area where the light was better. "I'll need to wear a different bra, I know," she said as she turned. The dress was backless just like the white one, but the front was slightly different.

Just as Tracey was about to talk about her hair again, the fireplace roared to life and Ginny's head popped through. Her eyes went wide.

"What the fuck are you wearing!? What is that?!" Her mouth dropped open.

"I – Ginny!" Hermione jumped. "What are you doing?"

"What are *you* doing?? I go out of town for three days and now you're the Queen of England?"

"I'm going to a Valentine's Ball tonight."

Ginny gasped. "With Malfoy?"

Hermione's eyes popped out of her head. Ginny couldn't see Daphne and Tracey from her view of the living room. Hermione had also not gotten a chance to talk with Ginny about much of anything this week.

"With… Malfoy Consulting, yes," Hermione tried. She looked to Daphne and Tracey quickly. Tracey was smirking, heating up a few hair instruments, and Daphne raised a brow at her.

"*Merlin's beard,* Hermione." Ginny looked her up and down again. "Do you need me to teach you the Contraceptive Charm before you go?"

Ginny wiggled her eyebrows at her. Hermione froze with her mouth open. She heard Tracey snort.

"I...I…" Hermione stammered. "Tracey and Daphne are here, doing my hair and makeup."

So, she'll need to tell me what I can have or else I'll just take it from her.

She told me I should ask.

"Tell me what you want."

I slide against the silk, dragging one hand over her breast, asking.

"Everything," she moans.

No, no, no, no, no.

Stupid, stupid girl. Why would you do that.

I squeeze my eyes tight, breathing harshly.

If she really—

If I can touch her—

Taste—

Maybe even press inside—

If she'll let me please her, if she'll let me drag pleasure from her body, if she'll let me watch as she comes, listen to her moan and maybe my name—

Maybe she'll know it's me.

Not against a wall again. Not like this.

I crush her to me and lift her. She gasps and the laugh – the giggle – she whispers into my ear shoots to my chest and I'm too warm.

I drop her down on the chaise, and the feeling of her fingers on my shoulders, begging me to stay with her…

I'm too warm. A fever in my chest.

I sit up on knees, pulling my jacket off to toss somewhere when I catch sight of her, lying in front of me, waiting for me to return to her. In silk.

Her hair.

Her eyes.

Her breath.

I can do this. I can make this good for her. I can make her moan and come apart with my hands, and maybe she'll let me do it again.

Maybe she'll ache for me, and in another few weeks I can offer myself to her again.

I grip the back of the chaise, and press closer to her, watching her eyes darken. My right hand on her waist, ready to carve her body into my memory, and I whisper against her lips, "Tell me when to stop."

I bring our lips together again, keeping it soft. Slow. Tasting her delicately. My hand drifts up her ribcage, fingers searching for the swell, the lift of her breast against the silk. I concentrate on the handful of her, curl my fingers into her, and find her peak with my thumb. Hard and pebbled through her bra and the dress.

She wheezes into my mouth – "Oh, god, Draco."

My name on her breath, like she's begging me to touch her. Like she knows it's my hand on her, my thumb rolling her nipple, my body hovering over hers.

Like she might belong to me.

My jaw clenches with the desire. She yelps. I bit her.

Fuck.

"I'm sorry." Her lips are too precious. I move to her neck. Skin I can tear into.

I suck the skin into my mouth. The same place I bruised her earlier this week – and was that only days ago?

I taste the makeup there. And set to licking it off. My hand palms her again, thumb pushing against her.

And she touches my waist, both hands on my sides. She doesn't have to. She can just lay back and feel.

"More. Please, Draco."

Begging for it.

Begging *me.*

And I lose my breath, wondering at her voice against my ear while I'm inside of her, while she shivers around me, *begging* me to fuck her, asking me for more. Asking me for something only I can give to her.

She presses her knee to my hip. She wants more.

I stretch my legs out, remembering this from years before. Remembering rubbing and hips rolling. The sensation of sex without being inside the heat.

She sighs against my ear when my torso rolls down to meet hers. Her hips open, cradling me like we fit together. I feel my cock respond to the heat below me. I feel her breasts against my chest again.

"Better?"

"Yes, god," she moans.

I look at her, her eyes fluttering shut, her lips parted and panting.

I press our mouths together, wet kisses between shallow breaths.

Her hips jump, pressing tight to mine. Perfect. Perfect girl.

She does it again, on purpose now, like she knows I could come in my trousers, like she wants me to.

Like she wants me to rock against her slowly, pressing my cock against her knickers, and give her the friction she needs—

I slither between us to rub at her breast, to tug at her nipple.

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Thirty One

She told Morty about the Ball that night, and asked if possibly he could cover the last hour of the evening so she could get home and get ready.

"Absolutely not." He frowned at her. "You will leave at noon today, young lady."

She blinked at him. "I'm sorry?"

"The Valentine's Ball is a huge event! I don't want you doddering around a bookshop when you should be getting ready!"

She gaped at him. "I… Well, I don't need that much time. I'd hate to inconvenience you—"

"And don't worry about tomorrow." He waved the air, beginning up the stairs to his flat. "You'll need to recuperate!"

"What? No, Morty. I'll be in tomorrow!"

"Don't even think of it!" he yelled back at her.

She pouted. "Fine! But I'll be in by noon!"

The door slammed to his apartment.

She frowned.

When he forced her out of the store at twelve that day, Hermione went home and showered, preparing for Daphne and Tracey to come over.

She'd owled them as she left work the day before, asking if she could pay them to fix her up for the Ball.

It was odd, having the two of them over without Pansy. Pansy was always the one chatting and gossiping about old friends, so when Tracey played music from her wand, Hermione resolved to remain quiet for the afternoon.

"Do we want it up or down tonight?" Tracey asked, breaking the silence.

She moans into my mouth, and I delve between her thighs, pressing my cock tight to her. She squeaks and I can feel her thighs around me, her arms holding my chest to her, nails digging into my shirt.

"Tell me when to stop," I beg her, and then I'm fucking her slowly, the fabric between us, my hand torturing her breast, my hipbones digging into hers. I show her what our bodies could do together.

And she meets my thrust with a moan, and I feel my balls tighten. It's too close. I can't –

I can't—

I need to—

I lift off of her, my cock missing her already. I stare down at her, swallowing hard while my right hand finds her hip, silk already pooling around her waist. I follow the line of her lace towards her center, and I wonder if I'll be able to finish her off before I come in my trousers.

I kiss her neck.

Maybe she'll let me use my mouth.

I touch her. Finally. Only lace between us. She bites my ear, and I gasp into her hair. I press against her again, feeling her wet for me.

"God, please, please, please." Her voice washing over my ear. And I force myself to go slow in case she wants to stop.

"Tell me – Tell me when to stop." I'm almost begging her now. I really should have asked at the beginning how far we'll go. Instead of waiting for her stop me.

I'm rubbing circles against her perfect cunt now, and she mumbles, moaning.

"Why would you stop? What's wrong?"

"If you want me to stop…" I pull back to look down at her, a blush running down her neck. Her eyes black. "If you want to stop—" She has to tell me.

"Why the fuck would we stop!" she screams.

And I feel like I missed something.

"Because… because I'm a virgin?" she asks. "Is that why?"

Yes? I look down at her, wondering if she doesn't remember.

"That's why you stopped us. Last time."

"*I* stopped us?" She pushes at me and I sit back. She sits up and screeches, "*You* stopped us!"

"*You* said you had never – So I pulled away!"

"Yes, I *remember*," like it offends her. "But I never asked you to stop!"

That is… *definitely* not what happened. But am I to argue with her at a time like this.

I'd asked her, minutes ago. *Tell me what you want*.

And she'd said, *Everything*.

But she doesn't know what *Everything* means to me.

I could be inside of her. I could fuck her into this couch like she was mine. And it still wouldn't be my Everything.

"If you don't tell me to stop," I hum between us, giving her one last chance, "then I'm going to take you, Granger. Right here on this chaise lounge."

I wait. I wait for her to revise her wishes.

"What are you waiting for."

I shove her back, my hands going to her chest, needing her breasts, needing to see her, feel her taste her.

She had her fucking chance.

I rip the dress down the middle until I can see her lace bra, licking my lips at the way she gasps.

"What are you—?"

"I'll buy you a thousand dresses," I promise, leaning down to take her mouth.

She pants against me as I suck and kiss down her jaw to her chest, barely pausing before attaching my lips to her breast. She groans the most delicious sound, and I know I have to hear it again.

She holds my head to her chest, and I lick and suck at the lace, moving my hand under her dress again, sighing when she shivers.

I slip under her knickers, savoring every moment. Her hips jump against my hand when I find her clit.

My tongue and teeth on her chest, and she clutches me closer.

She wants me. She wants me inside of her, pumping into her, making love to her.

I rub harder on her, listening to her breath as she pants. I look up at her. Her face tilted back, eyes squeezed shut.

"Look at me."

Her eyes drift open and her thighs twitch around my hand. I slip down and press one finger inside of her, consumed by her heat, swirling harder on her clit, and I watch her eyes the moment she climaxes, just before they roll back and her hands grip the chaise.

She moans, her neck stretching, her legs squeezing my hand. And I rub large circles against her as she comes down.

She looks at me again, eyes hazy. And I would do it all again. I wouldn't change a single moment in our pasts just to keep this.

She sits up, pushing me off her. And I wonder if that's all.

But then she's pulling her ragged dress off her shoulders and lifting her arms until her bra is off. I have to brace myself when I see her naked chest for the first time. And then she starts unbuttoning my shirt.

"But you'll need to realize that it's not Draco Malfoy they'll want to see at these galas and fundraisers and dinner parties. It's Hermione Granger, activist, war hero, Golden Girl. You'll need to use that celebrity to get what you want."

He stopped in front of her, close enough to touch. She breathed as evenly as she could, the echo of her first name on his lips.

She looked up at him through her lashes. "You may need to teach me how."

His jaw clicked. He took a deep breath, and she noticed his hands were still in his pockets, purposefully away from her. "We can start tomorrow night," he whispered.

She nodded.

He looked down, stepping back. "Your Bulgarian will be there tomorrow." He checked her reaction.

"Viktor?" She raised her brows. "At the Governors' Ball?"

"Mm-hm." Draco hummed. "You can talk to him about the Snidgets. Try to get his support."

She bit her lip, thinking. "Wonderful," she said, eyes dancing over the carpet.

"A few other people who I think you could get on your side for any of your causes," he said. "I can introduce you."

She looked up at him. "Okay."

His eyes ran over her face and he said, "See you at seven."

The dress arrived Saturday morning. A box she recognized from the last time Desrosier's delivered a dress to her. Hermione pulled off the top, and peeled back the tissue paper, anxious to find what kind of dress Draco had ordered for her.

Her breath left her in a puff as her fingers dragged over the silk.

It was gold.

I slide out of her, holding her up with my arms, and push back in. Merlin, this sensation. This mind-blowing feeling.

I kiss her slow, lazy and without intent.

She moves, trying to set a pace, and I pull back to wait for her permission. I move faster, still a slow glide, hitting deep inside her, waiting for the pain to reappear on her face. She nods again, and I let my hips move, grunting into her hair.

Her hair, down and wild, swallowing my breath.

I hear a rattle, and we both stop. The door shakes with my thrusts. She laughs and I move us to the next wall. I wonder if the office can hear it.

I wonder if I care. I almost open the door and yell out, Hello all, I'm fucking Hermione Granger.

The thought has my hips snapping. She gasps, and I watch her face. It's faster than it's been, deeper too. She blinks at me with wide eyes, and I twist my arm until I can push at her clit. She rolls her eyes back and I feel her squeezing around me as I pound her hips into the wall.

"Fuck," I moan.

And she's gasping, holding my cock inside of her so tight that I can only roll my hips.

~*~

Thursday, February 17, 2000

We're in her office today, but only because Buckworth is here to finalize things. I can't keep my eyes off her mouth as she talks policy and legalities.

I walk Buckworth out, adjusting myself before standing.

I come back to her office, silence the room, and lift her onto her desk. I take my time kissing her, undressing her. This was our only meeting today, and I told Carrie and Walter to clear our calendars for the rest of the day.

When I push everything off her desk to make room for her long body, she laughs, and looks up at me like I'm the answer to a difficult Arithmancy problem.

~*~

Friday, February 18, 2000

I'm dusting kisses across her ribs when I wonder at how they protrude.

I've now memorized her entire body in ways I can paint, but her skin is thin here.

I ask if she's been sick, and she laughs, reminding me that I've occupied her lunch breaks for the past five days.

I pull back from where I had leaned over her on my desk, ready to feast on her, maybe lick at her cunt again, suck at her tits, and then maybe ask her how she felt about bending over this here desk.

I button up, and go ask Carrie to bring us lunch in twenty minutes. No earlier.

She smiles at me when I return to her, and I pull her hips to the edge of my desk, sucking on her neck as I just say *fuck it*, and push inside of her.

I use every second of those twenty minutes, and she's clenching me and whining in my ear, and I'm pumping into her, slapping our skin together and circling her clit until she shivers and screams something unintelligible into the room. I come only moments after, and I barely have a second to lick the sweat off her skin before Carrie knocks at the door.

I pull out of her, and she tumbles off the desk, searching for her shoes. I tuck in my shirt, muttering a spell to pop the buttons through, and close my trousers. I poke my head out, thank Carrie, and take the food.

She probably knows. But bless her, she doesn't make a comment about my flushed face or sweaty hair.

Granger has her blouse closed by the time I shut the door.

She cons me into talking about actual work while we eat, and I suppose that is fine.

I ask her if she'll be at Cornerstone this weekend. I sense her hesitate before saying yes.

"Will you?" she asks.

I clean up the mess from my sandwich and say, "Maybe Sunday."

"Is there a book you need?" she teases.

"Something like that." I smirk back at her.

She smiles, and then says carefully, "What do you have tomorrow?"

I want to lie. But why would I?

"I'm visiting my father." I stare down at the carpets, and she stutters, trying to ask, so I say, "It was part of his conditions to the inheritance. That I visit him on the monthly visitations in January and February."

I turn to see her poking at the remains of her salad, methodically, like avoiding my eyes.

I take the container from her, and bend across her lap to kiss her.

Bleu cheese. Of course. Her and bleu cheese. Disgusting.

"If you'd told me we'd be kissing again, I wouldn't have ordered it." She smiles.

"No, no. It's your favorite," I say, kissing her again until I press her into the cushions.

~*~

Saturday, August 26, 1995

"This soufflé is absolutely decadent, Mrs. Malfoy," Pansy sings. "I would be honored if Remmy could share the recipe with Yolly, my father's elf."

My mother lifts a polite brow and says, "Of course, dear. I'll have Remmy get in touch."

"Thank you, Mrs. Malfoy. Draco," Pansy coos, "isn't it divine?"

I hate the soufflé, but I assume that's not quite the point.

"It's lovely," I say. And Father's lip twitches.

It's only quiet for a moment before Pansy starts again.

"Mrs. Malfoy, did I see a late Victorian lamp in the drawing room? It looks so similar to the Rashan that we have in the summer cottage. I wondered if it was designed by him as well?"

Mother blinks at her. "You know, darling, I have no idea. I would be happy to find out and write to you."

"Oh, no," Pansy says. "I was just curious. Please do not trouble yourself."

I rub at my temples before returning to the rotten soufflé.

"Miss Parkinson," Father asks. "How are your marks? Any favorite subjects? O.W.L.s coming up this year."

Pansy rattles on to Father about her marks. Pansy compliments my mother's taste again. Pansy talks about me an awful lot. Pansy is a nervous wreck.

"She'll do," Father says when Pansy and Mother have settled on the couch after dinner. Father pours me a Firewhisky and says, "You like her?"

I blink at him. "She's fine. She's… a lot."

Father smirks. "That will fade. She's terrified of your mother. As she should be." He drinks deeply from his glass. His eyes land on Pansy again, and then he says, "You know the contraception charm already?"

I cough, sputtering my drink.

"I—yes, Father."

"Good," he says. He looks to me. "You can never be too careful, Draco. If she gets pregnant, you will marry her. End of story." He looks back at Pansy and Mother. "Doesn't matter if you're fifteen or twenty-five, there will be no children outside of a union."

My hands shake as I nod and sip from my tumbler. "I know, Father." There was a brief mention of this two summers ago when he sat me down on the very chairs Mother and Pansy are perched on and told me things I never wanted to know about the female body.

"And trust me, Draco," he says, "Miss Parkinson knows it too." His eyes drift over Pansy again, and he says, "Don't trust her to cast the charm. That one knows exactly what she wants and exactly how to get it."

I frown at him.

"She wouldn't do that. She's masterful, yes, but not—"

"Draco," he says, turning to me and lifting a brow. "There's not a single person in this room that believes you wish to marry Miss Parkinson." He clasps my shoulder. "She will do whatever is necessary. Mark my words."

I watch as he brings two glasses of port to Pansy and Mother.

Pansy smiles brightly at me over Mother's shoulder.

~*~

My cock takes forever to soften as her tongue pushes into my mouth, drinking me down. Her breasts stay tight and hard against my chest, pushing up into me as her body rolls in slow waves.

I could probably make her come again, but we have a meeting in ten minutes.

~*~

Wednesday, February 16, 2000

She's reached into my trousers.

And I'm watching her fingers close around my cock.

I look up at her panting, and her eyes are wide, brows lifted.

Perfect.

"It's perfect," I assure her.

She blinks, nodding. She strokes me softly, up and down, like a tease.

"You can… I…" I stammer, never imagining that I would need the words to explain to Hermione Granger how to stroke my cock. She pauses, and I say, "Squeeze a bit more."

She does as instructed, and I sigh against her forehead. She pulls at me, fist tight, and I tilt her face up to kiss her, which is more of a breathy gasping against her lips.

She's leaning back against my office door, tugging at my cock, and when she switches the angle of her wrist I choke.

"Is it…?"

"It's good," I sigh into her neck, dropping my head forward. I reach down and close my hand around hers, giving her a pace, and then twisting her wrist at bit at the end. The first time she does it on her own my legs shake.

I grab her hips, wheezing on her neck.

She pulls back, and slips her dress off her shoulders. I watch as it flutters to the ground. She pulls down her knickers and carefully tugs my trousers and trunks to the floor.

She maneuvers up into my arms, legs around my waist again, like she wants us to try again. We really should give it a week, yeah?

But she's stroking my cock again, kissing me suggestively, biting at me.

I pull back, before I lose control with her.

"Don't be such a Hufflepuff about it, Draco."

A *Hufflepuff!*

I'm about to drop her on her arse when she smirks.

I'll show her *Hufflepuff*.

I push her against the door, tongue sliding into her mouth and cock sliding against her. She moans, and I guide myself into her, pushing slowly, feeling the tension in her body. Once I'm surrounded by her heat again, I look to her and she nods.

I move to her neck and drag her leg up, slipping closer to her, feeling that warmth against my cock again. I want to take my trousers off, but I don't trust myself.

I push our hips together, relishing the small noises she makes. She turns her head into my neck, nipping at my ear. I suck a pathway down her chest to her breasts, kissing her over the bra, and trying to keep a rhythm in our hips.

I pull the cup down, and her nipple is tight already. I pull it into my mouth, sucking and pushing my tongue against it.

She sighs, and holds my head to her. Her legs slip around my hips, and then it's just the tent in my trousers pressing against her core, rolling slow waves over the both of us.

I swirl her nipple over and over, moaning into her skin, and pulling at her other bra cup until I have her other breast in my hand. She moans the most delicious sound and I run my teeth across her. Her back presses up to me.

I kiss across her chest to her other nipple, looking up at her face. She's turned to the ceiling, eyes closed and lips open. Her hips are pushing back against me, and I drop my hand between us to press over her clit, over the black knickers.

"Oh, god," she sighs, and her knees press against my waist.

I suck on the skin around her nipple, nipping and biting, pulling the soft skin between my teeth. Her hands sweep through my hair like waves, and I pull my hand away from her center, pressing my cock to her clit again. She breaths against my forehead as I thrust carefully against her.

I suck her nipple between my lips again, fingering at her other in soft pulls, and she begins to thrust back at me, her chest lifting to push against my mouth and her hips snapping up to meet mine.

I'm leaking into my trousers, and moaning around her nipple. She's twisting my hair around her fingers, and I shift until I'm in a position to just rock into her over and over and over, and she throws her head back, calling my name, and moans a long low growl that sings in the air.

My tongue flicks at her nipple until she relaxes back against the leather cushions, lips open, and then I continue rocking, feeling the wet slide of her knickers against my trousers, my cock remembering her cunt, remembering the wet heat and pushing closer and closer to get inside of her.

I release her nipple and dive into her mouth as I come against her, my tongue sweeping through her mouth and my moans swimming down her throat to be a part of her.

She holds my shoulders as I shiver, hips jerking against her and emptying into my trunks. Her tongue meets mine, and we kiss slowly, our pleasure leaking against each other.

Saturday, February 19, 2000

It should be a fairly simple visit.

There's nothing left for us really.

I don't even bother to smooth my hair back.

I have fulfilled my commitments. He has fulfilled his.

We will be done.

So, when I pull my chair to sit across from him, and his eyes sweep my scalp, I almost smirk back at him.

He asks me about the client list. He asks me about Waterstone. And then he asks about her.

"She's wonderful. We have the Werewolf policy fully funded. Rhett Buckworth sends his regards."

He grins at me. "And how are you and Miss Granger progressing personally?"

"We're working very well together." I keep it simple and factual.

I'm so relaxed that I only notice at the very last moment that he's pressing forward, looking into my eyes.

My bricks sprout high, blocking him out. I frown at him. "Is there something you'd like to ask, Father?"

His lips twitch. "She looked absolutely stunning at the governor's ball, Draco. I'm just interested to know if you fully appreciated the view. I saw in the *Prophet* that the two of you walked arm in arm for most of the evening."

"We did," I say. "She was my business partner, not my date."

He hums, examining me. "It's been several years," he says, "but I assume you still remember the contraceptive charm?"

My eye twitches, and I open my mouth to fight him.

"Or I suppose," he continues, "this time it might be *you*, who tries to conveniently forget it one night." He chuckles. "I don't know her very well, but I would guess she would prefer to be married—"

"No," I hiss. "You *don't* know her very well."

He eyes me, taking in my stiff shoulders. He never took kindly to being interrupted.

"Is there anything else we need to discuss, Father?" I ask. "This is my last mandatory visit with you."

"Mandatory?" he chuckles. "Well, now." He crosses his legs.

"Yes. The terms of our contract were that I would visit you in January and February in exchange for ten weekly installments of the inheritance," I say, back straight in my chair. "Now, I would guess that by simply walking into this room today, I have fulfilled my end of the deal." I clasp my hands. "Is there anything else? Or shall we say our goodbyes."

His eyes harden, in a way that used to make me shiver.

"No," he says slowly. "I guess our terms are met."

"Wonderful." I stand swiftly. "Then I assume I will receive the final three installments of my inheritance over the next three weeks." I look him over and say, "Goodbye, Father."

I turn to the door, and he sings, "Yes, you should. Assuming all terms are met."

I pause, clenching my jaw, and turn back to him. "As previously discussed, all terms of our agreement have been met, so I don't—"

"*Our* agreement, yes." He examines his nails. "Miss Granger's agreement, however, is still being worked through."

I feel a hum in my veins.

I have years of experience with this man that tell me this is a trap. This is an excuse and a ploy for attention. But still I cannot help myself when I ask, "Excuse me?"

He looks up at me, eyes bright with mischief. "Miss Granger's agreement with me," he says simply. "Surely you know of it, since you *know* her so well."

I stare at him, waiting. Waiting for him to play his hand. Waiting to pick apart his words until they are nothing more than intimidation and manipulation woven together with a lilting aristocratic voice.

He continues, so I don't have to ask. "She's been seeing Madame Michele for seven weeks now. Two or three other instructors as well." He grins at me.

I swallow. "I don't believe you."

He laughs. And it ricochets off the damp stones. "You know, Draco, I'd heard that love blinds, but truly you cannot be this daft."

I stare at him, seated so calmly behind his table, just as if it were his desk at the Manor.

"With the way you've watched her so closely for the past ten years, I would have thought you'd notice. The little changes? Smoothing out her rough edges?" He drums his fingers on the table. "Perhaps she holds her teacups differently. Or maybe her walk is lighter." He looks at the wall. "I certainly have noticed it, and I'm locked away, watching through *Prophet* photographs."

I feel my blood running cold, like a tap turned the wrong way. She's begun to use her saucer under her cup. Her fingers on the champagne stem at the Valentine's Ball. So different from the way she held the glass at New Year's. The tall heels she wears without unbalancing. Her nails, painted and trim instead of bitten off.

Her curtsey to me during the French Waltz. How it's changed over the years. Almost as if she'd been practicing.

"Are you telling me you've sent her to finishing school?" I ask, voice dead and dry.

He tilts his head. "Are you telling me you haven't noticed?" He chuckles. "She should be at a class just now, actually." He checks the clock on the wall. "She meets her instructors weekly,

I groan, feeling the edge of release, just there. My eyes drift up, past her shucked skirt, up her stomach to her breasts, flushed and plump. I need to take my time there next. Need to give them attention. Up to her face, and I see her eyes watching me, lips open and panting. Her eyes dark and bright and her sweating pink face flushes further. She bites her lip, and my cock swells, ready for her.

I look down at her cunt one last time, and I come all over the black couch, imagining it's her stomach, or her arse, or that the wet squeeze of my hand is her cunt.

I'm heaving air, lightheaded, and sticky now. I drop my head forward, catching my breath on her thigh, my eyes never leaving her center.

She pushes my hair back, and I look up at her, a small smile looking down on me.

Mine.

I kiss her thigh, and lift my head, seeing my office again. I vanish the mess, smirking at ruining Blaise's favorite couch again.

"So," I say, and I can hear her come thick on my vocal chords. "Do you think you have a handle on the Werewolf financials?"

She smiles at me, like I'm the only one who knows how to make her. "I don't know. You may have to go over that last part again."

What a fucking tease, this witch. I grin at her. "I'll schedule a meeting tomorrow at lunch."

~*~

Tuesday, February 15, 2000

The woman is trying my patience.

She wore a black bra in today. It's nothing fancy, but it still means that Hermione Granger owns a black bra. And maybe she's wearing black knickers.

But I promised myself I'd give her a few days to recover, so we're on the couch again. I've pulled her into my lap, sitting her on my knee while I kiss her deeply. Her hands landed on my shoulders and I opened her blouse to find this black bra.

She grins at me. I pull her to lay across the couch, and her legs part for me to slide into place. I slide her skirt up, out of the way, and she shivers.

They are black. Simple, but black. I'm staring at her black knickers while she reaches for my belt.

No, no, Granger. Not for a few days.

I think of eating her out again while she's wearing these black knickers, pressing my nose into them while my tongue pushes inside of her. But I want to try something else.

I move her hands away, and lay down on top of her. She kisses me and I press my hips against her center. She sighs.

The sounds she makes…

Fucking Merlin…

I do it again, dragging through her, slipping across her opening slowly, and one quick swirl to her clit. Her hands cover her face, like she can't bear it.

"And the squid." I can't be bothered to pull my mouth away. "It's a greenish color, yes?"

She corrects me. And it trembles me. I realize I'm leaking, cock pointing high, and aching for her.

"It's killed people, I've heard," I say, leaning to her again, and I'm dizzy when I taste more of her, pouring from her like honey.

She argues, fights for the squid, gasping the facts and saving the Giant Squid's reputation even as I tongue at her. She starts preaching about the merpeople and I almost moan. I latch onto her clit, closing my lips and sucking until I can press my tongue against it softly.

She grabs my hair, pressing my face into her cunt, and I bring a hand to my cock, squeezing the base so I don't come.

"Oh, god Draco. Please!"

I pump myself once, twisting my hand around the head, and then coming back to tighten around my base.

I release her clit, and mumble into her sex. "What about the merpeople?"

Her nails cut against my scalp as she rattles off dates and facts, things I already know. And since she's correct, I feel like a reward is in order. My tongue swipes over her clit, up and down, side to side, diagonally, and then harder, putting more pressure on her when she pushes my face closer. She tugs hard at my hair and I slide my hand around my shaft again, groaning into her cunt. Her fucking perfect cunt.

She's gasping, rolling her hips against me, moaning for me.

I push a finger into her. She whispers my name into the air, begging her Muggle gods for release and mumbling words about perfection and always.

I let my tongue write my name against her clit, signing myself to her.

She screams. And clutches my head, gasping for me.

I'm dragging my hand on my cock as thick honey pours from her onto my fingers, and when she's done trembling around me, after the final crest hits her walls, she releases my hair, and I slip my dripping hand from her cunt and wrap it around my cock, the slick slide of it tightening my balls.

Finish before she knows. Before she sees what she does to me.

I look back at her swollen cunt, imagining my signature across her parted folds, pink and slick.

Mine.

and once Madame Michele confirms that she attended all classes, I instruct my solicitor to deposit your inheritance."

My lungs beg for breath. I see spots in my vision.

"Well, feel free to hold onto those last three payments, Father. She's done with that now."

"Don't cut off your nose to spite your face, Draco." He waves his hand. "She's learning so much. She's so much improved by this."

"*Improved*," I hiss. "There was nothing to improve upon—"

"We both know that's not true—"

"She's an absolute vision," I hiss. "She's the brightest witch this world has ever seen with the kindest heart. She didn't need to learn how to hold a teacup or organize a dinner party." I stalk to him, and knock aside my metal chair, listening to it clank against the floor. I press my palms against the table and look him dead in the eye. "You are the only person who thinks she needs to be more. Mother sees her true self. The Ministry sees it. Other women look up to her, envy her even. Even Pansy sees it."

He laughs, throwing his head back. His hair falls over his shoulders.

"Oh, Draco," he says. "Surely you don't think Miss Parkinson came up with the idea to use Miss Granger by herself?"

His eyes glint at me, and my head feels light. I press my teeth together as my brain spins.

He's poisoned them all against me. Who do I even have any more?

I stand tall, looking down on him, and say, "Thank you, Father… for making it very easy to say goodbye to you." I swallow, memorizing the face I will aspire to grow apart from.

He lifts a brow, and I turn on my heel, heading to a small teashop in London.

groans, her lips grazing my stomach, I look down to take in her naked torso. Her hands are on my waist, and there, on her left arm, a pale raised scar.

I can hear her screaming, and Bella's laugh.

She moans now…

I blink it away, and I watch her breathing on my stomach. Lost in the feeling of my fingers. Begging me to please her.

Maybe I can erase those memories for both of us. Overwrite them with different sounds.

I release her nipple, push my trousers down and kneel in front of her.

I roll down her knickers and she moans. "Oh, god, yes."

I never got to taste her. Not even suck my fingers into my mouth.

I kiss her knee, looking up at her. Her breasts heaving, her knuckles tightening on the couch arm. I kiss her thigh, and her eyes flutter. I'm pushing up her skirt – the only article she's still wearing – and pushing her legs apart, kissing the inside of her thigh when she finally tenses.

She's stammering something but I've finally caught sight of her bare cunt, glistening. The air leaves my lungs, and her thighs tremble under my hands. She's perfect. Just like I always imagined her to be, but better.

She's going to talk me out of this. I can hear her begin. No one's ever done this to her. No one's ever tasted her and I vow to be the first and the last.

I swallow and think of the best way to distract Hermione Granger from her intentions. A pop quiz.

"Granger, why don't you tell me the history of the Giant Squid in the Hogwarts lake?"

She stares down at me, mouth open mid-protest. I kiss her thigh again.

Teach me, Granger. Tell me everything you know.

"It was deposited there in 1306, yes?" I ask, knowing full well—

"No, it was there from the beginning," she says. Good girl. "The founders—"

I bring my mouth to her, one open-mouthed kiss to her cunt, and she growls a gasp, something that will bounce around my had for years to come.

The taste of her. It wasn't like I had loads of experience with this, but her taste…

Pansy made me good at this. Or good enough for her. It was easier to shut off my mind when my lips couldn't whisper her name.

"Yes? The founders?" I ask. One kiss for each correct answer. I feel like she'll appreciate that.

"The f-founders placed Hogwarts castle on the – the – the grounds, next to the black lake." I lean into her, loving the way her eyes never leave me, like she'll watch me as she comes. "So, the giant squid was there all alo—"

Good girl. I part her with my tongue, hands squeezing against the muscles in her thighs as she jumps, and I push my face into her, licking up from her entrance to her clit.

"What's wrong?" I search her face, watching the tension in between her brows and along her jaw.

"I'm fine." She smiles with tears in her eyes. "Just sore. Keep going."

I stare at her face, waiting. She tells me she's fine again, and tries to kiss me.

She's uncomfortable. Sore.

I drop her on the arm of the couch, and she clutches me with her thighs so I can't stand up tall. "Don't stop. I'm fine. I want this."

She brushes her desires against my ear and I almost push into her right there.

I lean my left arm against the back of the couch, and move my right into her knickers. I swirl against her clit and watch her face relax. I push one finger inside of her and she likes that. I keep my thumb moving on her clit, watching her face.

She looks up at me with those eyes and begs me to fuck her. This witch will destroy me.

I try two fingers, hoping… And she winces.

She lies, telling me she's ready. I stand up, pulling back from her, wondering what to do with her now. And then she's scrambling, tossing away her bra, unbuttoning my shirt.

I watch her chest rise and fall, as I pull my shirt off. She starts on my trousers, and I feel like I'll need to sit soon. It's dizzying, the way she wants me.

She moves button by button, down the front of my trousers, teasing more as she goes, scraping her fingers down my shaft. Her nipples are pulled tight, and she's licking her lips staring at my crotch. I wonder if I could ask her to suck me off.

No.

That's too…

She wouldn't want to.

But I think of sugar quills and soup spoons, and I grow harder against her fingers. She's almost done with my buttons and I reach up, running my fingers over her bare breast.

She gasps.

And one day I'll ask her. One day I'll tell her she can have whatever she wants from me if she'll just use her mouth. Just once.

I imagine my cock sliding between her lips, and I tweak her other breast.

She moans and leans forward, pressing her forehead to my stomach. Her lips just inches away from where I want them.

Her tongue would press lightly, unsure, as her eyes stare up at me, asking for guidance.

I could teach her how to suck me off.

I've been rolling my fingers around her nipple, absently driving her insane. Her hips are dragging slowly on the couch. She'll be so easy to get off. Maybe a few times. And when she

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Thirty Two

Hermione's heart stopped when Ginny told her that the Contraceptive Charm needed to be cast *before*.

Then she started crying when Ginny said she had a potion that one could take for the day after.

Ginny jumped up and retrieved the potion. As Hermione hiccupped and swallowed, Ginny watched her.

"So… that was my last one," Ginny said. "So, we'll need to brew or buy some more…" Ginny's voice lilted up at the end.

"Of course. I'll pay for a new batch for you." Hermione wiped her eyes.

"Right." Ginny said, watching her. "Should we be buying double?"

Hermione looked at her.

"Or was this the only time you'll be needing a potion for a little while?"

Ginny was digging, and Hermione was too exhausted to figure it out.

"I mean," Ginny said. "For next time…"

Hermione blinked. "I think I'll remember the Charm next time."

Ginny pounced on her, grabbing her shoulders and shaking. "SO THERE WILL BE A NEXT TIME???!"

As her body was shaken around and her torso mounted and hugged like a doll, Hermione finally realized what Ginny was asking.

Ginny pulled back. "What are you wearing? Where's your dress?"

"He ripped it off of me."

Ginny fell off the bed.

Would there be a next time?

Hermione covered her love bites, both fresh and old, and looked at her reflection.

They hadn't discussed it. How would this work? Or was it not going to? Was last night all there would be?

And before the Love Contract could even cross her mind, a peck at the window revealed the owl with today's *Prophet*.

Wonderful.

She grabbed it from the owl's leg, and brought it into the dining room. She opened the fold.

And there she was on the front page, descending a grand staircase and sliding her hand into Draco's.

She sat and tossed the paper across the room, placing her head in her hands.

Thirty seconds later she picked it up again, smoothed it out, and read Rita's loving tribute to the Valentine's Day Ball. Thankfully, Rita had described the two of them as members of Malfoy Consulting Group, and not War Hero Hermione Granger or Ex-Death Eater Draco Malfoy. At least there might be some good publicity for M.C.G.

She sat and sipped her coffee and wondered what to do with her morning. Ginny was gone already, and Hermione didn't have to get ready for Cornerstone until closer to noon, per Morty's insistence.

She'd taken a shower the night before at Ginny's urging. Ginny had started telling her all sorts of… interesting things, like they were now bound by a common knowledge of the mystery of life. Things that Hermione had heard over the years, and had filed away as "adult things," but she was now an adult, she guessed.

"Do you feel different?" Ginny had asked, just as Hermione was shutting the door to the bathroom.

"I feel… sore."

Ginny nodded enthusiastically, going on to explain how she and Harry had to wait a few days before they could try again, and when Hermione's eye twitched involuntarily, Ginny laughed and let her shut the door in her face.

Did she feel different?

Her brain tried to articulate it while the shower washed away the scent of him.

She finally dragged herself to Cornerstone at half past eleven. It was oddly busy when she arrived, and although Morty gave her a disappointed glare that she'd come in at all, he was silently grateful that she could immediately jump on and assist an older gentleman with a few top shelf books.

I pull her knees around me, locking her legs around my waist. She presses me tight to her and I groan deep my chest. I keep a steadying hand on her thigh while unbuttoning her blouse, my eyes dropping to her chest every time I forget to move my lips against hers.

Once I've tugged her blouse out of her skirt and finished with the buttons I peel it wide, drinking in her skin, trying to memorize her tits, giving myself more time than I'd taken on Saturday.

"Er, the paperwork? Are you worried about it at all?" she whispers.

I reach up for her chest, filling my hand with her breast.

"The Werewolf financials? No, of course not."

She stutters, and I smile at the way I can make her lashes flutter. I drift my hand on her thigh under her skirt to her knickers. "I – I meant the… contract."

"Contract?"

I want all this lace off her. She moans as I press against her clit and reach for her bra fastenings.

"The Love Contract."

I freeze. That bloody contract. Is she afraid of the repercussions?

"Are you worried about it?" I ask.

"Only in the sense that I signed a document promising not to do this."

And then she squeezes her legs around me, rubbing herself on my hand. The little minx. I continue taking off her bra, and say, "Only in the sense that I *created* a document to keep us from doing this."

She smiles and I slide into her knickers, running my fingers through her.

"And to keep Blaise away from Melody," I toss in, kissing her neck.

"Well, that's not working." She laughs, and the sound tickles my ear, shivering my chest. And I set out to make her quake.

My fingers swirl around her clit, my other arm wound around her back. I can feel her chest against mine, and her breath comes sharply.

"We can discuss it later, I guess," she mumbles. "It's a common contract for businesses, especially privately owned. I've looked it up."

"Shh. You can teach me later."

I imagine her bouncing on me, quizzing me on the Goblin Rebellions, not letting me come until I summarize my arguments—

"Ah!"

She jerks away from me, and I tighten my hold so she doesn't drop. My fingers had just pushed inside, the warmth beginning to swallow me again.

We should talk first, yes? She would want to talk?

She turns to me, clutching her notes in front of her. Her eyes are bright and anxious. Her hair is down again today. It's been down every day since I ripped out her hairband.

I feel desire licking at me, like an infection I can't stop the spread of.

I hear the people just on the other side of this door, and I wonder if it turns her on as much as it does for me.

"Do you think you'll be able to keep quiet, Granger?" I hum, knowing she can't. Knowing she moans, and cries out. We'll need to work on that so I can have her in every place imaginable.

Her eyes burn out. "Yes." She nods at the carpets. "No, yes, I understand." She clings to her paperwork, and I wonder what she thinks she understands.

I watch in horror as her eyes meet mine, tears welling up. "I'll be able to keep quiet. Keep this to myself. We can pretend it never happened if that's what you want."

Fuck, we're both such idiots. I hate us so much.

"Let me clarify: Do you think you'll be able to keep quiet," I say, smirking at her, moving towards her, "or do I need to silence the room."

I see it dawn in her eyes. And then she licks her lips, and I'm so glad she understands because we need to be naked now.

"You'll need to silence the room."

I do just that, and then she's rushing into my arms. My hands on her hips and hers in my hair. Her lips pushing against me, starved, and a deep fear that it had all been in my head vanishes.

Her mouth is frenzied and I grip her head in one hand, angling her face. She sighs into me once I've taken control. And I file that lovely thought away.

What a silly little bint, to think I would want to forget this ever happened.

"Merlin, I thought I lost you," I say, moving down her jaw, sucking on the covered bruises.

"*You* thought? You're the one being so cagey—"

"I was aiming for playful."

"You're always playful—"

I pull her hips to me, and her hands start to unbutton my waistcoat. My cock twitches with the proof that she wants us to be naked, wants me inside of her again. I let her unbutton and remove the vest and then I grab her backside, lifting her. She makes the most adorable sound of surprise, and I look for a surface to fuck her into.

My eyes lift from her neck, and find that window next to the couch. The space she'd filled in the *Prophet* photoshoot. The space she'd filled ever since. She smiles at me when I press her body into the wall, almost like she remembers it like I do.

The store remained busy throughout the day, which didn't give her much time to let her mind wander to the way Draco threaded his fingers through her hair when he was close, or how he gripped at her hips when he changed the angle, or the low sound of his voice when he whispered, "Look at me."

Not much time. But she found some anyway.

When Morty came back downstairs just before closing, he joined her at the counter as she finished her notations in the ledger.

"Your life is becoming far too interesting to still be working here, Miss Granger."

Hermione smiled and closed the book.

"Did Mr. Malfoy get in touch with you?"

She missed the ink pot entirely as she tried to place the quill back.

"I'm sorry?"

Morty cleaned his glasses, and looked up at her. "He was here. About fifteen minutes after opening."

Hermione's heart beat stuttered. "What… What did he want?"

Morty slid his glasses back on his nose. "Well, it certainly wasn't a book."

Hermione's eyes widened as Morty's brow lifted.

"I… What…"

"I let him know that you were off today, as I assumed you would take the whole day like I told you to."

"Oh," Hermione said. "Well, I guess I'll see him at work tomorrow."

She turned from the thin shopkeeper, and tried to process this.

Why had he come? What did he want?

A chill hit her.

Did he want to clarify things? Make sure she knew it wouldn't happen again? Or how they weren't to discuss it again?

She thought of how he'd gone to New York after they'd first kissed. How he'd returned cold, and closed off.

Hermione quickly closed shop, and headed home.

The next morning, after barely catching enough sleep to suffice for the day, Hermione was woken by the gentle weight of Ginny laying down next to her in her bed.

"Ginny?" She rubbed her eyes. "It's four in the morning."

"Yeah, it's your turn, Granger."

Hermione turned on her side and waited for Ginny to talk. Ginny stared at the ceiling with wide eyes. She hadn't slept at all.

"I've done a thing."

"What's wrong?" Hermione pushed her hair away from her face.

Ginny looked over at her. Then reached across and set something down on Hermione's hip.

A velvet box that Hermione had seen just last week.

"Oh, Ginny. No." Hermione ran her hands over her face.

"So, it's true?" Ginny's eyes were wide and watery. "This is it?"

"Where did you get that?"

"He told you? This is real?"

Hermione bit her lip. "Yes, he told me."

"When? Tonight at dinner?"

"Yes," Hermione said. "Why do you have that?"

"He's been off." Ginny looked back at the ceiling. "He's nervous and irritable and we're fighting and then I got nervous so I went through his things."

"What? Ginny…"

"Oh, don't give me that moral high ground." Ginny turned to her. "You snooped through your boyfriend's memories."

Hermione blushed at the term, and plucked the box from her hip, held it out to her. "You have to put it back. Put it back before he notices."

Ginny ran her hands over Hermione's sheets. "I was thinking," she said, "I could keep it with me. Then meet him at dinner and while he's super fidgety and upset, pull out the box and propose to *him*." Ginny gave her maniacal grin.

Hermione blinked, watching an expression on her face that she'd usually seen on a pair of twins. "That's the worst thing I've ever heard."

"No, but it would be *funny*. Or maybe I could show up already wearing it and then he'd –"

"Ginny. Let your boyfriend propose to you. He only gets to do it once."

Ginny swallowed and nodded at the ceiling. A smile spread slowly across her pink lips.

"I'm getting married to Harry Potter."

Ginny turned to her, blush blossoming and running her freckles together. She giggled.

Hermione laughed. "Not unless you get that ring back to him, you're not! He could very well die of an anxiety attack if he realizes it's missing!"

Hermione handed the box back to her, and Ginny threw her arms around her, squeezing tightly.

She gripped her satchel bag to her chest. Hermione stood in the lifts to the office, a bit later than she would normally arrive.

Breathe. The worst thing would be if someone assumed something based on her inability to act casually. This was just another normal day.

few morning pleasantries I leave his doorway, pacing back to the front. Melody nods to Granger's office.

I slip through her doorway, a bit less suave than I could have hoped.

"Granger. Yes, good," I stammer.

She looks up at me with her beautiful eyes, and I remember her face as she came. The way she held me inside of her like I belonged there forever.

"Er, Senior Staff meeting at nine," I say. I want to spend time with her today. "And then we should meet about the Werewolf Policy financials. After lunch?"

"Yes. Great."

I nod. This was wonderful. I'd eat lunch and then I'd feast on her. I wonder if she'll let me bounce her on my cock.

I'm halfway out the door, looking at my timepiece. I can't wait four hours.

I turn back to her door, suggesting we meet before lunch.

"Yes. Great." She's breathless. And I intend to keep her that way.

Blaise keeps exploding hearts and confetti everywhere he goes, and it keeps reminding me that I should have something for her. Something to give her for Valentine's Day.

He bursts into the conference room, spraying glitter everywhere, promising to clean up after himself. She's already seated with her coffee cup.

"How was everyone's weekend?" I ask, taking my seat. She's blushing, not looking up at me. And I wonder what she's thinking about. If she's possibly thinking about us.

Blaise says, "I was having a lovely time at the governor's mansion before Granger came in and took all the attention."

"Yes. Blaise, Granger, and I attended the Valentine's Ball on Saturday. Blaise was able to secure a few accounts. Granger had a successful evening as well."

She chokes on her coffee. And I didn't even mean to make a secret joke, but now I'm desperate to get her alone. Now that I know that she's thinking about it.

I spend the next hour focused. We discuss our funding, our progress. I let them know I've chosen Cornelia Waterstone for the Wizengamot position. I see her head rise to look at me, and I know she's pleased.

I tell them about the fruit basket up front, and then I say, "Granger and I will be working on financing now, but I'll be available after lunch for anything."

And if you dare to fucking disturb us, I will hex your bits off.

I wait for her outside the conference room. She takes forever to exit, and then I lead her to my office. Maybe I should get a bed installed in there.

I let her enter first, and I almost grab her ass on the way inside. I shut the door behind us, and lean back on the door.

Morty lifts his head from what he's staring at on the counter.

"Mr. Malfoy!"

I blink at him.

"Mr. Hindes. Wonderful to see you." I search the surrounding shop quickly for her.

"I was just catching up on your adventures last night," he says.

I trip on the last step. "My… my adventures?"

He lifts the *Daily Prophet* and shakes it at me. "The Governor's Ball."

I watch as Granger slides her hand into mine, gold dress glinting.

"Oh, yes," I say. "It was grand."

He stares at me for a moment. "I assumed you would be sleeping it off."

"Yes, I just…" The coffee cup in my hand steams. "I thought maybe I'd…"

"She won't be in today, Mr. Malfoy."

My stomach twists. Has she run?

He continues, "I told her to take the day off."

"Oh, right. Very kind of you, Mr. Hindes."

He hums, and pushes his glasses up his nose. He eyes the cup in my hand. "Is that coffee for me?" He smiles.

I press my lips together. "Yep."

I wander Diagon Alley that day, bumping into all sorts of men looking for gifts for their spouses, and I have to remind myself that it's too early to be buying her diamonds. She wouldn't want diamonds anyway. But I want to give them to her.

~*~

Monday, February 14, 2000

I wait with coffee at the front desk. Melody is giving me a hard time, asking me if I need anything with a glint in her eye.

"Malfoy."

I look up and Mockridge is standing in his office doorway, beckoning me. He disappears inside, not waiting for a response. Because it looks like I'm unoccupied. Because I'm standing here, doing fucking nothing.

I look to the clock.

"I'll handle that, Mr. Malfoy," Melody says, lifting a brow.

I sigh and hand her the coffee, heading towards Mockridge while Melody paces to Granger's office.

Mockridge is interested in the Buckworth donation we secured Saturday night, and I tell him I'll discuss it more in depth in the Senior Consultant meeting. I hear the elevator ding. After a

Breathe.

The doors opened, and she was assaulted by floating hearts and pink streamers.

Fuck. It was Valentine's Day.

Melody smiled up at her.

"Good morning!"

Hermione mumbled something back and quickly turned right to head to her office. She felt tightness in her chest loosen, and she realized that Draco wasn't at the front with coffee, like he had been all last week.

Just another normal day.

She took a breath, and sat at her desk. Before she could decide what his absence could mean, Draco slid into her doorway, like a child wearing socks on a hardwood floor.

"Granger. Yes, good."

She was frozen. This man had been on top of her two days ago. He pushed his hair away from his face.

"Er, Senior Staff meeting at nine, and then we should meet about the Werewolf Policy financials. After lunch?"

His eyes were wide and there was pink on his cheekbones.

Was he embarrassed? Because she was mortified.

"Yes. Great," she said.

He nodded at her and then stepped out. She closed her eyes, rubbing at her temples.

Just another normal day.

"Er—" from the doorway. She looked up, and Draco was back. "Perhaps before lunch is better. If you're free."

"Yes. Great," she repeated.

He nodded and left. For good this time. She made sure.

Perhaps Walter should join them for the meeting? She couldn't imagine sitting alone with Draco in his office, trying to discuss financial allocations.

She breathed in deeply, and reached for her calendar and her quill. Her hand stopped in the air.

A to-go cup of steaming coffee sat next to her ink pot.

Normal.

Normal. Normal.

At five minutes to nine she and her coffee cup made their way through the disgustingly pink office, passing bowls of chocolates and candies. She slipped into the conference room and found several people already seated. Draco was absent.

There was a little pile of candy in front of every chair at the table and as she sat, Dorothea Bulstrode turned to her.

"Happy Valentine's Day." She pushed a little heart-shaped card at her, unsmiling, and then turned back to her chocolates.

"Er, thank you, Dorothea."

Hermione opened the card, and it said *Have a great day*.

Since when did every single person celebrate Valentine's Day by shoving it down your throat?

On cue, Blaise Zabini stormed into the room, fluttering hearts exploding into the air. "Happy Valentine's Day, everybody!" Streamers flew, chocolate scattered everywhere, and the magic hearts fluttered like butterflies, zooming around the room.

"I expect you'll be cleaning this up, Blaise?" Draco entered behind him, careful to not step on fallen chocolates.

"Yes, Mr. Malfoy, sir."

Draco moved around the table, and Hermione felt very warm as she watched his body in a way she'd never watched him before. He wore a wizarding variation on a waistcoat, grey with a tie. It hugged him perfectly and Hermione shook the thoughts of his slender ribs out of her head as he sat.

She looked down at her chocolates, and clutched her coffee cup to keep her hands from reaching for them.

Draco took his seat next to her at the head of the table, and she couldn't tell if he looked at her once, because she refused to look back at him.

"How was everyone's weekend?" Draco asked as he organized the papers he'd brought in. Hermione caught herself watching his hands.

A few responses here and there, before Blaise spoke up.

"I was having a lovely time at the governor's mansion before Granger came in a took all the attention."

She looked over at him and he was grinning back at her. Hermione brought her coffee cup to her lips to distract herself.

"Yes. Blaise, Granger, and I attended the Valentine's Ball on Saturday," Draco said. "Blaise was able to secure a few accounts. Granger had a successful evening as well."

She choked. Hot coffee, running down her airway.

Dorothea slammed her hand on her back.

Hermione nodded her thanks.

"The Werewolf Policy is now fully funded, and she'll be working on publicity for the Golden Snidget campaign next," Draco said. "Anything to add, Granger?"

She looked up at him and immediately blushed.

"See anything you want today?" Morty asks, a smile playing on his lips.

"Er, no," I stammer, looking away from Father. "Thank you, Mr. Hindes."

We walk to the Apparition point, and I apologize when Father snipes at me about running off.

~*~

Saturday, February 12, 2000 – later

There are scratches down my back and knickers in my pocket.

The scratches… I have a hazy memory of. Her nails in my skin as she trembled under me.

The knickers… I have a few questions about their appearance.

I finally made it back to the Manor after a difficult thirty minutes of tea with Blaise and Melody, who seemed to know Blaise's kitchen far better than a one-night stand should.

"And you just sent her home?" she'd asked, boiling water in the kettle, a robe wrapped around her that matched Blaise's.

"Should I have taken her home?" I asked.

"Yes."

"No."

Blaise and Melody spoke together.

"Listen, Mel," Blaise had begun pompously. "You don't know the full situation here. Draco would have probably made an ass of himself if he went home with her. Saying I love you, or some nonsense."

Agreed.

"Listen, *Blaise*," Melody had hissed, hands on her hips. "It was her first time."

The three of us stared at each other.

"Oh, fuck." I said, dropping my head into my hands.

I'd come home, undressed, hissed at the pain of the cuts on my back. After examining them in the mirror, remembering the way she'd moaned, the scent of her skin, I started to shuck my trousers.

Which is why I'm standing here with her knickers in my hand, wondering how I did it. I remember seeing them on the ground near the couch, and then I looked up to hand them to her and she was bending over, grabbing her bra. Her legs long and arse round.

I leave the knickers on the counter, slipping into the tub, letting the suds sting at my back. I stare at them until I decide they're mine now.

~*~

Sunday, February 13, 2000

At 9:57AM, I appear in Diagon Alley with a cup of coffee. I walk through the streets to Cornerstone, pulling the door open right at 10AM.

I could wait for the signed sixth to arrive… but I don't like to read the signed ones. I don't like to break the spines or leave fingerprints on the silver covers.

I'm on chapter seven, and the two lovers have finally been reunited. The front door squelches open, and something tugs at me to look up for the first time in an hour.

Hermione Granger dances through the door, looking around like she never seen a bookstore in her life.

Her jaw is dropped open, eyes devouring.

"Hello, miss," Morty says.

I pull myself behind the tall shelves, eyes watching her through the gaps.

"Good afternoon," she says. "How long has this bookshop been here?"

"My wife and I opened this shop forty years ago," Morty says, removing his glasses.

Her eyes sparkle. She scans the shelves, and I pull my shoe back when she glances my direction. Her hair hasn't been styled smooth since the Yule Ball, but it's pulled back today. Her neck stretches, and I lick my lips.

She chats with Morty, and he's kind to her. He gives her a bit of a tour, pointing out the new releases, where the fiction section is, where the biographies are.

She does what she does at Hogwarts: carries five or six books in her arms while still looking through the shelves. Like she doesn't have magic to float them. Or a shopkeeper to hold them at the counter. She sets them on her hip, disappearing every so often around the fiction stacks so I can only see her knees through the spaces between books. Her face appears when she pulls a book, and I watch her read the cover. She smiles at the description, and I crane my neck, trying to figure what title it is.

Maybe Morty knows. I look down at the counter, to find him smiling up at me softly. I jump, looking down at the Gainsworth, finding my place again.

The front door opens again, and I look up to make sure she's not leaving.

It's Father. He scans the shop stiffly. He's found me here before, and sometimes I tuck away into this nook and watch Morty lie to him, say he hasn't seen me.

Father sweeps over the stacks, lips in a frown, and he ignores Morty's greeting, prowling towards the fiction.

Towards her.

I stumble down the ladder, leaving the book, shoes catching on the rungs until I'm almost falling down the ten feet.

His eyes catch on my frantic movements, and he pauses just before turning the corner, barely three paces from her.

I nod at him and say, "Finished?"

He lifts a brow at me and I push toward the door, begging him to follow.

"Nope," she said. "That about covers it."

"And that was a nice feature Skeeter ran in yesterday's *Prophet*," Wentworth added. "Great publicity for the company and the two of you looked splendid!"

Alright, Wentworth. That was enough.

"Excuse me, Charles," Blaise chimed in. "I was photographed on page three."

The next hour was agony. She had no idea how he was able to lead a meeting, being in the same room as her, without looking like a complete fool. As Draco and Mockridge presented the projected budget for March, detailing areas where they needed to cut back or push forward, Hermione actively kept her eyes off of him.

Off of his hands. Off of his neck.

"And lastly," Draco said. Off of his lips. "We've managed to fill the Wizengamot Relations position, and just in time, as our first Wizengamot date is in a few weeks. Cornelia Waterstone starts next Monday."

Waterstone. That was the woman who Hermione had pushed for, who had great answers about office dynamics and a wonderful background in law.

Blaise pouted. She was also the least attractive woman who had been interviewed.

"Mr. Buckworth, our new Werewolf Policy investor, has delivered a fruit basket to us for Valentine's Day. It's up with Melody, so feel free to grab what you can before the Associates take it all." Draco stood. "Granger and I will be working on financing now, but I'll be available after lunch for anything."

Now? Right now? He said before lunch, but it was 10AM. She blinked at the table.

The senior staff began standing and heading out. Blaise ran around all of them, looking for the fruit basket. She didn't know how to gather up all her materials and her coffee cup in a timely manner with her hands shaking. She tossed her empty coffee cup in the wastebasket.

When she finally exited the conference room, Draco was waiting for her. He gestured for her to lead the way to his office.

Walter? She needed Walter. How in Merlin's name was she supposed to talk finances with him alone in his office.

She looked over to Melody's desk and found half the office surrounding the fruit basket, including Walter.

Perhaps she should suggest grabbing him?

They reached Draco's door and Hermione entered, clutching her notes. She moved to the center of the room and turned back to him, about to ask about Walter, and watched as he closed the door behind him.

He turned, and leaned back on the wood, placing his hands in his pockets.

Oh, god.

She pulled her notes across her chest like a shield, feeling the papers crinkle under her fingers.

He leveled his eyes on her, unreadable, but intense.

"Do you think you'll be able to keep quiet, Granger?"

She felt the words like a knife to her gut. That was it. They were going to ignore it, and move forward.

He didn't want her speaking to anyone about this. He didn't want her bringing it up with him…

He didn't want her.

"Yes." She nodded, looking down at the carpet, the space between their feet. "No, yes, I understand." Her stomach felt heavy.

Merlin, he was probably concerned about the Love Contract. Hermione would be, if she were in his shoes. Hermione held the power to destroy him and this company now. Did he honestly think she would?

She continued, "You don't need to worry about me. I won't speak of it."

She looked up at him, hating the way her vision blurred. She swallowed and tried to grin.

He was still, examining her. His eyes darted between her own, and his mouth was tight. There was a strain in his features that she recognized from Hogwarts.

If he wasn't still standing in front of the door, she would nod at him, grin, and excuse herself to go cry in her office. Perhaps she needed to say more?

"I'll be able to keep quiet. Keep this to myself. We can pretend it never happened if that's what you want." She watched him blink at her. "You don't need to be concerned with any of the legal ramifica—"

"Let me clarify," he said, stepping off the door. "Do you think you'll be able to keep quiet," he repeated, moving toward her, face relaxing slightly, and the smallest smirk tugging at his lips, "or do I need to silence the room."

She blinked at him. He stopped in front of her, hands still in his pockets, and lips twitching. She squeezed the papers in her fingers, across her chest.

He was… They were…

She swallowed, and wet her lips on accident. His eyes darkened.

"You'll need to silence the room."

He smirked at her, eyes flashing. While he muttered the silencing charm and the locking spell, she cast the contraceptive charm. She tossed her notes onto the couch and threw herself at him.

He stepped backwards with her momentum, hands coming to her hips as hers twisted into his hair, pulling his lips down to hers.

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Nineteen

Saturday, July 8, 1995

Father is still at Borgin and Burkes, bartering and intimidating, so I snuck off, finding my way through the crowds to Cornerstone. I haven't seen it since last summer, but Morty smiles when he catches sight of me.

"Young Mr. Malfoy. Welcome."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Hindes. How is your summer?"

Morty pushes the mint bowl to me, and I pluck up one, twisting the foil. "Excellent, excellent. Hogwarts treating you well?" His brows dip, and then he whispers, "I did hear about that poor Diggory boy. Did you know him well?"

I shrug. "Not well, no. It's a bit of a fright really, but I hear things like this happen in the Triwizard Tournament all the time." I pop the mint into my mouth, eyes hungry on the stacks.

"Do take care of yourself, Draco," he says, giving my shoulder a pat. "Take your time browsing." He gestures toward the new releases. "Anything you need mailed to Hogwarts, just give to me as you leave."

I browse through the shelves, taking two books with me as I climb a ladder to a nook on the back wall. Morty and Maggie used to have a cat up here when I was younger. The cat died when I was eight, but they still keep a folded blanket here, and I like to think it's for me.

Morty winks at me as I settle in, and I lose myself for a while in the new Lance Gainsworth, *Undesirable No. 6*. He's announced there will be seven. I wrote to him two years ago after the last one came out to let him know how much I enjoy them. I didn't expect anything back, but two weeks later I received a package of five signed copies, and a note promising delivery of the final two upon completion.

She brushed hurried kisses across his mouth before he finally reached up with a hand and held her face still as he deepened the kiss, parting her lips and tasting her. They both sighed, exhaling into each other.

"Merlin, I thought I lost you," he sighed against her jaw as he worked his lips over towards her shoulder. The hand at her face slid into her hair.

She chuckled lowly. "*You* thought?" She gasped as he ran his teeth across an old bruise. He must love that spot. "You're the one being so cagey—"

"I was aiming for playful," he hissed into her ear.

"You're always playful—"

He slipped the hand on her hip around to grab her, pulling her closer to his hips. She let her hands leave his hair and travel to the buttons on his waistcoat. As soon as the first button popped open, the hand in her hair gripped her, and even more of her neck was exposed to him.

Her fingers worked to remove all the buttons, and once he shrugged out of it, lips never leaving her neck, he moved both hands to her backside, grabbing her and lifting her up. She squeaked, grabbed his shoulders, and had a moment where she didn't understand the point of it. She opened her eyes and they were face to face, and he started walking them towards the couch behind her.

But instead of the couch, he pressed her against the wall next to it. Just where she had stood for one of the poses in the first photoshoot. As he pressed her spine against the wall, moving his hands to the backs of her thighs, twisting them around his hips, she smiled that this was the place she'd been standing for the poses against the window. When Draco had walked in, sliding his jacket on, and seen her for the first time.

He kissed her again. And she found that the best way to keep from falling was to squeeze him and let his hips pin her against the wall. He groaned against her mouth.

One hand came up and began unbuttoning her blouse while the other moved slow circles on her thigh. As it was coming off of her, she thought of today's outfit – how pleased she had been that it was a very professional skirt/blouse combination and how badly she needed professionalism today.

"Er," Hermione said, as Draco popped the last button on her blouse and opened it wide to see her. "The paperwork? Are you worried about it at all?"

"The Werewolf financials? No, of course not." He palmed her through her bra.

She pressed her lips together, and tried to keep her eyes open. "I – I meant the… contract."

"Contract?" The hand rubbing circles on her thigh had somehow found its way between them, now rubbing her over her knickers. The other hand was now travelling around her back to her bra clasp.

She moaned. Then bit out, "The Love Contract."

Both hands stilled, and the hand pressing between them paused mid-rub, pressing over her sensitive spot.

Oh, god. Why was she talking?

She opened her eyes and his grey ones were watching her, pink on his cheeks.

"Are you worried about it?" he said, eyes darting back and forth between hers, and she was very aware of the hand pressing against her center, and she wished he would either remove it or *move* it.

"Only in the sense that I signed a document promising not to do this." She squeezed her thighs around his hips – *accidentally,* of course – and somehow it pushed them together, his hand pressing firm to her core. She gasped, eyelids fluttering, and tried to keep herself from doing it again.

When her eyes focused on him, his smirk was back, and the fingers searching for the clasp on her bra continued their journey. He answered, "Only in the sense that I *created* a document to keep us from doing this."

Her bra snapped open, and his fingers dipped below her knickers.

"And to keep Blaise away from Melody," he added, kissing her neck.

"Well, that's not working." She chuckled against his temple. Her thighs were shaking as he ran a finger along her center, moving up to press against her bud, and her whole body shivered. He circled her, running in different directions, and his other arm came around her waist to support her. Her bra momentarily forgotten, hanging off her shoulders.

"We can discuss it later, I guess." She mumbled in between gasps. "It's a common contract for businesses, especially privately owned. I've looked it up."

"Shh." Against her ear. "You can teach me later."

She felt him smile against her ear, and she responded with one of her own. She was just wondering if her hands should be doing something, seeing as his were doing *all the things* when she felt two fingers run towards her opening and push inside of her.

She yelped. The pinching was back, but it wasn't good. It felt so much more tender than it had two days ago. It was like she'd pulled muscles, but they were *inside*.

"What's wrong?"

Draco pulled out of her. She had her eyes squeezed shut and her hands fisted in his shirt. She remembered what Ginny told her, about needing to wait a few days before trying again. She took a slow breath in and opened her eyes, embarrassed that her vision was wet.

"I'm fine," she tried, smiling. "Just sore. Keep going."

He narrowed his eyes at her.

"Get the fuck outta here, Melody!" he yells. "There's something important happening out here!"

I watch her face, trying to decide if this was right. Usually people could just fall sleep after, or went home.

Pansy always just went back to her dorm.

"I'll make excuses for you," I say.

She looks up at me, waiting. And I lean in and kiss her.

She steps through the Floo and is gone.

And I think that was the wrong thing to do.

I stare into the flames, wondering if I chase after her.

But we… have an understanding now, yes?

We have feelings for each other.

Don't we?

Did we say it?

My head hurts. I need Blaise.

I conjure a mirror and get myself back together, missing her lipstick the moment it disappears from my skin.

I return to the Ball, shaking hands with a few people, searching for Blaise.

Half an hour later when Slughorn tells me he left, I head to the fireplaces.

I step through to his posh little flat that he bought when he moved back to the U.K. calling his name.

He appears from down the hall, in a robe, holding his wand.

"What?" He looks me up and down searching for injuries.

"I had sex with her. What do I do now?"

"Who?"

I glare at him. "Who do you think?" I sit on his couch.

He scratches his jaw. "It better not be Melody, 'cause she's in the next room."

I narrow my eyes at him.

"Zabini," I hiss. "You signed a *contract*."

His eyes widen. "What the fuck are you talking about?! You just fucked Hermione Granger!"

We stare at each other for a moment.

"Oh, Merlin—"

"Shit! Draco!" He jumps on me.

"I know—"

"You fucked Hermione Granger?"

"I did."

"Will wonders never cease!" He bounces on top me, knees pressing into my stomach.

"So…" A female voice from the hallway. "Are we done for tonight?"

"I'm fine," she repeated. She slid her hands up into his hair and pulled his lips to hers. He kissed her, then stepped backwards, moving them off the wall, turning, and deposited her on the arm of the black leather couch.

Her shaking legs thanked him, but she still held him close, worried that they were stopping.

"Don't stop. I'm fine," she breathed against his neck. "I want this."

He shivered, and pulled back to look at her. He grabbed her hips, pulling her to the edge, and slid his hand back under her knickers. He flicked her twice, watching her pull her lip between her teeth, before swirling down and pressing one long finger into her.

Yes, this was nice. She sighed as he pumped in and out of her several times, twisting and then pressing on her again, flicking her, swirling her. She pressed against his hand, trying to meet his rhythm.

"Draco, I'm ready. I'm ready, please." She looked up at him. He was holding himself up with one hand on the arm of the couch next to her, leaning down to her level. He watched her as he slipped out, and then tried pressing two fingers back inside.

She bit her lip, squeaking, and knew her eyes were pressed closed. It was like her body didn't want to do this, but it did at the same time. She opened her eyes and nodded at him. "That's fine. I'm ready." She nodded vigorously, clenching her jaw.

He raised a brow at her, suspiciously, and tried moving inside of her. She gripped his arms, surprised that his shirt was still on, and attempted to control her facial expressions.

He frowned at her and removed his hand, standing up tall.

"No, no. Draco I'm ready." She pulled her bra off, tossing it away, and reached up to start unbuttoning his shirt. She watched his eyes slide across her chest, proud of the way he licked his lips. He slipped his shirt off his shoulders once she was done.

She hesitated, then reached for his belt. She watched the muscles in his stomach tighten, and his arms twitched, like he would stop her. Once the belt was open, she looked up at him. His chest was heaving, and she got to run her eyes over his skin.

She started unbuttoning his trousers, trying to ignore the bulge pressing against the front. His hands clenched into fists as she undid the lower buttons, and she knew her fingers were brushing against him.

Good. He'd done something similar to her on Saturday night, and she felt the skin on her exposed chest shiver at the memory of him taking his pants off against her stomach. Out of the corner of her eye she saw her breasts pull into taut peaks.

She purposefully let her fingers scrape down the tent in his trousers as she finished with the last of the buttons, and just when she thought she had the upper hand, he reached forward and cupped a breast. Her fingers stuttered over him as he pulled at her, rolling her, tracing her underside and then rubbing his thumb over her.

It took her thirty seconds to remember how to undo the last button on his trousers. She was panting. She reached up to his waistline, ready to pull his pants down, and he switched hands, pulling and plucking at her other breast. He pinched her and she moaned, dropping her head onto his stomach, hands resting on his hips still. He continued running his thumb in tight circles around her, over and over, never edging closer and she panted against his stomach, watching his muscles shake.

Could this put her over the edge? She realized she was shifting her hips against the couch, trying to find friction. Her knickers were still on, so she widened her legs, trying to pull the fabric closer to her bud, slightly embarrassed at all the moisture.

It helped a little. She moaned as he finally pulled at her breast. She could feel it rising in her, and she was just about to bring her hands to her core when Draco dropped his hand from her chest, pulled his trousers down, and knelt in front of her.

His eyes were hot, looking up at her, and his tongue ran across his teeth as he reached up and started tugging her knickers down.

"Oh, god, yes."

She lifted her hips and then she was only wearing her skirt. She was ready. She would grit her way through this if it meant he kept looking at her like this. He leaned forward and pressed a kiss against her knee. She bit her lip.

He watched her as he pressed another kiss against her leg, a little higher. Then another. He was halfway up her thigh before she realized what he was going to do.

"Oh – I… er…" She blushed. "You don't… That's…"

He puffed air against her and she clenched, instinctively trying to close her legs around something, and realized he had her held open, one hand on the inside of each knee.

"Granger, why don't you tell me the history of the Giant Squid in the Hogwarts lake?" He licked his lips, and pressed another kiss higher on her thigh, watching her with hot eyes.

She blinked at him, hands tightening around the leather couch.

"What?" She gasped.

"It was deposited there in 1306, yes?" He breathed against her again, and she groaned.

"No, it was there from the beginning. The founders –"

And he kissed her right on her core. She couldn't define the sound that was wrenched out of her lungs, but she dug her fingers into the leather, and tried bringing her knees together again. He ran his hands halfway up her thighs, still held open.

"Yes? The founders?" He lifted an innocent brow at her, and waited.

"The f-founders placed Hogwarts castle on the—" He dipped his head, still looking into her eyes. "The – the grounds, next to the black lake." She could feel his breath on her. "So, the giant

She says yes, but I don't believe her, so I show her what I want to do, snapping forward. She blinks quickly and says yes again.

I grab her hip, pressing my forehead to hers, and bring our chests together. And I fuck her the way I want to.

Not too fast. Just quick enough to feel her walls drag against my cock before I push back in. I can hear myself sighing on every exhale.

She's watching me. And I want so badly for her to like this. To maybe want this again.

I fit my hand between us, her clit bumping my fingers on every thrust of my hips.

She squeezes me softly, and I can't think. My vision whites before coming back, and *Hermione* is underneath me still. She squeezes me again, this time on purpose, and I retaliate by rubbing hard on her clit, hips jumping faster.

She's so tight. And her breath on my face, gasping as I fuck her.

My fingers curl into her hair, squeezing my fist and tugging her neck open to my mouth.

I'm almost there. My face in her fucking hair.

I grunt into her neck, snapping my hips into her, rubbing her clit with the vain hope that—

And she moans, chest arching into me.

Come on, lover. I kiss her cheek, and return to her neck.

She groans, and I pull back to watch her come while I'm inside of her, pumping into her.

She drifts back to earth, and when she opens her eyes and smiles at me, I can't think of anything but coming. I have to come.

When everything tightens inside of me, and I groan, shaking, and pouring into her, I have one hand on her hip, one fisted in her curls.

I breathe against her chest, waiting for the world to come back.

But it's just us.

I feel her ribs under me, expanding, trying to breathe against my weight. I drop one last kiss to the top of her breast, tasting the sweat on her skin, and then I struggle to pull out of her and sit up.

Debauched. Fucked into the couch. Hair wild, lips smothered, and smiling at me.

I find my trunks and trousers. I'm still catching my breath as I slide my shirt on.

This is what we do, right? We get dressed and we go home?

She's fiddling with her gold dress, fabric specially crafted by Desrosiers, making a *reparo* very difficult.

I'll buy her another one.

I transfigure it into a robe for her. She grabs her shoes and I take her to the fireplace.

"If you're planning to go back out there," she says, "you'll need a look in the mirror first."

She chases me again, hands in my hair and my hips snap to hers, ready to drag aside her knickers, pull my cock out of my trunks, and thrust up into her.

I hold us both still, eyes squeezed shut.

Not like that.

"Draco, please."

I hold her close as I turn us so she's on her back again. I count to ten before I can look at her, her lips puffing air against my face and her eyes sinking into me.

"Are you sure."

Because I won't stop. Not once I'm inside.

She murmurs a prayer of yeses.

And then I'm pulling her knickers down, listening to her breath as I push my finger inside of her, then another. Preparing her in a way I'd never needed to with Pansy. Never even asked who'd come before me.

She begs me to just begin, but I tell her to trust me. We have to do it this way.

I touch her clit again, and she grabs my hair, kissing me hard, begging me. And that must be enough, right?

I push my trunks away, hold onto her hip, and press inside of her.

And the centuries spin.

There's a dance playing behind my eyes, and I try to listen to the melody but all I hear is her breath.

I'm inside of her. Fully. And my jaw opens in bliss.

I dare to look down at her, and she's staring at me like I've given her the moon.

"Okay?" I ask.

She nods, and I start.

And there's nothing worse than the pace I set for her. Nothing so torturous as feeling her heat swallowing me every time, her walls so tight and unused, begging me to just say put long enough to get to know my size.

So, I move slow. And I kiss her, eyes closed and tongue insistent.

I try to think of anything I can do to make her feel like this. To let her understand this.

Pressing my hand to her chest again, thrumming over her, I twirl her nipple between my fingers. She gasps into my mouth. Her nails drag across my shoulders.

I slide down her waist, still unbelieving that she's naked under me. This skin is mine.

I swivel down her hips, pulling her knee higher and when I sink deeper into her, I hear her squeak.

I close my eyes and think about a slow rhythm, her knee at my chest, her air between us.

Opening my eyes, and I look into hers and ask, "Can I go faster?"

squid was there all alo- oh!" His tongue. He was… He was pushing his tongue against her. Starting from below and licking upward.

This was… far too intimate. She couldn't…

Hermione brought her hands up to her face, pressing her eyes closed as he started another slow swipe.

"And the squid," he mumbled into her. "It's a greenish color, yes?"

"No, it's r-red." She curled her fingers against her face. "Dark red. Almost purple." Her thighs were starting to fight him now, shaking. She either wanted to close them and push him out, or hold him there. She hadn't decided.

"It's killed people, I've heard."

"No, no." She moaned as he licked at her again. "It's very docile. Helpful even. It's had sev- several quarrels with the merpeople but –" And his lips closed around her bud. And sucked.

She gasped, and her hands grappled for his hair, trying to hold on.

"Oh, god Draco. Please!"

"What about the merpeople?"

She dragged her nails through his scalp, pinching her eyes closed, afraid to look down at him.

"In 1497 the merpeople revolted, and – and – and –" He was lapping at her, trying different rhythms, different pressure. "And they – and they tried to – "

She realized that she was pushing her hips against him, dragging his face closer with every flick of his tongue. But she guessed he'd stop her if he cared. She twisted his hair around her fingers and she felt him groan against her. She bucked her hips forward at the vibrations.

"They tried – The merpeople tried to – tried to –"

She was like a broken record, she couldn't go on. She didn't dare open her eyes. She was afraid to see him between her thighs, knowing it would burn into her memory forever.

"Ugh, Draco, please."

And she felt the press of a finger inside of her, his mouth still working above. She began to splinter, reaching an edge, and she could hear her own voice saying a number of things, and making little breathy moans in time with his tongue, and she could feel him grunting and breathing hard against her.

She screamed as she broke apart. She pressed her hips against his mouth, holding him there. She had her hands tangled in his hair, and her thighs clenched closed around his neck. He continued flicking his tongue across her, as she pulsed. When she was done and couldn't handle it anymore, she released him.

He pulled his finger from her, and she almost fell backwards and down onto the couch cushions, forgetting there was nothing behind her. She grabbed at the backrest of the couch to hold herself up, and slowly opened her eyes when she heard him moving.

A quick sound, in time with his breathing. And she saw the top of his head from where he knelt in front of her, hair twisted and slick. His eyes were dark and deep as he ran his gaze from her exposed folds, up to her bare chest, and further to her face. He bit his lip, and groaned, and she suddenly realized that he was finishing himself.

She blinked and looked away, unsure if she was supposed to see. Of course. He *should*. She hadn't really done all that much for him.

A cut off cry, and she knew he was finished. He must have painted the side of the couch. He dropped his head onto her inner thigh breathing harshly against her. The lock of blond hair that always fell across his forehead was misbehaving again, and Hermione bit her lip and decided that she was allowed to push it back for him.

As her fingers brushed behind his ear, his eyes connected with hers. He pressed a kiss against her thigh, and lifted his head off of her.

"So," he whispered, voice hoarse. "Do you think you have a handle on the Werewolf financials?" He smirked up at her.

She couldn't help but smile down on him. "I don't know," she said. "You may have to go over that last part again."

His eyes flashed at her. "I'll schedule a meeting tomorrow at lunch."

Tuesday at lunch, Draco taught her a valuable lesson about the wonders of dry-humping. As she lay on her back on the leather couch, with Draco moving deliciously against her, she thought it was just about time to remove their underthings and get to it.

But Draco brought her right to the edge, and followed her over it. Again, another mess on the couch.

She pieced together that Draco was wary about entering her again. She did them both the favor of trying a few things in the shower Wednesday morning, making her feel like she was quite ready to try again.

On Wednesday's lunchtime "meeting," she attempted telling Draco this without so many words, and even found her way into his pants for the first time. He let her stroke him and try things and he'd tell her what worked and what would feel better. He had her pressed up against the door, barely letting her through it before slamming her back, but now his head was resting on her shoulder as she pulled at him. When he grabbed her hips, squeezing, she knew it was about time.

She released him and shimmied out of her dress, stepping out of her underwear too. He watched her as she dropped his trunks to the floor, and she pulled him against her, biting her lip. She found a way to get back into the position they had been in on Monday, her legs around his hips and his hips about to pound her into the door.

Single-minded determination. Like brewing a potion. She slips each button through, until she stops.

And I realize she's seen it. *Sectumsempra*.

She tries to touch the scar, but I snatch her hands off.

Don't pity me, Granger. Not after all this.

I deserve every scar I have. Every mark. And I'd do it all again.

She looks up at me like she's done something wrong, so I kiss the inside of her wrist. Then again. And again.

She attacks me with her mouth, and we both chuckle at the pain. She struggles underneath me, and I realize too late she's trying to get naked. She slips out from under me, standing and shoving the silk down around her thighs, to her ankles. She takes off each shoe with a balance that has her stomach muscles pulling tight, and she turns back to face me as I take in her body.

Her thighs. I've wanted them around me. Wanted them clutching my waist, or straddling me in a chair.

Her hips. Perfect curve from the top of her legs to her waist, and I almost ask her to turn around so I can see her arse.

Her ribs and breasts. Pulled straight from my imagination.

"Take off your trousers."

I look to her mouth, making sure it really was her who said it. She blushes, and I find it captivating. I have to slow down.

"I mean…" she mutters, "that *is* where we're going with this, yes?"

She's suddenly nervous. And I love her.

I stand, squeezing into the space in front of her, and I can tell she wants to step back, but meets my challenge anyway.

She breathes deep, and her chest almost touches mine.

I reach for my belt and trousers, and each time I unbutton my knuckles brushes her stomach. I work slowly, watching her eyes, watching her nipples pull tight.

I drop my trousers, and I can't even plan my next move before she's pushing me, shoving me back and climbing on top of me.

Finally in my lap, legs on either side of me. And she's aggressive and in control. She pops the buttons on my shirt. She forces my head back so she can press her tongue into my mouth. She shoves my shirt down my shoulders.

I keep my hands soft on her hips, not trusting myself yet.

She scoots closer, opening her thighs, and rocks against me before I know what's happening.

My cock pressed tight to her, and I'm trying to hold it together when she does it again.

My hands hold her still, begging her please, please don't.

She'd known it was Occlumency, but she hadn't known how deep it ran. He continued.

"Severus used to help me. Used to poke around until I'd regrouped. Until there were resilient walls again…"

Again, it felt like there was more. But Hermione was afraid to move. Afraid he would stop.

"But without him…" He swallowed. "Before going to New York, I had been slipping. For months. I couldn't get the walls in place. Couldn't separate." He moved his hands over his knees again. "Blaise has tried to help, but he's shit at Legilimency." Draco chuckled, and the sound grated at her, so nervous and unnatural.

"I thought I needed someone to … test me. To poke around until it was all regrouped." He ran a hand through his hair. "So, I got in touch with someone in New York who is one of the greatest Legilimens of our time. I offered to pay her handsomely to meet with me, and set up a portkey that night."

Hermione was no longer afraid of a buxom blonde who had had Draco's body. Now she was considering someone who had access to his mind, his secrets, the hidden places she wished he'd share with her. The pain in her ribs choked her.

"Is that…" She cleared her throat. "Is that something she does for a living? Is there a profession in that?"

"No, no." Draco shook his head, still looking down at the carpet. "She refused my money. Refused to meet with me, really." He chuckled again. "I had to beg her. She's a normal witch. A widow."

Widow. Hermione didn't want to know much more about this woman, but she was secretly glad there wasn't some twenty-five-year-old, small-waisted, large-breasted blonde in the states who knew every one of Draco Malfoy's secrets.

"Did it help?" she asked. "Did you get what you wanted?"

She thought of the dinner with Mr. Townsend. How cold he'd been and how removed he'd been from her afterwards.

A small, sad smile ran across his lips. "No." He turned to look at her. Finally. "I kissed you again, didn't I?"

Hermione swallowed, watching him, reading him. His eyes were kind, but he was rotting her from the inside.

She tried to match him and smiled sadly back. "Actually, I kissed you."

He smirked, and it was like Draco had returned. "Yes, you went and ruined everything, didn't you." He lifted his hands from their place on his knees and brought them to her face. He leaned in to kiss her and mumbled against her lips, "Thank Merlin she didn't let me pay her. What a waste that would have been."

She smiled against his lips as he kissed her. He pressed his tongue against hers and she let him consume her slowly, but she was screaming from the inside. She needed to ask him now, before the moment vanished.

He pulled away to tilt his mouth against hers again, and she brought her hands to his, pausing. He opened his eyes to look at her, and she saw the boy who had stared open-mouthed at her bedroom, checking every corner with his eyes before they filled with tears and he collapsed over. She heard the gasp as his aunt electrocuted her, and she heard his mother's voice – "What would Severus say" – as he caught his breath and pressed his eyelids closed. She saw the grey eyes that glared at her in the courtroom, that stared deadly at her his first visit to Cornerstone, that asked her how long she had been dating Aiden.

"Did you go to New York to forget about me?" she asked.

He looked back and forth between her eyes, and brushed his thumb across her lips.

"No," he said. "To put you back in your box."

He kissed her lips lightly again. She smiled. "Alright. Yes." She bit her lip, then added, "But do tell Mippy that I sleep on the right side of the bed."

He bit back a grin. "I'll make sure she accommodates you." Before she could even begin to fathom what spending the night in Draco's room would entail, he continued, "Also, I'll be out of town on Friday. Personal trip." He shifted on the couch, facing forward while she had her body turned to him.

"Oh." That's all she could think of to say. "Are you going back to New York?"

His eyes flipped up to hers, then away. "No."

She nodded, like he'd said something she'd understood. She bit the inside of her cheek before mustering her bravery.

"What was in New York?"

She watched him clench his jaw. He'd come back tense, and aggressive, and non-communicative, and she, for some reason, wanted to push his buttons on this issue.

"New York was a mistake."

She regretted ever bringing this up. She felt like whatever he was about to say, was going to be ten times worse than not knowing.

Draco stared at his hands, then finally took a breath. "There's a woman there." His jaw clicked.

Hermione felt like a hot spike had been shoved inside her chest. Her very active imagination began picturing Draco in all sorts of positions with a faceless American girl. Large breasts, small waist, blonde beach hair. She heard him take another deep breath beside her, readying himself to spill his secrets, and she almost stopped him, wanting to hear no more.

"She's a Legilimens."

Her head whipped to face him. A sexy Legilimens?

"I needed… I thought I needed her assistance." Draco swallowed, picking at the crumbs of his sandwich.

"Assistance with what?" she whispered, afraid she would break this spell of honesty he was under.

Draco took a breath, sliding his palms over his knees, readying himself to speak.

"I'm a very skilled Occlumens. Between Aunt Bella and Severus… I had some remarkable teachers." Draco scratched his jaw, keeping his eyes on his carpet. "I've been compartmentalizing for years. Separating memories, thoughts, emotions…" He paused, like he wanted to add something else to that list. Hermione couldn't look away from his face.

She thought of him in her childhood bedroom, a deep breath in and then a blank stare. Him at his fireplace, as she screamed behind him, his mother's hand on his own. A deep breath in and then a blank stare.

tomato and brought it to her lips. “Does the magazine ‘Seeker Weekly’ do articles? Or just talk Quidditch rubbish?”

She looked over at him, and he was watching her. He smiled. “Yes, they have articles.”

“Oh, good. We can see if they’ll do one too.” She popped the tomato in her mouth and munched happily.

He finished chewing his sandwich, and said, “Good news that Krum wants to be involved.”

“Yes, he was very interested at the governor’s ball.” She aimed her fork at another tomato when she heard Draco chuckle.

“Mm-hmm. I’m sure he was,” he sang. He looked over at her with suggestive eyes.

She frowned at him. “No, not like that.”

“I’m sure just like that.” Draco raised a brow as he crumbled his sandwich wrapper. “You can’t honestly believe he’s interested in the Golden Snidgets’ welfare.”

“He is.” She felt her shoulders tense. “He is *very* interested in the Golden Snidgets, and I’ll *prove* it to you when I come back from lunch with his full support.” She stuck her nose in the air.

“Sure, Granger. Try wearing a burlap sack this time instead, and we’ll see where his true interests lie.”

She glared at him. He smirked back.

She turned back to her salad he said, “I hear you’re having dinner with my mother on Saturday.”

She glanced up at him. “Yes, that’s right.” She speared a crouton and asked, “Will you be there?”

Quick as a curse he grabbed the crouton off her fork and popped it in his mouth. She glared at him. “Possibly.” He crunched and winked at her.

She glared as she picked the last crouton and tossed it in her mouth. She was just closing the carton and placing it in the plastic bag for their trash when he spoke.

“Would you consider staying the night? After dinner?”

She looked up at him from her bent over position over their trash bag. He stared at her, pressing his lips together.

“At the Manor?” She sat up, blinking at him. He nodded. “In your room?”

“Or Mippy’s room. Wherever you feel most at home,” he deadpanned.

“Would… would your mother be alright with that? Isn’t it… improper?” She laughed tightly.

Draco shrugged. “She doesn’t have to know.” He leaned across the couch cushion to whisper in her ear. “We’d have an entire wing of the Manor to ourselves.” He kissed her ear. Then her jaw. Then her lips. “And if she catches, us I’ll just tell her to have breakfast prepared in the morning too.”

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Thirty Four

On Tuesday evening, she stepped through the fireplace to arrive in the tea room. She bit the inside of her cheek, wondering if this was the right decision, but ultimately knew that if she could secure the next three installments of the inheritance, then it would all go away.

She took a seat at one of the nearby tables and waited until 7:59PM when the door to Madame Michele’s office opened.

The small woman examined her through her glasses. Hermione stood.

“Mz Granger. I waz told you would not be taking anymore classes.”

Hermione swallowed. “There was a misunderstanding, I’m afraid. I intend to finish these classes, and continue the deal I had with Lucius Malfoy. I would appreciate if you would relay that to him.”

Madame Michele raised a wiry brow at her. “Very well, Mz Granger. I will do my best.”

Hermione had owled Monsieur DuBois on Monday to reschedule the interior design class Draco had crashed, and Madame Bernard, whose hosting class Hermione had postponed on Sunday morning.

Madame Bernard had agreed to meet at 9PM on Tuesday directly after Madame Michele, and Monsieur DuBois had said only Wednesday at 7AM would work for him.

She had a feeling that they all planned this.

She arrived to work on Wednesday morning at five past eight, yawning. Draco was there when the lift opened, and he raised a brow at her as he handed her a cup of coffee.

“Rough night?”

"Yes." She didn't bother coming up with any kind of excuse. She sipped the coffee as they walked to her office, like every morning. As she pulled the cup away from her lips, she saw Kelsey, Mockridge's Associate, look at the two of them and smile down at her desk.

Hermione blinked. Were they too obvious?

"I've decided on a plan for lunch," Draco said, and Hermione focused on him. "Something to get our privacy back," he whispered to her.

Cornelia Waterstone had crashed lunch yesterday as well. And yesterday, Waterstone had accepted when Draco offered for her to have lunch with them. They hadn't had sex since Monday, or even touched each other. Which was suddenly very apparent to Hermione as Draco guided her to her own doorway, hand low on her back.

Draco continued, "I've booked a meeting on the Muggle-born Integration Program for this afternoon. We won't be needing any Wizengamot council on that." He raised a brow at her. "And, I guess, we could actually talk about it." He winked at her, and because his back was to the office floor, she was the only one to see.

She killed the smile on her lips. "I have the lunch meeting with Viktor today, remember?"

She watched the dream die on his face. "Ah, yes. Viktor." His smile didn't reach his eyes.

"Maybe tomorrow?"

"I have a meeting tomorrow at lunch. And then I'm out of town on Friday." He frowned at her. "Are you free tomorrow night?"

She blinked at him. Tomorrow night? As in… a real date? And not just hanky-panky during the lunch hour?

"Er… I guess so." Dance class! "I mean, er, no. I'm not, actually." She looked away from him. "But I am free tonight." She looked back at him. She had no idea what it was he had planned, but she if he wanted to see her in any official capacity, she would do it.

He pouted. "Tonight is no good for me." He glared at the door frame. "I'll figure something out." He looked back at her, and touched her hip lightly before he walked away. She was sure no one could see, but she still melted a bit.

A few hours later she was headed out to her lunch with Viktor. They met at the same café she and Katya had gone to, and Hermione wondered if it was a Bulgarian thing.

He was already waiting for her, and he stood from the table when she entered.

"Hermyowne," he said, and she thought that was pretty darn close. He pulled her to him and kissed her on each cheek, brushing close to her lips.

They sat and chatted and laughed, and she found the perfect timing to bring up the Golden Snidget campaign. Luckily for her, having Viktor's support on this cost both Viktor and M.C.G. very little. He would need to be interviewed for *The Quibbler* and the *Daily Prophet* during their

Cornelia had seen on the office calendar that Hermione and Draco spent some time before lunch discussing her cases on a daily basis, and had decided to join them to get caught up to speed on the Werewolf Policy.

This meant that Hermione had to go grab her notes for the Werewolf Policy, as she originally had no intention of doing anything but wrapping her legs around Draco's hips in this "lunch" meeting.

When she returned, Draco and Cornelia were already in deep conversation about the Wizengamot members themselves, and Cornelia's plans to connect with each of them regarding the upcoming proposal.

When Draco's secretary (Carrie – the name was Carrie) interrupted at 12:30 to ask about Draco's lunch order, he very politely invited Cornelia to join them, but Hermione could see the tightness in his lips, the hope that she would decline.

"Oh, thank you, sir. But I have a friend down the street that I have scheduled to get lunch with." Cornelia left with a curt nod, and after Carrie took their order, and shut the door behind herself and Cornelia, Draco silenced the room and waved his hand to send everything on his desk flying onto the floor.

"Get on the desk."

He was halfway out of his shirt when her brain caught up.

"Draco, we only have maybe fifteen minutes before Carrie brings back the lunch—!"

"Is that a challenge, Granger." He raised a brow at her as he started on his belt. "Don't think I can get you off in fifteen minutes?" His eyes were hot on hers.

She blinked at him, feeling her blood warm. He was halfway undressed already.

"Well, definitely not twice." She raised a brow back. And smirked.

He narrowed his eyes at her. And tossed her on the desk.

Sixteen minutes later, Draco and Hermione were sitting on the couch again, eating their sandwich and salad.

He asked her a few questions about the Werewolf Policy, she assumed so that they could count this as working.

She brought up a few points for the Golden Snidget project, and offered again to stall it due to the financial situation.

"As long as it is fundraised, there's no need to stall it."

She nodded, then said, "I'm meeting with Viktor on Wednesday." She swirled her lettuce around the carton. "We're going to lunch and I'll pitch the Golden Snidget campaign. Hopefully once he's on board we can get Skeeter and Mr. Lovegood to cover the project." She stabbed a

She began stacking her notes, and stood to leave. “We can push back the Golden Snidget project. And I’ll look for ways to cut corners on the Werewolf budget so we can reallocate those funds –”

“We can’t reallocate those funds. The donations were given with a specific understanding of what the funds would be used for.”

“So mine is the only department that isn’t going through budget cuts?” She flung her arms out to the sides. “How is *that* fair.”

“Yours is the only department fully funded by fundraising, not by the inheritance.” He walked around the edge of the table to stand in front of her. The door was still open, but she wanted him to touch her. Like they were partners, lovers. Like they comforted each other.

She squeezed the papers in her hands.

An idea came to her. “But the *salary* for my department members is paid by the inheritance. Walter and me,” she said. He narrowed his eyes at her. “You can cut my salary. Practically in half, really.”

“No, Granger. We aren’t cutting your salary.” He almost rolled his eyes at her, stepping back to push his chair in and take his notes.

“No, truly. The amount of money I make here is obscene. For February’s pay, you can cut my salary, or even take all of it,” she whispered. “No one needs to know.” She watched as he pressed his lips together, readying his argument. “Besides, with Pansy covering the costs of my wardrobe and without the classes burning a hole in my pocket, I’ll have very few expenses.”

His hands stopped moving through his paperwork. His jaw clicked. He looked up at her. “The expense for the classes was placed upon you?”

She saw the same fire in his eyes from the alley on Saturday.

“I wouldn’t let him cover it. I refused his money.” She blinked up at him. He moved his eyes across the table, thinking, planning his father’s death, probably. She touched his elbow to bring him back. “Draco, just for February. Cut my salary. The only person who will notice is Dorothea and I’m sure she won’t say anything.”

“No. That’s not how we’re going deal with this, Granger. I got us all into this mess, so let me get us out.” His jaw tightened and he looked at her before heading to the door.

As he left, she wondered how in Merlin’s name *he* was the one who got them into this mess. She looked down at her blotted parchment.

One thing was for sure. She was going to Madame Michele’s tomorrow night. Draco could deal with it.

Cornelia Waterstone ended up crashing Draco and her “lunch” date. And not in the fun way.

media campaign next week, and as they got closer to the court date, he would need to do a few ads against Golden Snidget hunting.

Viktor was very open to discussing it. He was attentive to everything she had to say, even if he did interrupt her every few minutes to tell her how beautiful she looked, or how her skin glowed when she was fired up about Snidget rights.

She tried to push down what Draco had said about Viktor only being interested in her and not the Snidgets.

At the end of the lunch, she offered to show him the new M.C.G. offices, and let him meet some of her coworkers, including Walter, who had tried his hardest to suppress his Viktor Krum fanaticism that morning.

Viktor walked with her across the street, and they took the service elevator up. Melody’s eyes grew wide and greedy, and several girls in the cubicles did a double-take on Viktor Krum. Walter appeared out of nowhere and began shaking Viktor’s hand, discussing some Quidditch-related thing. Hermione smiled politely as Wentworth poked his head out of his office and the three of them started in on some old World Cup story.

She stood at the front, watching as Melody tried to keep her eyes off of Viktor a few feet away, and sorted her mail.

Blaise almost knocked her over in the rush to get to Viktor Krum. As she righted herself, Draco appeared on her shoulder.

“How was your date?”

She ignored the phrasing and said, “Excellent. He’ll be joining us next week for the media coverage. And he’s very interested in the project, thank you very much.” She lowered her voice and continued, “I didn’t have to show him my tits or anything.”

She felt Draco still next to her, and she smiled up at him innocently.

“Great news, Granger.”

Viktor was making his way back to Hermione.

“Hermah-nee, I must be going.” Viktor looked up at Draco and gave him a tight smile. “Hello, Malfoy.”

“Krum,” Draco said, extending his hand to shake. “We’re so glad to have your support.”

“Yes,” Viktor said, pulling his hand away from Draco. “Anything for Harmany.” Despite the mispronunciation, Viktor managed to very confidently take Hermione’s hand and give her knuckles a kiss.

She smiled at him and offered to take him downstairs. She walked him out, past the deliveries door, and onto the street.

She promised to follow up with more details about the media day next week, and he let her know with deep eyes that she could contact him for anything she needed.

Hermione blushed and went to hug him. Viktor kissed her left cheek, then her right, and just as Hermione was pulling away to say farewell, he kissed her lips, soft and insistent.

She blinked at him as he pulled back. He gave her a dashing smile and walked away.

Hermione wandered back inside, stood with buzzing lips in the lifts, and when the doors opened and Draco was still there, pretending to sort mail, she tried to pass him.

"I don't like your Bulgarian," he said.

She looked up and Melody was preoccupied with something. No one could hear him. He looked up at her, checking her reaction. She steeled her eyes on him.

"I had to put up with yours. I lived," she said.

She raised a brow at him, and flounced away, into her office and out of sight.

The picture of Viktor kissing her on the lips was in Skeeter's society section on Thursday. Someone had followed them from the café, getting shots of them sitting together over croissants.

Ginny was very confused, but Hermione reassured her that it was nothing. Just a European thing.

Ginny pointed at the picture just as Viktor pressed his lips against hers, more than a peck, and said, "Yes, looks positively 'French' to me."

Hermione frowned at her and headed out the door.

When the lift doors opened, and Draco was not there with coffee, Hermione realized how many people read Skeeter's society section. She headed to her office, ignoring the stare from Kelsey, the intuitive associate, and closed her door behind her.

"'Old Flames Burn Brighter.'" A voice from her desk, and she looked over to see the *Daily Prophet* hovering in front of Draco's face as he read the title of the Skeeter section. He folded the paper over itself, and eyed her over the top. She noticed a cup of coffee placed on her desk next to her ink.

"What can I help you with, Mr. Malfoy?" She gave him a smarmy grin, as she hung up her coat and scarf on the coatrack.

She looked back at him and he was still leaning on the edge of her desk, reading the paper. He was smirking down at the words, but his eyes weren't moving and his lips were tight.

She walked over to him slowly, pulled down the paper from his face, and leaned up to kiss him. She pressed her lips over his, and he relaxed, bringing one arm to wrap around her waist. She moved her lips across his, lightly, coaxing him until he kissed her back firmly. He brought his hand to her cheek, dipping his tongue into her mouth.

She pulled back, and smiled against his lips. "I like our flame better."

should know that Melody's assistant Ranji and several other temporary positions have been put on hold for the next few weeks."

Wentworth sighed. Mockridge tutted. Waterstone frowned. And Blaise narrowed his eyes at Draco.

"And what happened to that *investor*, if I may ask?" Blaise said.

"The terms of our arrangement were unsuitable." Draco looked Blaise directly in the eye, with a stare conveying the end of the discussion.

Hermione felt her heart drumming against her ribcage. She stared at the woodgrain on the table. She knew she should have gone to the hosting class yesterday. This was a mistake. No matter what Draco said, these classes were necessary.

Whatever was going through her mind must have been displayed openly across her face, because when she looked up from the table, Blaise was watching her, one brow lifted.

She looked away and quickly refocused on Draco, who was detailing the needs for the next few weeks in light of their financial burden.

Mockridge cut in and said, "I thought you had mentioned that these weekly installments were safe. They were promised without conditions."

Draco swallowed and met Mockridge's eyes. "There were conditions after all."

Mockridge tutted again. "So, what is your plan, as we approach pay day at the end of this month?"

Hermione felt her stomach twisting. She tried to tune out the contingency plans they needed to place and looked up at anything else around the room. Her eyes landed on Cornelia Waterstone, whose first day was met with this conversation. Hermione realized that Waterstone's salary for February was a new expense to be paid. If they had known about the inheritance, Waterstone wouldn't have been hired until March.

This was out of control. She felt a pressure behind her eyes, frustrating her. She would need to talk to Draco, and continue with the classes.

When the meeting was done, and everyone's moods had spiraled downwards, Hermione stayed at the table as everyone stood and rushed back to their desks, tasked with finding ways to cut corners and possibly generate a bit more revenue over the next three weeks. She tapped her quill against the parchment, watching the blots form. Draco was still at the head of the table, pretending to gather his notes.

"Granger."

"This isn't fair. Not to those who've lost their jobs." She bit the inside of her cheek.

"They haven't been fired, Granger. Their hours have been cut."

"On the contrary," he said. "It was probably one of the easiest decisions my mother has ever made."

"Good, excellent." She looked down. "I… I'm very happy for her. And you." She grinned at him and he grinned back. "I am shocked at Skeeter's gall though. It's quite private business, even if it is excellent gossip. I do feel sorry for your mother."

"Don't," he said, shrugging and looking briefly at the door frame. "She was the one to give Skeeter the heads up."

Hermione could feel her mouth opening and closing. "Oh," she finally got out. "I thought it said your mother wasn't available for comment."

"Yes," Draco said, lifting himself off the door frame. "That was my mother's one condition. That she not be available for comment." He gave her a secret grin and left her standing in her office, wondering at the chess game Narcissa had set up.

Thirty minutes later, Hermione headed to the conference room for the senior staff meeting. When she got there, she was shocked to see a new face at the table, before remembering that Cornelia Waterstone started today in the Wizengamot Relations position. She was sitting at the end of the table, in the seat that had remained empty since the beginning. When Hermione walked in, the woman turned a no-nonsense look on her, and gave the slightest grin.

"Miss Granger, yes?" Cornelia Waterstone stood and shook her hand. "It's a pleasure to see you again."

"Likewise, Ms. Waterstone. We're very glad to have you here at Malfoy Consulting." Hermione felt very studied, under Waterstone's eyes. "I'm looking forward to working with you on the upcoming Werewolf Policy case."

"Yes, I've already gathered some information on that, profiles for the Wizengamot members and their feelings regarding the werewolf community. We should discuss sooner than later."

This woman's face had not moved once except for her mouth. Even that was so thin and tight that it hardly moved as she spoke.

Hermione grinned at her and took her seat as the rest of the team came in behind her.

Draco welcomed Cornelia, and gave her an opportunity to introduce herself to the staff. Blaise looked very put out the whole time she spoke. After everyone had given an update on their current projects, Draco stood and cleared his throat.

"I've said from the beginning that I do not wish to be cagey about our finances. We've had a bit of a change that I want you all to be aware of." Draco looked down at the table quickly and Hermione felt a like stone dropped in her stomach. "Our weekly income that was to last us another three weeks has been cut off early. I will be doing everything I can to renegotiate the contract between this investor, or to recruit a new investor to offset some of the strain, but you

He looked over her shoulder, trying to fight his smile. "I have a meeting in five minutes, or else I'd offer to pound you into this desk."

"Hmm." She blushed. "That's a shame." She reached around him, pressing against him on purpose, and grabbed her coffee cup. She smirked at him as she sipped.

"This week's installment of the inheritance transferred yesterday," he said, and she let the smile melt off her face. "It's usually on Tuesday evenings, but it was yesterday, at 8AM." He searched her face. "You don't know anything about that, though, do you Granger?"

She swallowed her coffee, and shook her head. "Maybe your father wants to give it to you after all?"

"Maybe," he hummed, searching her eyes. He moved her hair over her ear, and then kissed her on the cheek, then moved to the other cheek, and she was smiling before he could finish the same path Viktor had displayed in the papers. He kissed her lips.

He slid out from between her and the desk, and gave her a flirty grin as he left. She wandered to the door when she heard him greet someone at the elevators.

She leaned against her doorframe, and found Draco shaking hands with the same man from the governor's ball – the one Slughorn had introduced him to. She watched as Draco led him back to his office, and shut the door behind them.

Saturday couldn't come soon enough. Hermione wrapped up the books she'd previously borrowed and placed them next to her bag.

She checked her hair, dress, and makeup in the mirror again. It was very difficult to find something that was appropriate to wear to dinner with Narcissa Malfoy, and yet flirty enough to drive her whatever-he-was wild with desire. She'd settled for a Narcissa Malfoy approved dress, with some recently purchased Draco Malfoy approved undergarments.

She hadn't seen Draco since Thursday morning. He'd been swamped at work and then out of town on Friday. So that was now a total of five days since they'd had sex.

To put it mildly, she was *ready* to spend time with Draco tonight.

She took one last look in the mirror and stepped through her Floo to the Malfoy fireplace, into the entrance hall. At the base of the marble staircase, Narcissa Malfoy stood in long robes with her hands folded. Hermione took a moment to smile at her, feeling like she'd come home after a very long trip.

Before she could even get out a greeting, Mippy appeared in front of her.

"Miss! Mippy is happy to see you! Mippy has made an excellent soup for tonight, but Mippy could not find pumpkins! They're not in season! Mippy wanted to give you pumpkin soup!"

The elf's bright, round eyes shone up at her. Hermione smiled and said, "Thank you, Mippy. I'm sure whatever you've made is wonderful.

Mippy beamed. Narcissa coughed behind her, and Mippy nodded at her and moved to the side. Narcissa was there with a welcoming hug.

"Hermione, dear. I'm so happy to have you here."

She felt arms around her shoulders holding her close. She didn't realize that she missed Narcissa's smell.

"Thank you, Narcissa. I'm so happy to be here."

The older woman pulled back to smile at her, and said, "Let's get you set up in the library for a bit, should we?"

Mippy took the old books in Hermione's hands and popped away with them, as Hermione turned to follow Narcissa down the hallway, passing the busts. She kept her eyes off Lucius's stone face peering at her, and focused on where Draco's bust would one day stand, just to the side of the library doors.

Narcissa opened the library doors. It smelled just like she remembered it.

"Shall we sit for a bit?" Narcissa asked. "I don't want to take up too much of your browsing time."

"No, not at all. I would love to catch up."

Mippy, as if she had been waiting for those magic words, appeared holding a tray.

"Coffee, dear," Narcissa asked. "Or we have decaf as well?"

Though it was a bit late in the evening for caffeine, Hermione thought of the small amount of sleep she planned to get this evening, and hid her blush as she asked for caffeine.

Mippy poured, and she and Narcissa sat. So many things had changed and shifted since their first date in the library. Hermione wondered what Narcissa's grand scheme had been then.

They talked books. They talked Malfoy Consulting. They talked charity balls and the Chimaera that now resided in Gringotts and small anecdotes of Draco as a child. Every time Hermione brought her saucer below her cup, she caught Narcissa staring, lips pursed, and Hermione wondered if there were things she needed to un-learn.

Narcissa kept finding delicate ways to bring the conversation around to Draco – her biggest talent. Hermione was desperate to know if she knew about the two of them, but she was also sure that Narcissa's powers of perception were more impressive than she could have imagined.

"Narcissa," Hermione began, "I know this probably goes without saying, but I was sorry to hear about the divorce proceedings." Hermione looked down at her coffee. "Draco assured me that this was a good thing, but still, I wanted to express my sympathy for what you're going through."

She looked up, checking in with Narcissa and found a delicate smile on her lips.

"That's very kind of you, but yes, Draco is right. Everything is just as it should be." Narcissa replaced her cup on her saucer, and set it on the side table. "Lucius broke a deal with me. So I,

Who's to say how this came about, or if Ms. Black's decision was caused by a specific incident. Stick with this reporter, and I'm positive we can get down to the bottom of this together.

Hermione couldn't believe the words on the page. She couldn't decide if she was more shocked at Narcissa, or shocked at Skeeter for publishing such an article.

She filed away the information that Rita had been able to procure the visitor records from Azkaban, and therefore knew that Hermione had visited Lucius in November. She'd have to consider that later.

No, what she truly couldn't wrap her brain around was a pure-blood witch of such social standing filing for divorce.

She wondered what the pre-nuptial agreements were like in the wizarding world, if any, and hoped Narcissa had financial stability moving forward.

Hermione finished sipping her morning coffee, checked her shoddy makeup work in the mirror one last time before heading to the office.

As she stood in the elevator heading to Malfoy Consulting Group, she wondered how Draco was taking it. From what she understood of their messy family relationship, there would be no tears shed most likely. But it still must feel like the end of something.

The elevator doors opened and Draco stood at the reception desk, coffee cup in hand.

He winked at her.

And she suddenly remembered she was shagging this man. She blushed in a particularly telling way and stepped off the lift, taking the offered coffee cup and whispering a "Good morning."

"Senior staff meeting at ten, then we should meet this afternoon about the Golden Snidget campaign." Draco walked her to her office door like normal. "After our lunch, of course."

She looked up at him, and his bedroom eyes in the middle of the office floor made her feel reckless. So, they would be having "lunch" again this week.

"Lunch," she said. "Yes." Hermione looked over his shoulder and found Walter busy with a file. "And what were you planning to order today?"

His lips twitched. "I have a few ideas," he said. "But I'm open to suggestions." His eyes flashed at her, and she looked down at the carpets to keep from devouring him.

He pivoted away from her, but before he could get more than a few steps, she called out, "Er, Draco?" When he looked back to her, she nodded her head towards her office and stepped just inside the door. He joined her in the doorway, leaning against it. She lowered her voice.

"I, er… I saw the papers this morning. I just wanted to make sure you were… alright."

He gave her an even look, lifting a brow, and said, "Excellent."

"Yes, good," she stammered. "Just wanted to… make sure… I mean, I do know that sometimes these situations can feel difficult, so I just…" She trailed off, checking his face for any kind of reaction.

"Oh, no rush, dear."

Hermione looked up and Narcissa waved the air with her hand.

She continued, "I was thinking you could come by this Saturday and exchange them for others." Narcissa tilted her head at her, and her long blonde hair fell down her shoulder.

Hermione realized her mouth was still open, so she closed it.

"If you have the time, I could have dinner prepared as well." Narcissa flashed her teeth. "I know Mippy would love to see you again."

Hermione stared at her. She collected herself and responded, "Yes, that's… that's so kind of you, Narcissa. I would love to come for dinner this Saturday."

"Good." Narcissa grinned. "Then it's settled."

Hermione blinked several times before realizing that she was still holding the bag with Narcissa's book, and quickly jotted the notes in the ledger, feeling Narcissa's eyes on her.

"I'm so glad you're reading this author," Hermione said, attempting small talk. "Percival Hawk is truly coming into his own. Have you read his earlier work as well?"

Hermione looked up and Narcissa was watching her hands move over the ledger book.

"Yes, I have. I have always been a fan of his."

"I like this new one a lot," Hermione said as she placed it back in the bag. "He's improved so much as a writer. I know he's really been trying to better himself, studying quite a bit from his contemporaries and taking classes at the Muggle universities. I think it shows."

"That's lovely to hear," Narcissa said. She reached for the bag. "But Mr. Hawk had a lovely following before he tried changing himself." Narcissa raised a brow at her. "I know I always liked him, even without the… classes."

Hermione blinked as Narcissa nodded her head in goodbye, hiding a secret on her lips.

So she *did* hear about the lessons.

"NARCISSA MALFOY FILES FOR DIVORCE"

By Rita Skeeter

Narcissa Malfoy (née Black) will be Malfoy no longer. A very uncommon thing to do in pure-blood marriages, the youngest Black sister filed for divorce Monday morning.

Ms. Narcissa Black was not available for comment, but the paperwork filed in the Wizengamot cited "irreconcilable differences" with her soon-to-be ex-husband. Lucius Malfoy was convicted in 1998 for his support of You-Know-Who during the Second Wizarding War.

Azkaban visitor records show that Narcissa has visited her husband on his monthly visitations consistently for the past two years, until their son Draco was released from Azkaban, taking her place as the primary visitor. Records show that the last time Narcissa Black visited Lucius Malfoy in Azkaban was December 1, 1999.

in turn, am cashing in my chips." Narcissa turned back to her. "It's nothing Lucius didn't see coming."

Hermione nodded at her coffee cup, trying to understand the complexities of the Malfoy family drama.

"Well, dear," Narcissa said, "you have about an hour before dinner is served. Let me leave you to browse." Narcissa stood and Hermione followed suit. Narcissa pointed a finger at her. "And don't let me catch you leaving here with less than ten new books!"

Hermione laughed and thanked her. Narcissa produced the same basket that Draco had brought for her the last time she'd looked for books, and said, "Draco should be home in time for dinner."

She left her, standing in the middle of the library. Hermione smiled at the books, determined to discover something new today while she wandered. She forced herself to pass the instructional texts and old spellbooks, moving deeper into the stacks. She hadn't seen the back wall of the library before, so she started to feel a bit overwhelmed at the sheer size of the room. Hermione had a passing, innocent thought that she would give anything to have free reign of the Malfoy library, to have amassed this collection, to be able to add to it, to be able to read every book in it.

And just as she found the back wall, complete with a window seat overlooking the gardens, Hermione realized that Draco Malfoy's wife would. Lady Malfoy would get not only control of the library and its contents and care, but the whole house. The renovations, the design, the gardens.

The interior design lessons with Monseiur DuBois. The hosting classes with Madame Bernard.

Hermione swallowed, searching out the window, and finding the gazebo.

She shook her head, turning away and focusing on the stacks. Focusing on the books. Solid and uncomplicated.

She took her time, examining the shelves, looking through old texts for hidden secrets. She placed a few that she wanted to take with her on the window seat, but again, she needed to consolidate. Her fingers had just ghosted over a book on Nicolas Flamel, one that she was almost positive would have aided the three of them in their first year, when she felt the air shift in her corner.

She looked over her shoulder, and Draco was there, leaning casually. Watching her. He smirked.

Her blood warmed in her veins as she grinned back at him. "Didn't your mother ever teach you it isn't polite to stare?" She raised a brow at him.

"She tried." He crossed his arms. "But she also told me to enjoy the beautiful things in life, so I find it a very difficult contradiction."

She blinked at him, and felt herself blush. She looked back down to the Nicolas Flamel book, flipping open the cover.

"Interesting finds?"

"Mm-hmm. In fact, I'm almost positive that if I'd had access to the Malfoy library over the past ten years, Voldemort wouldn't have had a chance." She grinned down at the table of contents.

She heard him stand tall, and move closer to her. "Well, the next time a dark wizard comes along, I'll make sure you have everything you need."

Hermione gave a small smile, her mind wandering to her earlier thoughts about who might have access to this library in the future.

"What are you reading now?" She felt his voice over her shoulder, felt the heat of his chest behind her as she stood facing the stacks.

"Nicolas Flamel. Alchemist. Philosopher's stone." One of his hands moved her hair off of her neck. "This book was written in the 1800s, before much was known about him." His left hand rested on her hip, over the light dress she'd worn. "So – so it mainly has conspiracy theories and possible sightings."

She felt his face near her own, his cheek brushing her ear. He looked over her shoulder at the book and hummed, "Mm-hmm." The sound sent shivers through her, and she knew he noticed.

"Probably not all that factual," she said, and the hand on her hip started rubbing small circles, his thumb just below her ribs, his fingers splayed across her hipbone. "But – but that's always a very interesting place to start… with research." She was regretting now how thin her dress was. She could feel the heat of his hand on her like there was no fabric at all. "Starting with the things that had been disqualified or proven wrong."

He hummed in her ear again, and her fingers squeezed on the book. She pressed her lips together, as he lowered his head to her neck, brushing his lips across her skin. She leaned back against his chest, and his right hand ran down her arm, leaving goosebumps along the way. She closed her eyes, thinking that the last time they'd truly been together was when he'd thrown her across his desk, her fingers squeezing the stone as he pounded his hips against her own, sucking on her skin.

His right hand finally reached her hand, holding the book. "Why don't you read me the Preface?" He flipped the page for her. She swallowed.

She took a deep breath, and tried to focus her glazing eyes on the pages in front of her.

She was still grinning at the counter as a customer left and the door admitted Narcissa Malfoy.

Hermione blinked at her – long royal blue robes, hanging off of her like water, delicate fingers letting the door close behind her. She looked up at Hermione, and smiled.

It was like a piece of Hermione's soul had been out of alignment for months, and it had just clicked back into place.

"Hermione, my dear," Narcissa said from the doorway. Her eyes sparkled as she ascended the steps and arrived at the counter.

"Hello, Narcissa." Hermione couldn't clear the smile off her face. She had the sudden thought that Narcissa had no idea that Hermione had been shagging her son senseless for the past week, and she hoped she wouldn't mind terribly.

"It's wonderful to see you." Narcissa floated to the counter and settled a knowing stare on her.

Perhaps thinking about shagging Draco right now was not the best idea.

"Are you here for the book on reserve?" Hermione turned away from Lady Malfoy and tried to shake her head clear of the image of Draco above her.

"Yes, thank you, dear," Narcissa said. "And of course, to visit with you, as long as the shop stays relatively calm."

Hermione turned back, holding the reserve bag, and found Narcissa's kind eyes on her. And Hermione wondered if she knew about the classes. If Draco had told her.

"Of course. How have you been?"

"Quite well, thank you," Narcissa said, and Hermione studied the quirk of her lips and considered if Narcissa used the makeup brands that Pansy used on her. "I saw the pictures from the governor's ball last weekend. You looked magnificent."

Hermione focused on keeping any blush off of her cheeks as she responded, "Thank you. I was happy to be representing Malfoy Consulting with Draco that night. We made some wonderful connections."

"You know, Hermione, dear," Narcissa began, and Hermione felt her heart leap at all the different possible directions this could go. "You must be done with those books that you borrowed in the fall."

Hermione looked at her, eyes wide and frozen. The books that should have been returned in December. The books that should have been owled back to Narcissa the moment she fled from Malfoy Manor after the visit to Azkaban. She was done with the books. And it was completely inappropriate for her to still have them in her possession. It was improper.

"I – yes, I have actually finished with them." Hermione could feel the heat fighting its way up her neck. "I apologize for holding onto them for so long." She looked down at the counter. "I will owl them back to you this evening –"

His eyes were hot. And they were glued to her. More specifically, to her behind.

His gaze flipped to her eyes, and he smirked. "Mind if I take a look?"

She pressed her lips together, and nodded. "Be my guest." She turned back to the shelf, keeping her hands pressed against the counter, her hips pushing out, and her spine straight and long. She heard him coming around the counter. He slipped behind her, brushing his hips against her backside. She bit her lip too keep from making a sound.

"How strange," he said. She saw his larger hand rest next to hers on the counter. She felt the other rest on her ribs as he leaned down over her, pressing his chest against her back. He placed his face next to hers. "I could have sworn something back here was mine."

She let out a short laugh, and then pressed back against him, feeling his hips just behind her. The hand on her ribs, skirted up and pressed firmly against her breast over her shirt.

She knew the sign said *Closed.* She knew that Morty rarely came downstairs to check on her after six. And she knew that the foot traffic at this time of day was light. And it was all warming her blood.

His fingers tweaked her through her bra, and she gasped. He pressed firmly against her backside, and she could feel him hard against her.

"I think we could find what you're looking for in the non-fiction section," she whispered, turning to look at him as his lips were about to start in on her neck.

He grinned. "The customer service here is impeccable."

On Sunday morning, Hermione had written to Madame Bernard to letting her know that she needed to reschedule the hosting class she usually had with her on Sundays. She made sure to use the word "reschedule" and not "discontinue." Also on Sunday, the announcement of Harry and Ginny's engagement was in the papers as well. Hermione had convinced Ginny to let Harry propose at dinner on Valentine's Day, and she hadn't seen much of the two of them since.

Harry had been rather proactive with Skeeter. He contacted her to set up an interview on Saturday for Sunday's paper, to prevent any tabloid responses. It had resulted in a lovely, in-depth article about the two of them (and a bit about the history of the Boy-Who-Lived-And-Died-And-Lived-Again).

Hermione smiled down at the article at Cornerstone on Sunday.

She smiled for many reasons that day, one of which was the book on reserve behind the counter that had been there when she'd opened up. Draco must have written to Morty early this morning to have the book on reserve for him, and while the two of them had made no plans to see each other today after parting the night before, she was giddy thinking of him coming by again.

"'Not much is known of Nicolas Flamel. I have tracked him over my fifty-four years, and I have made discoveries that I wish for the modern world to know of.'"

Hermione paused when Draco's hand left the book and joined his other on her waist, both now rubbing circles against her dress.

"Go on," he whispered. And his lips dropped to her neck again.

"'I have been to France, at the Beauxbatons Academy of Magic. I have—'" His kisses were so light on her skin, that she almost wished for him to press harder. "'I have spoken with the remaining portraits who may know of Flamel and his wife Perenelle. They have told me many tales of young Nicolas…'"

Hermione's eyes closed for a moment. Draco's hand moved up the left side of her ribs, counting them as he travelled. His hand stopped before reaching her breast, letting each finger fit between a rib, and his thumb round the swell of her. She waited for him to touch her, eyelids fluttering, with his right hand still drawing circles on her hip and his lips painting patterns on her shoulder.

"What did the portraits have to say, Granger?" he mumbled against her skin, and a shock pulled through her stomach, squeezing her thighs together, and pulling at the skin on her chest until she knew her nipples were poking through the fabric.

She whimpered. "Um…" She opened her eyes, blinking to clear them. "'…tales of young Nicolas and his adventures at school. But some of them had seen him since. Some of them…'" She focused on the book as Draco's thumb started whispering across her breast, inching closer. His fingers lifted, cupping her, and his right hand slid down, down, gathering the fabric of her dress to get underneath. "'Some of them had seen Nicolas Flamel and his w-wife as recently as 1798, putting the Fl-flamels at around four-hundred-years-old.'"

Draco brought his right hand under the dress, and she felt the fabric flutter back down, ghosting across her knees as his fingers danced across her thighs. She knew she'd already made a mess of her new knickers. The knickers that Draco would see her in tonight, and she smiled, biting her lip as he brushed his hand against her. He bit down on her neck and she moaned. His left hand finally gave her what she wanted, moving over her breast, and then plucking at her, pulling and teasing through her dress, through her bra.

"Four-hundred-years-old is very old, isn't it, Granger?"

"Mm-hmm." She gasped. "Yes." She hissed.

The hand touching her over her knickers, moved up to her belly, and dipped under the elastic, running over and down, slipping through her.

She leaned into him, almost dropping the book.

"What else does it say," he whispered, then kissing against her jaw, sucking on her.

"I – I can't, Draco. Please."

He slipped a finger inside of her, slowly pushing in, and she gasped. He pushed his hips against her firmly, holding her up between his hips and the hand inside her knickers, and she felt him hard against her backside. The hand at her chest ran across to her other breast, trying to fight the fabric of her dress to let him under and inside. He pushed his hips against her again, and he flicked his thumb over her bud.

"Oh, god. Draco."

He added another finger inside of her and she could feel him huffing against her jaw, kissing her forgotten as he pushed in and out, pumping a slow rhythm while he moved his thumb against her quickly, his hips starting to grind.

She dropped the book. She ran her hands over his arms, trying to find something to hold onto.

"Put your hands on the shelves." His voice was gruff against her jaw. And her hands shot forward, leaning slightly, changing the angle of her hips that made the both of them moan. She felt him moving his hips quickly, faster as he rubbed at her, faster as she clenched around his fingers as they thrusted into her.

"Fuck," he hissed against her, straining. "I've wanted this…" He gasped against her ear. "Wanted this every time I saw you in the Hogwarts library."

She groaned, started to squeeze him. "Please, Draco."

The hand in her bra snapped down to her hips, holding her still as he rutted against her, the fingers inside of her slowed, but his thumb kept moving on her. She began to ride his hand, hearing him gasp as she moved against him.

A *crack* from behind them. A squeaky voice.

"Mippy is telling you that dinner is ready."

Hermione's hand slapped over her mouth, as Draco stilled behind her, one hand still inside her knickers. Her eyes were wide as Draco carefully slipped his fingers from her, moving his hand to her thigh.

He cleared his throat.

"Thank you, Mippy. We'll be there shortly."

A *crack*.

They were still.

Hermione laughed. She felt his forehead drop onto her neck and a curse whisper against her back. That made her laugh harder.

Dinner was lovely. In comparison to the first time she'd had dinner with Narcissa and Draco, it was a walk in the park.

They stared into each other's eyes, raindrops falling on their lashes. He pressed his lips against her forehead, kissing her eyebrow, her temple, her cheekbone. He made a path toward her lips.

And they kissed in the rain.

He escorted her to Cornerstone for the rest of her shift. She was ready to say goodbye to him at the door, but he followed her in, shaking the rain off the umbrella he'd transfigured.

Morty greeted him and they chatted briefly as she got behind the register again. When Morty bid them a good afternoon and headed upstairs, Draco stayed.

He browsed the books and watched her help customers. He eyed the hag warily, but he mainly stayed out of her way.

By four o'clock as the people who had waited out the storm by staying inside the bookstore were just starting to leave, she was far more aware of his eyes on her. She filed books, passing his chair and feeling him watch her. She'd look over at him though, and find him reading, eyes on his book. She'd make notes in the ledger book and feel the hair on her arm bristle.

By five o'clock he wasn't even reading anymore. There were only two other people in the shop, most people put off by the bad weather, and he sat in his chair and watched her move about the shop. She'd look over at him, as if to catch him, and he just stared back at her. It started to make her warm.

At fifteen minutes to closing, the last of the shoppers were making their final purchases, and he came to lean against the stacks near the counter. His eyes were dark whenever she looked over at him. She stumbled through the last transactions, and once the last shopper had waved goodbye, she pointed her wand at the *Open* sign, turning it to *Closed*.

She swallowed, and looked over at him. He leaned his left hip against the book stacks, legs crossed at the ankle. He had his arms crossed over his chest, one hand at his chin, thumb against his lips. She watched his lips part and his thumb dipped inside.

She took a deep, steadying breath, and tried not to lick her lips.

"We're closed for today, Mr. Malfoy," she said. "Is there anything I can put on hold for you, for tomorrow?" She bit back a grin as he lifted a brow at her.

He prowled toward the counter.

"Are you quite sure there's nothing on reserve for me back there?" He tipped his head to the side as he leaned forward on his elbows in front of her.

She smiled at him. "I can check." She turned around, knowing full well that the reserve shelf was empty. She bit her lip, hoping she was doing something slightly attractive, and bent at the waist, bringing her head down to the shelf, and straightening her back to push out her denim clad backside. She braced her hands on the counter.

"Hm. Nothing here for you." She turned her head to look at him, a grin on her face.

we were together. Had been for ages. I – I corrected him, of course," she said. She wanted to cross her arms, or pick at her nails, but she refrained. "But then later, he had photographs of… the Marcus Flint incident."

She looked up at him, afraid to bring that up, but he already knew that too. He wasn't surprised one bit that Lucius had photographs of them grabbing at each other in an alley way, not so different from the one they were currently in. She filed this away for later as a raindrop hit her cheek.

"He was disappointed that I'd lied to him about us." She sniffed. "And he said he wouldn't release your inheritance if I didn't go to those classes." She looked over his shoulder. She felt so small, admitting this weakness. Admitting to being blackmailed.

"What was on the list?" he grit out. His eyes were dark with anger, but she knew it wasn't directed at her this time.

She recited them. She found herself stuttering over some of them, the ones that were clearly meant for a wife, not a girlfriend, or whatever it was they were doing. *Financially knowledgeable. Obedient. Skilled in hosting. Trained in décor.* Her face flushed as he listened, watching her, unmoving.

"He said the only thing he could part with was pure-blood."

And Draco laughed. The sound shook her, and the sky thundered with him. He stepped away from her, chuckling, bringing his hands to rub his eyes. He turned his back to her and she saw his head shaking as he laughed. He took a shaky breath in.

"Why did you do this, Granger."

She stared at his back, still marveling over his reaction.

"I'll finish these next three weeks, Draco, and then you'll be done with him. You'll not owe him anything. You'll be rid of him."

"No, no." His voice bounced around the bricks and she saw him pull his hands across the skin of his face. "I'll never be rid of him." He turned to her. "He's got his hooks in you, now."

She shivered, unsure. "What do you mean?"

"I'd seen it, but I ignored it." He stepped back to her, eyes sad. "You're different. The way you drink your coffee is different. The way you walk. The way you dance." He placed his hand on her cheek. "You're changing. And now every time I see you lift your saucer with your cup, I'll think of him. Think of this. When you curtsey. When you shake hands." He brushed his thumb across her lip. She felt a tear drop leave her eyes. "Why did you do this."

She sniffed again, seeing the light rain drops hit the crates behind him. She wished she had the Gryffindor courage to tell him why, to tell him it was for him. So, she settled for the next best answer.

"It was the right thing to do."

When she said her goodbyes to Narcissa, thanking her and promising to see each other more often, Draco was already standing, waiting to "escort her out."

He walked her down the hall, passing the library, and out into the entrance hall. He turned at the bottom of the stairs and started to climb. He took her hand in his, and lead her up. Once on the third floor, they twisted through a few hallways, passing tapestries and statues. Hermione was ashamed to realize that Monsieur DuBois would be quite proud of her as she recognized many famous paintings and styles.

The moonlight shone in through a window they were approaching. Draco's fingers were warm on her skin. The window overlooked a small pond, and the white peacocks could just be seen in the dusk light. She stopped dead, looking out the large window, and Draco's hand was pulled from hers.

"Wow," she murmured.

She came to the window practically pressing her nose against it. She turned back to look at Draco and he was watching her. She smiled and let him lead her down the hall.

They passed a few doors, and stopped in front of an ornate wooden one. There was a dragon carved into the surface.

He looked at her, then took a steady breath and opened the door, pushing it aside so she could enter before him. She stepped inside.

It looked exactly how one would expect Draco Malfoy's bedroom to look. Canopy bed. Green curtains. Book shelves and armchairs. Fireplace. Plush carpeting. Doors leading out to a balcony.

Hermione giggled.

"What?"

She looked up at him, smiling, and saw he was watching her closely.

"It's just all very predictable. I love it." She laughed. He rolled his eyes and closed the door behind them.

She strolled around the room, twice the size of her bedroom at home, possibly the size of her entire apartment with Ginny, if you count the closet, ensuite bathroom, and balcony.

She went to the bookshelf, documenting the titles that Draco liked to have close to him. She let her fingers trail across the shelves.

She poked her head into the bathroom, finding a huge marble tub. She touched the curtains, let her eyes pass over a picture of Draco with Crabbe and Goyle, taken about fourth year.

He followed her as she explored, giving her a few feet of space, and she could feel his eyes on her.

She approached the closet door, and turned to ask permission. He nodded. She opened the walk-in closet and found mostly black and grey. She laughed again. She wandered in, and felt him come to lean in the doorway. She ran her hands over his clothes.

"We need to get you into some oranges and pinks." She winked at him.

His lips twitched, but he was still watching her. Nervous almost.

There was a set of drawers in the corner, and she almost asked permission to shuffle through them. She let her fingers run over the wood, and Draco shifted in the doorway. She turned to him and found that tense expression on his face again.

Hermione moved to him, wound her hands up his chest and into his hair, and kissed him. He wrapped his arms around her waist, squeezing her to him. She parted his lips and tasted the wine from dinner on him, smiling against his mouth as he let his hands wander down and grab her backside. He pulled her close to him and sighed into her mouth.

"I like your bedroom, Draco."

His eyes fluttered open, dark and heady. He smiled down at her and kissed her again. She pulled back and looked down at his chest, shy suddenly.

"I have a surprise for you."

"Oh, really." His voice teased her.

"Yes, I think… I think you'll like it."

"When do I get my surprise." His hands were still cupping her backside, and he squeezed, then massaged, rubbing figures into her flesh. She felt a hot pulse of pleasure move through her, and she thought of how ready she had been to have him inside of her when they were in the library earlier.

"You'll need to, um… give me some space," she stuttered. He smiled down at her, and exited the closet, moving to sit on the edge of his bed. He smirked at her, and she felt a shiver go through her.

She stood in front of him, and reached back for the zipper on her dress. She got it down, and looked up at him as she pulled off one shoulder, then the other. When the fabric pulled past her bra, his eyes flashed at her.

It was a deep green color, with black lace on the edges. It was very thin, so thin that she knew he could see her nipples through it.

She pushed the dress down her waist, and let it slide down her hips, where she revealed green knickers to match.

He swallowed.

She stepped out of the dress, and stood there in only her bra, knickers, and heels. She pressed her lips closed, trying not to cover herself.

"Get on the bed."

The harsh whisper crashed over her, and she opened her eyes. She focused on the packing crates and old boxes in the alley.

"N-no. Nothing like that." She felt a cold chill that Draco could even wonder…

Draco threaded his fingers through her hair and tugged until her neck was open to his mouth. His lips moved across her jaw, up to her ear.

"Have you been to see him since you went in November?"

The hand on her hips squeezed as his breath misted over her neck.

"No, we've written – He's written letters." She hummed. "Threats." Could she call it threats?

Draco attached to her neck and began sucking and biting on his favorite spot. She felt his hips press into hers and the hand on her hip start to slide. She saw Muggles walking by the alley entrance, completely unaware of them due to the repelling charm.

"Tell me about the letters. Tell me what he said to you."

Draco bit down on her neck a bit too hard. Claiming her. Marking her. Hermione winced and reached her hands up to his face.

"Draco, stop." She pulled his face back to look into his eyes. They were clouded, still hot but there was an aggression there she didn't recognize. "I know what you're doing, Draco, and stop." She rubbed her thumb across his cheek, calming him. "This… what we have is very special to me and you're turning it into something ugly."

She watched as he closed his eyes, pressed his forehead against hers and tried to relax. She was curious to know why Lucius affected him so much, but she was also scared to find out.

He placed a soft kiss on her lips and pulled back, lifting his hips away from her.

"What did my father say to you in Azkaban?"

She breathed in deeply, wishing to be talking about anything else. She heard thunder.

"He gave me a list of things. To work on."

She looked up at Draco, arms-length away from her, hands still resting lightly on her hips. He narrowed his eyes.

"For what?"

Oh, god. She felt the blush spreading up her jaw. "To be… to be seen with you. To be worthy of you." To be a Malfoy bride…

His frown deepened. "In November?" He looked to the side, thinking. "You weren't even with the company yet." His hands dropped from her hips and she felt like she could breathe again.

"Yes, but we were being pictured together so often. And… and he knew about the Auction." She watched as Draco's eyes flipped to her. He wasn't surprised. He looked wary, if anything.

She continued, "He knew that you'd gone to Narcissa's mother. He knew that – that you would have saved me." This caught him off guard though. His left eye twitched. "He thought

"You're not the only one who had a deal with him, Granger." She heard his voice shake. She watched him swallow as they darted around a group of children. "You shouldn't have gotten involved in this."

She skipped over a few curbs to catch up to him as he powered through the street.

"How did you find me there?" She tried sticking to the easy questions.

"I asked Madame Michele for your schedule."

She looked down at her quickly moving feet. He'd gone to Madame Michele first, disturbed her morning, and then tracked her down. She wanted to touch him. She wanted to calm him.

She heard him chuckle, and watched him shake his head at something running through his mind.

"You're done with those classes," he hissed.

She reached for him, but stopped herself. They were on the seventh block. One more before they could Apparate. The crowd thinned as the Muggle-Repelling Charm shivered over them.

"What about the money, Draco? The next three installments?"

"I told him to shove them up his ass," he snarled.

They approached a small alleyway before the end of the block. If she could get him to calm down before they Apparated...

"We need that money, Draco. Malfoy Consulting is barely afloat as it is. I need to keep going to those classes —"

"No!" He grabbed her elbow and brought her into the small alley, just shy of the Apparition point. The rest of the Muggles continued on with their day, pulling out umbrellas. He pointed a finger in her face. "You are not to step foot in that tea room again, do you hear me, Granger?"

His eyes were burning into her.

"The business is more important than some insane classes, Draco!"

He grabbed her shoulders, just firm enough to press her against the brick.

"*Nothing* is more important than you."

She lost her breath as he sucked in a shaky gasp. His fingers twitched on her shoulders and his eyes danced back and forth between her own.

And then he kissed her. Both hands up her neck to her face, tilting her head back for him as he stepped closer to her.

She was shaking as she brought her hands up to his sides. She let him dominate her mouth, taking time to breathe when she could, but his body pressed her against the alley wall and his hands held her still as he moved his lips against her.

She felt him slide one hand down her cheek, down her neck, across her ribs and grab her hip, as his mouth kissed her hotly on her jaw.

"Did he ever touch you?"

She looked up at him and he was standing, moving to the side of the bed so she could get on it. His eyes were running over her body, up to her face, and then back down.

She smiled. Hermione moved to the bed, feeling the cool air against her skin, and feeling his eyes on her. She heard the smallest intake of air when she passed him, and he saw for the first time that her knickers were thong style. She saw his hand reach up and grasp the post of his bed.

She bit her lip, and decided to tease him. If she could.

She leaned down, bringing one knee to the bottom of the bed, and began to crawl to the center. She knew her barely covered ass was on display for him, and she tried to push her hips out even higher. She could hear him breathing.

She reached the center of his giant bed, and twisted her head to look at him.

"Like this?"

His eyes were on her backside. He swallowed and looked up at her face with hot eyes. "Lay down."

She smiled and twisted around so she was laying with her head on his pillows. She stared up at his canopy bed, and grinned. She brought her knees together demurely, as he moved to the foot of the bed, and kicked off his shoes. He pulled his sweater over his head and tossed it somewhere, and began to crawl up the bed, like she had. She raised up on her elbows to watch him.

When his head reached her knees, he kissed each of them, over and over until they parted against her will. She could feel her breathing coming quicker now, and as his eyes watched her face, he kissed a path up her thigh, toward her pretty green underwear.

She bit her lip. He'd only put his mouth there the once, in his office, when she'd rambled about the giant squid to him. It was good. Very good. But he had distracted her then, and she knew she was already wet, and his eyes were devouring her green underwear as his lips got closer and closer.

She was about to maybe grab his head, pull him away from… down there, when he planted his mouth right on her, over her fancy green knickers.

She gasped, and found his sheets in her fists, her head landed on his pillows, and her knees tried to close, tried to keep him out, but he pushed her open with his hand on her thigh.

He kissed her over the fabric twice, once close to her entrance, and again just on top of her clit, and she growled something. She felt his tongue, swiping from bottom to top, over the fabric, pressing firm at the top, and the fabric and his tongue and the pressure –

"Fuck… Draco."

He lifted his head. She looked down at him and his eyes were glazed over and hot. His mouth was open and panting over her, she could feel the air hit her every time he breathed.

"Say it again."

She looked down at him, panting, and felt the words hit her panties.

"Draco…"

He shook his head at her, smirking. She felt the muscles inside of her flutter around nothing. She wanted him inside, something to clench down on. He still held her open, his hand on her thigh, starting to squeeze her.

"Fuck," she tried.

Draco smiled at her, and lowered his head, kissing her again. She moaned.

"Oh, fuck."

He laughed against her, and the sound and the air hit her right where she wanted him. He moved the hand off her thigh, and pulled her knickers to the side. Her eyes widened when she realized he wouldn't just take them off of her. He dipped his head, eyes watching her eyes, and let his tongue swirl down on her. He slipped inside, licking and pushing, then out again.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," she gasped.

He groaned, with his tongue inside of her, and she grabbed his hair, pushing him down, forcing him closer. He lowered down on the bed on his elbow, and wrapped his arm under her thigh, opening her more, pushing her leg higher, her knee up and open.

She raised her hips. It was a sudden movement. And it brought him further inside. He moved his tongue faster against her. Quick lapping motions against her entrance. She raised her hips again.

"Oh, fuck, Draco."

Draco dragged his lips to her clit, moving the fabric aside with his hand, and moved quickly against her. She bucked against him again, pushing his face into her with her hands at the back of his head.

This was heaven. This was bliss. To feel him devouring her, not being able to breath and not caring.

Not being able to breath.

She released his head, moving her hands to the sheets again, and moaned. He came up for air quickly, sucking it in. He looked up at her.

"Let me know when you're close."

She watched as he pressed into her again, his tongue dancing across her. She didn't know how she would know when she was close. It happened so suddenly sometimes.

She brought her hands up to her breasts as he lapped at her. She moaned as she played with herself through the thin bra. She imagined his hands, tweaking and pulling.

She felt her muscles move inside of her. She wanted to close her legs on something. He had her wide open, and she wanted to clench down and ride something.

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Thirty Three

"Miss Granger will not be able to finish her lesson today."

She swallowed.

"Oh," Monsieur DuBois pouted, looking back and forth between them. "I do hope everything is alright."

He turned his eyes on her, hot and aggressive. "I'm afraid not."

She took a shaky inhale, and began moving her napkin off her lap. Draco placed a handful of galleons on the table, apologizing to Monsieur DuBois, and promising to say hello to his mother.

As she stood from the table, gathering her notes, Draco's hand came up to guide her elbow around the gate, and onto the sidewalk. He waved a jaunty hand at the interior design teacher before escorting her in the direction of the nearest Apparition point.

They had eight blocks. There were storm clouds in the sky.

He dropped her elbow after the first block. She struggled to match his pace.

He started popping knuckles and cracking his neck after the second block, narrowly missing getting hit by a cab.

"Draco —"

"How long have you been plotting with my father."

She looked up at him as they stopped at a busy corner. His eyes were hot, scanning the streets, and darting around her.

"You say it like we're working together," she said.

"Aren't you?" He heaved a breath in. Then walked when the signal turned.

It took her a moment to comprehend. He left her on the curb, and she struggled to catch up.

"What did he tell you? If he defines it as anything other than *blackmail* then he lied to you –"

She sipped her espresso.

Monsieur DuBois pulled out a book of Renaissance decor, and started discussing the styles, the architecture. He began detailing the proper maintenance of a Renaissance mansion, and what a proper remodel would include.

The sun had just started slanting into Hermione's eyes as Monsieur DuBois explained the truly *disastrous* remodel that the French Minister had attempted. He began chuckling at things that Hermione couldn't possibly understand. She grinned as best she could.

The waiter's shadow falling across her face when he returned to their table shook Hermione out of her trance a bit. She waited for her soup to be set down in front of her, grateful for the shield from the sun.

When Monsieur DuBois stopped speaking, and no soup was set before her, Hermione looked up at the person shading her from the sun, and her blood ran cold to see Draco, jaw tight, but smiling down at Monsieur DuBois.

"Mr. Malfoy!" Monsieur DuBois chirped. "My, you look splendid. Would you like to join us?"

Hermione felt the caffeine in her stomach turn and tumble as she watched Draco grin at the older man, shaking his hand. She concentrated on forcing her lungs to expand.

"I apologize, Monsieur, but something has come up actually," Draco said. She watched his face tighten and twitch even as he smiled. "Miss Granger will not be able to finish her lesson today."

Lesson.

There was no way around it. He knew. Lucius told him.

She swallowed.

"Oh," Monsieur DuBois pouted, looking back and forth between them. "I do hope everything is alright."

She watched Malfoy blink at him. He turned his eyes on her, hot and aggressive. "I'm afraid not."

He groaned against her again and the sound sent waves through her. She grabbed at her breasts, pulling and pulling and another fluttering in her abdomen.

"I think… I think I'm … Draco."

He looked up at her, and his eyes landed on her hands on her breasts. He made a sound against her again, and it moved through her.

"Fuck," she whispered.

The hand holding her knickers open, quickly moved to her entrance. He kept his eyes on her as he flicked her with his tongue, quicker and quicker, and she started to pull in different directions.

Two of his fingers finally entered her, pushing all the way in, and she clenched around them, and started to whine. He held them there, not moving, just pushed up inside, and sucked hard on her clit.

She felt her muscles clamp down, pleased to have something to hold onto. And she screamed as she flew over the edge.

On the way down, she could feel his fingers, pumping slowly, lazy. And his tongue working small listless circles. She opened her eyes and found him watching her, tongue on her.

"Fuck," she said again.

He laughed against her. He raised up onto his hands and crawled up her body, kissing her stomach along the way. He dropped light kisses onto each of her breasts through the sheer bra, and she smiled and bit her lip.

She could feel him hard against her hip as he hovered over her mouth and asked, "Can I kiss you like this?"

She blinked at him, not knowing what he meant, and then realized where his mouth had just been, and how her orgasm was still all over his lips.

"Um," she stuttered. "I guess so."

He smiled at her and shook his head. He grabbed a tissue from his side table and wiped his mouth. He kissed her jaw, her neck.

She was so happy. And almost sleepy. But he pressed against her stomach, firmly, grinding.

Should she… Should she return the favor?

She'd never… done that before.

She was suddenly wide awake.

Maybe he would talk her through it?

She reached down for his pants and started to unbuckle him. He sighed against her neck.

He pulled back and helped her, sitting back on his knees, and staring down at her, licking his lips.

Well, that didn't take long. She was hot again.

She pushed at his shoulders until he was on his back. He laughed at her, and she crawled on top of him. Her hair was around her shoulders and she pressed her lips against his, forgetting that he tasted like her. She gasped as he pushed into her mouth.

She pulled back and kissed down his chest. One of his hands came to her head, moving through her hair. She looked up at him and his eyes were dark. She kissed one of his nipples and his lips quirked at her.

Alright, not so sensitive there.

She dipped her head, continuing down, and he gasped when he figured out her intentions. She looked up and his eyes were wide and watching her. She kissed him again, lower, and his jaw opened. She watched as his breath came out heavier the lower she got.

She started pulling at his trousers and he sat up, grabbing her arms.

"You don't have to."

She sat up and looked at him. "You don't want me to?"

His mouth opened. And closed. And he didn't say anything. She looked down at his waist again, and saw how ready he was. She kissed his stomach, and Draco laid back.

"Oh, Merlin," he whispered.

She pulled his trousers over his hips, and swallowed as she stared at the front of his boxers. She didn't know what to do. She saw his stomach muscles clench, and she looked up at his face, eyes on her.

"We don't – " He reached for her, sitting up again. "There's so many things I want to do tonight. Every night. We can try that later."

His hands slid down her arms, and he kissed her, pressing his tongue inside and she tasted herself.

"Can we do something else instead?" he asked.

She tried not to feel ashamed, and inexperienced. So, she just nodded.

He moved her off of him, and took off his trousers completely, followed by his boxers. She was so glad they didn't go with plan A, as she truly got a look at him.

He pulled her knickers down to her knees and she finished taking them off along with her heels. She reached for her bra, and he stopped her. "No, I never want you to take that off." He smiled against her lips and she smiled back. He pressed over her, him completely naked now and her still in her bra.

He opened her knees wide, pressing against her, and kissed her on the mouth again. Once she pulled her knees up, pressing alongside of him, he turned them, flipping onto his back. Her hair fell around them as she pulled up.

"Can we try like this?" he asked, looking up from the pillows.

Plan A might have been easier. She didn't know how to… move like he did.

It wasn't the *only* conditions…

And she wondered when it was that he visited Lucius in January.

Hermione nodded, like Draco had just said something she agreed with, and continued to build huts with her vegetables.

Her salad container was taken from her, and she looked up as Draco was moving it to the floor, and moving to kiss her.

She smiled against him as he leaned across her to press their lips together.

"Ugh," he said, pulling back. "You taste like bleu cheese." He wrinkled his nose.

She laughed and held onto his shoulders. She knew from watching him in the Great Hall that he hated bleu cheese dressing. "If you'd told me we'd be kissing again, I wouldn't have ordered it," she mumbled against his mouth.

"No, no. It's your favorite."

He kissed her. And her chest was warm.

He'd watched her in the Great Hall too.

Monsieur DuBois had her yawning. She was doing a fantastic job of hiding her gaping mouth every time he brought up Renaissance artwork and how it clashes terribly with Venetian rugs.

They met every Saturday afternoon at a Muggle cafe that seemed to be Monsieur DuBois's favorite place. They knew him by name there. Hermione ordered an espresso drink that day, because her eyes could not keep open. She was just letting the breeze from the outdoor patio they were on lull her, and the sun across her forehead warm her.

"Da Vinci was, of course, a Squib —"

This caught Hermione's ears. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

Monsieur DuBois raised a calculated brow at her. "I said, Leonardo da Vinci was a Squib. His great grandfather was the Italian Minister of Magic in 1414."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "I... had never heard of that. Do you happen to know of any books on the topic that I could look into?"

"Well," Monsieur DuBois shifted in his chair, crossing his legs and turning slightly away from her. "I've seen it on a family tree."

"Hmm." Hermione pursed her lips.

The waiter came over, flirted a bit with Monsieur DuBois, and took their food order. Hermione truly hated the salads at this cafe. She had now tried every salad on the menu and not a one of them was filling or tasty. She decided on a bowl of soup today.

She glanced at her timepiece as inconspicuously as possible, but it wasn't good enough.

"Do you have somewhere to be, Miss Granger?"

She looked up at him. "No, no. Just... checking the time, Monsieur."

Her brows came together. "Sick?"

"You're thin." He pressed a finger lightly in between two ribs.

She blinked up at him. "Thank you?"

This was the time to discuss this?

"Thinner."

She laughed. "I haven't had lunch in five days." She chuckled, reaching for him.

He blinked at her.

And that was how Hermione found herself eating a salad in Draco's office.

He'd straightened his clothes, and poked his head out to ask his secretary – *Carrie.* Carrie the Secretary. How had it been that easy? – to order them lunch from the café around the corner.

He'd come back to her, made her scream, and then instead of getting her clothes on, fixing her hair, and making her way across the floor back to her office, they'd sat on the leather couch, eating the food delivery.

It was… awkward. Almost like a date. When the silence and crunching had gone on long enough, she started talking about work. He was much more amenable to a back and forth now, and they ended up making a plan for the first week of Wizengamot hearings in March.

"Will you be at Cornerstone this weekend?" he asked her as he crumbled up the wrappings for his sandwich.

She chewed, pushing at her cucumbers and wondering what the right answer to this question was.

"Yes." She pressed her lips together. "Will you?"

"Maybe Sunday." He brushed a few crumbs off the couch and vanished them.

She bit back a grin. "Is there a book you need?"

"Something like that."

She looked up at him and he was smirking at her. She started organizing her remaining tomatoes with her fork.

Her smile fell as she thought of the way he disappeared to New York, or the cagey meeting he had with Slughorn at the governor's ball, or the response from Noelle that she was still waiting on. She wanted to know things about him still, wanted to know how he spent his time.

"What do you have tomorrow?" She couldn't fight the blush that rose on her neck.

He paused before answering, and she looked up at him. He was staring at the carpet.

"I'm visiting my father."

Oh. No, never mind. There were some things she didn't want to know.

"Is … is everything alright? Or…?"

"It was part of his conditions to the inheritance. That I visit him on the monthly visitations in January and February." His voice was clipped and his jaw clenched.

"I… don't know how to…"

He smiled up at her and licked his lips. "Let's figure it out."

He brought his hands up to her hips, and pulled her gently down on top of him, sliding against her. She pressed her lips together, her bottom half still very wet from earlier.

She brought her hands to his chest, pressing against him as she raised up, and let him guide himself into her. He slipped in easily, and she tried to relax, closing her eyes, and lowered down onto his hips. She thought he was all the way inside, but he was still stretching into her. Her muscles clenched on him, trying to accommodate him, and he moaned.

She opened her eyes and found his squeezed closed, breath coming quickly.

She didn't know what to do next. She tried reversing the motion, and lifted up again, letting him slide almost all the way out of her and then coming back down again. His eyes snapped open to watch her.

She pushed her hair out of the way, over her shoulder, and he must have liked that because his hands squeezed her hips.

She raised up again, trying to go faster, but knowing that this pace was going to be difficult. She could feel her thighs shaking already.

She was just about to ask him to take over. She looked up at his face and found him panting, devouring her with his eyes, licking his lips, and squeezing his fingers on her hips.

She tried a few more strokes. He reached up and pulled at her breast. She gasped, and found one more stroke in her. She leaned her arms on his chest again, putting her weight on him, and the angle changed. She caught her breath as both his hands came up to her chest. Squeezing and lifting and tugging at her through the bra. Her hips bucked against him, and his eyes rolled back in his head.

She tried it again, and he groaned.

Well, this she could do. And it was starting to feel okay for her too. She slammed her hips forward. Short, sharp movements, and he panted, grabbing at her ribs.

She came down again, placing her hands beside his head. Her hair fell over her shoulder again and she left it there as his eyes darkened. She thrust her hips in this angle and she could feel the base of him on her sensitive bud. She did it again, and bucked again. And she picked up the pace.

"Yes," he hissed.

She looked up at his face and it was tight, and eyes pressed closed. She rode him again, forward, and forward, and down, down, down. And his hips rose up to meet hers. He groaned.

"Granger, yes. Oh, fuck yes." He moved one hand to her hip, pulling her forward as his hips snapped up, and his other hand moved between their bodies, and the extra pressure made her gasp.

She watched his face, hovering over him, as he started to take over the pace. She didn't care. His hips rose to meet her as his hand pulled her down on him. She spread her knees wider, and it brought her closer, opening more, and she held her breath as he started moving his fingers fast on her. Over and over and she didn't know she was able to come again. She thought this was for him. But she felt herself getting lighter and lighter. She kissed him, and he growled into her mouth, her hair tangling between their lips.

Her hips were barely moving now, just rutting quickly, pushing against his hand that was on her clit. She was clenching against him, and he was panting in her mouth. She pulled up, raising back up, tall on his hips. She felt like she could do this now.

She moved her hips quickly from here, forward, forward, forward. His eyes watched her, and his hips found a rhythm again. Up against her, up, up, up.

She brought her hands to her breasts again. He groaned deep in his throat and he started pounding upwards, quicker. She watched him, his eyes rolling in his head and his lip between his teeth. He was sweating hard, and she knew her chest was damp too.

She tried to move up and down again instead of forward. She bounced on him twice before he let out an "oh, yes."

She clenched her thighs, trying to keep a rhythm of up and down and up and down. His fingers started moving on her clit again. She gasped and bounced two more times before she started clenching around him, her muscles fluttering and grabbing him, she couldn't bounce anymore. Couldn't do anything.

She was falling. Her back hit the mattress and she realized he had flipped them. She was still clenching him, moaning and screaming and grabbing his shoulders, and pushing her nails into his back, but he started pounding her into the mattress. His hips moved aggressively but she didn't care. He was groaning in her ears. He was panting, and cursing and she was still clenching inside and she didn't know when it would stop. She ran her hands into his hair and he bit down on her neck as he stuttered, rhythm failing. He yelled something against her skin and snapped his hips four more times before pressing forward and holding himself against her, straining. She found another ledge to fall over.

She screamed and felt her inside muscles massaging him, pulling him closer and closer. She felt the stars behind her eyelids and felt his skin breaking under her nails.

She panted against him. He was heavy on her and she couldn't catch her breath.

"I can't… oh, my god. I can't breathe."

He lifted up, and looked into her eyes. He stayed inside of her as she caught her breath. Every few seconds her muscles would hold him again. And she had no idea what it felt like for him but for her it was like never ending agony. Perfect agony.

He finally pulled out of her, and she felt another wave hit her without him inside.

She didn't know much about how to… position oneself... Nor was she in a great position to start the momentum, but she knew she was ready, and he was still watching her, frowning at her, but hard against her.

She kissed him, trying to rub herself against him again, grabbing at his hair and biting his lips, and he pulled away about to tell her she didn't have to.

She lifted a brow, mimicking him. "Don't be such a Hufflepuff about it, Draco."

His jaw dropped, his eyes wide. She smirked and he kissed it off of her. When he entered her, it was tight again, but nothing like the pain had been on Monday. Once she had convinced him for the third time that he could go faster, the way his hips snapped her against the door had it rattling in its frame.

They paused, listening to the echo, wondering if they could hear it outside the silenced room. He laughed, moving them off the door and against the wall next to it.

On Thursday, she had to sit through an entire meeting with Draco and Mr. Buckworth in her office. She sat behind her desk, with Draco staring at her while Mr. Buckworth and she discussed the Werewolf Policy.

At the end, Draco offered to walk Mr. Buckworth to the lifts. When he returned, he locked the door and silenced the room.

Hermione swallowed.

Five minutes later, she was sitting on the edge of her desk, hooking her leg around Draco's hips, letting him undress her.

He *did* sweep his arm across her desk, throwing everything onto the floor, and they *did* laugh about it.

On Friday, they were back in his office. She started to feel guilty about never discussing work with him, so she tried to talk about the progress on the Snidget project while he undressed her. He let her talk, sucking at her neck and placing her on his desk.

When she laid back, she realized that everything was already cleared from his desk, and decided to just let the cool marble sink into her sink as he worked off her laced shoes.

Once her shoes were off, he kissed her heel, and then her calf, and continued to drop sucking kisses up her legs, ghosting over her knickers, and then sliding up her stomach. He dipped to the right, and tried to place a kiss on each rib.

The marble was digging into her fingers as she grabbed the edges of the desk, and he was halfway up her chest when he pulled back, staring down at her.

He frowned.

"What?"

He let his hand run across her ribs, looking down at her strangely.

"Are you sick?"

I press down, changing the angle a bit. She moans, and I thrust faster, snapping my hips into her, her body unable to wiggle against me while I push on her waist.

"Oh, Merlin, Granger…"

"Is it good?" she whimpers.

"It's fucking perfect," I hiss, slamming my cock inside of her, feeling her clamp down on me with every thrust. "Can I go faster—"

"Please."

I drive into her. Hermione Granger, bent over a chair in a bookshop, with her denim jeans around her fucking knees.

I watch her fingers curl in the pillow, her head turning into the fabric.

"Turn your head," I say.

She waits a few thrusts before complying. She faces out, hair falling over her neck and cheek. I reach forward and move her curls, twisting them softly and feeling my cock pulse.

"Look at me."

She turns back, panting. And I have to close my eyes to keep from coming.

"Oh, god…" I hear.

When I open my eyes, her mouth is open in a silent scream, and her cunt grips me as I fuck into her. I can hardly get back inside like this, but I try to stay still for her as she gasps.

Fuck I love you so much.

Her muscles start to release, and the warm wetness starts to flood between us, and I know she's not fully done but I can't wait—

I lean forward, gripping her curls in one hand, pressing her waist down with the other, and I fuck her with grunting gasps, cock sinking deep and barely leaving her heat before slamming forward again.

I look down at her arse one last time before I let go, and then I'm gazing into her eyes again as she breathes little sighs into the air, watching me come.

I tug at her hair, and squeeze at her skin, and stay buried inside of her for what feels like hours until I can breathe again. My legs tremor as I bend over, pressing kisses against her back, folding over on top of her to kiss her lips.

I feel her cunt clench me as I rest my weight on her, dipping my tongue into her mouth and smoothing my hand through her hair.

She's still in there. And she's mine.

~*~

I Apparate home, landing on the soft grass just beyond the gates of the Manor. I walk against the February wind, tugging my cloak tighter around myself. The gates admit me, and I pace my way across the path to the large front doors which open at my approach.

I find Mother in the new drawing room, glaring down at her book coolly.

"I almost sent out a search party," she says, eyes on the page.

I was supposed to be home for lunch. The Selwyns were coming over.

I lean on the doorframe, looking down at the new carpets that cover the spot where her blood is still etched into the stones.

"Tell me again about the day she went to see Lucius."

She closes her book and looks up at me. She considers, looking toward the new fireplace, and says, "He agreed to release your inheritance if he could meet her. I must admit that he already knew of your feelings for her. And I feel that agreeing under those circumstances was my mistake."

She looks at me, waiting for a reaction. I have none to give.

"Hermione went to see him... She was very nervous. And when she returned she was quite out of sorts."

I feel my teeth grind together. I nod for her to continue.

"Her first priority upon returning was making it clear to me that the two of you were not courting." I feel the sting, but I was prepared for it. "She was convinced you would not want that, though I am unsure if your father was the one who planted that idea..."

No. It was probably me. With my acid and ice. With talks of Auctions and virginities. With Katyas and Noelles.

Mother pauses. I narrow my eyes at her.

"And I asked her. Quite bluntly. And she said she had no interest in marrying you."

The words close my throat, but I've heard them before.

No interest in marrying me. No interest in becoming Father's idea of a Malfoy bride. Until the inheritance was tied to her. Then she stepped forward like a knight with a shield, facing down the fires.

"Have things changed?" she asks, softly.

She's eyeing me with a strange hope in her eyes, and I see a ballet of grandchildren spinning above her head.

"We, uh..." I clear my throat. "We have made some... progress."

Mother smiles an obnoxious grin, and I roll my eyes at her.

"I do hope you're being safe."

"Mother!" I sputter.

"Or, actually," she ponders, "do be *unsafe*, won't you? Just be engaged by the time the little one is born."

"Mother, that is quite enough out of you."

She bounces on the loveseat like a child and says, “Can we please have her over? Next weekend?”

I roll my eyes, and say, “Fine.” She smiles. Then I press my lips together hating to ruin this lightness, and say, “If it’s no matter to you, I’d like for you to play your last move with Father.” I look at her, and find her brows drawn together. “He has been sending her to Madame Michele. I found her today with Monsieur DuBois, learning about Renaissance architecture.”

The smile fades from her face, and she is still as a statue when she says, “Did you now.”

I nod. “He told her the inheritance wouldn’t be released to me unless she conformed.”

My mother is an absolute vision when she’s angry. Most people flush, fire igniting in their eyes, blood boiling. But Mother ices over.

“Draco, darling,” she says, gazing out the window at the night sky. “Your father and I are getting a divorce. I hope that won’t disturb you too greatly.”

She plucks up her book and resumes reading.

~*~

Sunday, February 20, 2000

My Italian is a bit rusty, but I’m able to find my way to the correct villa. I knock at the door, and an old elf immediately pulls it open.

“Draco Malfoy to see Miss Parkinson,” I say.

He says something back in Italian, and I recognize schedule or appointment. He looks me up and down. Elves can translate any language, so this one’s just being an asshole.

“I do not have an appointment.”

He frowns at me and gestures for me to wait in the entry hall. It’s a small cottage, with large windows and ivy on the exterior walls. I’m examining the sitting room from its doorway when I hear heels on stairs.

“To what do I owe this surprise?”

I look up and Pansy descends the stairs in a dressing gown, her hair not fully combed, but her face already on. It’s been maybe eight years since I’ve seen her without makeup.

She sees it in my face, stopping on the last two steps, the light leaving her eyes.

“What’s wrong?”

I jump right to it, feeling a similar fire from yesterday deep in my chest.

“Have you been in contact with my father?”

Her brows meet her fringe.

“Recently? No. Why? Is there something the matter?”

I slide my hands into my pockets to stop this ache to squeeze something.

“And what about ‘not recently?”

She blinks at me, eyes searching mine, dancing over my tight shoulders and closed jaw.

She helps me by shimmying out of the denims, but I don’t let her get them past her knees before pushing my hand into her knickers, slipping through her and searching for her clit. She gasps, and her hands search for something grab, landing on the back of the armchair.

I swirl designs on her, slipping down to press inside of her, finding her perfectly wet and already squeezing me as my fingers slip inside. I groan against her ear.

“I want you to bend over this armchair,” I hiss into her ear.

She tenses, breath catching.

And I say again, “And if you don’t like it, we’ll stop.”

She nods, and I grip her knickers, pulling them down to her knees. She breathes heavily as I guide her slowly to lean over the arm of the chair. I pull the decorative pillow to rest on the seat, guiding her down to her elbows.

I pull back, looking down at her perky bum pressing up to me. I’m already leaking in my trousers.

I slide my hands along the skin of her back, rolling up her t-shirt, slipping over her arse. Her body is tense, but I massage circles into her cheeks. I hear a moan and I think it came from me.

I pop the last of my buttons and take my cock out of my trousers.

“What’s… What’s different about this?” she asks quickly, voice high. Probably wondering what my intentions are with her arse in the air.

“Nothing,” I say. “It’s the same as we’ve always done, just with you turned a different way.”

Though, of course, as I say it I am stroking my cock, looking down at her arsehole.

“Alright,” she whispers.

I reach between her legs and press my fingers into her again. “Just like this.”

“Alright.”

I push my cock between her legs, pressing forward, and she sighs into the pillow. I watch myself disappear inside of her and I mutter, “Fuck.”

“What is it?” she says. This loss of control, loss of seeing everything, isn’t really her cup of tea, I know.

“I just watched my cock slide into you, Granger,” I whisper, pressing further. She gasps. “And I’ve been dreaming about this arse for years. Watching your hips all throughout school.”

She squeaks when I push further, my hands gripping her hips tight.

I start a slow rhythm like this, watching as I enter her, feeling how tight she is like this. I ask her several times how it feels and she just responds with a breathy, “Good.”

I move my hands to her waist, planted right on top of the arm of the chair, sliding my fingers along her skin, following the dip of her waist to her full hips. Her backside is so soft and full against my hipbones.

I look up at her, and she's grinning. "Mind if I take a look?" I say.

She nods. "Be my guest." And she stays there. Ready for me.

I need to learn a spell to disappear denims. I'm sure Blaise knows it.

I slip behind the counter, and slide into the space behind her, my hips cradling hers as my cock pushes against her arse. I bend over her, pressing my hot breath against her ear, and sliding my hand along her ribs.

"How strange. I could have sworn something back here was mine."

She laughs, and presses into me, like agreeing with me. Mine.

Oh, we better fuck in this bookshop, Granger.

I glide my hand higher, cupping her breast and feeling for her hard nipple. She gasps and I press forward, letting her feel my cock, starting a slow roll against her backside.

I lean forward to kiss her neck, and she turns her head and says, "I think we could find what you're looking for in the non-fiction section."

There's that fire in her eyes that always spells disaster for my self-control, and I smirk back her and say, "The customer service here is impeccable."

She straightens, pressing up against me, and takes my hand, leading me around the counter to the right, towards a walled-off non-fiction section. The windows are covered with book shelves, and if anyone wanted to look inside, they would be hard-pressed to see anything in the darkness.

And then she dims the lights down.

Oh, what a saucy girl.

She turns and wraps herself around me, pressing our chests together, and slamming us back into a bookshelf, and I almost laugh into her mouth at the reverse of my own fantasy.

She tilts her head up to me, moaning as my hands slither down her waist to grab at her arse – the same arse she'd just presented to me, like it belonged to me.

She slides her hands down my chest and grabs for my belt, and I breathe heavily against her mouth as she unbuckles me like we only have ten minutes in her office before lunch arrives.

My eyes slide over to a comfy armchair in the corner, and I pause her hands on my buttons.

"Can we… Can I try something? And if you don't like it, we can stop?"

She pants against my face, and says, "Okay." And I kiss her like a man dying of thirst because she trusts me. Because she doesn't hesitate with me. And she makes me feel like I'm going to be different than my father in that regard.

I drag my tongue through her mouth, drinking from her and memorizing her tongue against mine. When I pull away I grab her hands and take her to the chair. I spin her to face the arm, and my hands reach around her hips to work open her jeans. She slides her hands up and down my wrists.

"He saw my design on the Argentinian Minister last June, and wrote to me from Azkaban." She crosses her arms over her chest, in a rare motion of insecurity that draws my eyes. "He… he's followed my work. Sending me congratulations, or…" She swallows. "He put me in contact with several people—"

"And you never mentioned this?" I snarl, losing whatever ounce of control I thought I had over this.

She snaps her mouth shut, eyes narrowing in a way I remember.

"Perhaps I did. It might be in one of the sixty-seven letters I sent to you while you were away."

"It wasn't." I laugh. "I read them all."

Her cheek twitches and she looks away from me.

"What does this have to do with anything?"

I prowl to the bottom of the stairs, looking up at her. "And what of 'The Modern Business Witch?" I hiss. "Did my father have anything to say about that?"

"Of course," she snaps. "He loved the design—"

"And what did he have to say about the model?"

Her lips close, and something darkens her eyes. "What did he say to you now?"

I pace, looking away from her, trying to remember who she is. Who we are. "Whose idea was it to use her?"

"Mine," she snaps.

"Really?"

"Yes," she straightens. "All decisions regarding my line are made by me. If it has my name on it, I stand by it. I'm sure you can appreciate that, Draco."

I look up at her, inches taller than me on the stairs. And I wait. She draws a careful breath through her nose.

"He wrote to me last month. After the New Year's party," she says. "He included a *Prophet* clipping of Granger, in her white dress and elegant styling, and suggested her." She laughs, and I wince at the sound. "I told him there was no universe in which Hermione Granger would consent to that kind of torture from me, but thank you. Then he let me know about her new position at Malfoy Consulting. And he reminded me of the needs she might have in the future… outside of her employment."

She looks at me, eyes catching on my scowl.

"The decision was mine, Draco. Lucius only gave me a boost of confidence that if I asked, she might say yes. If *you* asked," she said, "she might say yes."

My throat is closing, trying to decide if I need to hit something or cry.

"You used her—"

"We're *all* using her," she says, shrugging. "That's what we do, Draco." She bites her lip, smearing her lipstick. "And I won't apologize for keeping in touch with your father. He's the only Malfoy who would talk to me, and he's the closest thing to a paternal guardian I ever had. He always treated me like family."

I look away, chewing on my cheek, sniffing, and feeling the icy chill of useless anger.

"Because you're pure-blood, pure-bred, and flawlessly beautiful," I bite back, sneering at the qualities.

"What else is there?" she snarls.

I look back at her, and she's lifting a brow at me, asking me, a glistening sadness in her eyes that I haven't seen in years.

She steps down off the stairs, and comes to stand in front of me, smaller now. "He asked me to make her one of those three things," she whispers. "And I know you never needed all of that to see her as 'flawlessly beautiful…" Pansy smiles wetly at me. "But you dragged her into your world without even thinking of how difficult it would be for her. To be lacking in those three weapons."

She straightens my shirt collar, like we're on our way upstairs to a wintery Great Hall in our formal robes.

I swallow and say, "Lucius sent her to Madame Michele."

I wait for her to scowl, to ask, to react at all.

"I know."

My eyes snap to her, rage building again.

She continues, "It was obvious. To me, at least." Her hands brush my shoulders, dropping to her sides. "She was such a *commoner* at school," she chuckles, "It was clear to me that she had been working with someone."

I step away, grinding my teeth, glowering at her sitting room.

"If you want her in your world, Draco, there are things she needs to learn," she hums next to me.

I close my eyes, thinking of the list.

"If she's willing to learn them, that says something too," Pansy says at my shoulder.

I turn my head to see her looking down at our feet.

"Why would you consent to that insane idea?" I ask. "I know how you feel about her. The Pansy I used to know would rather toss her business model in the rubbish than assist Hermione Granger's career or personal life in any way."

She looks out the window. "People change, Draco." And then flatly: "I'm referring to *her*, of course. I'm as perfect as I've always been." I smile. "And it wasn't her I was helping." She looks

Beautiful. Fashionable. Level headed.

She smiles softly, still speaking to the woman at the register.

Financially knowledgeable. Obedient. Trained in décor.

I watch her fingers flirt with the ledger book.

Practiced dancer. Intelligent. Cool tempered.

And something worse twists itself around my head, some small idea voiced with an aristocratic hiss and a lilting sigh.

You can have your Mudblood. But I want ten weeks.

Perhaps… Perhaps there was truth there. I could have her. I could marry her, even. But he needed to ensure that she had the proper training to handle the job.

Don't botch the proposal, Draco, he'd said, joking.

She looks over at me again when the customer leaves, and she busies herself once she's seen I'm already looking back at her.

It wasn't that simple. There is always something else with Lucius Malfoy. I let go of any hope for my father, remember that only this morning he stabbed me with words he didn't need to use. Just to make me hurt.

I clear my mind, pushing Lucius behind a wall now, and bringing Hermione forward.

By the time the shop is closing down I'm thinking of all the different ways I can touch her again. We can go to hers or mine, and I can lap at her again, begging her to teach me about the house elf wars or some rubbish.

She's saying goodnight to the final customer, and I've come to stand at the stacks, waiting. Watching her as she squirms under my gaze. I don't hold back anything, sending my desires forward in ways I haven't been able to for five years.

She flips the sign to *Closed*, and turns to me with a smile.

"We're closed for today, Mr. Malfoy," she says. "Is there anything I can put on hold for you, for tomorrow?"

Shopkeeper roleplay? Whatever else are you hiding from me, Granger?

I move to lean on the counter, gravitating closer to her. "Are you quite sure there's nothing on reserve for me back there?"

"I can check." And she turns, leans forward, and those tight denims pulls so deliciously close to her skin as she wiggles her arse for me. What a vixen she is.

She says something, but all I'm focused on is the dip of her back under her shirt, the round cheeks pressing forwards to me. And I feel my cock harden when she turns her head to look back at me, just as if I had her bent over my desk.

We haven't discussed those positions. I didn't want to frighten her off with how badly I wanted to see her bent over, or bouncing on top of me, or on her hands and knees—

I'd seen it here before, browsing but never interacting with her. I hear it shuffle to the other side of the stack, and I watch as it pokes its head out again, jumping, and retreating.

I've never seen it buy anything.

I've never seen it communicate with anyone.

But it's kept its eye on her. And on me.

A thick sludging feeling pours over my chest as I watch it pull a book with a bony hand, waddling down another set of stacks.

Granger's busy with a customer. I close my book, placing it on my chair, and move to the stacks, sliding down the shelves until I'm just behind the lumpy creature.

I see it look through the gaps in the shelves and jump when it finds me gone from my chair. It spins to go on a search for me, and it finds me directly behind it, like some kind of horror story.

It lets out a startled "meep" sound, and I glare down at it with all the Lucius Malfoy I have left in me.

"Your service to my father is complete. Leave this store and never return. If I find you within one hundred meters of Hermione Granger again, I will eviscerate you slowly with all the Dark Magic I have in me. Is that clear?"

Its black eyes gape at me. Then it drops the book and scrambles to the exit.

I listen for the door opening, and Granger says a "Stay dry!" as the shuffle of flat feet tumbles out the door.

I release my shoulders, feeling relief and anxiety swirl together. I hear my father's smug voice.

I've been having her watched since the moment she left Hogwarts.

I don't remember how many times I've seen that hag here. It was inconsequential to me. But I'm suddenly positive that every visit I've paid to Cornerstone Books has been carefully documented. Even months ago, when I couldn't stay away from her, flirting over giftwrapping.

And Lucius just asks me softly, *How are things progressing with you two?*

When he knew.

He'd known before her visit to Azkaban. Before the *list*.

I shake my head, trying to dispel some of the aches that trying to outthink my father create. I reshelf the dropped book, wondering if Lucius knew he couldn't control me any longer, so he went through her.

Graceful. Table manners.

I grab up a few more books with no intention of reading them.

Skilled in hosting. Witty. Charming. Social leader.

Moving back to my chair, I drop back, and the movement pulls her eyes to me, like she's been wondering where I'd got to.

up at me. "You may remember my feelings for her, but you must have forgotten my feelings for you."

Her eyes shine up at me, and I feel a pressing weight behind my eyes. She threads her arm through my mine, turning to stare into the sitting room with me.

"There's still a small group of us who would do anything for you," she says. "Quite irritating really."

My eyes find the window, and I stare off, trying to figure out what I can contribute to this.

"Why did you never answer any of my letters?" she whispers. "You read them, and never wrote me back. Once a week I wrote to you, for fifteen months."

A bird lands on the branch outside. He shivers his wings.

"After the first few month in Azkaban, I stopped believing that I would be released. I didn't want you hoping for anything."

She huffs a small laugh. "Contrary to your ego, Draco Malfoy, I did not spend the past two years longing for you." I feel her flip her hair over her shoulder, posturing. "I've had a grand time, thank you very much." And then she adds, "I had a torrid affair with Theodore."

My brows pull together. "Theo? He's…"

"Yes, I know that now. Let's not discuss it."

She pulls her arm from me, turning to go fetch us tea as long as I'm visiting. I feel a grin tugging at me with this new information.

"Does Blaise know?" I call after her.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, please don't tell him."

She goes back to work, and I find a few books, planting myself in a large chair with a view of the counter, and cast *Oculus Dolus*.

I spend an hour watching her. Watching the way she moves. It's still her. She still fumbles with quills and parchment, like she's trying to decide the quickest way to write down her thoughts. She still shifts her weight from one hip to the other – and I wonder if she's used cushioning charms on her feet; she really should use them if she's going to insist on standing for sixteen hours on Saturday and Sunday. She still sucks on the end of her quill, even without the blue sugar to tempt her. Her lips still pull tight on the end of the feather, cheeks straining, and eyes on the paperwork in front of her.

And most important in all this, she still watches me.

Still, she lifts her eyes and finds my location in a room. Still, she looks away too quickly, even though I'm not "looking back" at her. Still, she tilts her face to the counter and lets her lashes flutter up, thinking she's the sneakiest of spies while her eyes graze over me.

Watching me at the Ministry. Watching me at Hogwarts even. I never used to think she looked at me. Never thought she'd glanced at me when I wanted her to, but maybe it's been a dance for years, spinning to different partners and turning heads away from each other.

I want to ask her what she meant when she said, "I win." How long has she been watching me.

She grabs a few books and marches into the fiction section to reshelf them. The way she walks… It's not that different, is it?

She passes the hag that's been wandering for an hour or so, steering clear of me. She smiles brightly at it. The hag jumps and turns, waddling over to a different section.

I watch her eyes come to me again, resting on me while I pretend to read. She drinks in my hair and my face, sliding over my body in a way she really shouldn't do in a place of business, but then finally resting on the book in my lap, tilting her head to try to figure out what I'm reading.

Hermione Granger and books.

I release the charm on my eyes, and when she brings her gaze back to my face, making eye contact, she jolts and blushes, turning away. I feel a grin blossoming on my lips, and she looks back at me. She smiles back, like I've just asked her to dance.

Maybe I have.

And I decide not to use *Oculus Dolus* any longer. No need to deceive her of anything in the future.

The hag pokes its head around a book stack again as Granger walks back to the counter, a little sway to her hips. The hag looks directly at me and pulls back when it meets my eyes.

wife who would put up with me. Not even Mother can compare to this impossible list. And Father knows it.

"He said the only thing he could part with was pure-blood."

I feel a grin split my face.

So, it's a joke then?

He says I can have her, but only if she strips it all away to be someone un-her.

He says stay away from her, but do use her, son, if at all possible.

How are things progressing between you two?

She's so much more like this, don't you think? Much more like a Malfoy wife.

Pushing me into this, even as I try to crawl away.

I'm laughing. I'm cackling into an alleyway with half a Golden Girl about to cry.

"Why did you do this, Granger."

It's barely a question because I know it's him. It's him who served her to me on a platter, a shell of her.

"I'll finish these next three weeks, Draco, and then you'll be done with him," she says. "You'll not owe him anything. You'll be rid of him."

"No, no." I rub my face, feeling my skin buzz with the rainstorm. "I'll never be rid of him. He's got his hooks in you, now." I look at her and confess, "I'd seen it, but I ignored it. You're different. The way you drink your coffee is different. The way you walk. The way you dance." I touch her to remind myself that she's real, that she's still here. "You're changing. And now every time I see you lift your saucer with your cup, I'll think of him. Think of this. When you curtsey. When you shake hands."

She cries, this Pygmalion doll of mine.

"Why did you do this," I whisper against her lips.

"It was the right thing to do," she says, painting across my skin.

There she is.

Her brown eyes flicker between mine, searching for justice and equality, fighting for herself, fighting for others, fighting for me.

Maybe she's still in there. I lean into her mouth, wondering if I can breathe her back to life.

~*~

She tells me she has to get back to Cornerstone, and everything besides the two of us comes back to me as I pull away from her lips.

We Apparate to Diagon Alley, and when we arrive in a downpour, I transfigure a large umbrella for us. She looks like she'll say goodbye when I open the door for her, but I just dry us both with a spell and say hello to Morty. He grins at us with a secret smile that I remember from years ago, sitting high behind the counter.

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Twenty One

Sunday, February 20, 2000

When I get home from Italy, Mother is sitting with Rita Skeeter in our drawing room. I walk in just as the Quick-Quotes Quill is taking down my mother's recent Azkaban visitation dates.

Rita is sitting on the edge of her chair, rocking slightly, but pressing her lips together in a firm line, as if opening her mouth would ruin this momentous occasion.

"Hello, Draco," Mother says when she's finished. Rita turns to me quickly, eyes glittering. "My son and I have no comment," Mother finishes.

Rita snaps her jaw closed, and takes a deep breath. She collects her Quick-Quotes Quill from the air, and stands. "Thank you, Mrs. Malfoy."

"Black, if you please, Rita."

Rita's eyes grow wider. She nods quickly to me as she heads for the fireplaces. I hear the flames burst.

"Well, that didn't take long," I say.

Mother sips her tea and stares at the new curtains. "It shouldn't be a shock to him. I told him this would happen if he interfered." She presses her knuckles to her lips, and I frown at her. "I saw her today. She's not much different, but there are small things, aren't there?"

She looks to me and I nod.

"It's not very noticeable, but it's there." She circles a finger around the rim of her teacup, and says, "She's coming to dinner on Saturday." Mother looks at me with lifted brows. "Do be discreet, Draco. At least *pretend* she's not staying the night."

I feel the blood rush to my cheeks, and I look over her shoulder and nod, escaping the room before she asks me something completely inappropriate like if we need a fertility potion slipped into her wine glass.

On Monday, the paper announces the divorce on the front page. Skeeter's done a wonderful job of keeping it intriguing but vague.

I stand at the front with Melody, holding a coffee cup when the lift doors open, and I can't help but wink at her when her eyes brighten at seeing me there.

She takes the cup with a lovely blush and I fall into step beside her on the way to her office. "Senior staff meeting at ten, then we should meet this afternoon about the Golden Snidget campaign. After our lunch, of course."

She looks up at me and I let my eyes rover over her. Just the mention of our "lunches" has me wondering what her knickers look like today.

She looks nervously over my shoulder, and says, "Lunch. Yes. And what were you planning to order today?"

I smirk. This witch…

"I have a few ideas," I say. "But I'm open to suggestions."

Fuck, I think about bending her over her desk, sliding into her while looking down at her arse again. And I wonder what dirty little things she wants from me that she has yet to tell me. If I can pry them out of her.

She blushes down at the floor, and I take my cue to walk away before I do something to her here on the office floor.

"Er, Draco?" she calls me back and beckons me into her office. We stand just inside the door when she says, "I, er… I saw the papers this morning. I just wanted to make sure you were… alright."

"Excellent," I say. Strange that it would affect me at all.

She stammers her way through what she really means, which is a loose translation of "I hope you feel alright," and as she suggests that divorces can be difficult, I say, "On the contrary. It was probably one of the easiest decisions my mother has ever made."

"Good, excellent." She stutters over a mix of condolences and congratulations, and I wonder when she'll come to understand how the Malfoy family works. Will it take years? "I am shocked at Skeeter's gall though. It's quite private business, even if it is excellent gossip. I do feel sorry for your mother."

I shrug at her. "Don't. She was the one to give Skeeter the heads up." And I explain to her what Skeeter really means when she prints "They were not available for comment." I watch as her mind tries to absorb that kind of trickery. I can tell it's not easy for her.

In the meeting that morning, I introduce Cornelia Waterstone. Just as I felt when I brought her in for a second interview, I feel like Waterstone is someone the Wizengamot will not want to argue with.

Her eyes flicker between mine, and then she does.

"He gave me a list of things. To work on."

I stare at her, waiting for more.

A list?

"For what?"

"To be…" she stutters, "to be seen with you. To be worthy of you."

In November? By that time, he'd made it quite clear that I was to stay away from her so why…

"You weren't even with the company yet," I say, looking down at the cloud-darkened stones.

"Yes, but we were being pictured together so often," she says, lashes fluttering so pretty. "And… and he knew about the Auction."

That fucking Auction.

I knew he told her. I knew it.

I wait for her to put me in my place. To spew into me the correct way to have handled this. To give me notes on my behaviors.

I wait.

She just looks at me with open, trusting eyes.

"He knew that you'd gone to Narcissa's mother." And now she does too. I wonder if she truly understands what it would have meant…

And then:

"He knew that you would have saved me."

Saved her. Funny to phrase it that way when I would have kept her locked away in her pretty little room. But her face is begging me for something, and she continues.

"He thought we were together. Had been for ages. I – I corrected him, of course," she says, looking away.

Yes, of course, please do correct him. We weren't together then and we hardly are now. Would she even classify it in such a way? With no hopes towards a future?

And then she's telling me she's seen the photographs of the alley way where I almost touched her, almost pinned her beneath me and ravaged her.

She breathes heavily, and there's rain on her cheeks. She tells me about the blackmail. The classes for the inheritance. But all I can think about is the beginning of all this.

"What was on the list?"

She speaks the words from memory, and I feel a weight crushing me with every item.

"Graceful, with table manners, skilled in hosting," she says, and I think of Mother, "witty, charming, social leader," and I think of Pansy. The list goes on, and as she stutters over "level headed" and "obedient" I try to imagine her that way. I try to think of a boring life with a boring

I grab her arms and hiss, "*Nothing* is more important than you." I hear the skies crack apart, like bricks falling from the sky.

She breathes against my face, seeing me. Seeing all of me.

I've said too much.

I've *done* too much.

Father at least had the sense to keep his cards close to the vest with her. I've just laid all mine out, hoping she'll bet on me.

I kiss her, just so she'll stop looking at me that way, like I'm some kind of gentleman. Some kind of hero in a story.

And I press my body into hers, like no gentleman would do. Like no student of Madame Michele's Charms and Manners School would be allowed to do.

Her hands are on my waist and my tongue tangles in her mouth.

So much I need to know. So much we need to discuss. But this part is mine. She's let me have this already, so I know I can have it.

Echoes call back to me, something vile as I claim her. The ways I've won her from them all piece together in my head.

We could have split her down the middle. In more ways than one!

I think it's time you found a new bookshop, Malfoy.

Do you think she'll ever moan for you after she's screamed for me?

I pull my lips off her, hands pawing at every part of her and mouth sucking at her jaw.

"Did he ever touch you?"

"N-no. Nothing like that," she gasps, and I pull her hair until I have her neck.

"Have you been to see him since you went in November?"

My hips press into hers, begging to let me back inside.

"No, we've written – He's written letters. Threats."

I suck at her skin, marking the spot that always screams that she belongs to someone. That someone has kissed her and fucked her and wants her.

"Tell me about the letters. Tell me what he said to you."

I sink into her neck, and then she's pulling my face back, holding my head softly, looking into me with anxious eyes.

"I know what you're doing, Draco, and stop." She rubs her thumb across my cheek, calming me. "This… what we have is very special to me and you're turning it into something ugly."

She's right. I close my eyes and breathe in her scent. I press a soft apology against her lips, and ask her the question that has been slowly killing me for months.

"What did my father say to you in Azkaban?"

Please. Please, Hermione. Just answer it.

I also need to announce the current state of finances in the meeting. Granger keeps her head down, and Mockridge keeps his gaze digging into me.

"I thought you had mentioned that these weekly installments were safe," Mockridge questions. "They were promised without conditions."

I face his unpleased expression. "There were conditions after all."

I feel Granger shift next to me.

I hate announcing this on Waterstone's first day. I hate cutting our interns' hours. I hate that I asked Mother for a loan this morning, so that I could cut my own salary by seventy-five percent.

But more than all of this, I hate that her shoulders have curved in on themselves, like she's somehow failed the company. Like she's the problem.

She stays at the end of the meeting, creating blots in her parchment.

"Granger." Out with it.

"This isn't fair. Not to those who've lost their jobs," she bites out.

"They haven't been fired, Granger. Their hours have been cut."

She stands, a sudden determination. "We can push back the Golden Snidget project. And I'll look for ways to cut corners on the Werewolf budget so we can reallocate those funds—"

"We can't reallocate those funds," I stop her. "The donations were given with a specific understanding of what the funds would be used for."

"So mine is the only department that isn't going through budget cuts?" She's fuming, gesturing wildly. "How is *that* fair."

"Yours is the only department fully funded by fundraising, not by the inheritance," I explain. I move closer to her to… calm her or take her hand. But we're in public with the door open. So, I just breathe her in.

She sparks and says, "But the *salary* for my department members is paid by the inheritance. Walter and me. You can cut my salary. Practically in half, really."

She's too bright. I look away from her, shaking my head. "No, Granger. We aren't cutting your salary."

"No, truly. The amount of money I make here is obscene," she whispers as I gather my things. "For February's pay, you can cut my salary, or even take all of it. No one needs to know." I'm about to stop this silly idea when she says, "Besides, with Pansy covering the costs of my wardrobe and without the classes burning a hole in my pocket, I'll have very few expenses."

Like a shard of ice pressed deep into my stomach. My fingers freeze and my breath huffs an incredulous sigh. "The expense for the classes was placed upon you?"

I watch as she shakes her head. "I wouldn't let him cover it. I refused his money."

That's… that's not good enough. That's absolutely… despicable, that's what it is. And Madame Michele allowed it? She knew where the money was coming from and she still—

"Draco." She appears in front of me, and I feel it fade. "Just for February. Cut my salary. The only person who will notice is Dorothea and I'm sure she won't say anything."

"No. That's not how we're going deal with this, Granger." I move to the door, thinking of how else to challenge our budget. "I got us all into this mess, so let me get us out."

I stalk to my office, and I'm not even surprised to find Blaise on the couch.

I feel like telling him what's happened on that couch, but knowing him, he would just snuggle in further.

I shut the door, and he says, "What's going on?" Concern on his face.

I lean back on my door, closing my tired eyes. "He's sent her to Madame Michele." I look up at the ceiling. "Once a week since the New Year, she's had interior design lessons from Claude DuBois, dance with Truesdale, and hosting and etiquette with that awful witch Bernard." I sigh. "Every week the inheritance deposits into my accounts once she's completed her lessons."

I wait, unable to look at him. Waiting for him to say he noticed it already, like Pansy did. Waiting for his shrewd judgment to come in and ask if my pride is worth this financial duress.

"So," he whispers, "he'll actually let her marry you. Wow."

I snap my head to him, feeling my neck crack. He's looking at the wall over my shoulder, mind turning. I wait.

"Why would she need all of that if she's not going to become Mistress of Malfoy Manor?" His eyes flip to me, brows pulled together.

I stare at him. Similar thoughts floated to me on Saturday. But I had to shove them away.

"It's… pointless," I say. "She's not interested in that. She's been clear."

"She has?" Blaise lifts his brows. "How?"

"With my mother, she has been clear," I explain.

He frowns. "Then why has she been seeing a Charms Mistress for eight weeks?"

I swallow. And look away from him. "It's… the right thing to do, she said." And before he can push any further I say, "I have cut off the classes, so the inheritance will be cut off as well."

He looks at his hands and nods. "I'll write a few notes, see if we can move up some meetings. I'll tell my staff we have to buckle down." He runs his palm over his face. "Fuck, I hate this part. These… adult things."

He looks absolutely miserable. And I just can't hold it back any longer.

"Pansy slept with Theo last year."

His hand drops from his face, and he looks at me with an open mouth and wide eyes.

He blinks, and says, "Thank you. So much. That's the best thing I've heard all day." He stands swiftly and moves to my Floo. "I have to give her shit *right* now."

What else is she keeping from me?

"Draco—"

"How long have you been plotting with my father," I snap, trying to make sense of all this. Trying to figure out how…

What part of this relationship is even real.

It's not a relationship, really. She's allowing me to fuck her.

We're stopped at a crosswalk, and I feel her next to me.

I win.

She's never told me that she wanted me. Never said she has ached for me for as long as I've wanted her. She said, *I win.*

"You say it like we're working together," she says, hissing at me.

"Aren't you?"

The signal changes and I plow through the street, a vague memory of where the Apparition point is.

"What did he tell you?" she demands. "If he defines it as anything other than *blackmail* then he lied to you—"

"You're not the only one who had a deal with him, Granger. You shouldn't have gotten involved in this."

She's jogging to keep up with me, and I just want to get her alone. Just get us to a private place where it's just the two of us and I can force her to start from the beginning. To tell me everything.

She asks me how I found her, and I tell her about going to the teashop.

The way Madame Michele had eyed me, knowing exactly what I was there for. Like she expected me weeks ago.

Because I should have known. I chuckle. Because it was so simple.

"You're done with those classes," I bite out.

"What about the money, Draco? The next three installments?"

We're a block away from Apparating. And I feel the clouds condensing above us.

"I told him to shove them up his ass." Essentially.

"We need that money, Draco," she pleads. "Malfoy Consulting is barely afloat as it is. I need to keep going to those classes—"

The idea is so abhorrent to me, that she would continue playing his game. I grab her and pull her into an alley, pointing a finger in her face. "You are not to step foot in that tea room again, do you hear me, Granger?"

She looks at me with wide eyes, and says, "The business is more important than some insane classes, Draco!"

Dolohov takes one step closer to me. I'm as tall as him, so his breath hits me right in the nose.

"I'll be watching you, Malfoy." He smiles. "You're weak, like your father." He reaches up and straightens my collar. "You'll make a mistake one day, and I'll be there. I'll make sure the Dark Lord knows how much of a coward you are. And I'll enjoy watching him end you."

I give him a small grin and say, "Looking forward to it, Antonin."

He steps back, looking over Lovegood once more, and drags Rowle up the stairs.

I'm steadying my breath still when Lovegood runs to Mr. Ollivander, pouring water into his mouth and asking what the weather is like outside.

I watch the two of them for a bit as I clean up the cards and slice up the apple I brought down for the wandmaker.

"You did very good, Draco," Looney says.

I frown at the floor, about to head upstairs again. I want to lighten the room. I don't want to leave them in the heaviness.

"What colors are they, do you suppose," I say, nodding upstairs to where the two Death Eaters disappeared.

I expect her to say puke green, or neon-spotted maroon.

"Hm." She looks up at the ceiling. "They don't have any." Her fingers twist around a curly strand. "My colors shy away from the darkness."

~*~

Saturday, February 19, 2000

There was something that wrapped around my heart, something that still clung to the belief that she would never. That Lucius was lying.

And that something unravels and falls away like a scarf in the wind when I see her sitting at a café table, ankles crossed, coffee cup hovering over a saucer as she sips.

And everything feels raw. The sun is too bright. The people are too loud.

I recognize the man from a handful of meetings with Mother years ago. He might have even been the one to redecorate the drawing room—

And I hear her screaming, cutting above the buzzing street. I see her writhing on the floor, and I think of how soft she's made me. How years of my soul stretching to touch hers has pulled me too thin.

Weak for her.

And as I approach the table, as she looks up at me in terror. As I smile at Monsieur DuBois, I think of all the little ways she's lied to me.

I guide her around the gate, escorting her out, and I wonder why she wouldn't tell me about her trip to Azkaban when I asked. How many times did I have to beg her to tell me about it.

~*~

At 11:58AM, Granger knocks on my office door, and I'm so glad I didn't start undressing early, because it's not Granger.

Cornelia Waterstone wants to chat about the Werewolf Policy. It's almost worth the expression on Granger's face when she enters my office, and realizes she needs to grab her notes.

Waterstone leaves us with fifteen minutes before Carrie comes back with lunch, and I'm already hard as I close the door on the tight-lipped woman.

I lay her out over my desk, and ask her to undress herself so I can get started, slipping inside of her and bunching her skirt up her thighs. When her fingers finally open her blouse, I dip down and lap her tits. She holds my head to her, and I thrust against her shallowly until she comes. As she's still squeezing me, I stand tall, hold her hips still, and fuck her quickly into her wood, listening to the desk scrape across the carpet with each snap of my hips. She holds onto my wrists, and tries to catch her breath as I tumble over, pouring into her.

We sit on the couch, eating lunch together, and one of these days I want to sit with her naked. Get Carrie to deliver lunch before we fuck and then just lock the door and watch her eat her tomatoes with her breasts bared to me. Maybe I'll eat her out while she eats her salad.

We talk work a bit, and it helps to center my mind on anything but fucking her again. She screamed so pretty for me today.

She's proposing ideas for the Golden Snidget Campaign, and I truly don't care much for it but it's great publicity for us.

"I'm meeting with Viktor on Wednesday," she says. No, I really don't care for it. She continues, "We're going to lunch and I'll pitch the Golden Snidget campaign. Hopefully once he's on board we can get Skeeter and Mr. Lovegood to cover the project." She munches on her lettuce and says, "Does the magazine 'Seeker Weekly' do articles? Or just talk Quidditch rubbish?"

Quidditch Rubbish. She's remarkable.

"Yes, they have articles." I feel my lips smiling at her as she speaks, crunching, and pressing a napkin to her lips. I wonder if she's happy. If the sex relaxes her like it does for me. If just being near me makes her feel content, like for me.

I finish my sandwich and say, "Good news that Krum wants to be involved."

"Yes, he was very interested at the governor's ball."

I remember. Eyes on her chest. Hands on her body.

"Mm-hmm. I'm sure he was," I tease.

She pouts. "No, not like that."

"I'm sure just like that." My voice lilts and I see her bristle. "You can't honestly believe he's interested in the Golden Snidgets' welfare."

"He is," she snaps, and I almost laugh. "He is *very* interested in the Golden Snidgets, and I'll *prove* it to you when I come back from lunch with his full support."

She presses her lips together, peeved at me, and maybe I've changed my mind. Maybe I want to feed her the salad. Or a decadent dessert, lifting the spoon and watching as her lips part, licking it clean. Her eyes rolling back in her head at the pleasure of it.

"Sure, Granger," I say, looking back at my paper wrappings. "Try wearing a burlap sack this time instead, and we'll see where his true interests lie."

She glares at me, and I think yes, I want to feed her. Or lick something off of her. Or dip her in something sweet. Make her bathe in it. Maybe soon.

"I hear you're having dinner with my mother on Saturday."

She looks up at me, caught. "Yes, that's right." She stabs a crouton. "Will you be there?"

Feeling lighter at the possibility of having her alone for a whole night, I grab the crouton, plucking it off her fork and crunching it. "Possibly." I wink at her.

She scowls, digging for the last crouton and munching it quickly before I can steal it. I smile as she closes her container and bends for the trash bag.

"Would you consider staying the night? After dinner?" I ask, and it wasn't supposed to be a difficult question, but the crouton sticks in my throat.

"At the Manor?" She blinks at me. "In your room?"

"Or Mippy's room," I quip. "Wherever you feel most at home."

"Would… would your mother be alright with that? Isn't it… improper?"

If she only knew…

I shrug and say, "She doesn't have to know." Her wide eyes almost look interested, excited and now that she's done eating I'm ready to tempt her again. I lean into her. "We'd have an entire wing of the Manor to ourselves." She shivers as I kiss her ear. I press against her jaw, smelling her neck, and then a soft kiss to her lips that has her eyes closing. "And if she catches, us I'll just tell her to have breakfast prepared in the morning too."

Again on her lips, because I can. Because she lets me.

She smiles and quips about sleeping in Mippy's room again, and I grin at her, promising her comfort.

I should slip this in, quickly, lightly. "Also, I'll be out of town on Friday. Personal trip."

I turn forward on the couch, and I wonder when I lost the ability to lie.

"Are you going back to New York?"

My lungs jump. And I look to her, but she's only curious. "No."

I feel a cold sweep through my limbs, and any hope of leaving the dungeon easily drains out of me.

I turn to Lovegood, my wand crushed in my grip. I raise my arm, and look into her eyes.

She gives me that small grin that I remember from months ago, when I had my wand turned on her in a classroom, ready to sizzle her nerve endings.

"*Imperio*."

She sways on her feet. And then hops onto one. And I don't know if I'm actually cursing her or if she's reading my mind.

She hops to the other foot. And then – something I did *not* ask her to do – she does a jumping jack.

I drop my wand and she relaxes. I look back to Dolohov.

His eyes glitter an ugly color and he says, "Is that the best you've got, Malfoy?"

I shrug. "I'll probably pass the exam."

Rowle hiccups, leaning on the stone wall. "You wanna—you wanna really see if you're good at it, you should have her strip."

He laughs into his chest, head lolling to the side.

There's an icy shard digging into my lungs that tastes like fear. I feel Lovegood's heat next to me. She's still.

Dolohov raises a brow at me, waiting.

I sneer at him, looking over Lovegood briefly before snipping at him. "She's barely fourteen," I exaggerate.

Dolohov smiles at me, like he sees right through me. Rowle says, "Even better." He laughs and stumbles a bit.

"Not very inventive, either of you," Dolohov says, stepping forward, challenging me. "I'd test my skills by having her on her knees, sucking me off." He stops in front of me. He's reaching distance from Lovegood. I stare into his eyes, breathing slowly. "That's a real fun game. 'Cause if you let up on the *Imperio*, if you get too… distracted," he says, chuckling, "she might bite your cock off."

He chuckles. His eyes slide over to her, and I see the same expression he had looking at Granger in the paper, talking about an Auction. The same expression he'd worn a few weeks back when we broke into a Muggle jewelry shop on one of our many missions to look for a tiara, but he'd told me to wait outside while he "dealt with" the shop girls.

"The risk's a bit too high then," I say, pulling his eyes back to me. "I'll stick to hopscotch, thank you." I look to Rowle and Ollivander. "You've delivered your prisoner. I'll ask you now to leave my house."

My eyes snap up to her. She flips the first card. And waits for my turn. She looks up at me and her blue eyes are almost white.

"Yes," I whisper. "It can be easier. Are you…?"

She tilts her head at me.

I stare into her eyes, sending my thoughts forwards.

A Legilimens.

I watch the words slide on a silver thread between our eyes, slithering into her pupils and disappearing inside.

She bites the inside of her cheek. "Mm. I don't think so."

I laugh. A barking sound full of relief and mirth. She literally just read unspoken words from my mind.

She leans in, like she's about to tell me the secrets of the world. "I just know how to keep the wrackspurts away."

She winks. And I'm about to laugh at her, about to flip my card over when the door to the dungeon bangs open.

I stand, pulling my wand.

Ollivander's pale, thin body crashes down the stairs, hitting step after step on the way down. Lovegood moves to go to him, and I grab her elbow.

Two pairs of boots follow, and then Dolohov and Rowle are there. Rowle kicks Ollivander's side, but Dolohov stops when he sees us. His eyes scan to the apple cores and playing cards. He slides his thin black eyes up to me, and smirks.

"Are we interrupting something, Malfoy?"

Rowle looks up, catching sight of me. His feet trip and replant. He might be drunk.

I take a breath, and everything locks into place.

"Not at all. Just keeping watch over our prisoner," I say. "Per my father's instructions."

Dolohov smiles, and moves lazily towards us. "So, old Lucius thinks this little bird needs a private guard?" His eyes rake over Lovegood. "She special? A locking charm on the door won't keep her?"

Rowle gives a wobbly laugh. Ollivander lays still and silent at his feet.

I lift a brow at them, give a long-suffering sigh, and say, "Well, to be honest, Professor Carrow is testing us tomorrow on the Imperius Curse." I glance at Lovegood. "I've been practicing. Winning card games and making her jump around a bit."

I look back at them, shrugging. And that should be it.

But then Dolohov's lips part, crooked teeth devious.

"Let's see then."

There's a strange strain in the thread between us, but she powers through, like I knew she would.

"What was in New York?"

I grind my teeth together, preparing for a difficult topic.

"New York was a mistake." I let it hang there, in the silence, deciding what to tell her about Queenie Goldstein. What to tell her about me. "There's a woman there." I bite my cheek and after a breath, I say, "She's a Legilimens."

I stare at my lap, but I can feel her eyes, her interest. Before she can ask I continue.

"I needed… I thought I needed her assistance."

I finger the crumbs in my lap, wondering if she could just… not ask her next question.

"Assistance with what?"

But of course.

And what was it I was running from? What was it Queenie said to me?

Voldemort is gone, sugar. So, who are you protecting her from?

"I'm a very skilled Occlumens," I rush out. "Between Aunt Bella and Severus… I had some remarkable teachers." My skin itches. The carpets are interesting. "I've been compartmentalizing for years. Separating memories, thoughts, emotions…"

People. Entire humans can live in other boxes, Granger.

"Severus used to help me. Used to poke around until I'd regrouped. Until there were resilient walls again…"

Until you were elsewhere. Until you were safe.

"But without him…" I choke on something in my throat. "Before going to New York, I had been slipping. For months. I couldn't get the walls in place. Couldn't separate." I press my hands into my pants, thinking of how she had invaded my entire body for those weeks. "Blaise has tried to help, but he's shit at Legilimency."

I laugh and it's forced.

"I thought I needed someone to … test me. To poke around until it was all regrouped." I need to wash my hair. I feel greasy. "So, I got in touch with someone in New York who is one of the greatest Legilimens of our time. I offered to pay her handsomely to meet with me, and set up a Portkey that night."

She's silent. And I wonder what she thinks she knows about me. If things are falling to place for her.

"Is that something she does for a living?" she asks. "Is there a profession in that?"

"No, no. She refused my money. Refused to meet with me, really," I recall. "I had to beg her. She's a normal witch. A widow."

"Did it help?" she asks quietly. "Did you get what you wanted?"

I finally turn back to her. “No.” I smile lightly, remembering how it had burned inside of me to hear she would quit. To know it wasn’t enough. “I kissed you again, didn’t I?”

Her brain was working, but she managed to smile and say, “Actually, I kissed you.”

She had, hadn’t she? She’d broken the spell.

“Yes, you went and ruined everything, didn’t you.” I bring my hands to her cheeks, running my thumbs over her skin. “Thank Merlin she didn’t let me pay her. What a waste that would have been.”

She smiles and lets me kiss her. Our lips barely testing each other’s. Like we’re new at this now. Like different people after this moment, this confession.

What would it feel like to make love to her like this. Open. No bricks or walls.

I tilt my head to hers, ready to find out, and she softly pushes me back. Her eyes are wary, but deep, like velvet. Blue velvet.

“Did you go to New York to forget about me?” she asks, ready for any answer.

I fall into her eyes, like swimming in a velvet-lined jewelry box, storing all my questions and all my heartbeats into her eyes.

“No. To put you back in your box.”

She blinks at me, and I lean in to press my soul to hers again.

~*~

Friday, February 24, 1995

“The fuck is this Task about?” Theo says, pulling his mittens on. “Will we get to watch Potter drown today?”

I push through the fifth and sixth years, making space for us in the stands. Pansy is suddenly by my side, even though I didn’t remember walking with her. She laces our fingers together as we sit.

“I think they have to dive for something,” she says. She leans her head against my shoulder. I sigh.

“I overheard some of the Ravenclaws talking,” Daphne says, sitting down with Blaise in front of us. “Cho Chang went to see McGonagall last night and never came back to her dormitory. I think Diggory has to save her from the bottom of the lake.”

I smirk. “Let’s hope they both drown. Two Seekers out of the way. Oo! And Potter makes three!”

Goyle chuckles heavily.

Pansy says, “So, what? All of their girlfriends are down there? That’s so chauvinistic.”

Pansy learned a new word this month. She has been saying it as often as possible. Valentine’s Day, in particular, is very chauvinistic.

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Twenty

Tuesday, February 17, 1998

I feel like I’ve been at the Manor more often than Hogwarts these past few weeks. Severus wakes me once a week and instructs me to get dressed because I have been selected for a mission.

That’s how I find myself here tonight, playing Exploding Snap with Looney Lovegood.

She flips over a Toad Card on top of mine, and my arms jumps, chest seizing to slap my hand down before hers—

Slap!

She’s beaten me, giggling.

“Fuck.”

“I think that’s eighteen to fourteen, yes?” she says, shuffling the cards again. The cards have only exploded twice so far.

“You cheat,” I say, childish even to my ears.

“You’re the one with the wand,” she says. “Mr. Ollivander usually beats me. He’s quite quick for an older gentleman.”

I glance over to the empty space beside a stone pillar, rumpled blanket and spare socks next to a book.

“They took him yesterday,” she says, without needing me to ask. I don’t need to ask much with her. She just supplies. “How is school?” she says.

“Awful.” I take the cards she deals me and stack them neatly. “The Carrows have moved onto *Imperio*.”

She nods. “But you can resist that, yes? As an Occlumens?”

Something slaps the back of my head. I turn to glare and Marcus is grinning at me with his twisted teeth. I smirk back.

"Oi," he says, sitting down. "You all hear? The merpeople stole 'the thing they would miss the most."

I sneer and say, "You think Potter's parents are down there?"

My congregation snickers.

"No, no," Marcus says, "Ron Weasley is Potter's."

I smile at the lake. "Poor Granger. What a hard way to learn her boyfriend's queer."

Theo laughs loudly and awkwardly, slapping his knee.

"Well, they can all drown," Marcus says. "She's down there too. Viktor Krum's slag."

I blink at the water as Pansy gags and starts a diatribe about Krum and Granger. I look to the edge of the lake, and there's Krum in swimming shorts, stretching. I check the stands, and sure enough, she's not there.

Then Daphne's asking the question that I'm too afraid to ask.

"What happens at the end of the hour if they don't rescue them?"

"Well, people have died in the Tournament before, haven't they? Maybe it's not the Champions that don't make it," Pansy says, laughing gleefully.

The whistle blows. And I watch Krum run into the water, splashing and desperate to get to her.

I watch Potter stumble into the lake, taking his sweet time before going underwater.

My hand is wet in Pansy's.

I tear my eyes off the lake and join the conversation again. There's nothing to do for an hour but wait. But at the end of the hour, no one has reappeared. And I wonder if Dumbledore would really let something happen to the Golden Trio.

It's ridiculous really that she be Krum's. They've been on one date. She wouldn't mean enough to him. Does the bastard really have no one else worth saving?

I twitch at every wave in the lake, and when Krum breaks the water with a soggy Gryffindor in his arms, Pansy slips her hand out of mine, shaking out her fingers.

~*~

Wednesday, February 23, 2000

Cornelia Waterstone must die.

I haven't touched Hermione since Monday afternoon. And my fingers are itching.

The bitch sat in on our lunch meeting again yesterday. And I will fire her.

Once I find reason, she's gone.

My lip is almost bleeding from biting the skin as I wait for Granger at the lifts with her coffee cup. The doors ding and she yawns in my face.

I smile at her. "Rough night?"

"Yes."

She takes the coffee from me, and a low hum sings through me when my hand presses against her back as we walk to her office.

I tell her my plan for getting rid of Waterstone: a meeting on the Muggle-born Integration Program today, which does not need her expertise.

She hesitates. "I have the lunch meeting with Viktor today, remember?"

"Ah, yes. Viktor." Lovely.

"Maybe tomorrow?" she asks.

Dr. Flanders is coming in tomorrow…

"I have a meeting tomorrow at lunch. And then I'm out of town on Friday." I scowl at her door. "Are you free tomorrow night?"

And the surprised look she gives reminds me that we don't see each other outside the office or bookstores. This weekend is the first time.

Would she want to go to dinner with me? Is it too public for what we are? Maybe I could take her someplace no one will see us. Nepal. Or Antarctica.

"Er… I guess so," she says, and then changes her mind. "I mean, er, no. I'm not, actually. But I am free tonight."

Fuck.

"Tonight is no good for me." I twist my lips. "I'll figure something out."

I want to lean into her, just press my lips lightly to her skin. But I settle for tapping a finger on her hip, the place I like to press bruises into when she won't stop squirming under me.

She licks her lips as I walk away.

Kelsey, Mockridge's associate, grins at me as I walk past.

"Mind your own business, Miss Perkins," I hum.

"Of course, Mr. Malfoy," she chuckles.

After lunch, I hear a commotion on the floor, and I stick my head out to find Viktor Krum holding court with my staff. Wentworth and Walter have sucked him into a Quidditch discussion, and Granger stands to the side, looking at her mail. I slide up next to her.

"How was your date?" I whisper.

She grins, ignoring my jab. "Excellent. He'll be joining us next week for the media coverage. And he's very interested in the project, thank you very much. I didn't have to show him my tits or anything."

Oh, she hilarious. A fucking comedian.

"Great news, Granger," I hiss.

She sat there in his bed for two breaths. She stood, naked, and grabbed her dress from in front of his closet. She slipped her panties on, pulled the dress over her head, and grabbed her shoes.

She wanted to knock on the door. To beg him. To sit with her back against the wall until he came out and forgave her.

She left his room.

She had no idea where she was. She looked at the tapestries and walked to the end of the hall, looking both ways, wishing she already knew the layout of his wing. She turned and found a door, the room next to his.

Her room.

She swallowed. "Mippy."

A *crack*.

"Miss!"

"Can you help me get out of here? Find me a fireplace?"

"What is Miss doing here so late!"

The little girl elf stared up at her with wide, sleepy eyes. Hermione felt more tears on her cheeks, and didn't bother stopping them.

"Just…" She shook her head, closing her eyes. "…ruining everything."

And for the second time in a handful of months, she found herself making a dramatic exit from Malfoy Manor, and the boy inside of it.

"There's that word again," he spat. He turned back to her and stalked to the bed. "You think I would have *saved* you at that Auction, Granger? You think I gathered all available funds, reached out to all relatives and contacts, so that I could set you free? Sent you running with a stolen wand?"

The breath heaved in her chest as she watched him, his eyes glinting at her.

"The room we passed on the way to mine? The first door? That was your room." He stopped in front of her, sneering. "You were never getting out of here." He smirked, shaking his head. "I don't know why I bothered lying about recognizing you that night. You were always going to end up a prisoner in Malfoy Manor."

Her neck was hot. "So, you're telling me that belonging to you would have been the same as any other Death Eater?" His eye twitched and she pressed on. "I would have served your dinner and been your entertainment at parties. *Crucio'd* when I disobeyed – at best. Passed around like a whore?"

His eye twitched again and he had to look away from her.

"I've had plenty of time to think on this, Draco, so let me know when to stop –"

"Stop."

She shook her head at him. "You would have saved me. It wouldn't have been freedom, but it would have been the best you could have done. You would have saved me from that life—"

"Do you think I would have been able to keep away from you?" He glared at her. "That you would have lived out your days here and remained untouched."

"Yes," she said. "Don't try to scare me, Draco. I know what kind of person you truly are."

"Ah, yes. You've seen the worst of me, haven't you, Granger." He sneered at her. He prowled to the doors to the balcony. "Just needed to tip a memory into a basin and it's like we've known each other forever."

She pounded her fists into the bed. "I'm sorry, Draco. I'm sorry. I didn't think I had another choice. I wanted to know you. I wanted to understand you—"

He spun around. "Then ASK, Hermione. Don't take!"

She felt the syllables of her given name hit her across the face, as if he'd actually slapped her. Practically the same words she'd used against him a few weeks ago, about not assuming things about her. And asking permission.

She felt the first tear fall.

"I'd like for you to leave." He whispered it into the ground. She heard it bounce around the room. "Get out."

She didn't have anything else to say. She had no leg to stand on.

Draco turned, and headed into his washroom. He shut the door.

Krum appears and butchers her name like he always does, and then turns to me with a "Hello, Malfoy."

His face is tight. Which is wonderful. It means he knows I stand in the way.

"Krum," I say, shaking his hand. "We're so glad to have your support."

"Yes," Krum mumbles. "Anything for Harmany."

He takes her hand and kisses her knuckles.

Krum has gotten more skin contact from her in the past hour than I have in two days. And it boils me. He sends me a raised brow as his lips pull away.

Oh, wonderful. Another name to add to my kill list.

She walks him downstairs. I wait for her to return, fumbling through mail.

The lift opens and she tries to dodge me.

"I don't like your Bulgarian," I say.

I look to her, and she her jaw opens and her eyes narrow.

"I had to put up with yours. I lived," she says. And flounces off to her office.

I crack my neck, and drum my fingers on Melody's counter for a moment before taking a walk around the floor.

Touché, darling.

~*~

I have to admit. Denims are comfortable.

I walked into a Muggle shop in London, flashed a smile at the salesgirl, and had her dress me for a vacation.

Thankfully the store is on the higher end, so there are no palm trees on my buttoned shirt. I have her remove the tags, and walk back to the Apparition point in my new jeans. Once the Muggle-Repelling Charm washes over me, I reach into my bag for my "props" and grab the seashell Portkey at 8:29PM, and wait.

A minute later I'm tugged through space with salt on my tongue, arriving in an alley in bright sunlight with a view of some strange structure that is oddly beautiful. I look down at my tourist's map, and see "Sydney Opera House."

Lovely. I'll have to pick up a brochure.

I spend a few hours walking in the summer air (finding a place for espresso too) and bringing this Muggle camera to my face like I see other Muggles do. They are able to make it flash, but I haven't the foggiest how to do that. Must be professionals.

Just before nine, I wander over to a small storefront, just in time to see a woman with hair the color of brown sugar and a man with wiry curls approaching with the keys to unlock. They're chattering about something he read in the newspaper. She's rolling her eyes at him.

I smile.

Merlin, her mother is beautiful. Some kind of quiet grace that would never stand out against my mother or her friends, but a simple, domestic beauty. Her father looks a bit too much like Weasley for my taste. He's gangly and tall and his features have freckled in the Australia sun.

At least I had the decency to fall for someone the physical polar-opposite of my mother, unlike some Oedipal-scar-headed sods I know…

I turn through a few storefronts until five past the hour. I take deep breath and make a show of looking to see if they're open.

When I open the door, she's already smiling at me from behind the counter. "Good morning."

"Good morning, Miss," I say, looking around. "Are you open? I don't mean to intrude—"

"Yes, yes, we are!" She says, pulling candies and brownies from the drawers below. "Miss," she hums under her breath, chuckling at my compliment.

"And you're a sweets shop?" I ask.

Mr. Wilkins appears from the back room, an apron on his waist and flour on his hands already.

"Yes," he says with a grin. "Sweet Tooth. My, are you a Brit?"

"I am," I say with an open grin. "It sounds like you are, too."

"Where are you from?" he asks, picking up a towel to clean his hands, something methodical about it. Like he's used to cleaning his hands quickly and fully.

"Wiltshire," I say. "And you?"

"Hampstead," he says. "We moved down here about two years ago." And then he leans across the counter, holding his hand out. "Wendell Wilkins."

I stare at his hand, and spend half a second dizzy with the lie. With the disappointment that he finds me acceptable. That he would even like me. And it wasn't actually me.

"Drake Mallory," I say. Dr. Flanders said to keep everything close enough with the hope of a trigger.

"This is my wife, Monica."

I shake her hand. Skin soft.

"What brings you down here, Drake?" Monica asks me, opening the register and starting the daily count.

"It's my honeymoon," I say.

"Oh, how lovely!"

"But I'm alone, unfortunately." I grimace.

"Oh," Monica stops. "Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that."

I shrug. "It's alright. I thought I would take the trip regardless. I've never been down under."

"Do you know how difficult it was for me to release those memories to the Wizengamot, Granger?" His back was still to her. His voice was cold but quiet. "You know how hard I work to keep people out of my mind."

She squeezed her eyes shut, begging to go back to sleep. This was so much worse now that she knew about his Occlumency.

"I wanted to know you," she said. "I wanted to understand you." She knew she should have better explanations than this. "I needed to know why your blood was on my living room walls."

"I told you why," he hissed. "You asked and I told you."

"Never the whole truth. You always leave something out."

He stood, very suddenly and whipped around to look at her. "Who says you're entitled to the whole truth?"

His eyes were bright and hot. He'd put his boxers back on, and she was still naked in his bed, clutching the sheets to her. She pressed her lips together.

"I don't know how to apologize for this," she said, and her voice broke.

"Which ones," he said.

"What?"

"Which ones did you watch? Or did you grab some popcorn and play them all?"

She took a deep breath. "No. Just two. The one at my house. And the night the Snatchers brought us to Malfoy Manor."

His face twisted. "Why?"

She felt the tears blinding her. "I needed to know why you saved us. I needed to understand—"

He prowled to her. "*Why* do you keep using that word!" He came around the side of the bed. "I didn't *save* you, Granger," he snarled. "I did *nothing*." His eyes flickered. "You were screaming on my drawing room floor and I stood there."

She took a shaky breath. "That's not how I saw it."

"Oh, I'm so glad we both have seen these memories so now we can debate them," he snapped.

She clenched her jaw. "You did your best, Draco. You tried to help us then, and you would have helped me if there was an Auction. That's all I wanted to know about." She edged to the end of the bed, holding the sheets to her. "When you told me about the Auction for the first time, you told me you'd sell me for a profit. But your father told me something completely different."

Draco clenched his hands into fists and paced away from her.

"So, I had to know!" she called after him as he moved through the room. "And I could tell he was right. You would have saved me."

And she was wide awake again. “To… to see my parents?” He nodded. “No. No, I don’t… I don’t really think I’d want to see them if they didn’t remember me.” She let her eyes drift across the room. “If I had to pretend to be someone else.”

He continued his strokes on her arm. She counted them as they lay in silence. On the fourth one he said, “Have you looked into counter-curses?”

She felt her eyes drifting closed. “A little bit. There’s not been any success with reversing memory charms that deep. Removing an event is easy. You can recover it over time. But removing a person…” She swallowed and opened her eyes, not knowing they were closed. “It’s too many events.”

He nodded. She could feel it. He waited six strokes of his arm this time, before saying “I’m sorry you had to do that.”

Her eyes couldn’t open. But she nodded a bit. “I know.”

“And I’m sorry I was on that mission. The one at your house.”

“It’s fine,” she hummed. “You wouldn’t have hurt them.” She heard her voice drifting. “I saw it on your face.”

She counted nine more strokes against her arm before she fell asleep for good. After another three, his arm stilled.

She woke up in the dark. She turned to cuddle into Draco’s side, and fall back asleep again, but he wasn’t there.

She sat up. And looked around the dim room. Was he in the bathroom?

As her eyes adjusted, she found his form, sitting on the edge of the bed, at the foot. His back was to her.

“What are you doing?” she asked, voice groggy.

She watched as his back moved with every breath, slow and steady.

“Did Potter help you?”

She blinked. She pulled the duvet up around her chest. “What?”

“Potter helped you get to the memories?”

The room was cold. She was very awake. And he was very far away.

“I… I don’t know what you—”

“It’s just like Hogwarts, isn’t it? You and Potter running around under an Invisibility Cloak, doing whatever the fuck you want, while the rest of us have to play by the rules.”

Her throat was tight. She’d said something. As she was falling asleep. It was so clear now that it was the wrong thing to say.

“Draco. I’m … I’m sorry –”

Wendell bends and plucks a piece of dark chocolate from the glass. “For your heart. On the house.” He smiles at me as he places the paper-wrapped piece on the counter. “They say chocolate keeps the darkness away.”

I stare at him. Wondering if that’s something she told them. If they knew anything about Dementors before.

“Thank you,” I choke out. “I’ve… I’ve heard that too.”

“How long are you in Sydney?” she asks, and she brushes her hair out of her eyes like her daughter does.

“Just until Saturday morning,” I say. “I have a few tours scheduled today, and then tomorrow I’m going to just try to eat my way through Sydney.” I laugh. “Do you have any recommendations for a party of one?”

I flash Monica a grin, and she blinks. And just as I planned, she says, “You can come to ours.” She turns to Wendell. “For dinner.”

My mouth opens, and I start to decline. Wendell says, “Absolutely. We’d love to have a fellow Brit over. We need an update on the weather. Like, has it ever not rained?”

He grins at me. And I spy two large front teeth.

I smile back at them. I buy a pound of chocolate. I ask for a good breakfast spot. I ask Monica about the book I see peeking out from under the register, and watch as she brightens and tells me the plot of the murder-mystery novel.

I wave goodbye to them. And head back to the transportation point, pulling another Portkey.

~*~

Thursday, February 24, 2000

OLD FLAMES BURN BRIGHTER

By Rita Skeeter

I look over the picture of Krum’s lips on hers. It feels like it’s been days since he came to the office, but it was yesterday. It’s been days for me.

I watch as he leans in again, kissing each cheek and then once on her lips.

She puckers for him. I swear I can see it.

I hear the lift ding. I hear heels on the carpets. I hear the office door click closed.

“‘Old Flames Burn Brighter.’“

I fold the paper down and watch her jump to see me leaning on her desk.

It was very difficult finding bricks this morning. They crumbled and cracked in my haste to bury her.

And now that she’s here, I struggle between falling to my knees and begging her to stay with me, and burning the building to the ground.

Just the order to do it in, really.

"What can I help you with, Mr. Malfoy?" she hums.

She grins at me, like her mother. Only her smile is teasing me. Like I have nothing to worry about. Like it's commonplace for us to kiss others in the paper.

And it is.

I look down again instead of watching her self-satisfied smirk. I hear her move close to me. And then the paper disappears and her lips are on mine. Slow and sweet.

And I can't stop my arm from twining around her, like a vine, curling into place on the stones. She opens her mouth under my lips, pressing into me, her stomach against mine. I hold her face, tasting her slowly, beckoning her back to me.

She whispers into my mouth, "I like our flame better."

And that's all I need to hear really. She hasn't denied anything. But she's made it clear it doesn't matter.

I feel a smile tugging at my cheeks, and I look over her shoulder. "I have a meeting in five minutes, or else I'd offer to pound you into this desk."

"Hmm," she breathes. "That's a shame." And then she reaches behind me for her coffee cup, pressing her torso into line with mine, her breasts firm on my chest.

I think of how long it's been since I've touched her skin, since we've come together, since her body has trembled in my arms.

I look down at her smirk. At her intelligent eyes.

Scheming really.

I remember my scan of the financials that morning.

"This week's installment of the inheritance transferred yesterday. It's usually on Tuesday evenings, but it was yesterday, at 8AM." I search her wary eyes. "You don't know anything about that, though, do you Granger?"

She sips her coffee slowly, smile tight. And I remember how exhausted she was yesterday. Like she'd had a full day before coming into the office. And I know it's a lie when she says, "Maybe your father wants to give it to you after all?"

And wonder if I'd rather have honesty or loyalty. Because she's a liar and a cheat when it comes to this inheritance. And I think I can only have one.

"Maybe." I brush her hair over her ear, like her mother does.

I kiss her cheek, then her other, imitating Viktor Krum's clumsy movements. And she's smiling at the joke when I press against her lips again.

I slip away from her, smiling at her smile, and go to greet Dr. Flanders at the elevator.

We sit and chat for a few hours about how tomorrow will go.

~*~

Friday, February 25, 2000

"Ugh, no. Please come back." She grabbed at his shoulders. He laughed. She bit her lip, still trying to figure out if she was still in the middle of an orgasm.

He pressed his head against her chest. He kissed each of her breasts over and over, alternating kisses. She just watched him, waiting for another wave that never came.

"You're the most perfect thing in the world," he whispered against her breast. She felt the air pass the fabric and if he asked her, she would go again. Right now.

He turned over to lay on his back, and dragged her body with him. She laid her head on his chest, and was struck by how much better a sleepover was than an office tryst or a chaise lounge in a governor's ball. She got to lay here. With him.

And he had invited her to stay the night, so there was no need for any awkward gathering of clothes and "see you next time."

He pulled the duvet up around them. She sat up and took off the bra, tossing it in a random direction. As she laid back down, his eyes were taking in her bare chest. She pressed against his side, laying on one hip, draping her leg across his.

"I'm coming back. For the bed," she announced. She smiled and closed her eyes.

His chest rumbled. "Just the bed?"

"And your mother, of course. The bed. And your mother."

"And the library."

"And the library. The bed, your mother, and the library."

He ran a hand up and down her arm lightly.

"My mother was very glad to have you over," he said.

She smiled against his chest. "I'm very glad to be friends with her again. I missed her."

Draco sighed. "That was my fault, I'm afraid." She lifted her head and looked up at him. He stared at the ceiling. "I told her to stay away from you. After your visit to Azkaban. After she miscalculated her control over my father." He swallowed. "I'm sorry. I told her not to contact you again."

She blinked at his face. "Oh." She thought of Narcissa and her last conversation before the estrangement. The way she'd frosted at her when Hermione said she would not be marrying Draco. She wondered if that was something Narcissa told him… "I'm actually quite glad to hear that. She's the closest thing I feel I have to a mother. So, I'm glad to hear she hadn't given up on me."

He squeezed her shoulder. "I'm sorry."

She turned and kissed his arm where she lay on it. She felt lazy and exhausted for the first time, and the hand rubbing down her arm was delicious.

"Have you ever gone down to Australia?"

I stand. A fire twisting through me. "Who says you're entitled to the whole truth?" I spit at her. She's sitting up in my bed, holding a sheet to her.

"I don't know how to apologize for this," she whispers.

I ignore her attempt at apology. "Which ones."

"What?"

"Which ones did you watch? Or did you grab some popcorn and play them all?"

"No. Just two. The one at my house. And the night the Snatchers brought us to Malfoy Manor."

I can hear her screaming. It echoes up through our chimneys, crawling like smoke from the drawing room below.

"Why?" I hiss at her, and her eyes are wet.

Good.

"I needed to know why you saved us. I needed to understand—"

"*Why* do you keep using that word!" My feet carry me to her, like I'll find answers if I can just breathe the same air as her. "I didn't *save* you, Granger. I did *nothing*. You were screaming on my drawing room floor and I stood there."

"That's not how I saw it."

She saw. She saw me weak for her. Saw me turn to the fireplace and crumble into a pile of bricks as she screamed.

"Oh, I'm so glad we both have seen these memories so now we can debate them."

"You did your best, Draco. You tried to help us then, and you would have helped me if there was an Auction. That's all I wanted to know about."

Did my best. Running around Hogwarts looking for her. Building castles in my mind to hide her in.

I remember this feeling. It hasn't sizzled me in such a long time, too wrapped up in her scent and her body, too grateful to be in her presence.

Like the wind could blow in either direction and I could fuck her or kill her.

"When you told me about the Auction for the first time," she says, "you told me you'd sell me for a profit. But your father told me something completely different."

Of course, he did. If Lucius hadn't gotten involved we could have continued to orbit each other. Bookstores and bar stools. Just shallow enough to keep me satiated.

Maybe Father saw this coming. Maybe he knew we'd end here, with her naked in my bed, explaining why she didn't trust me enough.

I turn to the balcony windows.

"So, I had to know! And I could tell he was right. You would have saved me."

I spin to her. "There's that word again." *Saved*. "You think I would have *saved* you at that Auction, Granger? You think I gathered all available funds, reached out to all relatives and contacts, so that I could set you free? Sent you running with a stolen wand? The room we passed on the way to mine? The first door? That was your room." I feel like dragging her in there. Just grabbing a chunk of her hair and shoving her inside so she can feel what it would have been like. "You were never getting out of here." I smirk at her, laughing at her. "I don't know why I bothered lying about recognizing you that night. You were always going to end up a prisoner in Malfoy Manor."

"So, you're telling me that belonging to you would have been the same as any other Death Eater?" she reasons, and I think of Rowle and Dolohov. "I would have served your dinner and been your entertainment at parties. *Crucio'd* when I disobeyed – at best. Passed around like a whore?"

We could have split her down the middle. In more ways than one!

I look away from her.

"I've had plenty of time to think on this, Draco, so let me know when to stop—"

"Stop."

She presses on. "You would have saved me. It wouldn't have been freedom, but it would have been the best you could have done—"

The best I could have done. Far, far from it.

"Do you think I would have been able to keep away from you?" I sneer at her. "That you would have lived out your days here and remained untouched."

"Yes." So quick and honest. "Don't try to scare me, Draco. I know what kind of person you truly are."

"Ah, yes. You've seen the worst of me, haven't you, Granger." I walk away from the bed. She has no fucking clue what the past five years have been like inside my head. "Just needed to tip a memory into a basin and it's like we've known each other forever."

"I'm sorry, Draco. I'm sorry. I didn't think I had another choice. I wanted to know you. I wanted to understand you—"

Hypocritical bitch. "Then ASK, Hermione. Don't take!" I'm screaming.

Her name is foreign on my tongue. And I feel a sense of brutal satisfaction that we both hear it aloud for the first time as a bastardized endearment.

A tear falls down her left check, and I look down to the carpets to keep from reaching for her.

What happens now.

She apologized. I don't accept.

We're… finished, I guess.

"I'd like for you to leave." She doesn't move, so I clarify, "Get out."

I head to my bathroom suite. I can't watch her get dressed.

I lean my forehead on the door. I can hear her slipping out of the sheets and for a moment I wonder if she's coming for me. If she'll wait me out.

My bedroom door closes.

My chest contracts.

Finished, I guess.

But she probably doesn't know her way out. I should probably—only gentlemanly to walk her out. And kiss her goodbye with a promise for tomorrow—

I'm out the bathroom suite and racing to the hallway, throwing my bedroom door open as a *crack!* bounces through the corridor, shattering the silence and rumpling the portraits.

I stumble to the place she just stood with Mippy, before the little elf vanished her. I stand in my trunks, sucking in air, figuring out what it is I am chasing. What I'm apologizing for. What I'm running through hallways for.

Is it worth it? If she doesn't trust me. If I never allow her to trust me.

It's not enough. Nothing I've done has been. Always just short of the mark.

I turn back to my room, and my eyes land on a door. Unmarked. Innocuous. The faintest hint of a Notice-Me-Not Charm that only I know to look for.

And I could tell he was right. You would have saved me.

Save her. Like an angel. Like Potter.

What was a mattress and a bookshelf compared to freedom. Compared to fighting, instead of running through a castle, hoping to catch a glimpse of brown curls.

My fingers twitch and the door opens, swinging wide.

What were two wingback chairs in front of a fireplace compared to pulling my wand on Bellatrix, cursing her in the back while the blade pulled across her unmarked skin?

What was a renovation, paid in favors and gold, knocking down the wall between suites and opening the first bedroom into a living area with bookshelves upon bookshelves, compared to *That's not Harry Potter. His eyes are too close together.*

What were cream bed curtains, falling down over a canopy bed as large as my own, feather pillows, heavy satin sheets, compared to cursing Greyback, Yaxley, and Dolohov in the back as they crawled into her home.

A laugh bubbles out of me as I look around the suite. What the fuck was all of this? How would this have made her forget she was a captive, made her forget her friends were likely dead.

Like she hadn't already read every book on these fucking shelves—

Like a sword cutting through their spines, each book is bisected, tops falling off and pages fluttering to the ground.

I need a map. Or a chart of this betrayal. Some kind of graph of her decisions over the past six months to spot the moment she decided to infiltrate my mind and steal things that don't belong to her.

It would spike in certain places, wouldn't it?

Meeting with Lucius behind my back.

Etiquette lessons.

She's still taking those lessons, I know. Still lying to me.

Another spike.

And suddenly I think of everything else locked away in the Ministry cabinets. And my mind floods with everything I wished I could lose when they pulled the wisps from my head.

What had she seen?

I sit at the foot of the bed, my trunks back on. I feel the weight of another person on the bed behind me. Haven't shared a bed with someone like this. Haven't trusted myself to sleep next to someone for years in fear that secrets would pour out of me in my dreams.

And she worked her way inside, slithering through the cracks.

The bed moves. The sheets slide.

"What are you doing?"

I breathe deep into this acid.

"Did Potter help you?"

But, of course he did. I just need to hear her say it.

"What?"

"Potter helped you get to the memories?"

She pauses too long. She tries confusion.

"It's just like Hogwarts, isn't it? You and Potter running around under an Invisibility Cloak, doing whatever the fuck you want, while the rest of us have to play by the rules."

"Draco. I'm … I'm sorry—"

"Do you know how difficult it was for me to release those memories to the Wizengamot, Granger?" I hiss. "You know how hard I work to keep people out of my mind."

I think of Severus, standing over me as I try to keep my mind from flying into fragments after the Headmaster died.

Did she see that too?

Who I am kidding. She saw everything.

"I wanted to know you. I wanted to understand you." Her voice trembles. "I needed to know why your blood was on my living room walls."

"I told you why. You asked and I told you."

"Never the whole truth. You always leave something out."

"You wouldn't have hurt them," she hums. "I saw it on your face."

I guess that's enough. That she knows deep down that I wouldn't have hurt them.

She tumbles into sleep. And I stare at the ceiling, running my fingers over her arm.

I listen to her breathe.

I feel her air across my skin.

I saw it on your face.

I frown at the ceiling.

You wouldn't have hurt them. I saw it on your face.

Was she there? My chest tightens. Was she that close to danger that day?

Under Potter's Invisibility Cloak maybe?

No. Greyback would have scented them.

I almost rustle her to ask. To clarify.

But she was confused. She had to ask me why my blood was on her walls. She saw something on my face that day?

My eyes dance over my canopy curtains, wisping down from the tall bedposts. Wisping like memories.

My skin hardens. A chill running across the planes, tingling my face, tightening my toes. The muscles in my throat solidify, like choking on poured concrete.

It was impossible.

I saw it on your face.

I think back to the way I ran for her, desperate. The way I blasted open her bedroom door, searching every inch of the space for signs of her. The weight of the marble in my pocket, ready to take us away.

I saw it on your face.

I drag in a breath through a closed airway. The weight of her is too heavy on me. I peel myself from her, looking anywhere but the body in bed as I find my boxers.

It wouldn't be the first time she and Potter broke into the Ministry.

There's heat behind my eyes, sprouting forward into a pinch. A flush on my skin of embarrassment.

There was a time when she stopped asking me about that day. When it seemed like she dropped it. And there was a turning point where she wanted me again.

Where was it?

Something to do with werewolves.

Anything you need.

The wingback chairs explode open. Why would I provide two? What company did I expect her to entertain? What a mockery.

The armoire catches fire, burning the clothes I prepared for her arrival. The curtains around her bed sizzle with blue electricity before catching periwinkle flames and turning her bed into a pyre.

I stand, burning in the destruction.

Like anything would have been enough.

I should have run to Dumbledore. Just before sixth year, when I'd been given the task. I should have committed myself to the Order.

It still wouldn't have been enough.

The flames glint off a reflective surface deep within the room, shining mirrors and brass back at me.

And I hate Severus Snape for doing this to me. For giving me the option to keep her hidden, to keep her safe—

You would have saved me.

I shake my head, glaring at the jewelry box on her bedside table. I had thought it was a fitting home for it.

I stretch my hand for my wand, and it clatters through my bedroom, into the hallway, and slides into my outstretched fingers.

I wave my hand and quiet the room. Smoke and fluttering pages remain.

I point my wand at the jewelry box, summoning it forward to the ground in front of me. It's the only thing in this room that deserves to go.

"*Diffindo!*"

It bounces once.

I snarl, "*Bombarda!*"

It spins on itself, mocking me, top still closed.

"*Incendio! Deletrius!*"

What did Severus do. Almost like it wasn't the first time someone had tried to destroy it.

I send it against the wall. Not a dent in its side.

I freeze it, heat it.

My blood is thundering. This fucking box ruining my life for five years, mocking me. Keeping her locked away like a pretty cream room in a manor. Can't touch her in her box. Won't be able to hurt her in her box.

Keep her in her box and she won't hurt you.

"*Avada Kedavra.*"

It explodes in a shower of mirrors and brass and blue velvet. Something slices my cheek, blood mixing with the slide of tears down my face. It smokes. And quiets.

I stare at the hole in the ground, waiting. Waiting for something to feel different. Better.

A scrap of blue velvet flutters from the ceiling, sliding down to fall over my shoulder. I pluck it off my skin and run my fingers over it as I walk a wide circle around the blasted carpet, stepping on glass and brass in my bare feet, my blood mixing into the book pages and blue velvet.

I gather the remains, pulling the glass out of my feet, piling the brass and hinges, holding the fabric in trembling fingers.

And I piece it back together.

~*~

Saturday, May 2, 1998 - later

Second floor girls' bathroom. Second floor girls' bathroom.

I skid around corners. There are spiders as large as four-posters crawling down corridors. Ghosts glistening through walls on horseback.

I take the stairs down two at a time. I can hear voices, hers interspersed like a drum beat.

"But how did you get in there? You need to speak Parseltongue!"

Potter.

"He did! Show him, Ron!"

I peek around the corner and she's standing there, staring at Weasley like he cured Dragon Pox. They're holding bones in their arms.

"I had to have a few goes to get it right," Weasley crows, "but, we got there in the end."

"He was amazing!" She smiles brightly at him. "Amazing!"

I watch as they regroup. I watch her eyes rove over Weasley, drinking him in like she's just realized how thirsty she is.

I remember her on my drawing room floor. She's much recovered. No lasting damage. I wonder if the scar is still there. If she was able to heal the skin in time.

They run off. All three of them, like they're not about to die. And maybe they won't.

I check both directions, and follow.

An explosion to my left blows me off my feet. I land on my side, trying to remember how to breathe and I can hear several new battles beginning around me. I lie there, mentally examining my ribs.

I pull myself up to my feet and watch as the fighters move away.

I'm alone again.

A gurgling to my right.

"Malfoy."

"And your mother, of course. The bed. And your mother."

"And the library."

"And the library. The bed, your mother, and the library."

I smile at the ceiling.

I never imagined this part. Never fantasized about her staying the night.

I trail my fingers up her arm, rounding her shoulder and back down, steering clear of the white scars on her forearm spelling a word I don't use any more. "My mother was very glad to have you over."

She hums, "I'm very glad to be friends with her again. I missed her."

I swallow, thinking of her without a mother for so long. And mine instructed to stay away. I confess, "That was my fault, I'm afraid. I told her to stay away from you. After your visit to Azkaban. After she miscalculated her control over my father." I feel her stiffen in my arms. "I'm sorry. I told her not to contact you again."

"Oh," she says. "I'm actually quite glad to hear that. She's the closest thing I feel I have to a mother. So, I'm glad to hear she hadn't given up on me."

Another stab to my chest. I hold her closer. "I'm sorry." She kisses my arm, accepting my apology. But I can't think of anything but Monica Wilkins sobbing in the bathroom, thinking there was a girl out there who needed her. "Have you ever gone down to Australia?"

"To… to see my parents?" I nod. "No. No, I don't… I don't really think I'd want to see them if they didn't remember me. If I had to pretend to be someone else."

I swallow, praying that Dr. Flanders has made progress. I slide my fingers across her arm, lulling her to sleep. "Have you looked into counter-curses?"

"A little bit," she says. "There's not been any success with reversing memory charms that deep. Removing an event is easy. You can recover it over time. But removing a person… It's too many events."

Exactly. Exactly as Dr. Flanders described. It seemed she had just never taken the next step to speak to a specialist. Probably too afraid of failure.

A calm happiness pours over me, suddenly very proud that I've done this for her. The beginning steps she couldn't take, I took for her.

"I'm sorry you had to do that." I don't elaborate.

"I know." She's drifting off to sleep, but I have to finish. I have to get it out.

My hand strokes down her arm as I say, "And I'm sorry I was on that mission. The one at your house."

"It's fine," she mumbles.

Sweet relief burns over me. I shouldn't have apologized while she was asleep, but I had to.

I part my lips, about to confess. To say: *I was there to save you. I was there to save them.*

I hold her hip and bring my other hand to her clit. She gasps, and I continue to press up into her. Her thighs open wider, and she drops lower, moaning. I rub at her clit, feeling her flutter.

She grabs my face and kisses me, her curls in my mouth as we press our tongues together. Her hips keep snapping in small movements, searching for her climax.

She pulls up tall, and I get to watch her run her hand through her hair, panting hard in a green bra.

I get to pretend it's the Slytherin dormitories, and she's snuck in to fuck me.

She rolls her hips, bringing her hands to her breasts.

Goddess. She's so powerful like this. I'm just a side note in this story. She rides me, beginning to bounce on me, her tits jiggling, her thighs trembling. And I grab her hips and do my best to keep up. Try to touch her. Try to fuck her.

But she barely needs me as her hips slam down on me, using me to get off, trusting me to do the same.

Her cunt contracts, and her jaw drops open in a silent scream. She can't move as her body bends in bliss.

I roll us, feeling her walls holding me, and then I'm fucking her into the mattress, my face in her hair, her thighs around my hips.

"Fucking fuck," I groan into her neck, my hips pounding her, and it's so much better than my desk at work. Her cunt flutters, still going, and I don't want it to stop for her. I'll keep this pace forever if it means she's still coming.

Then her hands run into my hair, fingers gripping me as she yells out, honey dripping out of her between us, and I bite her neck to keep from screaming. *She* screams. And I'm grunting something into her, my hips fucking her, snapping deep. I feel her clamp down on me, and I come with a yell, her walls pulling at me in waves.

It feels like it lasts forever, pouring into her, breathing air from her. She moans into my ear and scratches at my back, and it feels like she comes again.

"I can't… oh, my god. I can't breathe."

I pull back and watch as she pants, staring into my eyes. Her walls pull at me and her eyelids flutter. She's beautiful and blissed and breathless.

She moans for me to come back to her when I slide out. I chuckle, and kiss at her chest, and whisper into her skin, "You're the most perfect thing in the world."

I turn us over, laying on my back with her in my arms. She rests for a moment, and then tugs her bra off, tossing it away. She presses her naked body along mine, throwing her leg over my thigh and dropping her head onto my chest.

"I'm coming back," she says. "For the bed."

"Just the bed?"

I turn to find Rowle on his back, blood coming up from his lungs, reaching out with wide fingers for his wand inches away.

"Malfoy. Help."

He's got a gash in his side, probably from the explosion. It's an easy fix. A basic skin-knitting charm to get him on his feet again.

"My wand…"

I watch as he stretches, tearing the delicate flesh above his hip.

He coughs, and I see blood bubble out of him.

"Just need my wand."

Cold sweat across my arms. I step towards him, and pull my wand up to aim at his wound. It's a simple twist and twirl motion.

"Thank you," he gasps, and waits for me to cast.

We could have split her down the middle. In more ways than one!

I smile as my wand presses into him, and he howls. I kneel on his chest, digging the wood into his wound, and whisper a slicing charm, watching his eyes bulge as I split him down the middle.

I stand tall, step over him, kick his wand down the stones, and watch him as he gasps and gurgles, making sure I'm the last thing he sees.

I wipe my wand on his robes, and continue following the bounce of curls through the castle.

I take off my trousers and trunks fully, and watch as her eyes jump to my cock, as if imagining how blow jobs actually work.

I'll teach you one day, love.

We take her knickers and heels off, but once she reaches for her bra I stop her. "No, I never want you to take that off."

She smiles. And I lay on top of her, bringing her legs around me before spinning us until she's on top.

"Can we try like this?" I ask through her wild curls falling over us.

She sits up, looking confused. "I… don't know how to…"

"Let's figure it out."

I help her sit over me, and guide myself into her. She closes her eyes to concentrate on taking me, and I watch my cock slip inside of her.

Oh, Merlin.

Her in that green bra, sinking down me. Of all the fantasies I've had in this bed, I don't think that was imagined.

I squeeze my eyes shut, waiting to bottom out inside of her as her walls clench around me.

Of all the fantasies I've had in this bed, coming after two seconds was not imagined either.

She starts to move, and I have to watch. She lifts up, trying to find a good way to do this, and I almost help her but then she's flipping her hair over her shoulder and I definitely remember that part from my fantasies.

I grab her hips, and just lay back and watch her figure it out. Watch Hermione Granger solve a problem.

It's fascinating and exhilarating.

I reach up for her breast when she gets the hang of it, and she leans down on me, changing the angle. She bucks against me, and I take a moment to breathe.

She continues with that thought, jerking her hips into mine, and I'm groaning as I rub at her tits and let her fuck me.

She falls to her elbows, hips moving in a quick pace, her hair everywhere. And I find I don't have to help her at all.

I hold her hips as she searches for her own pleasure, using me. Her face is open and lips panting air.

She ruts against me, little moans pouring out of her, and I let her fuck me, just like I've always imagined. Taking control and knowing exactly what to do.

She goes faster, fucking herself on my cock. And my hips jump, meeting hers.

"Granger, yes," I whine. "Oh, fuck yes."

I watch her hesitate, and when she agrees, I know she's unsure so I smile and wipe my mouth before kissing her skin again. My body leans heavily on her, my hips pressing into her. She reaches for my buckle, and I just can't believe she's mine.

Then she rolls us over, and I laugh at our elbows and knees. She kisses my mouth and I press my tongue to hers, wondering if she tastes herself.

She kisses down my neck and chest, pausing over my nipples, testing to see if I like it. I grin at her and she frowns, like she's trying to find the right spell.

Her eyes flicker back to mine, wide and questioning as she kisses my stomach, and I'm trying to figure out what it is she's doing when her tongue slides against my abdomen.

She couldn't…

Air leaves me. I watch her as she continues lower.

She… She wouldn't want to.

She blinks up at me and her hands move to my buttons, lips inching below my bellybutton. I jump up, grabbing her wrists.

"You don't have to." My voice is hoarse from swallowing her down, and I wonder if she thinks we need to be even. That's not…

"You don't want me to?" She's confused, asking me to clarify why I wouldn't want her mouth on me.

And I have no fucking clue why I wouldn't. Or how I could explain to her how badly I want it. So badly that I can't guarantee I wouldn't hurt her. That I wouldn't thrust into her throat and pour into her, fisting her hair so she couldn't move.

The way I want it isn't the way she should do the first time.

I've said nothing, so she kisses my stomach again, and continues to unbutton me. I fall back and stare at my ceiling as she slides my trousers down, and I try not to think of how many times I've stared up at this ceiling thinking of her lips around my cock.

I feel my pulse between my legs, and I press my eyes together, prepared to hold back, prepared to keep my hands to myself.

When she hasn't touched me, I open my eyes to see her staring down at the bulge in my trunks, like waiting for it to reveal its true intentions.

I sit up again, hands on her shoulders. "We don't—There's so many things I want to do tonight. Every night. We can try that later."

She nods, visibly relieved, blushing at her failure. I kiss her deeply, convincing her that I want her. I think of something else, something she can accomplish.

Something we can utilize this bed for.

"Can we do something else instead?" I ask, and she nods.

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Thirty Five

She couldn't feel anything.

There was a hole inside of her, and every minute another piece fell into the gaping abyss, waiting to swallow her whole.

She had dug herself a grave, and she was content to lie in it.

At six in the morning, Ginny knocked softly on her door. She pushed it open.

"I saw your bag in the hallway," she said. Hermione kept her eyes on her ceiling. "I thought you were staying the night."

"Me too."

The *pitter-patter* of Ginny's feet on the floor. She climbed into bed next to her.

"What did he do?"

Ginny was on her side, facing her, head propped up on her arm.

"Nothing. He found out about the memories."

Ginny stilled beside her. Hermione kept her unblinking eyes on her ceiling. They were dry and tired.

"Oh."

"And then he asked me to leave."

"Oh."

Hermione swallowed. "You know, at Hogwarts, whenever Harry, Ron and I would do something dangerous or against the rules, I would plan a story in case we were caught. I was always prepared to speak to McGonagall or Dumbledore. Ready to tell them an excuse." Hermione turned to look at Ginny, the blue eyes already on her. "I never thought he would find out. I never considered it. So, I had nothing."

Ginny nodded.

"So, what did you end up saying?"

"'Sorry?'" Hermione chuckled darkly. She shrugged against her pillows, and turned back to the ceiling with a deprecating smile. "I told him I wanted to know him better."

"Does he know you love him?"

Hermione's cheeks flushed and she bit her lip. "No. Every time I have the opportunity, every time he asks me why I've done something for him… I tell him it was the right thing to do."

"Which is basically the same thing for you," Ginny said. Hermione looked at her again, and Ginny gave her a sad smile. "Does this mean you're broken up?"

"We… weren't really together, were we?" Hermione pressed her lips together. She sighed. "We weren't going on dates, or going public with our relationship."

"But that's what you want, yes?" Ginny's eyes were watching her. Hermione nodded. "Does he know that you want that?"

She felt her brows come together. "I… I've been just taking what I can get, honestly." She shook her head.

"Maybe it's time for you to set the rules, then." Ginny was cocking a brow at her. She reminded her of Fred so much then.

"I don't think he wants anything to do with me anymore," she said. "Much less, going public to his staff, who all had to sign that Love Contract business."

She felt Ginny roll out of the bed. "You'll never know until you ask for it."

She drifted through her Sunday. She went to class with Madame Bernard. She went to Cornerstone. Not a Malfoy in sight.

She went home. Ginny had asked Harry to come over and cook for them, so Hermione tried to be social for a few hours before retiring to bed, finding it exhausting to pretend she was fine and to ignore the lovely way the two of them interacted. Unafraid of being together. In love.

She was drowsy on the way in to work on Monday. Draco did not meet her with her coffee. She didn't expect him to.

It was Walter's first day back from his week at the Somerset Snidget Sanctuary, and they met to go over his notes and numbers before she headed to the conference room for the 9AM senior staff meeting.

He was already in the conference room when she entered, standing at the head of the table, flipping through paperwork. Wentworth and Blaise were seated, chatting through something. Draco looked up as she moved through the doorway, and then looked away.

As if she was nothing to him.

She pulled her chair out and sat. She flipped through her notes, and ignored the hands that moved paperwork around just inches from her.

"Fuck… Draco."

And maybe making her talk about the Giant Squid was the wrong thing. If she curses while I eat her out, that's worth everything.

"Say it again."

She says my name, and while I love it, I wait for her to say "fuck" again.

I smile and kiss her cunt. She moans and says, "Oh, fuck."

A chorus of fucks when I pull her knickers aside and lap at her. I twitch in my trousers. She grabs at my hair, and I twist my arm under her thigh, pressing her open. She tastes just as perfect as before.

She bucks against me and my tongue slides further inside of her.

"Oh, fuck, Draco."

I move to her clit, pressing quick firm strokes, and the noises she keens ring in my ears. She pulls my face into her, jerking her hips against me, and my own hips shift against the mattress, searching for something warm and wet.

She releases my head, and I suck in air, watching her fingers twist in the comforter.

I want to feel her come. I want to memorize the way her muscles grip me.

"Let me know when you're close."

I dip my head back to her, and she watches me for as long as she can before her head falls back. Her hips jump at me again, and I push her thighs down.

"I think… I think I'm … Draco."

I look up at her and she's got her hands on her breasts, rubbing herself. That fucking green bra.

I groan and it shakes her. "Fuck," she grunts.

Merlin, I love that.

Two of my fingers slide inside of her, opening her, and she sighs for more. I latch onto her clit and suck.

Her thighs try to close on my head. Her walls flutter around my fingers, and then clench as she cries out.

I work her down, slow pumping of my fingers, light lapping of my tongue.

When she opens her eyes again, she looks down and says, "Fuck."

Vixen.

I kiss up her stomach, kissing her breasts through the bra, but I stop when I reach for her lips.

Pansy hated this. She made me wipe my mouth or even brush my teeth before I could kiss her again.

"Can I kiss you like this?"

I kiss her, smiling, but she pulls back and looks down at her shoes.

"I have a surprise for you."

"Oh, really," I say, thinking of all the surprises I have in store for her once we get on the mattress. How many hours I'll spend on her.

"Yes, I think… I think you'll like it."

I smile. You silly witch. Of course, I will.

"When do I get my surprise," I say, squeezing at her.

"You'll need to, um… give me some space," she mumbles, and I smile and release her. I move to the bed, sitting on the edge.

She unzips her dress, and I already like my surprise.

I watch as the shoulders drop and reveal a green bra. Slytherin green.

I feel my throat dry as the dress drops to the floor. Green knickers too.

These are new. These are just for me. I know Hermione Granger would never in her life purposefully buy green underthings for herself.

She looks nervous, like she's unsure I like her in this. So, I stand and take charge. "Get on the bed."

She smiles, proud of herself, biting her lip as she passes me, and my eyes drop to backside to find… very little.

These Muggles. They know what they're doing.

Her cheeks are perfectly framed with just a scrap of green fabric disappearing between them. The witch literally makes my knees weak as I grab for the bedpost.

She crawls across my bed, her arse in the air, long legs dragging along the comforter. I watch the muscles in her thighs, the dip of the knickers against her cunt, the cheeks that I want to bite into.

She stops in the center of the bed. "Like this?"

I look up and she's turned over her shoulder, and I know I have to have her on all fours in my bed one day, turning her head to watch me as I fuck her.

"Lay down," I tell her. And she obeys. And I wonder if one day she'll let me tell her exactly what to do. If she'd give me one night of pulling her wrists above her head and giving her instructions to obey.

She presses her knees together as I take my things off. I hesitate with my trousers, and decide to keep them on for now.

I crawl up to her, kissing her knees as she watches me. They fall open and I kiss up to her knickers. Fuck. I want to fuck her with these on.

I kiss her over them. And her head falls back. My lips press against her, promising things to her, and I drag my tongue over the green lace, pressing hard against her clit.

She needed to speak to him in private, but she would need to spring it on him. She couldn't imagine him agreeing to a meeting with her today.

"Good morning, Granger." Blaise's voice sang to her across the table.

She looked up and he was grinning. "Good morning."

"How was your weekend?"

"Uh…" She looked down at her hands. "Not so great."

Blaise eyed her, and Draco kept his hands moving.

He began the meeting a few minutes later. His voice was the same. His mannerisms the same. As if nothing was bothering him. And maybe nothing was. Maybe he had resigned himself to this.

When it was her time to give a status report on her team, she stood. She read from her notes. She glanced about the room. She spoke eloquently. She sat.

Draco thanked her. Then they moved on to Wentworth. She listened.

Glancing up once, she found Blaise watching her, a curious expression.

When the meeting was done, she headed back to her office. She tried to organize her thoughts.

What an excellent reason for a Love Contract. Of course, for the sexual harassment problems, but more so, for the end of things.

A knock on her door frame, and Blaise was entering, shutting the door behind him. She stared at him as he stood at the door.

"So you guys broke up, huh?"

A hot spike of panic, followed by a chill of sadness.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Her voice was even. She turned back to her desk.

"Yeah, whatever, Granger," Blaise said, rolling his eyes. She heard him leave. And finally relaxed.

She had a three-hour meeting later with Draco and Waterstone. A very painful three hours. Draco wouldn't look at her. He wasn't completely ignoring her, still directing questions to her or nodding when he agreed, but to her, it was painfully obvious that he wanted nothing to do with her. It seemed he had spent the remainder of the weekend getting his walls back into place. He was impenetrable.

She wished he would just leave her and Waterstone to work, but a bit of micro-managing was to be expected. The werewolf trial started on Monday, a week away. The first big project of her department. Draco wanted to make sure everything ran smoothly.

On Tuesday morning, When Walter brought her mail in, Hermione's hands stilled over a letter with a familiar return address. A university in California.

Noelle Ogden's long awaited response.

Hermione rubbed her forehead. This was… just not the right time. Draco had expressly asked her not to write to Noelle. She'd disregarded his wishes and had done so.

Because she wanted to know him better. Just like the memories.

It took Hermione all day to decide what she would do with the letter. To not open a letter sent to you might result in opportunities missed, friendships curdled like forgotten cream. But to open it may result in far worse discoveries.

With an hour left of the work day, Hermione trudged her way to the office in the back corner. His door was ajar, so she let herself in and closed it behind her.

He glanced up at her, frown on his face, and back down at his papers.

"If this isn't work related, I'm going to have to ask you to get out."

She pressed her lips together, trying to keep any untoward comments from bursting through. She tossed the unopened letter from California on his desk. He stared at it, trying to decipher its meaning.

"I wrote to Noelle after you asked me not to. She's just now gotten back to me." She watched as his eyes flipped up to her, cold and steely. "I wanted to come clean. And let you decide if I get to open it or not."

He glared at her, pulled his wand, and tapped the letter, setting fire to it.

She blinked as it crumpled and crisped.

Well, then…. That answered that.

He brought his attention back to his paperwork, and Hermione felt very dismissed. She took a deep breath, accepting her punishment, and started for the door.

"She misunderstood the situation. Nothing in that letter would have been factual anyway."

Hermione turned back. Draco was still focused on what he was reading. "What situation?"

He looked up at her. "That night. With Marcus Flint." His jaw tightened. She stood still near the door. "After you left with O'Connor, I didn't handle things very well inside."

Hermione tried to think of how Noelle would have seen it. Draco and Marcus getting in a fist fight in the middle of a pub. Hermione thought of how Aiden's friend had described it to Aiden.

I guess right after we left, Malfoy went back inside and started wailing on Flint! I guess he was flirting with Noelle or something…

She nodded at the floor. "And you didn't clear it up for her? Tell her what actually happened?"

"She was not my priority at the moment. Something I made abundantly clear to her afterwards." He grimaced. "And I didn't know how much of it you wanted to be public knowledge."

She giggles, and kisses my lips again.

When I finally make it to the dinner table, Mother gives me a disapproving eyebrow. And I glare back at her.

Probably forced the poor elf to interrupt.

Mippy can't make eye contact with me for the rest of dinner.

I count down the minutes before we're standing from the table, saying our goodbyes. I lead her through the entrance hall, and up the stairs, taking her hand. She stops a few times, and I remember she's never been up this way. I let her look out over the pond and the peacocks.

When we reach my door, I'm struck with a sudden fear. Is my room clean enough? When did Mippy last change the sheets? Have I hidden away anything I don't want her to see?

I look down at her, bracing myself before opening the door for her.

She steps inside, looks around briefly, and laughs.

I frown. "What?"

She smiles at me and says, "It's just all very predictable. I love it."

I look around as she steps inside, and realize that yes, the green and silver were maybe a bit too childish.

She wanders, and I trail close behind her, watching her face, watching her fingers. They mark the things she's interested in. She looks carefully at my bookcase, and I *knew* there was something I wanted to clean up for her. I should have slipped in more nonfiction and biographies and theoretical magic.

She smiles at my books, and I wonder if she's teasing me.

When she peeks into the bathroom suite, her eyes sparkle, and I wonder about that bath…

She finds my closet, and thumbs through my cloaks and trousers while I lean in the doorway.

"We need to get you into some oranges and pinks." She winks.

She teases me, but maybe it's a joke I'm in on.

She moves to the drawers, and it hits me that, yes, there *was* something I needed to hide. The knickers from our first time could be explained maybe. Even the *Prophet* pictures could be shrugged off. But the pictures of us in the alley that Father's spies took would be harder to justify.

She looks to me and I must be incredibly open for her to read in my face that she needs to step away from the drawers.

She presses herself against me, hands sliding up and into my hair. She kisses me and I pull her close. She slips into my mouth and I slip down to grab her backside.

"I like your bedroom, Draco." Reassuring me. And it's such a relief that she can read me. That I don't need these walls. That she and I could possibly understand each other with our eyes for the next forever.

"Put your hands on the shelves," I whisper against her jaw. And when she obeys a fever runs through my chest, shivering down to my cock.

She likes the way my fingers shift inside of her with it, and I like the way her arse pushes against me.

My hips push back, rubbing my cock just right. Even with my trousers still on I'm sure I'll come soon.

If I get her off first, maybe she'll let me just slip inside like this.

I look up to see her hands squeezing the wooden shelves, and I close my eyes, grunting, "Fuck." Her hips push back, slamming herself onto my fingers. "I've wanted this… Wanted this every time I saw you in the Hogwarts library."

Wanted her to want me as much as she wanted those books.

Her cunt contracts on my fingers, and she moans, "Please, Draco."

I hold onto her hip with one hand, the other still inside of her, twisting on her clit and pulling her against me. She's moving too fast. Fucking herself on me, teasing my cock with her perfect arse, and her perfect moans.

I can't wait to be inside of her, so I hold her still as I thrust against her backside, thumbing her clit and watching her hands on the shelves.

I hear a crack, and I wonder if she's broken the shelves. The thought is just enough to make me come. I feel the tipping point—

"Mippy is telling you that dinner is ready."

My brain needs a few seconds to catch up, but my cock immediately knows what's happened, backing off.

She's stiff as a board, and I slip my fingers out of her, and say, "Thank you, Mippy. We'll be there shortly."

A *crack* as she disappears.

She laughs and I drop my sweating forehead onto her neck.

"Fuck."

She cackles.

There must be a spell to keep House Elves from doing that. Someone must have thought of it.

She slips out of my grasp, and I steady myself on the shelf to my left. She turns and kisses me.

"Give me a moment," I say.

She blinks at me and slides her hand down my chest. "Do you want me to…"

I grab her wrist and say, "No, I'm… I really don't want to come with Mippy's voice in my head."

She bit her lip, thinking that she also hadn't wanted Draco dragged through the mud with her in the press should she have gone to the Auror's Office about Flint.

"She told her father that I was brash, and unstable. Not someone to invest in." Draco tapped his quill on the parchment in front of him.

"That could have been easily cleared up, Draco. I would have happily written to Noelle or her father." She wanted to step toward him, but refrained.

"The damage was done. I didn't want you involved any more than you already had been."

She tried to think of anything else she wanted to say on this matter. She nodded, and turned back toward the door.

"Any other backstabbing secrets you've been holding onto Granger?" She turned, and his eyes were cold again. "It's Tuesday. I'm starting to wonder if a tenth of my inheritance will transfer into my accounts tonight at 9PM."

She raised a brow at him and grabbed the door handle. "It probably will." She let herself out.

Thursday was publicity day for the Golden Snidget campaign. She had the *Prophet* and the *Quibbler* coming to do a write up on the project, and Ginny, Harry, Rolf Scamander and Viktor Krum were coming to give interviews and have their photos taken as part of the "Save the Snidgets" campaign that would run in magazines and newspapers.

She felt like all her projects were actually moving forward, all within the same week. Today was publicity for the Golden Snidgets, which would print on Sunday, and the werewolf trial at the Wizengamot was scheduled to begin Monday. She had an incredibly busy week. Which was excellent, as it helped her not to concentrate on how awful she felt.

Yesterday had been just as strained as Monday and Tuesday. She had needed to prep the office on the Snidget campaign, so that if Rita went poking around in strange places, she would find a unified team. She and Walter addressed the whole floor on Wednesday afternoon, giving them basic information and talking points. Draco stood in his office doorway, arms crossed, shoulder leaning on the frame, and eyes off of her. Eventually he disappeared into his office, shutting the door behind him.

A *ding* of the lifts and a pair of heels marching their way to her office brought her back to the present.

"Darling!"

Hermione looked up, and Pansy Parkinson, tan and glorious, was pushing her way into the room carrying shopping bags and boxes.

"How I've missed you!"

Hermione blinked. "Me?"

"Yes, you! My model! My muse!" Pasny started dropping the bags in a chair and pushing the boxes onto Hermione's desk, almost tipping her inkpot. "I found so many goodies for you while I was in Italy."

As she scurried to save the paperwork on her desk that was slowly being plowed over, Hermione said, "Did you have a good time?"

"The best! I'll tell you all about it, but let's get set up for the publicity shoot today, hm?"

Pansy conjured a rack, and clothes started flying out of the bags and boxes, landing perfectly on the hangers.

As Pansy shoved her behind a changing curtain with an arm full of dresses to try, Hermione realized that she hadn't seen Pansy Parkinson since before the Valentine's Day Gala. Was it only three weeks ago?

She stared at the fabrics in her arms. Had she and Draco only lasted three weeks before they imploded?

Rita Skeeter arrived at 11AM, an hour before she was invited. While Daphne and Tracey started on her makeup, she heard Skeeter talking to Draco up front, asking questions about the werewolf trial next week, operations at the office, his thoughts on the Golden Snidget campaign. Rita's voice carried across the floor, and the scratching of her Quick Quotes Quill started grating on her ears, but Draco kept his tones deep and calm. She could only catch a word or two of his responses.

"And, Draco dear, how's your love life? Anyone special right now?" Rita's sing-song drifted through Hermione's office door. She swallowed, straining to hear Draco's response. She heard his rumble, a hiss of words, and a clattering of consonants, but couldn't piece together what he'd said.

Skeeter laughed. A high-pitched crystal sound that made Hermione's eye twitch.

"You ready?"

Hermione looked up and Daphne was hovering over her face with a lip pencil. Daphne raised a knowing brow at her. Hermione realized she'd been biting her lip. She released it and nodded.

Daphne looked over Hermione's shoulder at Tracey, taming her curls, and smirked before descending on her with the lip pencil.

A moment later, Pansy was shoving her into a purple dress with buttons down the front, and she was greeting Skeeter at the front. Draco excused himself, and Skeeter started her onslaught of questions on Hermione. Bozo was in the conference room, setting up backdrops and clearing space for the pictures.

The elevator doors dinged behind her just as Skeeter began asking her about her personal life, and Hermione turned to see Luna Lovegood standing inside the lift, eyes dreamy and wide.

"Luna!" Hermione smiled. "Are you representing the *Quibbler?*"

Maybe I'll quiz her on it later with my tongue inside of her. She'd fucking *love* that. I'll give her House points and only let her come when she reaches one hundred.

She takes a deep breath and reads, her voice washing over me. I hold her waist, rubbing against her hipbones. She pauses, and I tell her to continue.

I sprinkle light kisses on her neck, and slide my hand up her ribs until I'm almost at her breast. She stutters, and stops whatever she was reading about the portraits at Beauxbatons.

"What did the portraits have to say, Granger?"

I watch her nipples tighten through her thin dress. I wonder if my voice turns her on like hers does to me.

A small sound presses through her throat, and she continues, "Um…'tales of young Nicolas and his adventures at school. But some of them had seen him since. Some of them"—I cup her left breast ignoring her aching nipple, and gather the fabric of her dress up her thigh—"Some of them had seen Nicolas Flamel and his w-wife as recently as 1798, putting the Fl-flamels at around four-hundred-years-old."

I'm under her dress, inching towards her knickers and she can't focus on the Flamels any longer. My fingers dance across her and she moans when I nip at her neck. I run my other hand over her breast, rolling her nipple over her dress.

"Four-hundred-years-old is very old, isn't it, Granger?" I prompt her. And when she agrees and gasps, I dip into her knickers and slide my fingers through her. Already soaked. Her neck is tilted open to me, and I see that my love bites have faded since I last saw her. I pluck at her nipple and sigh, "What else does it say," setting to work on marking her again.

"I – I can't, Draco. Please."

Neither can I. I slip a finger inside of her, shaking at how tight she still is. My cock twitches against her backside, and I pull her close as she leans back against me, head on my shoulder. I fuck her with one finger until she moans. My other hand slips under her dress, reaching across her chest to get inside her bra. My wrist twists until I can thumb at her clit.

"Oh, god. Draco."

I love the way she says that.

I slip another finger inside of her and she trembles. Her hips jerk, and she rubs against my cock, so tight against me I think I can feel myself slipping in between her cheeks.

Would she let me fuck her like this? Just pull her dress up and shove aside her knickers and then I'd be inside of her. I'll tell her it's just like at Cornerstone, just lean forward on the stacks there, Granger.

She drops the book, and her hands try to grab for something. My wrists, my neck. She's groaning so beautifully every time I push my fingers inside.

She's deep in the stacks, nose stuck in an old volume that looks like it will fall apart in her fingers.

Her hair is down. And her dress is smooth and light against her waist and hips.

I can see them in her, more clearly now. Her mother's eyes. Her father's chin. Monica's graceful movements with Wendell's jerky thoughts pulling his body in all directions.

It seems unfair that she hasn't seen them in two and a half years, and I made dinner for them hours ago.

She turns her long neck and finds me watching her. I smirk.

"Didn't your mother ever teach you it isn't polite to stare?" She grins back at me.

"She tried," I say. "But she also told me to enjoy the beautiful things in life, so I find it a very difficult contradiction."

She blushes, and I take a moment to drink her in.

Hermione Granger in the Malfoy library, radiantly happy.

"Interesting finds?"

"Mm-hmm. In fact, I'm almost positive that if I'd had access to the Malfoy library over the past ten years, Voldemort wouldn't have had a chance."

She smiles down at the book in her hands, and I gravitate closer to her. "Well, the next time a dark wizard comes along, I'll make sure you have everything you need. What are you reading now?"

I stand just behind her, looking down over her shoulder. And I can see a hint of her breasts in the dress. She's answering me, but I'm focused on the scent of her after so many days without her. Feels like months.

I brush her hair off her shoulder, steadying myself on her hip. My cheek rests against hers. And I think we could read like this. Maybe in the bath or in the window seat. She could huff when she was done reading a page and had to wait for me to finish.

She shivers. And my hand rubs against her hip, now thinking of other things we could do in the bath or the window seat.

She mumbles something about the book. Something about research and the best way to do things. And I watch her fingers tighten on the book.

I wonder how much time we have before dinner.

And then I realize I don't care.

I press my lips along her neck, and she leans back into me, tilting her head for me. I trail my fingers down her arms, slipping over her elbow. My eyes slide over the Table of Contents, and I flip to the next page for her.

"Why don't you read me the Preface?"

"Hello, Hermione." Luna danced out of the lift and let Hermione hug her tightly. "My father's come down with a terrible case of Norflax Flu, so I stepped in. I'm glad I get to spend time with you."

"Norflax Flu?" Rita Skeeter scoffed.

"Yes, it's a terrible cold caused by contact with a Norwegian Flaxson. They are native to Scandinavia." Luna brought a hand up to fiddle with her earrings.

"Oh. Has your father been to Scandinavia recently?" Hermione asked.

"No." Luna smiled, like she was ready to answer more questions.

Hermione opened her mouth, then closed it and nodded, and brought Luna and Rita to the conference room.

Once Harry and Ginny arrived, she was much calmer, focused on the task at hand. Ginny went to change into her Holyhead Harpies uniform, and while Skeeter begged Harry to put on his old Gryffindor Quidditch uniform "for old times' sake" – with a bat of her eyes – Harry managed to decline.

Rolf Scamander arrived, looking very out of place, and Hermione gave him a hug.

"I'm not a Quidditch player, Hermione," he said, eyes flitting nervously around the room. "I'm just somebodies' grandson."

"And that's all I'm asking you to be." Hermione smiled at him, and he disappeared into the conference room.

The lift doors opened and Viktor Krum appeared looking like he'd just come from a previous magazine shoot. Several of the workers who had met him last week waved and jumped up to greet him. He spotted Hermione and he headed straight for her, smiling and leaning in to kiss each cheek again.

And that was the perfect time for Draco to exit his office, reappearing for his interviews. Hermione looked at him and he looked away, heading for Krum to shake his hand.

"Thanks for being here, Krum." Draco's face was tight, and he disappeared into the conference room before Viktor could respond.

Viktor gestured for her to enter first, and she walked into the craze of the publicity day.

Bozo had removed the table and had set up a few backdrops, one of a Quidditch pitch for the Quidditch players and one of a stone wall for Harry and Rolf. Rita was currently dripping off of Harry, living for every word he said about the wedding planning, and Rolf was talking to Luna, looking far more comfortable than she'd ever seen him. Hermione smiled as she watched the two of them.

"Excuse me, everyone," she bellowed, and the room quieted. "Thank you all so much for being here. Here's how today is going to work. The photographer will take a few shots of each person for their advertisement. These will go in magazines, newspapers, on flyers, with our

message 'Save the Snidgets.' Then Luna and Rita will take some time to ask a few questions for their periodicals. Harry only has a short time with us before he needs to get back to the Ministry, so we'll have Bozo start with him." She looked around. "And maybe we'll have Rolf start with Luna and Rita."

Rita looked nonplussed. Pansy, Daphne and Tracey were at the ready for those being photographed, and everyone else just milled about the conference room, waiting for their turn. She found Viktor at her elbow more often than not, and tried to engage in conversation with everyone.

Everyone except Draco, of course.

Rita was done with Rolf quite early, and was eagerly awaiting the deposit of Harry Potter into her interview chair, but Hermione watched as Luna continued to ask him questions about his current projects and his grandfather's relationship with the Golden Snidgets.

As they moved through the group and Harry left, Ginny stayed, hovering around watching.

"This is going well, Hermione."

"Thanks, Gin."

"But you haven't interacted with him at all," Ginny said.

"Yes," she sighed. "I know."

Draco and Pansy were chatting in the corner. She was smiling and whispering about Viktor Krum's photoshoot. He was frowning.

As Krum finished, Bozo was now done with their guests. It was time for Hermione and Draco to be photographed as Krum moved into the interview chair. Ginny bid her goodbyes, and Draco moved to the stone background. Pansy fluttered to Hermione and began fussing with the dress and her hair.

Hermione took her pictures as well, trying her best to come off as someone who wanted to save a species, whatever that looked like. When she was done, Krum was still being interviewed.

"How about the two of you." Bozo gestured with his camera, like it was an extension of his arm. She followed the lens to see he was pointing at her and Draco.

"Oo yes!" Pansy clapped her hands. "The pair that put this all together!"

"No, that's not necessary," Hermione started, but Pansy was already dragging Draco back to the stone backdrop.

They stood there, separately. Shoulder-to-shoulder. The bulb flashed. Pansy frowned.

"Alright," she laughed. "A little looser?"

Hermione tried bringing her hand up on her hip, tilting her head. She bumped Draco's side and they moved away from each other.

Something wet rolls down my face. I pray that it's blood. "No," I say. "This… hasn't been fun for me." I lower my wand. "It's one-sided. She's not looking for me."

He just nods. And I don't have to ask again.

"I saw her and Weasley moving toward the second floor girls' bathroom," he says.

I jerk my head as a goodbye. I take off down the hall.

"Draco."

I spin back for him.

"I have 10,000. Probably more if we sell the vineyard." He shrugs. "It's yours."

I swallow and nod at him. "If I don't find you at the end, tell Pansy you never saw me."

I spin on my heel before I can thank him or say something meaningful about our friendship or beg him to come with me.

~*~

Saturday, February 26, 2000

I stay well after midnight the next day in Australia.

I head to Sweet Tooth in the morning to post a notice that the shop is closed for a week, and before I leave I place a few protective enchantments to keep any unsavory characters away.

Monica locks herself in the bathroom when the memory of an eight-year-old breaking her wrist pops through the haze and swarms her mind unbidden, with no other memories of her daughter to accompany it.

Wendell sits next to the bathroom door, whispering through the wood, and Dr. Flanders and I take a break to make lunch.

We haven't introduced magic yet. So, we can't open the door.

Dr. Flanders says we should save any magic for when they have grasped the first ten years. Only introduce them to Hogwarts and wizardry when they chronologically were introduced to it.

It's brilliant, really. But I just want to make a fucking pot of tea. And I don't know what these knobs and dials are for on this oven.

I couldn't tell the British Ministry exactly when I'd be coming back, so I have to go to the Australian Ministry for a Portkey. It's almost dawn when I finally find the statue outside of the Opera House, and follow the stairs down into the hidden Ministry.

I land on the moors outside the Manor in a bright sunset, and the time change hits me like a Bludger. I stumble for a moment, and once I can tell the difference between the ground and the sky, I start the trek up the stone path to the Manor.

To Hermione.

But first… Pepper-Up Potion. And a wash.

Once I'm fully awake again, I wander to the library, like a kite being reeled in.

"Somewhere downstairs."

"And you?" He steps toward me. "You're alright?"

"I'm walking, aren't I?" I look him over. He doesn't have a spot of dirt or blood on him. And if I checked his wand, not a spell would have been cast. A survivor. "What are you still doing here?" I ask again.

"Pansy tried to come back for you. I told her I'd go instead if she promised to stay put."

I squint my eyes at him. "And to find me, you've been waiting for me to pass through this corridor?"

"No," he says, pocketing his wand. "I've been following Hermione Granger. Knew you'd come along."

Ice in my chest. I blink at him, wondering if it's worth the effort. We'll all be dead soon, won't we? So, I nod at him. "Where did you last see her?"

He frowns at me.

"Leave with me, Draco."

"You found her?"

"Daphne and Pansy are at the Hogwarts Express platform. We're going to wait for the dust to settle and figure out what to do—"

"Tell me—"

"You can't do this—"

"Watch me."

He steps into me and grabs my shoulders. "She's not yours to keep safe!" He shakes me. "Look around you, Draco! There are bigger things happening. *She* is not looking for *you!"*

I feel a crack forming between my eyes. Like a sliver in a dam, holding too much pressure for too long.

"If you're not going to help me—"

"She must have a cunt of gold if you really can't see—"

My shoulders snap, jerking out of his hands. He stumbles back and my wand is in his face before he rights himself.

He stares down the end of my wand.

"You've made promises to each other then?" he confirms for himself, nodding. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

I blink at him, my fingers tightening on my wand. "We've made no promises. We… There is no 'we."

He stares at me. "This isn't a game for you though? Not a bit of fun before settling down with Pansy?"

Pansy looked horrified. She came in and had Draco stand behind her. She kept Hermione's hand on her hip, and had Draco bring his hand onto her other hip. Hermione could feel him warm behind her. Draco put his other hand in his pocket.

The bulb flashed a few times.

"Now this time, like you care?" Pansy tried.

Hermione set her face, ignoring the light hand on her hip, just where he loved to touch her.

They sprang apart from each other once Bozo allowed them to. Viktor was finished, so Hermione bid him goodbye as the room watched. She felt very stiff as he tried to kiss her cheeks goodbye again and asked if they could get together sometime soon.

She smiled and tried to act naturally as Rita Skeeter's eyes drilled into them.

After Hermione and Draco finished their interviews, Pansy and Hermione headed back to her office, passing Daphne and Blaise talking in the corner. They moved away from each other as Pansy and Hermione approached.

Hermione didn't have the brain capacity for this revelation. She was fried.

Once inside the office, Pansy helped her take off that dress, and suggested they try on her outfits for trial on Monday. She gave her a navy dress to try on behind the changing curtain. As Hermione slipped it over her head, she heard Pansy's voice call to her.

"So, what did I miss while I was in Italy?"

Hermione's hands stilled. Well, quite a bit.

"Um, nothing really." Hermione stayed behind the curtain longer than necessary.

"Mmhmm," Pansy hummed. "How long were the two of you together before he fucked it up?"

Hermione closed her eyes. She should have known better than to try to pull a fast one on Pansy Parkinson. She emerged from behind the curtain, and Pansy was folding clothing, looking at her with a smirk.

"Er… barely three weeks. And he didn't fuck up. I did." She slipped into the shoes Pansy had laid out for her.

Pansy laughed. "Not likely." Pansy came to her, and started tugging at the sleeves and pulling the fabric around her ribs. "I highly doubt that anything you could do would cause any kind of damage, Granger."

Hermione let her eyes glaze on the wall. "I broke into the Ministry and viewed the memories he provided to the Wizengamot."

She felt Pansy pause. "Wow, Granger. Wow."

Hermione looked at her and found Pansy grinning. She swallowed.

Pansy knelt at her side and started pinning the hem. "You'll be fine. Just give him a bit of space."

Hermione wanted to believe her, Draco's ex, but she couldn't. "I don't know. You didn't see his face. How betrayed he was. I think… I think I really botched it."

Pansy was silent as her fingers worked. Hermione glanced down at her and Pansy was grinning.

"What?" Hermione asked.

Pansy took a breath, and bit her lip. Hermione waited four more breaths before she finally spoke.

"Do you remember how you used to catch the two of us snogging in the hallways, Granger?"

Hermione suddenly felt very awkward. "Er… yes."

Pansy pulled a pin from her teeth. "It took me a long time – longer than I'd like to admit – to figure out that he only met with me on Thursday and Saturday nights. And an even longer time to realize that he would choose spots along your Prefect patrol route."

Pansy smiled up at her. And flipped the hem over to hand stitch it.

Hermione was frozen. Her heart beating hard and fast as she looked down on this girl in panic.

Pansy turned her attention back to the dress. "It wasn't until sixth year when he whispered your name to me," she said, pursing her lips sadly. "And even then I tried to ignore it for a few months."

Hermione swallowed. Her eyes watering.

"He's been waiting for you for a long time, Granger," Pansy said. "Just give him a bit more time." She shrugged and stood. "Let him have his tantrum. And when he's done crying he'll remember why he fought so hard for you."

Hermione stared at her, and all she managed to say was "I'm sorry, Pansy."

"It's not your fault." Pansy flipped her hair. "I have terrible taste in men." Her eyes widened gleefully. "Did you know Theo Nott is gay??"

"What?"

"Yes!"

"No!"

"Yes!"

"He's so handsome."

"I know. I tried. I turned him gay."

Hermione laughed, and Pansy fixed one of her stray curls, twisting it back for her.

Pansy and Hermione spent another hour and a half laughing and talking boys, and Hermione felt any residual guilt melt off of her.

Pansy left, and Hermione tried to wait. Tried to give him time. She really did.

But she had to see him.

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Twenty Two

Saturday, May 2, 1998

It's hot in this part of the castle. Like the energy leaving the bodies burns through the air before dissipating.

Several Death Eaters pass, yelling at me to follow, saying they've seen Potter come this way. I tell them I'm on my own mission.

It's true.

I saw her hair whipping through the corridors as the students gathered in the Great Hall. I was close enough to see Weasley's freckles for a moment.

It was foolish of me to think that she wouldn't be here for this. For the end of it.

If Potter fails… I'll try to get to her first. Presuming she's not dead already. The thought digs into my side. I'll try to end up with her, try to keep her from entering the pool of people to be sold. I need to find her, keep her in sight. And if the Dark Lord drops Potter, I'll take her then. Steal her like a diamond necklace in the night.

I turn a hallway, look both ways to make sure it's empty, and start north.

"Draco."

I spin and Blaise steps out from a hidden place behind a statue. He holds his wand at an angle, like he's not going to trust me.

"What are you still doing here?" I ask. He left with Pansy and Daphne.

"Where are you going?" he asks instead.

"I'm on my own mission."

"Under whose orders?"

I stare at him. Is it worth it to lie? What if this is our last conversation?

He nods at my silence, and says, "Where's Vin and Greg?"

She'd been holed up in her office with Pansy for almost two hours, and she hadn't seen any of her staff since the morning, before the publicity shoot. She headed towards his office, but as she approached she saw his light was off. She checked her timepiece. It was 4PM.

"He's gone."

Hermione turned, and Blaise was flipping through some papers behind her.

"He left as soon as he heard."

Hermione frowned at him. "Heard what?"

Blaise looked up at her, brow furrowed. "You don't know yet?"

She felt her ribs pull, and she shook her head at him.

"Lucius Malfoy was stabbed this morning. He's at St. Mungo's in critical condition."

There were reporters and cameras outside of St. Mungo's and at the Apparition point. She heard Skeeter calling her name, saying things like "Hermione, dear! You'll tell them to let me in, yes?"

Hermione headed straight for the reception desk where the Welcome Witch directed her up to the third floor – "Wounds – Magical & Natural." She stood in the lifts, listening to the Healers talk their office gossip in hushed voices.

On the third floor, she followed signs to the private suites, and once she saw a rather conspicuous D.M.L.E. officer, "disguised" as a waiting room visitor, she knew she was headed in the right direction.

She turned a corner, and at the end of the hall were two blond heads. Narcissa stood next to a door, on the other side of a stationed guard, and Draco leaned against the wall a bit further away. He lifted himself off the wall and moved slowly across the tiles to the other wall.

Narcissa, Draco and the guard made a beautiful picture, this far away. Still. Silent. There were two chairs next to Draco, but neither he nor his mother looked inclined to sit.

Narcissa saw her first. She smiled tightly. "Hermione, dear."

She saw Draco tense and then turn his gaze on her, still down the hallway. His eyes cut her open, but he quickly looked away, muttering something.

Narcissa walked to meet her. They hugged in the middle of the hallway, a few paces from Draco and the chairs he wouldn't sit in. Narcissa gathered her close, and if she knew any of the situation between Hermione and her son, she didn't show it.

"It's so kind of you to come, Hermione." Narcissa pulled back and held her face between her delicate fingers. She brushed a strand a hair back into place for her, and Hermione felt so warm inside her chest.

"Do you know anything yet?" Hermione glanced over Narcissa's shoulder and saw Draco frowning at the ground. "Is there anyone in custody?"

"No, nothing like that yet." Narcissa ran her hands down Hermione's arms. "But it seems a guard was placed under the Imperius curse this morning, and was ordered to attack him. They're still trying to figure out if the knife had any magical properties."

"An Azkaban guard did this?" Hermione looked at the door shielding Lucius Malfoy from the rest of the world. "That's preposterous."

Draco snorted. Both women turned to look at him, and he ignored them, moving down the hall, further from them.

Narcissa turned back to her. "Sit with me?"

"Of course."

Narcissa led her to the two chairs, holding her hand in hers. They sat silently for a moment until a Healer-in-Training appeared down the hall. She walked briskly towards them, and Hermione felt Narcissa hold her breath. The girl smiled shyly and then entered a door across from them – a supply room. The girl grabbed what she needed, then shut the door behind her, nodding politely before darting away. Narcissa relaxed again, and stared down at her knees.

"Draco tells me that the first Wizengamot date is set for next week."

Hermione looked back to Narcissa, ignoring the movement from the figure down the hall. "Yes, Monday. We're just about ready."

"That's wonderful." Narcissa smiled at her, then turned to look at Draco. Hermione saw the woman's eyebrow lift in a lovely judgmental way. Narcissa looked back at Hermione, innocently. "Dear, would you like anything at the café upstairs?"

"Oh, no, thank you." She saw Draco roll his eyes in the distance and caught on a second too late. "But, I can run and grab you something—"

"No, I think I'm just going to use the restroom." Narcissa stood, and Hermione was just about to say she needed to use the restroom as well, when Narcissa did what Narcissa did best: She meddled. "Will you wait for me here?"

Hermione took a breath and nodded. Narcissa patted her shoulder and left Hermione sitting alone in a hallway with Draco Malfoy and a silent guard.

She tried to think of something to say that wasn't as moronic as "how are you?" and failed. She was just opening her mouth to say exactly that when he spoke.

"What are you doing here?"

She glanced up at him, his eyes still on the tiles beneath his feet. His lips were tight.

"I wanted to be here for you and your mother." She watched as he rolled his shoulders back.

"You should be preparing for the trial next week."

"I'm prepared."

He lifted his head, staring at the wall across from him. "Someone needs to be in charge of the office—"

"Blonde," she whispers, gazing at my hair.

I stare at her, waiting for her continue. Waiting for her to finish whatever thought she started.

"Draco Malfoy," she says, like a prayer she used to recite as a child.

My heart beat stalls in my chest. My face tingles.

I watch as her hand reaches out and turns a lock of hair behind my ear.

"She used to talk about you. And your hair."

I swallow. Something crosses her face, and her head rears back, fingers at her temples like a sudden migraine. I help her back to her bedroom where Wendell is sleeping.

In the morning, she calls me Drake again. And asks again if I know her daughter.

"I do," I say. "And I trust him."

She nods, lifting her brows.

Dr. Flanders gestures to me. This is the part where I'm supposed to exploit a flaw in the memory charm. But I found so few.

"Wendell," I say. "Where did you go to university?"

"I didn't." He stares at me. His answer is quicker now.

"Where did you meet Monica?" I ask.

"At university," he responds. He looks down at his hands, lips parting. He stares at Monica, and she stares back. "Did I meet you at university?"

"I think so." She's squeezing my arm.

"Monica where did you go to university?" Dr. Flanders asks.

And he begins a series of questions designed to falter their thoughts. It's repetitive. And then, after the sixth time Wendell is asked where he went to university, he tells us he went to dentistry school.

Wendell and Monica stare at each other, the Confundus Charm starting to fade.

Dr. Flanders casts a calming spell over them. And I watch as he asks them about what they remember from the year 1979.

~*~

After eight hours, they remember they had a daughter.

It breaks Monica in half when she remembers giving birth, but nothing after that.

Wendell can remember Hermione as a toddler. A two-year-old with curls running into desks and toppling chairs.

I keep making coffee. Dr. Flanders told me that the first session needs to be productive, or else nothing will stick. So, we're up all night.

Dr. Flanders will stay in Australia for the next two weeks, sleeping in their guest room. At 5AM, the Wilkins move to their bedroom, finally allowed to sleep. Dr. Flanders takes the guest room. And I sleep on the couch.

I wake up at 7:30 to Monica Wilkins sitting on the coffee table, looking down on me.

"Who are you?" she asks.

The charms have worn off. And any distrust they would naturally have of this situation has seeped back into her.

I sit up slowly. "I'm a friend of your daughter's."

"Hermione," she confirms.

"Yes, Hermione."

She stares at me, eyes bloodshot. "Drake. Drake Mallory."

"I gave you a fake name, actually," I say, running a hand through my hair.

"Blaise has it handled."

Draco pursed his lips.

"I understand if you don't want me here," she said. "And I'll go if it will make things easier. But I wanted to make sure Narcissa was alright."

Draco clenched his jaw. He shifted on his feet and looked down the hallway in the opposite direction.

They were silent for what felt like a million heartbeats.

"It was a knife?" she asked.

He nodded.

"And an Azkaban guard was under the Imperius curse?"

"That's what they say."

She studied him. His hands were in his pockets and his hair fell around his eyes. He looked very tired.

"Have you seen him yet?"

He shook his head. "Not until he's stable."

She heard the click of Narcissa's shoes down the hall. She returned with a cup of tea and a few treats. She handed Draco a pumpkin pasty, encouraging him to eat it. Draco rolled his eyes and Hermione smiled. Narcissa offered her a few treats and she politely declined.

Narcissa and she sat for the next thirty minutes, chatting intermittently about nothing at all, staying away from the topic of the man lying in a hospital bed behind the door.

Whenever Draco crossed the hallway, pacing, she'd watch him. One might mistake him for bored, if they didn't know to look for the tightness in his jaw, the clenching and unclenching of his fists, the movement in a rather still person.

The door to Lucius's room opened, and rather suddenly everything was in motion again.

A Healer exited, older and clearly in charge. Narcissa jumped up. Draco pulled himself off the wall. The Healer stepped forward to speak with them and Hermione stood, trying to move behind Narcissa so she wouldn't intrude.

"We've repaired the damage to his internal organs," he said, directly to Narcissa. "It is still possible that the knife was magical or had been dipped in poison. We have a curse-breaker looking at it now, but based on preliminary sweeps of the wound, there is no magic or poison."

Narcissa nodded, eyes wide.

"What does that mean?" Draco huffed.

The Healer turned to him. "We expect him to make a full recovery."

Hermione watched as Narcissa nodded, hands twisting around themselves. Draco was still.

"I do need to go over some paperwork with you, Mrs. Malfoy—"

"Black," Draco said. He was frozen in place watching the Healer speak.

"Yes, of course, Ms. Black," the Healer corrected himself. "He's resting right now, but will be ready for visitors soon."

"Yes…" Narcissa looked around the hallway. "Well, I'll come with you now for the paperwork."

She turned without another glance at Draco or Hermione, and followed the Healer down the hallway.

Hermione faced Draco, his eyes still focused on the spot the Healer had been. His jaw clenched and released. His left eye twitched. She watched him swallow and take a breath in, listening to the air rattle like a Dementor.

She recognized this. She'd seen it on him in his memories, right before he broke.

He pushed the air out of his chest, and looked down at the tiles. She approached him slowly.

"Draco…"

He spun away from her, squeezing his eyes shut, and pressing his palms against his face. She looked up, and the guard was averting his gaze, shuffling his feet. No one else was in the hallway, but it was a very public place.

Draco's head rose quickly, and the hand that had been reaching for him returned to her side. He looked around the hallway with hot eyes, like he wanted to destroy something. She came to his side, and grabbed his hand as it fisted.

His chest was heaving, and his eyes were wet.

"Draco."

And he grabbed her hand, and held it close to him as he doubled over. A sound tore from his throat, a sob. He leaned on her and she brought her free hand to run her fingers through his hair.

"Why won't he just die."

Hermione's fingers froze. She didn't know how to help this. She didn't know how it felt to wish someone was dead. Someone who was her own flesh and blood.

She moved through his hair again, and he leaned into her more. She looked up and the guard was letting his eyes wander to them. A Mediwitch rounded the hall, looking at a chart.

"Shh," she cooed. "Come with me."

Hermione opened the door to the supply closet and pulled him inside. Once the door was shut behind them his voice broke on another sob.

It was dark in the closet, and she thought about casting a silencing charm and finding the light, but then he fell forward, onto his knees and wrapped his arms around her hips, pressing his wet face against her chest.

She stopped breathing.

"I wanted him to die," he choked.

Sweet Tooth closes at 7PM. So, at 8AM in the U.K., Dr. Flanders and I spin away on a Portkey.

I meet Wendell and Monica at Sweet Tooth as they're closing. They drive me back to their little house just outside of Sydney, and I set a tracking spell on my wand so Dr. Flanders can follow my location.

We have dinner.

I ask them if they have any children, and Monica replies that they'd always wanted children, but it just never happened for them.

I ask where they went to university, and something flickers in Wendell's face, like he couldn't remember for a moment. And then abruptly responds that he hadn't.

I ask how long they've been baking, and together they respond, "Twenty-five years."

She was thorough. I get through every question Dr. Flanders gave me, and they never respond with, "Hm, I don't quite remember."

This would take a while. Dr. Flanders warned me. But this was deep.

After dinner, a knock on their front door. Wendell and Monica frown at each other, excusing themselves. They hadn't expected company. I slip my wand into my robe sleeve.

"Hello, how can we help you?" Wendell says. And I wonder if that's how he would have opened the door for Yaxley. Or if she'd taken away a certain amount of shrewd carefulness as well.

I stand from the table.

Dr. Flanders casts a Confundus Charm on Wendell, and I hit Monica in the back with another. It feels dirty, like a *Crucio*.

Wendell stumbles a little, blinking. And Monica leans against a door frame.

"Hello, Wendell," Dr. Flanders says. "My name is Henry."

Wendell blinks slowly. "Hello."

"May I come in?" Henry smiles.

"Yes, please." Monica gestures and she falls a bit. I grab her arm, remembering her daughter slipping in an alleyway, drugged and dizzy. I swallow my bile and remind myself that this is a proven process.

Wendell and Monica sit together on the couch, blinking slowly at Dr. Flanders.

I sit next to Monica. She still holds my arm.

"Wendell, Monica," Dr. Flanders begins. "My name is Henry. I'm a doctor. You were in an accident two and a half years ago. And I'm here to help you remember things you've forgotten."

Wendell's head tilts slowly. "An accident?"

"Of sorts," Dr. Flanders smiles.

Monica's head turns to me. "Do you know him?" she asks me slowly.

There's a window at the end of the other corridor, and for a moment I see my father, standing next to my mother, pacing.

I blink to clear my eyes, recognizing myself in the reflection next to my mother.

I focus down on the tiles. They would make a clean wall. Sterile. Built up from the ground like a sloping mountain.

Heels clicking on my tiles. Climbing up alongside the slope, scaling my mountain.

She's at the other end of the corridor, walking towards us, eyes on me.

Fucking hell.

No peace.

Mother hugs her, answers her questions.

"An Azkaban guard did this? That's preposterous."

I laugh, shaking my head at her naiveté.

Mother sits with her. Talks to her. Dotes on her.

And then Mother glares at me. Finally figuring out why I haven't been eating, haven't been sleeping. Haven't been living.

But not our breakup nor her husband's precarious health can deter her from meddling.

She leaves us alone. And the silence is dark, twisting inside of me at something that reaches for the light.

"What are you doing here?"

There. It's broken.

"I wanted to be here for you and your mother."

"You should be preparing for the trial next week," I hiss.

"I'm prepared."

Of course, she is. "Someone needs to be in charge of the office—"

"Blaise has it handled."

Always an answer for everything.

"I understand if you don't want me here. And I'll go if it will make things easier." She's looking at me. I can feel it. "But I wanted to make sure Narcissa was alright."

I want to snap at her. Tell her it's family only.

I hold my tongue, waiting for Mother to come back and mind her.

"It was a knife?" she asks.

I nod, looking at my tiles again.

"And an Azkaban guard was under the Imperius curse?"

"That's what they say."

"Have you seen him yet?"

"Not until he's stable," I say, kicking at the floor.

Mother returns, forcing a pumpkin pasty into my hand. I push it into my pocket until I can dispose of it.

It feels like hours pass as I listen to the two of them chat.

She's the closest thing I feel I have to a mother.

Jean Granger swims in front of my eyes, waiting for me. Waiting for my mind to open to her so she can find her way back—

There is a door in front of me.

A man stands next to it.

Two women chatter to my right.

I smell cleaning potions.

My neck aches.

I am hungry.

The door in front of me opens. The Healer steps out.

I move closer to him. My mother stands.

He's repaired my father's organs. He's worried about a knife. He's working with curse-breakers.

"What does that mean?" my throat asks.

He looks at me. He has grey hair and brown eyes and thin old skin.

"We expect him to make a full recovery."

He speaks to my mother again about paperwork and all I hear is "Mrs. Malfoy."

"Black." I correct him. He should know in advance. The paperwork will say Black. It's only appropriate to let them know. Legal documents need legal signatures.

He takes my mother away to sign paperwork. And there's a door at the end of the corridor. Closed.

A guard stands next to it. Keeping me out. Keeping him in.

My chest is cold. Breath is icy.

A full recovery.

Fully recovered. No need for deeds and wills. A perfect little plan to get us all here.

I think of a 500-year-old bottle of scotch and Italian voices singing to me. We always said we go back. *Maybe for your seventeenth*, he'd said.

But he wasn't there.

Maybe for Christmas next year.

But he was gone again.

I hated that scotch.

But he promised we would.

Maybe when he's out. Maybe the day they release him I'll Apparate us both to—

My breath stabs my throat.

The guard blurs, like water on a glass. And the tiles are wet and I can't breathe. There's a voice calling me back—

My robes are tight.

My shoes are black.

I have ten fingers.

My fingers over my eyes, pushing the water back inside.

Would he be happy I cried over him? Or just disappointed in my weakness.

You could never disappoint me, Draco.

No.

I look up.

It's a game. This whole thing. Italy and Azkaban and Mungo's.

Just chest pieces moving, clattering about a board and falling over.

A hand wraps around mine. And I don't know whose queen she is. Which side of the board she belongs to, his or mine.

She'll topple us all if we're not careful.

I grab for her, bringing her skin to mine and it hurts to touch her again. It slices into my stomach, and I pull her into me, clutching at her.

A gasping wet sound from my ribs, like there's something pouring out of me, my insides on the tiles.

Clattering and falling out of my throat, bricks tumbling down my tongue and to the floor.

Her fingers in my hair. Her chest against my side. Her voice in my ears and her scent against me.

And it could have been this simple. For years, it could have been only us. But the man behind the door kept me from her, kept me from what I wanted, kept me from being happy.

Lying, like he always does. Never about what I want. Never for my happiness.

I could have been free of him. A knife could have sliced him into ribbons until he was just a memory of scotch and newspapers and his eyes staring back at me in the mirror.

Why won't he just die.

It would be so much simpler.

She's dragging me somewhere. Sweeping me away into a corner for just the two of us. Dark and private and it feel like home with her here.

My knees give out, but I know she's got me.

My arms around her body, the hips that belong to me, my face pressed into the stomach that I've kissed.

"I wanted him to die," I confess into the darkness. Into her.

~*~

Thursday, March 2, 2000 – later

The mediwitch recognizes me. I don't need to explain why I'm here.

She escorts me down several corridors until I find my mother at the end of one.

She paces the width of the hall with slow footfalls, her robes long and black.

Already in widow's wear.

She sees me as I approach and pulls me close to her, whispering sweet things and stroking my hair.

I stare over her shoulder to where a D.M.L.E. guard is standing next to a door. He looks at me, and looks away.

"What's happening?" I ask.

Mother pulls back to look at me. And probably repeats what she's just said to me.

Imperius'd.

Knife to the lower left side.

Tissue damage.

Poison.

Something clicks in my mind and I turn my eyes on her. "Imperius curse?"

She lifts a brow at me. "Yes. That's the official report."

I sneer at the door behind her. I roll my eyes and begin to pace with her.

The tiles beneath my shoes blur together in my path.

There are vaults. Deeds. Properties.

Unless he's already taken care of that. Unless he's so unhinged at this point that he would stage his own murder after ensuring that nothing would be passed to me.

I never secured the Manor. Or the estate in France. Just the inheritance. Just the cash.

It's possible he's tied those up with his great uncle's family in Normandy.

I look at Mother, standing still while I swim. Is this to hurt her? To evict her from the Manor if she continues with this divorce?

If he's altered his will, or worked with his solicitors to bargain the inheritance in place of the deeds, then we'll be out.

I try to think. Try to figure out how this works in his favor. His own death, worth all this.

Or is it a warning? He'll survive this and then show us the paperwork.

Draco asked for his galleons before his wedding, so I took it upon myself to alter the inheritance paperwork. I hope you understand, darling.

A door opens, and my eyes snap up.

Not his door.

Three doors away.

I lick my lips and say, "Potions. Charms. Transfiguration. History of Magic. Ancient Runes. Arithmancy. Possibly Herbology—"

"And what would you like to do with all of that?"

I stare at him. "Do?"

He sips, his eyes on me.

"Where do you want to go? What's your plan, Draco?"

I blink at him, and recover. "I might want to become a potioneer. With Severus's help, I could probably get into the Brazilian program. Or perhaps I could work my way up through the Wizengamot. Chief Warlock in no time."

I send him his own cocky grin.

He nods, watching me. "But what is it *you* want to do?"

I swallow.

He sips.

"Sir?"

He sighs with satisfaction at the taste of his scotch.

"Don't worry about what I want to hear. What do *you* want to do?" He lifts a brow at me. "What makes you happy, Draco?"

The only thing that comes to mind is Quidditch. And Potter falling off a cliff.

He continues, "You're exceptionally talented. With your name and your mind, you could easily become Minister of Magic."

His eyes drift to the doorway as a couple enters. My skin tingles.

"But," he says, "if you would like to play Quidditch, or teach"—his eyes find me again, and I wait for the hammer to fall—"that is perfectly acceptable as well."

I watch as he thanks the waiter for checking on us. As he swirls his glass, speaking in Italian. As he points at me, saying something that brings the waiter's attention to me with an "Ah!"

When the waiter leaves, I stare into my full scotch glass, and say, "You mean it? You wouldn't be terribly disappointed if I played Quidditch?" My lips twitch and I say, "Or if I take over for Rubeus Hagrid as Magical Creatures professor?"

He lifts a brow at me with a dry expression. "While I would hope that you would teach something that actually requires intellect… no. You could never disappoint me, Draco."

The scotch burns my chest, warming my bones, spreading heat across my skin.

"I want you to be happy, Draco." He's looking at me, examining me. I see my eyes staring back at me. "Find what makes you happy. And I'll get it for you."

Several waiters bring over a slice of tiramisu with a candle, singing Happy Birthday.

My father grins.

And I wish for us to stay like this forever.

"I know."

Her hands in my hair and on my neck, absolving me. Forgiving my thoughts.

I cry into her stomach, breathing her into me. I'll hold her until she pries me away.

Her fingers drift through my hair, dancing over my neck and shoulders calming my thoughts and my breath. She holds me, keeps me close and secure.

And I feel like I've fallen down a pit, but she's at the top, waiting for me.

Ginny Weasley's self-righteous tones sing to me: *He was there because he cared for me.*

She came for me. Protecting me.

Save me, please, Granger.

The curve of her hips to her small waist, so familiar under my palms. The rhythm of her breathing against my forehead. My lips press into her stomach, my hands sliding along her back.

She's here for me.

I come to my feet, pressing kisses along the center of her chest, inching toward her skin. She gasps, and I wrap my arms tighter around her, keeping her. My mouth finds the familiar path to her neck, her ear.

Everything falls away.

Nothing has felt like this, like having her close and having her want me.

"I miss you," I whisper into her, pushing against her, pinning her to the door and pressing myself to her.

She says my name in that breathy tone I've come to recognize from my dreams, and my hands slide to cover every inch of her.

Her stomach, her ribs, running up her neck to hold her face. I push into her mouth and she accepts me, taking me in and kissing me in the darkness.

Have to be inside of her again.

It's so simple when it's just the two of us and I'm inside of her.

Her hands move to my shoulders and I'm about to slide my knee between her thighs. She pushes me back.

"Draco. Not now."

I connect to her eyes. She doesn't want me. She doesn't want this—

She brings my face down to her, pressing her lips against mine sweetly. I kiss her back and she pulls away.

"You have to go back out there," she says.

And it all comes back down on me.

Father.

She drags her fingers over my cheeks, into my temples, pulling away all my dark thoughts. She brings me out of the dark room and into the light.

The guard's eyes flicker away from us.

My skin feels tight and swollen.

"I need to… I can't see him yet." I press my hand to my eyes, scraping away the emotion. "I'll check on mother with the paperwork, find a washroom."

So much to do. I'll need to see him. I'll need to speak with him about what it is he wants in return for the Manor. I should probably comfort Mother. I haven't done that yet.

"I'll be here."

I look to her.

Here for me.

Her hand is in mine, comforting me. Saving me.

She smiles at me. And I can't wait to return to her.

I leave, her fingers fluttering through mine, and I find a mirror and then my mother. She is speaking lowly with Skeeter when I find her.

"Draco!" Skeeter jumps. "You poor thing! How did you feel when you found out?"

"No questions to him, Rita." Mother's voice is low and dangerous, bringing Rita Skeeter to heel. "You have a piece on the Golden Snidgets to run on Sunday, so I suggest you quickly write up something about Lucius Malfoy's stabbing so you can concentrate on that feature."

Rita presses her lips together with difficulty, and marches away.

"Do you need me for any of the paperwork?" I ask.

"No," she says, taking my elbow. "I'm finished." She leads us back to the corridor. "When he's awake, I think you should see him. I know you don't want to, but you need to."

I grit my teeth and I feel her hand press on me.

"I know. I have to figure out what he wants. Why he's done this." I feel her eyes on me. "It must be a warning. A chance to show us what we'd have without him. I think he's found a way to keep the Manor from me."

I keep my gaze on the floor as we walk. She's quiet. Until she's not.

"What happened between you and Hermione?" she whispers to me.

"We… we broke up. It's a long, complicated story."

She squeezes me to her. "It doesn't have to be. She's here, isn't she?"

I nod. Feeling lighter. Feeling freer.

We turn the corner, and I take a breath, ready to see her sitting in those chairs, waiting for me. I'll sit with her and hold her hand. And I'll ask her to dinner. And later – much later – we'll talk through trust and secrets.

She's gone.

My feet stop.

She's left. Though she was here for me. She came for me, and now she's—

My fireplace hums. The flames crackle to life. And the fire morphs into a face I do not recognize.

"*Draco Lucius Malfoy. An urgent message from Azkaban prison."*

I stare at the mouth, flames flickering green.

"Proceed." My voice is gone.

"*After an earlier incident, prisoner number LM537 – Lucius Abraxas Malfoy – has been taken to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries for treatment of a stab wound to his left side. Any further questions should be directed a medical professional or an officer on-site. Thank you. Have a pleasant day."*

The fire dies.

Someone is talking to me.

A chair squeaks.

And then I'm standing, taking Floo powder from Blaise, and tossing it into the flames. I watch them turn green again.

Green like death.

And then Blaise says, "St. Mungo's." And I'm shoved through.

~*~

Sunday, June 5, 1994

The scotch burns.

I hate it.

But apparently, it's extremely expensive.

So, it's delicious.

"Delightful," I cough.

Father grins at me. "Leave the bottle," he tells the server in Italian. The short man's eyes widen, and he quickly bows and leaves us. "Are you ready for your exams?" He eyes me over the top of his glass.

"Yes. Despite Remus Lupin's lack of instruction. He's barely there."

I take another sip, forgetting my lesson the first time, and cough again.

"Do you like Defense Against the Dark Arts?"

"I suppose." I pat my lips with my napkin. "I like learning the spells and counter-curses. But I haven't had a suitable instructor yet."

Father hums, tapping his thumb on the table. "I'll speak to the governors about that," he says to himself. "And Potions? Severus is very pleased with you."

"I like Potions. I like the way things come together."

"If you had to take your O.W.L.s tomorrow, which subjects do you think you would score highest in?" He sips from his tumbler again.

This is a test. An O.W.L. in its own right.

A new point of view.

I get three minutes of quiet before Blaise marches in, closing the door behind him.

"I think Daphne and I might be back together."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Blaise."

"Well, I don't know. We're going to dinner tomorrow night."

I lift my brow at him.

"What?" He pouts. "We can talk for *hours* about *your* drama but the second I have news, suddenly you don't want to hear about it?"

I frown. "Fine. Yes. Go ahead." I gesture for him to continue.

"We're going to dinner tomorrow night."

"Brilliant."

"Yes."

"Is that all?"

"Think so."

"Great."

We sit. He sighs. "Alright. Fine. What's your drama?"

"I don't have drama at the moment," I say, shuffling papers. "I am now drama-free."

"And how is that?"

I shake my head at my desk. "Miserable, really."

"Well," Blaise begins, crossing his leg, "all I can say, is that it's for the best. This will fade, and you'll grow apart from each other—"

"What the fuck are you going on about?" I snap. "You're getting back together with yours."

"Right," he says. "Do as I say, not as I do." I roll my eyes and he scratches his jaw. "Draco, you need an opportunity to evolve and grow without Granger. You've been so caught up in her your entire life. It's time to be your own person, without her."

An airy New York accent floats to me.

You're so wrapped up in her. You won't have much left...

I swallow, and look to my nails. "What if the person I am, is someone who belongs to her?"

He's silent for a moment, and I can't meet his eyes. And then—

"Go jump off a bridge, I guess."

I drop my head onto my desk. "Blaise—"

"Or. I probably could compile a list of people who would *pay* to Avada you."

"Blaise—"

"Make some Galleons off it."

"Merlin—"

"Someone's gotta keep the business afloat after you're in the ground."

There's only a guard standing next to a door. And my father behind it.

I'm running, my mother calling after me. The guard draws his wand, eyes wide as I approach, but he's caught in indecision as I throw myself against the door, feeling the wood give under my weight.

She's standing at the end of a bedframe. Mint green curtains.

Here for me. Unless…

Here for him.

No, that's not—

—moan for you after she's screamed for me—

She's not—

There's tears in her eyes. He's hurt her.

"Get away from him."

She springs back, pressing herself against the wall as I step into the room and face my father, propped up in bed.

Pale. Impotent.

"Draco. So good of you to come," he sings to me, smiling.

But still dangerous.

"Stay away from her," I hiss. "Don't talk to her."

He tilts his head. "Draco, she came to find *me*."

I feel something burning up from my gut, and before it reaches my heart, she stops it.

"Don't," she yells out. "Stop using me against him. The game is done."

And I watch my father frown, and looks away. Like a child that has been sent to his room.

I turn to her, and she's glaring at him. Having none of it.

Hermione Granger just turned her best Prefect scowl on Lucius Malfoy and he withered like a first year.

I couldn't love her more.

"Hermione, please leave us alone," I ask.

She glances between us, like she needs to stay. For me.

To save me.

My fingers on her arm. "Please, go. I'll see you in the morning."

She looks at me softly. And I wish I could kiss her goodbye.

Maybe one day.

I turn my eyes on my father, waiting to hear the door click closed.

He stares back at me.

"She's remarkable," he says, a small grin. "But you've known that from the beginning."

"Yes," I reply.

Mother joins us, stepping around the curtain.

"Ah," Father says. "My ex-wife."

"I prefer former-lover," she quips. "It has a better ring to it."

I roll my eyes and go stand in the corner until they're done.

"Speaking of *rings*," he hums, looking down at her bare fingers. "I know the Malfoy engagement diamond has been sent to curse-breakers, but I've asked all the usual jewelers to let me know when your wedding band shows up for pricing."

"Oh, don't bother, dear. I was going to sell it to the Muggles."

I rub my eyes.

"How magnanimous of you, darling. Always thinking of those less fortunate."

"Yes, my thoughts have resided with *you* quite often—"

"Glad to hear it."

"So, Father," I cut in. "You're well? Not poisoned after all?"

He turns his scowling eyes to me, and takes a deep breath. "Yes. Thank you for your concern, Draco. I'm sure they'll catch the person who cursed poor Thompson."

"I'm not sure 'poor' is the word to describe Thompson any longer," I say, and his lips turn up at my cleverness. "So, while you've been granted momentary freedom, what is it you'd like to discuss?"

"Discuss?" he asks innocently. "Why, I just enjoy seeing you both."

"I'm sure." I step closer to his side. "What a blessing then, that you've been mortally injured."

"Your son thinks you intend to keep the Manor from him," Mother cuts to the chase. "That you have some kind of plan for your death that would prevent us from living happily without you."

Father's eyes drift to me. He tilts his head, turning over the idea. "No, no." He shakes his head, squinting, trying to decipher me. "Of course not, Draco. The Manor will be yours once you are married to Miss Granger."

Like punching me in my stomach. I take an even breath. "And when will that be, Father?"

He frowns at me. There's something in his eyes I can't understand. Something I remember from when I was young.

"I presume after you make her an offer of marriage. If you haven't already."

He chuckles. I stare into his grey eyes, remembering her running from the library, tears in her eyes, racing away from me. I whisper, "And if she won't have me?"

He sighs, lifting a brow. "Of course, she will. I've ensured it."

"Ensured it?" My throat is tight.

Carrie interrupts us. They're ready.

When I leave my office, Viktor Krum is here, pressing his lips to her skin. And Rolf Scamander is here, smiling at her.

Where's the Weasel. Such a pretty picture they all would make.

I shake Krum's hand. And the grin he gives me is challenging.

You are welcome to her, Vik.

We move into the conference room, and I wait for further instruction. Pansy hovers at my elbow, talking my ear off about Italy. I welcome the white noise.

Potter eyes me from across the room and I purposefully remain invested in other conversations.

I pose for pictures. Pansy tries to make Granger and me pose together, and I have to touch her, place my hand on her side.

I'm doing something wrong because no one is happy.

Lovegood shakes her head at us, like the combination of our hues is hurting her eyes.

I return to my office. As long as I keep my hands busy, I can't feel the heat from my fingertips.

After a few minutes my door opens without a knock. I'm expecting Pansy or Blaise.

Ginny Weasley strides in, pushing the door closed.

She marches to my desk, plants her hands on her hips and says, "It was my idea."

I stare up at her. And she charges on.

"I was the one who pushed her to do it. Blame me. Hermione thought it was a bad idea - she didn't want to snoop like that - but I practically forced her into it." She takes a breath. "Alright?"

"Alright."

"Brilliant. So, you forgive her?"

"Not likely."

She frowns at me. And then tosses herself into a chair. "Merlin, you're a pest," she mutters. "It's the past Malfoy. You two have a future to look forward to. Why dwell on those memories?"

"Because they still affect my present," I reply. "I want you to think of the most unpleasant memories you have, Weasley. The things you keep locked away. And now imagine Potter prying into them without your permission."

She frowns at me. "Harry was there. For every one of them."

I scowl at her, and shuffle papers around. "How nice."

"He was there because he cared for me. He was there *for* me, mostly." She sits forward. "He came for me. He protected me. He braved a Basilisk for me." She tilts her head. "And you've done the same for her," she says, standing and crossing to the door. "You just need a new point of view, Draco Malfoy."

She gives me a small grin, and disappears.

Today is the publicity campaign for the Snidgets. Rita holds me hostage at the front desk until I answer questions about my love life. I smile at her like Draco Malfoy smiles at Rita Skeeter. My voice croons to her like Draco Malfoy's voice croons.

"Always on the market, Rita," I say. "I can't imagine settling down."

I see curls behind my eyes when I blink.

She leaves her office in purple, shaking hands with Rita and jumping right to work. I leave her to it, trailing back to my office.

I sit behind my desk. And wait.

I turn back to the financials. We're solvent. And I ignore the explanation why.

I stare at the obsidian reflection from my desk.

Brick of obsidian. I hadn't thought of that.

Volcanic.

Acidic.

Cooled and strong.

"Oh, dear." A voice from my doorway. Luna Lovegood is standing there, twisting her hair around her fingers. I blink to make sure I'm seeing her right. "Hm." She tilts her head. "You're orange again."

Orange. That sounds about right.

"Like rust. It's not pretty." She plops on the arm of my guest chair.

"Lovegood." I send her a tight grin. "Are you here for the *Quibbler*?"

She nods absently, looking around my office. She stands, fingers running along my walls, eyes drinking in my shelving and my furniture. She stops in the middle of the room, staring at my ceiling.

"It's like the inside of you." She tilts her head down to look at me. "Sterile. Cold."

My eyes flit across my office, seeing it for the first time.

"Hermione's wearing purple today," she hums. "But she's more of a grey. Slate." She turns her open gaze on me again. "She matches your eyes."

"Yes," I say. "None of us are really our best selves today, Lovegood."

"Can you see them yet? The colors?" She smiles at me.

Her fingers tug at a loose thread on her jumper. She sways, like she can hear a dance in her head.

"No." I look down at my desk. "I don't think they like me very much."

She hums. "I tried to write to you. You never responded."

I swallow. "I didn't respond to anyone. I'm sorry."

"Hm. That's alright." She stares at me, and tilts her head. "I don't like this color on you."

I give her a small grin. "I'll change into something else."

"I wasn't so sure myself. I thought she might have fancied you, yes." His eyes gleam at me. "But it wasn't until I received confirmation from Madame Michele that she attended her first lesson that I knew she truly cared for you."

My jaw clicks. I feel mother shift next to me. She moves to the window, examining the flowers on the ledge.

I try to follow his logic. Try to figure out what he wants next.

"You've misevaluated her. She's driven by what's right. She attended those classes because you morally obligated her to me—"

"Don't be an idiot, Draco. It doesn't suit you," he says. I snap my jaw closed. "She knew exactly what that little list was when I gave it to her."

"You're both right," Mother says. She stares out the window, hand on her clavicle. "She's not like us. She doesn't know how to play these games. But she's desperately in love with you, and has no idea what to do about it."

Desperately.

I blink at the back of her head. I turn my eyes back to Father and he's smiling at me. I look down.

"What do you want from us, Father. What do I have to do to get you to leave her alone?"

"I just want you to be happy, Draco—"

"*Nothing* has been further from the truth."

He frowns. "I've… taken steps, yes. Steps to make sure she was suitable for you. To make sure she was the right choice. I wanted to be sure she felt the same for you."

I snarl, "That isn't your responsibility—"

"It is my responsibility!" His voice booms throughout the room. I feel it clap in my chest. "As Lord of Malfoy Manor, it is my responsibility," he hisses. He sits in a hospital gurney, but it feels like he's in his armchair in the drawing room, holding court with me. "You think I don't know you? Haven't watched you over the years?" he growls at me. "I knew you'd disappear with her the moment you could. Knew you'd give everything to that girl without a moment's thought about your duty to this family."

"My duty to marry a pure-blood, you mean?" I lean forward, grabbing the rails at the end of his bed. "My duty to marry a girl who knows how to host parties and curtsey and recognize the Rembrandt we have in our ballroom."

"Yes." His eyes harden into mine. "All of those things are important. Your mother can testify to that."

I see her shift in the corner of my eye, but she doesn't speak to deny it. I think of Pansy.

If you want her in your world, Draco, there are things she needs to learn.

"But most importantly," Father begins, voice calm and even, "I knew if that girl gave you even a scrap of affection, you would follow her like a dog for the rest of your life. You'd be lost forever." He presses his lips together, and I feel my heart in my neck. "So, yes. I meddled." He scratches his jaw and grins. "I told you. I'll get you whatever makes you happy."

I close my eyes, an impending headache creeping through my brain. "In the future, I'd like to do the 'getting,' Father."

"Then what are you still doing here?"

I open my eyes. He's shaking his head at me. A small grin. Mother is looking at me over her shoulder, wearing a similar expression.

"If I'm not mistaken, she'll be at a dance studio in an hour." He lifts a brow at me. "She could use a partner."

I think of her arms around me, holding me. The way she shut down my father with one glance.

How she showed up for me. How she always shows up for me.

I nod at my Father, our best impression of a goodbye, and stumble to the door on my way to find her.

I pass through the door, face-to-face with the guard, before I turn back to wait for Mother.

When she doesn't follow, I look around the curtain, watching her float to sit on the bed at his side, her back to me.

Father's eyes dance across her face, and his hand reaches for hers. She pulls her arm back.

"Don't do this again," she whispers to him, barely loud enough for me to hear. She leans forward, and pushes his hair behind his ear. "Or I'll stab you myself."

He smiles up a her, turning his cheek into her palm.

"I know you will," he says.

I watch for a few moments as they stare into each other. She pulls her hand back, and hovers near him. She tells him about a book she's read, and he watches her face, listening and nodding. He tries to reach for her hand again and she shifts away into the chair at his side, but continues telling him about the book.

He smiles at the right moments, and frowns at the bad.

Like a dog. Looking for scraps.

I let the door close behind me, and disappear down the corridor, heading to a dance studio.

She's a cheat. Just like her mother. There's a procedure for things. If a doctor tells you not to skip ahead in your recovery, you don't go behind his back. Like disobeying a direct request. Like writing to a half-wit in California.

I burn the letter, and watch the fire dance across her surprised eyes.

Back to my paperwork, and I feel her step back.

"She misunderstood the situation," I explain. Nothing in that letter would have been factual anyway."

"What situation?"

"That night. With Marcus Flint," I hiss. "After you left with O'Connor, I didn't handle things very well inside."

She nods, like she understands. "And you didn't clear it up for her? Tell her what actually happened?"

"She was not my priority at the moment. Something I made abundantly clear to her afterwards." The way she screamed in the snow… "And I didn't know how much of it you wanted to be public knowledge. She told her father that I was brash, and unstable. Not someone to invest in."

Funny to have his name on the list in front of me, scratched out as she asks this. Funny to have the feeling of Marcus's hands on my collar still burning my skin.

"That could have been easily cleared up, Draco. I would have happily written to Noelle or her father."

"The damage was done. I didn't want you involved any more than you already had been."

I feel her ready to leave. I want to keep her, even if it burns.

"Any other backstabbing secrets you've been holding onto, Granger?" She turns back to me. "It's Tuesday. I'm starting to wonder if a tenth of my inheritance will transfer into my accounts tonight at 9PM."

She lifts a brow. "It probably will."

She flounces out.

A cheat, and a liar. I should know by now not to trust anyone with eyes like that.

I reexamine the finances with the idea of an installment in the bank this evening.

A cheat, and a liar. Keeping us afloat.

Perhaps my Slytherin is rubbing off on her.

~*~

Thursday, March 2, 2000

The inheritance did transfer. Mockridge is befuddled, but I tell him I cannot explain it.

know"—she swallows—"I remember sending my eleven-year-old off to a magic school. I remember reading the books she left behind and finding dark magic and wars. And I just…" She kisses my hand again. "Thank you."

Thank you.

Like *I'm* the one responsible for her. Like I *saved* her.

I pull my hand from her, nodding, and move to the kitchen to say hello to Wendell.

After breakfast, Dr. Flanders shows me his journal. They've kept their memories for two days, waking up every morning just as they were the previous evening.

"They're anxious to learn more. To see her as a teenager," he explains. "They are likely to regress at some point, but their current progress is wonderful. To be expected really; if their daughter is the brightest witch of our age, then they must be exceptionally adept as well."

I flip through his notes, waiting for him to tell me why I'm here.

"So, the next phase would require a Pensieve. And a slow process of letting them absorb someone's memories of Miss Granger while she was away at school."

I nod, running my fingers over a passage about Monica remembering her own real name. Jean.

And then like a snap, I realize that he wants *my* memories.

I look at him, eyes bright and twinkling behind his spectacles. I laugh. A bark right into his face.

Tossing his notes onto the table, my fingers come up to my eyes, rubbing at thin skin. "You've got to be fucking joking."

I'm still laughing when I grab my coat and slam the door behind me.

~*~

Tuesday, February 29, 2000 - again

My door office opens, and closes.

I look up, and she's standing there, shifting from one foot to the other.

She wears pink.

"If this isn't work related, I'm going to have to ask you to get out."

My eyes return to the list of investors I compiled months ago, before I thought I could finance this business on my own.

She throws a sealed letter to me, and for a moment I think it's her resignation again. I can't tell which relief is more acute: thinking it's her resignation, or realizing it's not.

A letter addressed to Hermione Granger, from California.

"I wrote to Noelle after you asked me not to," she says. I scowl at her, finding her mother's eyes. "She's just now gotten back to me. I wanted to come clean. And let you decide if I get to open it or not."

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Thirty Six

After leaving St. Mungo's, Hermione headed back to the office to close up and grab the belongings she'd left behind, including her dance bag.

She had her very last lesson with Miss Truesdale tonight. Then on Saturday, her last lesson with Monseiur DuBois, and on Sunday morning her last lesson with Madame Bernard. Tuesday would be her last lesson with Madame Michele, and the last tenth of the inheritance would transfer at 9PM.

She spent some time answering letters and catching up on her desk, reading the evening *Prophet* detailing as much of Lucius Malfoy's condition as Skeeter knew. She left the office with five minutes to spare before her lesson, Apparating to a point several blocks away from the small dance studio. Hermione was glad to be done with these classes, but even more so after her conversation with Lucius Malfoy that day.

You would have taken those classes sooner or later.

She shook her head to clear it as she sprinted inside, quickly shucking her scarf, coat, and mittens, and hanging them on the coat rack in the tiny lobby area just outside the studio door.

She kicked off her rain boots, strapped on the little ballet slippers, and grabbed the two-inch heels that Miss Truesdale had her practice in. She was so glad Pansy had her in a dress today, or else she would have to change into one of the studio's rehearsal skirts.

She turned to rush into the studio, with seconds to spare, and found Draco. Sitting in the tiny lobby waiting area, watching her.

She gasped in shock, then flushed in embarrassment at her own melodrama.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, hand over her heart. "Is everything – Is your father doing alright?"

He nodded and stood, placing his hands in his pockets. Still watching her.

"Then why are you…" She caught her breath. Was he here to shame her about the classes? To forbid her to help him anymore? "I'm taking these classes, Draco," she tried, firmly. "I only have one more week left, and I intend to finish. The inheritance will transfer and that's that. I made a deal."

He nodded at the floor. She watched him, waiting. He gave her a small smirk and pulled the door open, holding it for her. "After you."

She stared at him, not comprehending. She felt her feet move, and entered the bright studio, feeling him follow her.

Miss Truesdale was at the gramophone, her back to them.

"Miss Granger, you are two minutes late." Her stern voice carried to them across the hardwood floors.

Hermione opened her mouth to apologize, but Draco cut her off.

"I'm afraid that was my fault, Miss Truesdale."

The ex-ballerina spun around in a delicate twirl, and when her eyes landed on Draco, they shone.

"Young Mr. Malfoy! What a lovely surprise." The seventy-year-old woman – who still insisted on being called "miss" – let her eyes wander down Draco's form as he crossed the floor, smiling at her and taking her hand to kiss her knuckles. "You have been so missed."

Draco grinned, and Hermione tried not to roll her eyes, wondering if these teachers who sang his praises actually remembered his talents, or if they were just enamored by him and his mother. Was he really this excellent at *everything?*

Miss Truesdale asked Draco about Narcissa, gave her condolences on his father's health, and flicked her wand at the gramophone, shooing Hermione like a fly towards the ballet bar. Hermione frowned at the old bat, and began her warm-up. She tried to ignore the chatter from them, focusing on why Draco was here, sitting in a chair at the front of the room.

Miss Truesdale's voice floated to her. "If you are here to check on her progress, Mr. Malfoy, I am sorry to report that she needs *much* more time and focus to truly compare to girls her age."

Hermione pressed her lips together to keep from barking back as she came down from her final position at the bar. She heard Draco chuckle. Miss Truesdale waved her wand and footprints appeared on the studio floor, laying out the routine she would be learning.

"Miss Granger," she said. "We will learn Viennese Waltz formations today. Change your shoes."

Hermione quickly swapped her ballet flats for the practice heels and joined Miss Truesdale at the center of the room. The older woman one-two-three'd her way across the floor. Hermione watched the woman's feet match perfectly on each footprint, spinning in circles, and confusing Hermione's eyes.

"It's in the past now."

"No," Blaise says. "What's happened to you?" I look at him, and he's eyeing me carefully, like I'm some kind of rare creature he's only read about. "What's she done to you now?"

I blink at him, slowly, vision clearing as my lids lift. "She's proved you right. 'Such a stupid thing, to fall for a Mudblood.'" Blaise frowns at me. "'Especially her,'" I echo back to him.

When I turn back to the window, I hear him moving around. I hear him trying to speak to me. I hear him at my side. And eventually he's gone.

The word tastes like a medicine I used to take as a child. Never sweet to go down, but a cure for all internal injuries.

The owl from Dr. Flanders. I stare at it for five minutes before finally tearing the seal.

Incredible progress. Need you for phase two.

I stare out my window. The window I had her pressed against two weeks ago, just before I pressed my tongue to—

I blink.

There is a Muggle man with an umbrella.

An auto broken down.

Someone has lost a hat.

There is a letter in my hand, requesting my presence for a problem I intend to solve.

I head to the Ministry for a portkey.

~*~

Tuesday, February 29, 2000

Monica opens the door. I blink at her, struck by her eyes.

"Hello, Drake. Come in." She smiles warmly at me, and steps to the side. "Tea? Scones? Wendell's making sausages."

The change in her halts my feet before I say, "Er, yes. Thank you."

It's dinner time in the U.K. But I'm not sure I had breakfast today. Yesterday.

Monica takes my coat, babbling about the weather, and stops me before we proceed into the living room.

She looks up at me with Granger's eyes and whispers, "Please, tell me. She's alive, isn't she? Hermione?"

Her hand squeezes my arm, and she has no idea that the skin underneath her tight fingers is tender with a faded tattoo.

I frown at her. "Yes, she's alive. Why?"

The lines around her eyes disappear, like a good night's sleep has just set in. She breathes deeply. "Thank you. Thank you, thank you." She brings my knuckles to her lips. "Dr. Flanders won't let us skip ahead. Won't let us ask questions past our current memories. And I didn't

Marcus stands, buttons his robes, and walks around my desk. He picks up a piece of parchment and extends it to me. "Take a look at my proposal before your new Gryffindor morals blind you too far."

I summon the parchment to me instead of walking closer to him. For his safety, really.

The offer is worth this week's inheritance installment that I won't be getting. We would be able to hire back the staff whose hours were cut, and continue with normal business operations.

"Thank you for coming in, Flint," I say, disappearing the parchment. He's still leaning on my desk.

"Come on, Draco!" He laughs. "Let's put the past behind us. Let's get a drink." He nods at Blaise. "The three of us." He smirks at me and steps close, straightening my robes like he used to with my Hogwarts tie. "You've gotta unwind." His tongue peeks out from between his beloved teeth. "Invite Granger. From what the papers say, you two are much closer now that you were before."

There should be a fire. Something mirroring the last time he smiled at me while talking about her. Something like speaking to the hag in the bookstore, or even screaming at a naked girl in my bed.

You can let it out, sugar. Not everything belongs in boxes.

Marcus brushes my shoulders. "You got to have your way in the end, Draco. That's all that matters, right?"

Focus, Mr. Malfoy. You are too vulnerable like this. Too easy to manipulate.

Despite Severus's best efforts, Queenie Kowalski wins for a brief moment.

"I must not have been clear that last time we spoke, Marcus." My voice is steady, and I don't blink. "You are not to set foot on Malfoy property. You are not to contact myself or Miss Granger in any way. And if I never see those ridiculous teeth again, it will be too soon."

His eye twitches as I remove his hands from my person.

"Blaise, please escort Marcus out through the Floo." I say, keeping my eyes on Marcus's sour expression.

I hear Blaise standing, coming to my side. "Draco," he whispers, "I don't know what I'm missing but this is a little dramatic—"

"Marcus's 'manufacturing business' revolves around a potion used to drug women in bars. I don't think we want any of his Black Market money. As for the 'dramatics,' I would like to spare Miss Granger any discomfort in seeing the man that drugged her leaving my office." I look at Blaise. "So, if you please. Take Marcus away before he goes in pieces."

I move to the window, turning my back on the room and listening to the Floo *whoosh* as Marcus leaves.

"What happened?" Blaise stands next to the fireplace.

When Hermione stepped up to try it, she avoided Draco's stare. It felt like flying class at Hogwarts all over again, everyone watching as the know-it-all found something she didn't know.

She stumbled over the footprints several times, and heard a "tsk tsk" from the general direction of the gramophone.

"You see, Mr. Malfoy? She is unfocused and uncoordinated."

"Hm," Draco chuckled, and she ignored his eyes on her. "Perhaps she's been working too long without a partner."

She looked at him, feet fumbling as he approached her. She stared at him in horror as he reached for her hand and her waist.

"Er, I don't quite know the steps yet –"

"Come on, Granger. Let me take you for a spin."

She watched as he slipped one hand across her ribs as the other grasped her hand. She heard the music start up, and looked down at her feet as Miss Truesdale counted them in.

"Look at me," he whispered, and she looked into his eyes just as he stepped forward. She countered back. She held his stare as he turned them to face the corner of the room, and as his palm on her ribs guided her to step a certain way. She didn't blink away from him when Miss Truesdale called out, something about staying on her toes.

They returned to center, and his eyes were smirking at her. Miss Truesdale was giving notes, leathery fingers tilting her head, and prodding at her spine. She tried to concentrate on the feeling of being in his arms.

Working too long without a partner.

When they tried again, adding a bit more complexity, she focused on the feeling of Draco's thighs brushing hers as he led them around the room. She felt very light and free, and when he lifted their hands, and pushed her ribs to spin her underneath, her feet obeyed and she floated back into his arms. Her jaw opened and she burst out a laugh when he lifted a brow at her.

Miss Truesdale was quite pleased with her performance, but reminded her that ballroom dancing was no laughing matter. The ex-ballerina had Draco lead her through several other dance forms Hermione had been working on over the weeks. And Draco was right. It was infinitely easier with a partner.

The music played for the French Waltz. Her eyes snapped to him, and the corner of his mouth tilted upward. He bowed to her, and she responded with a curtsey. He reached for her, and she moved into his arms, beginning the dance she knew so well. For the first time, as his partner.

After twisting about the room with Draco, she couldn't help but think of how light his hand was on her ribs compared to Viktor's firm grip. How Viktor would need to stare at his feet for the third formation, but Draco keep his eyes on her.

She separated from him, moving to dance with the imaginary man two couples away. The place Draco had always been.

She faced the mirror on the side wall of the dance studio, and saw her hair was falling out of its ponytail, her face was flushed, and she had a silly grin on her face. Over her reflection's shoulder, she watched as Draco bowed. He rose, spine straight like always, and the mirror in front of him showed her his face as he caught her eyes. She felt the silly grin spreading as she dipped into a curtsey.

He brought his right hand up, palm facing his reflection and his imaginary partner. She brought hers up, like she had twice before when it was him in front of her. His eyes sparkled at her reflection in the mirror, and as he stepped forward to spin around, she watched a thousand different Dracos and Hermiones dance around each other in the bouncing reflections.

She thought of how terrified she felt when she had spun to him at the Yule Ball. How she waited for him to spit venom at her, and he had only bowed, watching her closely. She had felt out of breath as she brought her hand to his, keeping their skin from connecting, afraid he would snap at her, reel back and wipe his hand on his pant leg.

She turned around herself and caught his eyes across the room, and laughed.

"Miss Granger. Keep focused on your new partner."

This made her laugh harder. Draco smiled at her, biting his cheek.

"You must give your full attention to the new partner you meet," Miss Truesdale called. Hermione finished the circle and faced the mirror again, watching Draco's reflection. "The new partner in the French Waltz signifies the end of our youthful escapades." Hermione bit her tongue to keep from commenting on the *significance* of ballroom dancing. She turned and moved back to Draco, meeting again in the center of the room. Miss Truesdale continued, narrating their movements.

"And in returning to your original partner" – she faced Draco again – "it signifies that you have forsaken all others," – Hermione watched as Draco lifted his hand chest-level again, waiting – "and you have chosen your partner for life."

She blinked up at him. He swallowed. She lifted her hand, bringing it palm-to-palm with him, and just before they started the final spin around each other, she pressed her skin to his.

They stepped around each other. His hand was warm, and pressed against hers. She bit her lip, watching his face as they finished.

He bowed. She curtseyed. His eyes were deep and almost blue.

"Adequate, Miss Granger."

Miss Truesdale's voice broke her out of her trance. She shook her head, taking a deep breath, and listened while the woman gave her notes.

"Bloody hell, Draco. I thought you'd be more excited." He grins and grabs my shoulders "I've found our savior! We'll be back in the green in no time!"

I roll my eyes at him and say, "It's called 'the black,' Blaise," and push forward into my office.

Marcus Flint grins at me from my chair, his feet up on my three thousand galleon desk.

My skin vibrates.

"Draco," he coos. "I hear you're in a bit of a tight spot."

Blaise slides past me, begins a sales pitch of sorts, outlines how he reached out to Marcus last week, chuckles at a snide comment Marcus makes.

And all the while I stand in my doorway, staring at him with his feet on my desk. Where I used to fuck her.

A voice from the office floor behind me, speaking to Waterstone about some redheaded hag in the Wizengamot. I look over my shoulder to see her exiting the conference room, heading to her office.

If she sees him…

If he even looks at her—

There's a pebble stuck in the grooves of Marcus's shoe. He is in green.

It's raining.

I'm cold.

"So," Blaise wraps up, "I'll let you two iron out any details, talk… investor things." Blaise rubs his palms together, probably planning how he'll be able to hire back the female intern he had his eye on. He sits on the couch, quite pleased with himself.

Marcus smirks at me.

And I wish I'd broken his teeth when I hit him.

"I have quite a nest egg from my new potions career. I've been manufacturing as of late. Maybe you've heard." His eyes sparkle, like we're making fun of someone to their face like we used to. Like the events of that night are a private joke. "I'm looking for a place to invest my new money. And I heard you're in the red." He clucks his tongue.

I haven't moved yet. "Well," I begin, "that was so nice of Blaise to discuss private business financials with you, but we're doing just fine here at Malfoy Consulting." I slide my hands into my pocket to keep my fingers from twitching. "We won't be needing your assistance."

Marcus smiles at me. I hear Blaise sit up on the couch.

"Draco, what are you—"

"It's alright, Blaise," Marcus hums. "Draco's just a little sore at me. I tried to give him a hand a few months back with an affliction he's had. Brewed him up a little cure." He chuckles. "But I guess he didn't like the side effects."

Carrie brings in my calendar. I cancel the lunch appointments.

"Just for this week?" she asks, scratching through with a quill.

"Forever."

Then I request that she fill my week to the brim. Any busy-work and small meetings I've been putting off, I tell her to schedule it and contact the clients.

Mockridge brings me the financial report at 8:30AM before the Senior Staff Meeting.

"We're in the red."

I nod at the graphs.

"I want to be transparent and let you know that I'll be on the job hunt until we have our feet again. IF we have our feet again. I believe Wentworth will do the same after this is announced."

I look up at him. "I understand. Please keep me as informed as you can."

He nods and leaves.

I look down at the expenditures, and the empty space where investments used to be written.

If Mockridge goes, I'll have his salary to add the pile. That's a bright side.

Senior Staff Meeting at 9AM. I arrive early and shuffle papers in a rhythm I create.

Blaise complains to me about the lack of female staff members under him, begs me to let him have a new intern. Female, preferably.

I look up when she enters. I look back down. She sits next to me, in the spot I gave her when she was my Empress.

I wonder if I can move her.

I begin, and invite her to speak on her progress. Her hands tremble and her lips are dry. She brings her hair back over her shoulder, and I can't see where I sucked at her skin—

The person next to me sits. Their hands fold.

Blaise tries to visit my office after the meeting, and I lock him out.

I have a meeting with my Wizengamot Relations Consultant and my Non-Wizard Relations Consultant after lunch to work through the Werewolf Policy. We propose a week from today.

The only thing I learn is that Cornelia Waterstone has a chin hair on the left side of her jaw.

When I step out of the conference room, Blaise accosts me.

"I have the answer to all of our problems!"

"Wonderful." I lift a brow and step around him.

"I have an investor." He walks backwards, leading me to my office. "Someone we trust. Someone who's looking for a new startup." He shrugs. "I'm actually surprised you didn't reach out sooner."

"Alright," I say, waiting for him to elaborate. I shuffle my notes from the meeting and try to open my door. Blaise stops me.

Hermione thanked her. She stood stoically while Miss Truesdale suggested a few beginner classes that she taught over the summer to the students while they were out of school. She offered for Hermione to join the twelve-year-old pure-bloods, as that was the level she was currently at. Hermione raised a brow and responded, "I'll consider it."

Hermione waved goodbye to the crocodile-woman. Draco held the door open for her to the lobby, biting back a smile.

As the door swung closed, he said, "For what it's worth, I think you're on level with *fourteen-year-olds.* At *least*."

She sent him a withering glare as she changed her shoes and bundled up again.

"Do you and Monsieur DuBois always meet at that café?"

She looked up at him. "Er… yes, mainly. Why?"

"And you and Madame Bernard have tea at that French restaurant?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Why?"

"Like I said." He reached up and tucked her scarf in. "You've been working too long without a partner."

He lifted a brow and exited into the brisk evening air.

The next day at the office, Hermione was swamped preparing for the first day of the werewolf trial on Monday. She barely saw Draco once, but there was a cup of coffee waiting for her on her desk when she got in.

On Saturday, she arrived at the café to find Draco already sitting and chatting with Monsieur DuBois, laughing at something the instructor said. She pulled a chair and Monsieur DuBois promptly ignored her for the first ten minutes, then finally began quizzing her on modern architecture.

Sunday morning Draco was there with Madame Bernard, and the older woman thought it was the perfect opportunity for Hermione to test her skills and try to plan an imaginary party at the Manor with Draco. Draco insisted on everything being green and silver, just to piss her off. On both occasions, he said goodbye immediately after the lesson. He didn't offer to walk her back to Cornerstone, and he didn't show any affection towards her. Not that he could. They were never alone. By Monday morning, she was seriously confused on their relationship status.

He greeted her with coffee at the reception desk that morning. She thanked him, and he walked her the twenty feet to her door, discussing the day ahead. Draco would head to the Ministry early to handle Skeeter so that Hermione and Waterstone could focus on the case.

She took twenty minutes to gather her notes and practice her opening arguments before she started packing up. She should have known to close her door.

"So, your coffee delivery is back on schedule, I see."

She looked up to see Blaise in her doorway, holding a teacup.

"Hello, Blaise. I'm just on my way out."

He watched her quietly as she fumbled around with paperwork. When he didn't leave, she flipped her eyes to him.

"The two of you made up?" he asked, brow lifting. He took a sip of his tea.

She looked over his shoulder for eavesdroppers. "Er, yes, in a way."

"Nothing a little life-or-death, can't cure, eh?"

She looked at him again. There was an edge to his voice and a tightness in his lips.

"Is there something you need, Blaise?"

He sipped from his cup again, emptying it. Then vanished it with a wave and shut the door behind him. She watched as he placed his hands in his pockets and leaned back.

"I need to ask you a question, Granger. One that I posed to him a long time ago." Blaise watched her carefully, and Hermione felt her brows pulling together. "Is this a game?"

She blinked at him. "A game?"

"A bit of cat-and-mouse? Something to break the rules a bit?" He shrugged at her, and she felt very cold. "Or…are you in it for the long haul?"

She opened her mouth to reply and it was like she'd been Confunded.

"Because if you're not going to see this all the way through," he said, leveling his eyes on her, "then I beg you…. Back the fuck off."

She felt like she'd been slapped. She hadn't seen Blaise's eyes like this since Hogwarts. Since bullying in the corridors. Even then, there was teasing joy. But now, she was being chastised. And it was completely unnecessary.

She felt the anger rise in her, about to tell him to mind his business and get the hell out of her office when he spoke again, quieter.

"Please," he said. His eyes softened. "He won't survive this."

Hermione felt her anger slip away. She locked eyes with Blaise, and nodded.

"I appreciate your concern for him," she said. She cleared her throat and looked at her carpets. "But I do love him." She felt her heart thundering. "I have for a long time."

She waited. Waited for Blaise to laugh at her, or cheer in his victory at getting her to open up to him.

"But have you changed your mind about a future with him?"

She looked up at him. "Changed my mind?" There was no smugness on his face. Just curiosity.

"Still no dinner dates," Blaise said. "No going public with him."

Hermione started to sputter. "I… That's been his decision as much as mine—"

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Twenty Three

Monday, March 30, 1998

A girl is screaming. She writhes on the floor just ten paces in front of me.

The fire is warm against my legs.

My mother's hand on my wrist is cold.

My aunt pulls a blade and drops to the person with cinnamon curls and eyes—

The person begs. My aunt laughs.

There is a body on our drawing room floor. It looks at me. And screams.

Someone's hand is on my arm. An echo of a whisper in my ear. *What would Severus say?*

Something cries on a floor of blue velvet, bleeding into the carpets at the bottom of a well.

~*~

Sunday, February 27, 2000

"You can invite her to breakfast, dear."

I stop in the doorway. Mother sips tea.

"She isn't here."

Mother looks up and smiles. "Snuck her out already?"

I turn to the fireplaces, and follow the green flames to the Leaky. Tom waves at me. I walk into Muggle London.

It rains.

~*~

Monday, February 28, 2000

Mother asks me if I've eaten and I lie.

I Floo directly into my office. A note from Dr. Flanders on my desk. I stare at it, waiting for something to happen. I put it to the side.

"Oh, come off it Granger." He rolled his eyes and she widened hers. "Like you haven't been setting the rules for this since the beginning."

"What?!" If that wasn't the *exact* opposite from how *she* felt about this whole thing…

"If you've changed your mind, you need to tell him," he said. "He's been taking what he can get."

"Changed my mind about what?!" Hermione's voice was rising, but Blaise stayed very neutral as he spoke next.

"You said you wouldn't marry him."

She felt her skin prick, and her blood chill, and her eyes drilled into him.

She had. She'd said it to Narcissa when she'd left Azkaban. She had needed her to stop pushing. She'd needed to end Narcissa's delusions at the time.

And Narcissa had told Draco?

And he still believed it?

She stared at Blaise Zabini, the only person close to Draco who'd been allowed inside his mind.

A knock at her door.

"Granger?" Draco's voice "Ready?"

She jumped. "Yes, yes. Come in."

Draco opened the door, eyeing Blaise, and Hermione quickly grabbed her paperwork, sliding past both Slytherins as she headed for the lifts, her head a mess.

Draco, Cornelia Waterstone, and Hermione stood in the lifts in the Ministry, taking them down, down, to the Wizengamot.

Waterstone was chattering the entire time. She had done her research on each member of the Wizengamot, noting where they stood on issues in the past. She was very confident going into this trial.

They stood in the long stone hallways for twenty minutes or so, Waterstone mentioning Wizengamot members who might appreciate more eye-contact than others, and Hermione stood still, taking it all in.

"Cornelia," Draco said. "You know what would be most helpful right now?" She heard his voice take on that soothing coo that he used when he was about to manipulate someone into thinking they had a bright idea. "I think it would put everyone at ease to know when they'll be beginning."

"Oh, absolutely," Waterstone said. "I'll head up, and see if I can't watch the Wizengamot as they arrive, shall I?"

"Thank you. What a splendid idea."

Waterstone nodded and walked down the hall back to the lift. Once she'd disappeared, Hermione tried to focus her mind.

"Anxious?" Draco said.

She chuckled. Of all the things in her life, the Wizengamot was giving her the least anxiety.

She looked up at him. He leaned against the wall across from her, just as he had all those months ago, at Dolohov's trial. The day this mess began. Before Love Contracts and lists and Walls.

She stared down at the stones between them, like a battle line not to cross.

Draco thought she didn't want to marry him.

He's been taking what he can get.

Wasn't that precisely what she had told Ginny last week?

And what had Ginny said.

You'll never know until you ask for it.

She looked up at him. He stared at the wall next to her feet. Waiting for something.

Waiting.

"I want to be with you." The words tumbled past her lips and landed on the stones between them. She watched him blink at the wall. She swallowed, pushing her heart back down from where it had caught in her throat. "I want to date you. In public. Not just lunch in your office." She checked in with him and he was still fixed on the point where the ground met the wall, eyes glazing. "I want to come out as a couple to M.C.G., and figure out what to do about the Love Contract and dating policies…"

She shook her head, trying to clear her rambling thoughts.

"I want to go to dinner with you, and be photographed in the *Prophet*. And hold hands on the way to the Apparition point." Her heart was pounding and she could feel the rhythm in her fingertips. "I want to spend the night again – every night. I want to have weekly meals with your mother, and let Mippy make me pumpkin soup, and spend *hours* in that library –"

Her voice cracked, and the corner of his shoulder that she'd locked her eyes on started to blur. She thought of how badly she wanted that library and him in it. And how easy it could be to have it…

"I want to be your wife." She heaved a breath, words spinning off her tongue. "And see you in the mornings, and marry you in the gazebo and – and rule the fucking *world* with you."

She couldn't look at him. He hadn't moved a muscle.

"And I don't know where the wires got crossed along the way, I don't know how things got so twisted. But that's all I've ever wanted." She slapped a tear away from her cheek and sniffed.

"When you ask me why I've done the things I have, I want to be able to say it's because I love you." She gasped as it came out of her. "That everything has been for you. It's never been

The anger rippled through Draco's shoulders as he stepped in front of her, shielding her from his father's view.

"Stay away from her. Don't talk to her."

"Draco, she came to find *me*."

"Don't." It burst from her. She looked Lucius Malfoy in the eye until she saw it land on him. "Stop using me against him. The game is done." She held his pale eyes until he looked away, almost pouting, resigned.

"Hermione, please leave us alone," Draco said.

Her name on his lips paused her. She took one last look at Lucius Malfoy, hoping she'd never see or hear from him again in her lifetime, and knowing it was a foolish wish.

Draco touched her arm, pulling her gaze back to him. "Please go." His eyes were soft. "I'll see you in the morning."

She turned to find Narcissa standing quietly in the doorway, just out of her husband's sight. She gave Hermione a tired smile.

Hermione brushed her fingers across Draco's hand on her arm, and looked up at him and nodded. His eyes flew to her lips, and she wished he would kiss her goodbye.

She turned, pulling from Draco's grasp, and approached Narcissa in the doorway. Narcissa touched her shoulder as she passed, a gentle comfort, and Hermione exited.

Narcissa stepped fully into the room, and Hermione wondered at this family reunion. The first time Hermione had seen the three of them in the same space since the Great Hall at Hogwarts, all pale and shaken, Lucius trying to hold onto his pride, Narcissa trying to hold onto her son, and Draco trying to hold onto his control. And Hermione, looking in on them.

Narcissa closed the door behind herself.

She nodded at the guard and walked down the long hallway to the exits.

at her. "You would have taken those classes sooner or later. Draco wanted the inheritance sooner. So, I upped the timeline."

Hermione felt her hands shaking. She shouldn't have come in here.

The confidence he had. The feeling of inevitability. Pansy's sad smile as she flipped her hem this morning. Blaise's gentle probing this week. Narcissa and her hugs and grins and gentle touches and mothering eyes and family diamonds.

"Once you released the inheritance, you wouldn't have had any control over his bride," she whispered. "So, you manipulated me into taking the classes."

"Come now, Miss Granger. You manipulated yourself. I hardly had to do a thing."

He grinned without malice. Without a conniving plan. It was like he'd played his final card, and the deck had been swept away already.

She felt angry tears in her eyes. "Why did you do all this? Why did you interfere?" She closed her eyes, thinking of Blaise, Pansy, Narcissa. Ginny and Harry. Marcus Flint even… "All of you."

"I've already told you, Miss Granger," he chuckled. She opened her eyes to see him looking at her softly. "Everything I do, I do for my son."

She thought of his "proposal" last November. Take the classes, wedding in the gazebo, shadow Narcissa at society balls, and she could have had him.

She shook her head, pressing her lips together. "Well, Mr. Malfoy. Was it worth it? This game you've set up, with pawns and queens. Was it worth your pending divorce and your destroyed relationship with your son? They'll never want to see you again."

She tried to hiss at him, but she could only look on sadly.

"Oh, I don't know about that, Miss Granger." He lifted an arrogant brow. "I believe they're just on the other side of this door."

She blinked at him. And a chill swept through her as a piece clicked into place. She stepped back. "Was the guard even Imperius'd?"

Lucius grinned at her. Proudly. Fatherly.

"He's been well compensated, Miss Granger. I assure you," Lucius said. "It was about time to… what did you call it?" He smirked at her. "Oh, yes. Spice things up."

The door burst open and she turned to find Draco's hot eyes on her.

"Get away from him."

She felt her breath coming in short spontaneous movements. She stepped back from the bed, seeing the betrayed expression on his face as he rounded the privacy curtain, and turned to his father. She watched as Lucius smiled.

"Draco. So good of you to come."

about the 'right thing to do.'" She laughed, a manic sound that couldn't be pulled back in. "It's because I love you.

"And I want to know you. I want to know everything about you. And I understand that I have to ask, but I want to be able to ask. I want you to tell me things when I ask," she said, stomping her foot. She felt like she'd continue this nonsense until he stopped her. "But if there's something you can't tell me, not right now, then maybe there's a – a hand signal or something. Like you pull your ear—"

Finally, Draco stepped off the wall. She sucked in air, waiting for him. He turned to face her, and his cheeks were pink, his eyes were gliding over her face. He stepped toward her, crossing the invisible line between them.

"Ask," he whispered. "Ask me now."

She watched him get closer as she pulled air into her lungs. A million questions flying through her mind, but there was still the first question. The one she still hadn't heard him answer.

"Why didn't you identify me that night. At Malfoy Manor."

He took the final step into her, and she tilted her head back to see his face. He looked into her eyes, and small smirk tugged at the corner of his lips.

"It was the right thing to do."

She blinked, drinking in his smirk, the heat in his eyes, and felt another tear fall. A small laugh bubbled up from her chest, breaking her into a thousand pieces. She gasped in air, and she felt her face crumple. She couldn't decide if she was laughing or crying, but with this man, it was safe to assume both.

She closed her eyes, pressure pinching behind her lids, and her lips pressing together, and leaned her head back against the wall.

"God, I hate you." She laughed again, feeling the hot air hit his face.

"I love you, too, Granger."

And he pressed his lips on hers. She squeezed her eyes tight and felt the tears running away. She threw her arms around his shoulders and he slipped his hands to the curve of her spine.

She pulled back, the past five minutes hitting her in the face. "I'm sorry. That was probably a lot." She opened her eyes and he was still there in front of her. "The… marriage thing and staying every night –"

"Oh, I don't know." He shrugged, and she felt it in his arms. "I think the gazebo is available this weekend." He raised a brow at her and she laughed, slapping at his chest.

The sound of the lifts arriving. Waterstone was back. Draco pressed his lips against her one last time, and slipped out of her arms as the gates opened.

She smiled at him as Waterstone announced that it was time.

The oak doors opened, and the small, toady man appeared. The same one from all those months ago. She gave him her wand and looked back at Draco. He smiled softly at her.

She knew her face was mess, her eyes were still leaking, and her hands were shaking from the emotional whiplash, but Draco smiled at her.

And it was time to save the fucking werewolves.

The Wizengamot was even less excited to see her than normal. The redheaded woman that she loathed took lead on the examination of their case, and seemed to be purposefully prodding at Hermione throughout. The blonde woman who reminded her of Molly Weasley tried to smile encouragingly, but it was clear from the faces in the courtroom that they steeled themselves in preparation for this day.

The day Hermione Granger took on the Wizengamot.

After her opening statements were delivered and the Wizengamot had the opportunity to ask questions, court was dismissed after only two hours to allow the members the rest of the afternoon to review the paperwork and statistics Hermione provided.

Which was wonderful, because that meant Draco could take her out to lunch.

They ended up in a Muggle restaurant, and after forty-five minutes of Hermione yammering about how amazing she did in the courtroom, and forty-five minutes of Draco watching her with a small grin, she finally stopped and said, "And how's your sandwich?"

Draco smiled. "You know Granger, I'm not sure I like this concept of dating. Why take you out and pay for your meal here when I can listen to you ramble about yourself for hours at the office."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Maybe I'm paying."

"You can try," he warned.

The trial continued for the rest of the week. Harry came in on Tuesday to testify on behalf of Remus Lupin and his legacy. Every evening Draco took Hermione to dinner. They had yet to figure out what to do about the Love Contract and office dynamic, so they stuck with Muggle restaurants where they would be less likely to be recognized.

He walked her to the nearest Apparition point at the end of the every night, and he held her hand and kissed her goodbye. They didn't pick up the lunch time trysts, and Hermione didn't know if that was due to her being in trial for the Wizengamot, or if he was actually taking it slow.

On Tuesday evening, he came with her to Madame Michele's lesson and sat through tea with them. On Wednesday night, she asked him if he wanted to come home with her.

played all his cards when he told Draco about the classes. And he clearly posed no physical threat to her. It was a mental match she had to prepare for.

She took a deep breath and looked him directly in the eyes. "Why did you tell Draco about the classes? What *possible* motivation could you have had for that?"

He smirked at her, so different and so similar to Draco. "I assumed he already knew. I had no idea the two of you would keep *secrets* from each other."

He was toying with her, like a mouse. She summoned something deep inside of herself and felt her brow curve upwards.

"How boring it must be. To be in Azkaban with no one to play with." She stepped forward, and brought her hands down to lean on the rail at the foot of his bed. "Were things getting a bit too comfortable for you?" She quirked her head to the side and saw his eyes follow her. "Narcissa wasn't speaking to you. Your son's inheritance – the only thing that still tied him to you – was leaking away. And *I* was playing by your rules." She narrowed her eyes at him. "Was it time to spice things up?"

His lips twitched. She watched as his eyes ran over her face, a smile spreading on his cheeks.

"How different you are, Miss Granger," he sang. She squeezed the bedrail and kept her eyes as clear as she could. "I could credit Madame Michele for refining your approach, Miss Parkinson for styling you just so, or Miss Truesdale for teaching you how to move…" He let his eyes wander across her form, and she held her ground. "But it's something else as well," he said, eyes meeting hers again.

She sent him an icy stare, and let the sarcasm drip into her voice. "Now, now. Don't say it was 'in me all along.' Not when I've gone through all this trouble."

He smiled. Almost a true smile. He looked directly into her eyes and said, "You'll make a fine Lady Malfoy for him, Miss Granger."

Any confidence she had left her in a puff of air. She felt her eye twitch, and her lungs seize. She pulled up from her arrogant lean forward on the bedrail, and lost all idea of what to do with her hands.

She searched his face for his game. And found almost a fondness there. There was acceptance. There was pride. And if she reached deep into his eyes, she could almost see an expression lost in her memory, one that belonged to her own father.

What was he doing? What game was this?

"I don't understand," she breathed.

"You know, Miss Granger," he said, looking to the window on his left. "The Malfoy inheritance is only to be released on the heir's wedding day. It's been that way for centuries. And it would only be released should the bride be approved of." He turned back and grinned

He nodded and turned to head down the hallway, her hand pulling from his as he moved away. She hadn't realized he was holding it. She watched him go, and turned to look at the guard, staring down at the tiles. She wandered toward the chairs again, but didn't want to sit.

"He's awake."

Hermione looked up and the guard was watching her.

"Oh," she said. "Wonderful."

He shrugged. "You're on the list, if you'd like to see him."

She blinked at him. "The what?"

"The list of approved visitors. Hermione Granger is on Lucius Malfoy's list."

She felt her heart in her throat. "And when did he make this list if he's been unconscious?"

"It's in the Azkaban paperwork, so I'm not sure when your name was added. But before today."

She looked beyond him to the door. She held her breath knowing she was an idiot.

"Okay."

He nodded at her and gestured for her to enter.

She pushed open the door, feeling the weight of the moment. The moment that was supposed to be reserved for blood relatives only.

Sparse room. Light blue curtains on the window and long privacy drapes around the bed in the center of the room. There were flowers on the windowsill and she was curious to know if they were for show or if someone had actually cared for Lucius Malfoy enough to send them. She heard her own footsteps against the linoleum, clapping in the silent room as she rounded the privacy curtain to find Lucius Malfoy, propped up in bed, like he'd just finished a stay at a spa.

"Miss Granger." His lips turned up in the corners. "I was hoping you would be here."

Besides the hospital gown, the hospital bed, and the pale shade to his skin, there was no difference between the sight of him now, and her visit to him in Azkaban. He wore the same curious gaze, his hair pulled into the same style, and his superior attitude had not wilted one bit.

"Mr. Malfoy." She stood one step from the foot of his bed. "I'm surprised to find that I was included on your visitor list." She heard her voice, measured and controlled. She hoped her face gave the same façade.

"Of course, Miss Granger." His eyes sparkled at her. "You're practically family, after all."

Hermione felt a shiver, starting at the top of her spine and shooting through her like the Cruciatus curse.

She looked closer, and found the thin skin around the eyes, the delicate way he was propped against the pillows, the drowsy tilt of his head. She had nothing to be afraid of. This man had

His eyes flashed, and he bit his lip. "As much as I want to," he said, "I can't. There's something I need to get back to at the office tonight." He looked quite put out.

"Is it anything you need help with?" she asked.

He blinked at her, and paused before saying, "Not yet. But possibly soon."

On Friday, the Wizengamot voted. Forty-seven out of fifty members voted to implement the new werewolf laws, allowing equal rights for werewolves and adjusting the existing legislation.

She was positive the redhead was one of the three votes against, and she made sure to get her name and title so she could send her a rotten fruit basket next week.

She and Draco returned to the office, and he held her hand as they stepped into the lifts to take them back up to Malfoy Consulting.

"I have a surprise for you."

She looked up at him, and he was staring at his feet.

"A good surprise?" she laughed.

"Mmhmm." He nodded. The lift doors closed. "I was shocked to hear it was ready today." He looked at her. "So, I wanted you to have it now, in honor of your triumph in the Wizengamot today." He grinned at her. Nervously.

She blinked at him. A gift? Not a book or a sweater or parchment and quills. Something that needed to be made? Or worked on? She couldn't think of anything she wanted that needed to be made. Perhaps he'd gotten her parchment and quills with her initials engraved.

"I – thank you. I'm… quite speechless really." Her curiosity began working immediately. "It's something you had made?"

"No," he said, looking at the lift doors. "Fixed, really."

She frowned. "Fixed? Have I broken something?" She laughed, and he grinned.

"You'll know what it is in just thirty seconds, woman. Can't you wait?"

She stared at the lift doors. A surprise for her. From him.

The lift slowed, and he squeezed her hand before releasing it, his fingers drifting away from her.

"I have senior staff and associates in the conference room this afternoon for the March staff meeting. I'll let them know of your success today." The doors opened. "You're excused for the rest of the afternoon, Granger."

He started to exit. She jumped.

"What? Why? What?" She stepped out of the lifts. "Is *that* my surprise? You must not know me at all, Malfoy, if you think I enjoy days off—"

"Go!" He whipped around, exasperated. "Go to your office, enjoy your surprise, and I'll see you sometime tomorrow."

He stalked away from her. Tense. He was nervous. She looked around the floor, finding several people heading into the conference room. She wasn't invited to the meeting?

Hermione shook her head and walked to her office. She opened the door slowly, expecting balloons to drop or fireworks or something dangerous.

A man sat behind her desk, and a woman in her guest chair. The man stood.

"Miss Granger." He smiled. He was the man she'd seen Draco with at the Valentine's Day gala. The one he'd met with at the office a few weeks ago.

Hermione blinked, about to ask who they were when the woman turned toward her, and Hermione was staring at the face of her mother.

She felt her lungs tighten, pulling in on themselves. She felt her skin buzz. She stared at her mother's face –

No. Monica Wilkins. This woman didn't know her. Hermione could see it on her face as she frowned at her.

Hermione's mouth was open, so she closed it. "Hello, how can I help you?" she croaked.

"Hermione?" A voice from her bookshelves. Her father was standing there. She hadn't noticed him. And he'd called her Hermione…

"Yes, that's me." She could feel her heart drumming. She couldn't be sure. She couldn't hope –

Her mother stood, and her eyes were drawn back to her. She missed the way she moved.

"Your hair is different."

Hermione reached up and touched her hair, sleeked into large curls for court today. She remembered.

Monica Wilkins remembered a before.

"Mum?" Hermione's vision blurred. She felt her lips tremble and she pressed them together.

Her father moved toward her as her mother nodded. She crossed her arms, holding herself together. A tear tumbled down her face as her father touched her shoulder.

There was still a strange look on her mother's face, but her father hugged her, and she felt her chest break into fragments. When he released her, she turned to the man behind her desk.

"Who are you? What's happened? Are they cured?"

He smiled gently at her. "My name is Dr. Flanders. I'm a memory charm expert. Also, in the Muggle world I'm a psychologist. Your parents are on the *road* to recovery. The next step in the process involves you. Meeting you. Spending time with you."

"Step in the process?" She frowned at him. "How long have you been working with them?" She couldn't ignore her mother's eyes on her.

"About two weeks now," he said. "You three should talk. Ask each other questions. I'll remain a quiet observer in case things become too mentally taxing for them."

She brushed her hands through his hair, and felt him breathe again.

"I know." She felt the tears prick at her own eyes.

His arms tightened around her hips, pressing himself closer to her, and a broken sob pushed out of him, into her chest. He buried his face against her, and she held him, letting her fingers move through his hair, across his neck, down his shoulders and up again. She repeated this several times as his breath slowed. She felt his hot exhales against her stomach.

She heard him sniff as he moved his head, and she wondered if her dress was wet from his tears. The arms that looped around her hips loosened before his hands slid up her ribs, resting on her back. His face pressed against her stomach, then her sternum, and as he rose from his knees, she realized he was pressing his lips against her as his mouth touched down between her breasts.

She gasped, and his arms held her tight as his lips pressed against her chest, her collarbone, and then her neck. He whispered, hot against her ear, "I miss you."

She felt her breath coming quickly as he kissed her just below her ear, pressing her into the door.

"Draco."

He ran his hands across her back, slipping forward to run against her stomach.

This probably wasn't the most opportune time to… whatever this was.

His hands cupped her cheeks, kissing her mouth and letting his tongue push against hers. She sighed into him, and let him kiss her.

She pushed lightly at his shoulders.

"Draco. Not now." His eyes refocused on her, his face still pink and wet. He started to close off from her, like rejection, and she pulled his face to hers again for a soft kiss. His lips tried to move against hers and she pulled away. "You have to go back out there."

He sighed, pressing his forehead against hers. She moved her thumbs across his cheeks, brushing away the remaining tears, and trailing her fingers into the hair at his temples.

He let her pull him out of the supply closet, back into the too bright hallway. The guard was resolutely looking elsewhere.

"I need to…" Draco started. "I can't see him yet." He wiped his eyes, and Hermione took in his face, pink and splotchy, and the skin below his eyes puffy. He had undoubtedly been crying. It was so easy to tell. She hadn't seen true tears on him since he was a child. "I'll check on mother with the paperwork, find a washroom."

Hermione nodded. "I'll be here."

He looked at her, as if it surprised him. She gave him a small smile.

She nods, and I lean into her, pressing a soft kiss to her lips. Her fingers trace my jaw, and I pull away before I stay with her all night.

Once she's disappeared, I Apparate to Heathrow.

~*~

Friday, March 10, 2000

Dr. Flanders and the Grangers stay in a hotel suite near the office. When I'm not walking Granger to her office or escorting her down the lifts to the Wizengamot, I'm with the Grangers. They've maintained their memories for four days. They survived the stresses of Muggle travel (which Dr. Flanders assures me is not all that stressful, but I'm still unconvinced). They decided to close Sweet Tooth and put it on the market, officially moving back to the U.K.

I'll let the Granger family decide if they want their old house, but in the meantime, I send a crew to the Muggle neighborhood to clean my blood off the walls and erase any magical signatures haunting the house.

The Wizengamot votes for the Werewolf Policy. Of course, they do.

Father writes to me the night before to let me know that he has it on good authority that the majority of the council is voting in her favor. And the minority are weak-minded fools who only need a letter from the right person—

I roll my eyes and toss the letter into the fire.

When Granger and I head back to the office on Friday afternoon, I take her hand when we step into the lifts.

"I have a surprise for you." Merlin I hope this works.

"A good surprise?"

I nod. "I was shocked to hear it was ready today." Dr. Flanders and I were supposed to do this on Sunday, but he said it was time. "So, I wanted you to have it now, in honor of your triumph in the Wizengamot today."

"I – thank you," she stutters. "I'm… quite speechless really. It's something you had made?"

"No." Just wait, you silly witch. "Fixed, really."

She won't give it up though. So I tell her to just take the afternoon off, which she also doesn't like.

I march away from her, demanding that she go to her office and not come back.

I take a deep breath once I'm in the staff meeting. We begin as soon as I settle in. Mockridge starts in on our second quarter projections, quite pleased with himself that we have all ten installments of the inheritance to work with.

I'm just thinking of the Muggle-born Integration Program and how to throw money at it when the door to the conference room slams open.

Oh, fucking hell.

She marches to me, ignoring every other person in the room.

Something's gone wrong. Where is Dr. Flanders?

She reaches for me – to throttle me – and then her lips are on mine, leaning into me, hovering over my body. My hands steady her, holding her head and twirling her hair as she smiles into me.

She pulls away with a smirk, and tries to address the room with as much dignity as she can muster.

"Draco Malfoy and I are dating. We, uh… Yes. We're dating. Boyfriend and girlfriend," she stumbles. My face heats. "So, we'll need to take a look at that… er, Love Contract business. And just… abolish that, I say."

Blaise cheers. A few of the ladies giggle.

"Because… because I love him," she says, and I feel her eyes on me, inviting me. "And he loves me – I think—"

"I do, yes." There's some odd sensation of joy trying to overcome my face.

"So. That's that! I'll, uh, let you all get back to it."

She bids us goodbye, and they applaud her exit. All but Mockridge, who really for the life of him can't figure out what just happened.

At the end of the meeting, I run to my office, still blushing and smiling.

Blaise follows me in and jumps on my back, hollering.

"Merlin, Blaise!"

"You did it! You hooked yourself a Golden Girl, mate!"

"Get off!"

"Oh, she *fiery!* You'll have your hands full for sure—"

I knock him off of me and he shoves me onto the couch, one knee pressing into my chest. I'm about to twist his nipple to get him off when I see him snarling down at me.

My eyes go wide.

"If you fucking dare," he hisses, "choose Harry Potter as your best man over me…" He growls and I look up at him, quite terrified. "I will kill you the Zabini way. And then I'll marry your sexy little widow, and fuck her everywhere in Malfoy Manor—"

"What the fuck, Blaise!"

"I just want to be clear—"

"Yes, yes! You're the best man!"

"I'm the fucking best man."

"YES. You're the best man!"

He lifts off me, and smiles broadly. "Excellent. Now that that's straightened out, I have a new client to discuss with you."

He goes to sit in my office chair, spinning it in circles until I've collected myself enough to join him at my desk.

~*~

I call a meeting with Potter and Ginny Weasley. Dr. Flanders thinks more memories will help, especially ones that show Hermione with her parents.

Potter is finishing dinner on the stove as we chat. He's quite interested in Dr. Flanders and his techniques, but Ginny Weasley can't stop beaming at me. It's unnerving.

We sit around the small dining table, and I try not to notice all the little touches that scream Hermione here. The books, the pictures, the Muggle things that Ginny Weasley would have no use for.

"So, tomorrow, if your schedules allow?" I ask.

"Absolutely." Potter grins. "This is… It's quite extraordinary, Malfoy. What you've done."

I stand. "I've done nothing. Just… paid someone, really." I take one last look around the flat, and start to take my leave.

"You won't stay for dinner?" Potter asks.

No, not after Blaise's dramatics this afternoon.

"Hermione should be home soon, don't you think?" Ginny grins at me with manic eyes.

I scowl at her.

"I don't want to intrude—"

"Oh, Draco, dear, we're practically *family* now," Weasley says in a gross imitation of my mother's friends. Her eyes sparkle. "Besides, I need to grill you about your intentions."

I swallow. I've never wanted siblings for this exact reason. Too familiar.

"Granger and I have talked," I say, still standing, trying to extricate myself. "And we're… on the same page now. We want the same things."

Potter nods at me, trying to catch up, but Ginny Weasley stands quickly.

"When are you proposing?"

I blink at her. "That's… I think we're a bit early for that—"

"You have it on you don't you," she whispers.

"I have no idea what you're—"

And she's on me. Shoving me into the wall, hands fumbling through my pockets.

"OW! Weasley! What the fuck are you doing?"

Potter is protesting, but this witch grew up with six brothers. I grab for her hands and she slaps me away, digging into a different place in my robes.

"POTTER!" I look to him and he's shrugging at me, helpless. I'm a second away from shoving Ginny Weasley off of my person when she sings.

"Aha!"

My body flows into hers, my hands braced softly on the wall on either side of her. She tilts her head back, ready to drink me in.

I smirk at her. "It was the right thing to do."

She blinks at me. A slow smile pulling at her face. Her tears tumble down and she laughs, crying. She tilts her face toward the ceiling and whispers, "God, I hate you."

I smile. "I love you, too, Granger."

It was supposed to feel difficult, wasn't it? Not as simple as breathing.

I kiss her, and she holds me close. I slide against her spine, pulling her in. Her lips press wet kisses against mine, and she pulls back.

"I'm sorry. That was probably a lot. The… marriage thing and staying every night—"

Oh no you don't, Granger.

"Oh, I don't know. I think the gazebo is available this weekend."

She laughs. Like I'm kidding. And I grin at her.

The chime of the lifts arriving. I kiss her before pulling my arms away.

Waterstone marches down the corridor, announcing that they are ready for us.

Granger shoves the tears off her cheeks, wipes at her mascara, and strides to the oak doors. She looks back at me before disappearing, smiling and flushed.

Radiant.

The door closes, and I wait.

Wait for her.

What's another few hours after all this time?

~*~

We go to lunch and she talks my ear off. She tries to pay. The minx.

On Tuesday I follow her to tea with Madame Michele. The small woman smiles at me from the corner of her eye.

They all smile at me now. The girls in the office. Kelsey, who's always known. They all smirk into their magazines when I walk Granger to her office or when I escort her to the lifts for trial.

And I smirk back.

On Wednesday, we finish dinner at a lovely Italian place and she turns to me with soft eyes and says, "Would you like to come over to mine for a drink?"

Her place. Her bed with her sheets that smell like her.

I sigh. "As much as I want to, I can't. There's something I need to get back to at the office tonight." The lie comes easily.

"Is it anything you need help with?"

I stare at her, clenching my jaw to keep from telling her. "Not yet. But possibly soon."

That fucking soup. We'll have it every night if you want.

"—and spend *hours* in that library—"

Her voice trembles. And I really should have known it's the library she'd get emotional about. Should have shown it to her years ago. Given her the keys.

"I want to be your wife."

My throat closes. My eyes are dry. I can't move.

"And see you in the mornings, and marry you in the gazebo and – and rule the fucking *world* with you."

There's a song playing somewhere, thrumming in time to her voice. Something low and lovely. Pale pinks and periwinkle blues and velvet navy and golden silk dance in a carousel.

Lovegood was right. There are colors. *Everywhere*.

"And I don't know where the wires got crossed along the way, I don't know how things got so twisted. But that's all I've ever wanted."

Where is the fucking ring. Why don't I have it on me. At all times.

Her voice trembles as she continues to wreck me. "When you ask me why I've done the things I have, I want to be able to say it's because I love you." I feel my pulse in my ribs, beating to get out. "That everything has been for you. It's never been about the 'right thing to do.'" She laughs at herself. "It's because I love you."

I'd never imagined her saying it. Never knew what it would sound like from her lips, with that voice that tortured me in my dreams, singing to me in the mornings as I gripped myself, screaming and crying in my nightmares.

It's an exquisite sound. Like the first time you hear a song that you'll come to play on repeat.

"And I want to know you." She's still talking and I just don't know why we're not holding each other yet. "I want to know everything about you. And I understand that I have to ask, but I want to be able to ask. I want you to tell me things when I ask." She's getting off topic now. "But if there's something you can't tell me, not right now, then maybe there's a – a hand signal or something. Like you pull your ear—"

I jump when I realize it's me that she's waiting for. It's me that has to stop this nonsensical monologue.

I move for her, scared to look at her face and see that I dreamed it all.

But she has tears running down her cheeks, looking like she just fought for her life. I step into her, and she breathes deep, waiting.

"Ask," I beg. "Ask me now."

She looks deep into my eyes and says, "Why didn't you identify me that night. At Malfoy Manor."

And she's holding a golden box, flipping open the lid, and gasping.

She stumbles away from me, staring down at the ring. Potter appears over her shoulder and his eyebrows jump.

"Blimey, Malfoy," Weasley says.

"It's… I'm not doing it tonight. I was just—"

"Oh, yes, you *must* do it tonight." Weasley looks up at me, eyes bright and mischievous.

I shake my head. "No, I… I want to speak with Henry. When he owns his mind again." I look down. "I've spent a lot of time with them, and it's only right that I…"

I trail off, and when I look up, Potter is regarding me with something… something disgusting really. Something like pride or acceptance or friendship and it's awful. I sneer at him like I used to and he smiles at me.

Weasley pushes the ring box into Potter's hands. "Harry, quick. Bake a pot pie. We'll bury the ring in it and all have supper together and—"

"*Excuse* me?" I gasp. "You'll do no such thing."

The locks in the door start to turn, and we toss the ring box between us, running like mice into a casual position at the table. Granger pushes open the door and Weasley is jumping into her arms, congratulating her, while I tuck the ring box back into a pocket, recasting the Notice-Me-Not Charm.

We explain to her that they'll have a session with her parents and Dr. Flanders tomorrow, and her eyes don't leave mine.

Weasley catches on. She makes some excuse for leaving, dragging Potter behind her even as he protests over the dinner still uneaten on the stove.

And now we're alone in her flat. Her… tiny little flat.

"Don't I pay you, Granger? Surely with Weasley's Quidditch salary and your measly income, you can afford an upgrade."

"I like this place," she huffs. "Besides, I'm barely in it."

And I plan to keep it that way. I grin at her and say, "You outed us to the entire office today."

"I did. I really did, didn't I?" She's a bit nervous about it still, so I step in to her, touching her, holding her. "Was there a discussion of what to do with the Love Contract, or will you need to resign."

Oh, she's hilarious. I smile against her lips. She pulls me close.

I try to kiss her. To really kiss her, like I've wanted to, but she pulls away and looks up at me.

"Did you really show my parents your memories?"

I stare at a point over her shoulder, still trying to fight the bricks that snap into place. "A few," I say. "Just about everyone has seen into my mind now, so I thought, what's the difference?"

She smiles, and I kiss her neck, finding her skin just as sweet as I remembered.

"Which memories?"

"Wouldn't you like to know."

I can tell she aches to ask me more. But she just drags her fingers through my hair, and whispers into my ear, "Thank you, Draco. Thank you for bringing them back to me."

I press our hips together, and smile against her skin when I say, "Of course. It was the right thing to do."

She slaps my shoulder, blushing and trying to pull away from me. I'm laughing when I tug her back, pressing her into the hallway wall. She fights me, cursing my name until I press my tongue to hers, and I feel her melt back into me.

My hands slide around her waist, dropping down to hold her backside close to me. She sighs a small moan into my mouth, and I pepper kisses across her jaw until I whisper into her ear, "Show me your bedroom, Granger."

She kisses me quickly, and tugs us down the hall to the door on the left. I drink in as much of her bedroom as I can before I'm shoved to sit on her mattress, her legs climbing over mine and her lips on me again.

I laugh into her, thinking how easily she could have talked me into something slow and sweet today, but this witch is randy.

My hands slide up her sides and back down, rounding over her backside. It sounds like she growls against my lips. I squeeze her, filling my palms with her cheeks and rubbing circles against her dress.

She sighs against my lips, shifting on her knees to press closer to me. Her breasts push into my chest, and her hips open wide to press against mine. Her hands hold my head close to her as she devours me, and my palms slide across her dress, down to her thighs, rounding her knees and back, taking her dress with them.

My cock presses against her, and she rolls forward against it.

How many times have I wanked to this thought. This barest of ideas. Hermione Granger's thighs on either side of mine, her hands threading through my hair.

My hands slide over her thighs, and she mumbles against my lips, "Touch me."

She's wet, dripping through her knickers. I rub her through the fabric and she moans, kissing down my neck, hands sliding to unbutton my robes. My thumb drags against her, slow slides from her entrance to her clit that make her hips vibrate. Once I'm down to my shirt, she starts on her own dress. Buttons down the front pop open, and I watch her greedy fingers as she breathes against my neck.

She shrugs the dress off, sliding it down her shoulders and to the floor behind her. I press a circle on her clit, and she shivers, hands pausing before sliding into my hair again. She attacks

to understand social cues. She yammers on and on about Wizengamot member and their families, where they've stood on previous issues, who prefers direct eye contact.

And all of it is overwhelming Granger.

We have about ten minutes, and she looks like she's focusing on focusing.

"Cornelia," I interrupt, and Waterstone stops. "You know what would be most helpful right now?" I turn my Malfoy smile on her. "I think it would put everyone at ease to know when they'll be beginning."

Waterstone looks at me like she's just had a wonderful thought. "I'll head up, and see if I can't watch the Wizengamot as they arrive, shall I?"

There it is. "Thank you. What a splendid idea."

Waterstone leaves us alone, taking the lift upstairs. I stand across from Granger, leaning on the wall, hands in my pockets. She chews on her lip, eyes staring wide at the stones in front of her.

"Anxious?"

She laughs lightly.

I guess so.

I watch her mind work. She'll do brilliantly. She's always done brilliantly.

I let her think. I stare at her shoes, fondly remembering her ugly little Ministry shoes she wore to my trial, and every day after. Pansy has her in better shoes, obviously—

"I want to be with you."

The words jar me. I can scarcely believe they came from her.

"I want to date you. In public. Not just lunch in your office."

I swallow my heartbeat, listening to her words, trying to make sense of them.

"I want to come out as a couple to M.C.G., and figure out what to do about the Love Contract and dating policies…"

Her voice dances across the dank stones, quiet and sure. I'm afraid if I lift my eyes to her the spell will break and she'll stop.

"I want to go to dinner with you, and be photographed in the *Prophet*. And hold hands on the way to the Apparition point."

Like we want the same things. Like there's nothing between us any longer and why aren't we just *doing* those things—

"I want to spend the night again – every night."

Yes. Tie you to bed.

"I want to have weekly meals with your mother—"

She'd love that.

"—and let Mippy make me pumpkin soup—"

I nod.

She frowns at me. "Well?"

"'Well,' what?" I shrug. "We made up. We have a very important week ahead of us." I stare at the carpets, kicking my shoes against it. "I… I'm working on a project for her." I look up at Mother and she's waiting for me to continue. "I've been to Australia. I'm working with a doctor to counter-act the memory charm on her parents."

Her lashes flutter, and she takes a slow breath. "And is it working? You're sure the doctor knows what he's doing?"

I think of Jean clutching her robe tightly around herself, looking at me like an intruder. I swallow. "Yes." I look away. "They're lovely people. I can't wait for you to meet them soon."

She hums. "Well, if that's the ace up your sleeve, I hardly need to give you this."

She pulls from her robes a small golden box, opens it, and places it on the end table.

The Malfoy engagement ring sparkles back at me.

"Curse-free," she says.

I stare at it, and shake my head free of the image of it on her finger.

"That's not… I don't need that. Not yet." I press my lips together. "You remember what she said. It's not something she wants."

Mother tilts her head at me. She closes the ring box, stands and walks past me. "I think you'd be surprised at the answer if you just asked her."

She presses the box into my hands, and leaves me alone in the drawing room.

~*~

Monday, March 6, 2000

The lift doors open, and she smiles when her eyes land on me.

"Good morning, Mr. Malfoy," she hums, taking the cup of coffee from my warm fingers and letting me walk her to her office.

"Is there anything I can do for you before we head to the Ministry?"

"No," she breathes. "I just need to gather my things."

"I'll handle Skeeter today. Don't give her a second thought."

She nods at me. "Twenty minutes?"

She disappears into her office, her arm brushing mine.

She's considerably more anxious when I come to collect her. Blaise is visiting her, and I give him a curious look when she doesn't make eye contact with either of us as she heads for the lifts.

Waterstone, Granger, and I make our way to the Apparition point, into the main entrance of the Ministry, and down to the courtrooms. It is now clear to me that Waterstone is not equipped

my mouth with teeth and tongue, gripping my head to hers, and her hips start rolling back against my hand.

I bring my free hand to her hips, squeezing her as she moans into my mouth.

"Draco, please."

My hand twists until I've pushed aside her knickers, and I slide one finger inside of her. Like coming home after a long day. I release a shaky sigh against her lips, and brush my thumb over her clit in strong quick movements that have her starting to gasp. Her cunt flutters around my finger, and she groans when I add a second.

"Oh, god…"

Her lips parted, eyes squeezed shut, and when I rub my fingers inside of her, and circle my thumb on her clit, I watch as she comes with a shout, holding me inside of her, her face scrunched up.

Her face starts to relax, her eyes drift open to mine, and I say, "You're so beautiful."

I watch her eyes darken, and her teeth bite down on her lip, as she flutters around me again. Not quite an orgasm, but still something pleasurable to her. Something I gave her.

She's catching her breath still when her hands move from gripping my shoulders to the buttons on my shirt. I remove my fingers from her, holding her hips close to me as she kisses my neck. She opens my shirt, pushing it down my shoulders, leaving it on my elbows for me to finish, and then her hands drop to my buckle.

I smile into her hair.

She shifts on the mattress, giving herself more space to unbutton me, and I close my eyes when she sucks on my neck like I do to her. My cock twitches.

I feel her lifting off me to stand, pulling my trousers down my hips, and I laugh at her eagerness.

The sound is stuck in my throat when I open my eyes. She's sliding down to her knees. Between my legs.

Her hands pull me out of my trunks, and her eyes meet mine before I can even ask, "What are you doing?"

She swallows her nerves and says, "I think I know how. I've read… a few things."

I shake my head, trying to tell her, trying to find the words to make her understand that this will ruin me.

"You don't—"

"—have to," she finishes for me. "I know. I—I want to. "

A fever inches up my chest, burning me as I look down at Hermione Granger, on her knees in front of me, about to suck me off.

And my lips tremble.

She reads me like one of her books, brows furrowing, and says, "Why are you afraid?"

My mouth opens, useless. I can't… explain it. How my mind works. How things had to stay in boxes and how this… *this*… had to be locked away even deeper. I remember the hours Severus spent, extricating *this* from my mind, leaving behind one or two of the more aggressive and purely sexual fantasies.

It would be odd to find no desire for her whatsoever, he'd told me.

"It's a lot," I say, feeling my stomach shaking.

She smiles up at me, and strokes me slowly, softly, and says, "Do you want me to go slow?" A wink. Teasing me a bit, but truly asking.

So, I reach for her face, pressing my fingers into her hair, and say, "I want this. Very much."

She grins. And I watch as she brings her lips to the tip.

I can't breathe. She looks up at me. And her tongue peeks out to lick just the head.

Warm. Wet.

She blinks at me with her wide eyes and asks, "Tell me what you like?"

What do I even like?

"You," my voice tremors, before I can even process a response.

And the slow grin spreading a beautiful blush over her cheeks and down her neck is all I can see behind my closed eyes when she opens her lips and takes me into her mouth.

I gasp, and my fist closes on her hair. I think of sugar quills and soup spoons and swotty voices answering questions before my hand can even shoot into the air.

I grow harder, thicker, twitching inside her mouth. My eyes are screwed up and my fist releases her hair so I don't hurt her, clenching the comforter under me instead.

She slides her mouth on me. Pressure too light, like her hand earlier. Teasing almost. I feel her tongue twitching nervously, trying to figure out its purpose.

"Suck," a dark voice from my throat demands. And when she does, I groan out, my hands covering my face, helpless as she pulls at me.

I'm breathing quickly, feeling my stomach panting, just knowing that she's on her knees, with my cock in her mouth.

And it's like Hermione Granger solved a riddle she's been trying to crack. She takes more of me into her mouth, and sucks, pulling me into her, placing a hand on my thigh and squeezing the base of me with the other. It feels like the pressure will never end, and I moan into my palms, fighting the urge to just thrust into her.

She finally takes a breath, gasping, and before I can tell her she's done well and she can stop now, she descends on me again, sucking and dragging me into her mouth.

"Fuck."

She pulls off me. "Draco."

I take the vial from the cabinet that I've lovingly labeled "The Slap" and pour it into the Pensieve.

I watch her march towards me as I smirk at her. She slaps it off of me.

I laugh at myself, while Jean sucks in a breath, ready to chastise her daughter. I'm still laughing when we pull out of the memory.

I show them the Yule Ball, and I'm careful not to draw attention to my former self, letting them watch her dance and laugh with Krum. Jean leans into me while I watch myself pout in the corner with Pansy on my arm.

"Who is this beefy boy?" she says, vaguely waving at Krum. "You didn't escort her to this?"

I smile and swallow. "No, I was…" I look over at myself, glaring at her in disgust wondering if the Mudblood had slipped something into our pumpkin juice at the breakfast table. "I was an idiot." I chuckle.

Jean loops her arm through mine. "Good things come to those who wait."

~*~

Monday, March 6, 2000

They don't recognize me in the morning.

Dr. Flanders calms them, and escorts me to the front door, telling me things are normal. And he'll contact me in a few days.

But all I can hear on my way to a quiet corner where I can take my Portkey, is the sound of Jean's trembling voice asking who I was and what I wanted.

But they did ask where their daughter was.

I make it back to the Manor, seeing my bed for the first time in two days.

I'm seconds away from taking a Dreamless Sleep potion when Mippy pops into my bedroom.

"Master Draco! Mistress is worried! You is not home all weekend!"

I roll my eyes, sigh, and place the potion back down on my dresser. I follow the little elf down to the drawing room where Mother is reading a book. She doesn't lift her eyes from the page.

"Oh. You're alive. Splendid."

"Mother." I nod at her.

"For three days now I've donated your dinner scraps to the poor. Like some kind of soup kitchen."

"You, personally, handed out food?" I lift a brow at her.

She lifts one back. "Your father was released back to Azkaban this morning."

"Alright."

"Did you find Hermione on Thursday evening?"

I nod.

"Did you make up?"

I tear my eyes away, as the younger me wets his lips again. I stare down at my feet, feeling frustrated and vile and helpless.

I look up, ready to take them back, and I find Jean Granger watching the boy in the corner lusting after her only daughter. I feel a blush staining my cheeks and neck, and I turn to Henry, eyes still on his daughter, thankfully.

Jean smiles up at me, points to Hermione, and says, "Is this your fiancé?"

My muscles freeze. I stare at her until finally I remember that was my alias. A young man from the U.K. taking his honeymoon alone.

Before I can answer, she leans in and whispers, "You seem to like her."

I know. And so does every-fucking-body else.

I close my eyes, rubbing my jaw.

Jean giggles. And I open my eyes to watch Hermione look up, catch me staring, and quickly look away, wiping her mouth and blushing.

"She likes you, too," Jean says. I roll my eyes, and then she says, "She told me so."

Henry looks at his wife. I wait, heart beating.

Jean's brows knit together and she looks away for a moment. Then back to Hermione.

"Wendell," she says, staring at her daughter with wary eyes. "Who is that?"

Henry steps toward her, taking her arm. "Her name is Hermione."

Jean squints, stepping backwards. "I'd like to go. Can we go home now?"

We leave the memory.

Jean has to go lie down.

And Henry eyes me for the rest of the night.

~*~

Sunday, March 5, 2000

I spend the weekend dropping in on Granger's classes, flirting with Monsieur DuBois and winking at Madame Bernard. I say goodbye to her after every appointment, and head back to Australia.

Jean has a break-through on Saturday, while Henry regresses.

It's incredibly frustrating, watching them take one step forward, and two steps back.

By Sunday evening, they are at the same pace. They know their real names. They know they have a daughter named Hermione. Henry doesn't know more than that, but Jean remembers her at six, learning to ride a bike.

"She skinned her knee and cried for hours. You honestly don't remember, Henry?"

Henry is easily frustrated in these moments. And Dr. Flanders has to dose them with Calming Draught before every session.

It's time for them to see her in different stages of life, and in emotionally different places.

My fingers part over my eyes and I look down at her, flushed cheeks and swollen lips.

She hides a smirk behind her lips, and says, "Tell me if I'm doing it right?"

I take a deep breath as she dips her head, keeping her eyes on me as her tongue slips out, licking the tip. And then she tilts her head so she can lick my shaft. I groan when her tongue finds the underside of my head, all my nerves shaking in my skin.

She blinks at me, watching my face. Her eyes above a book, her eyes over the ledger at Cornerstone, her eyes across my desk. And she licks over the spot again.

My heels dig into the floor on either side of her, my hips begging to thrust, to fuck her. I'm sweating.

She places her lips around the head of my cock, watching my reaction, and presses her tongue against the underside, rubbing. My hands reach for her, and stop. My fists drop to the bed.

She's too quick of a learner. She watches for pieces to click in the puzzle and then she pushes further. Her tongue runs over and over the head of my cock, and she sucks. Just the head. Soft suction that has my thighs clenching, my balls pulling tight.

My hips jump. Her eyes widen, her tongue sliding along my shaft as I push into her mouth. And before I can apologize she sucks, blinding pressure.

My hand reaches for her. I pull her off of me, grabbing her hair, and dragging her up until I can toss her on the bed.

She breathes into my forehead as I kiss at her chest, pulling off her bra and sucking at her breasts.

I hear myself muttering against her skin.

"…want you to suck me off every morning and every night. Gonna fuck your mouth ten times a day, Granger."

She laughs, gasping, and moaning, her fingers running through my hair as I move aside her knickers, pressing myself to her entrance.

Her nails dig into my back, and I slide in so easily.

"So, good," I mumble. "You'd get an Outstanding in Oral Sex, Granger."

She laughs and says, "So would you—Oh!"

I'm rougher than I've been with her, but she's wet and wrapping herself around me, breathing in my ear such delightful little sounds.

My hips slam into hers, our bones knocking together, and my cock filling her completely. I feel myself cresting, thinking of her mouth on my cock again, thinking of shooting into her mouth—

"Fuck, fuck." And when her back arches, a small groan singing from her lips, I groan, "I love you," into her neck and she shivers, her legs squeezing me, her cunt squeezing me, until she pulses and cries out, her head thrown back against her mattress.

I don't slow down for her. I can't.

And she shakes around me, gasping for air as I thrust against her, pushing our bodies together, until we're blended. My fingers twist into her hair, fisting the curls, burying my face against it, and she might even come again as I pour into her, her walls rolling waves on me, pulling me deeper and keeping me close. I gasp for air into her curls, our bodies slick and sliding together.

Her hand runs through my hair, and I stay inside of her, resting on top of her until she squirms to push me off.

I stare up at her bedroom ceiling. And she curls against my side, and says, "So you like blow jobs, huh?"

I laugh into the humidity of her room. I'm about to say something about making good on my promise to have her ten times a day, when I take in the decorations of her bedroom.

"Granger," I start, sitting up, turning to look at the wall behind me. "Are you in the middle of redecorating?"

"What?" she breathes. She turns to look.

Her walls… are completely blank. A few nails where pictures used to hang. Those pictures sit in the corner of her room. White walls in every direction.

"You'd think after so many speeches from Monsieur DuBois, you would have learned something about decorating. Like… color."

"Oh," she says, laughing a little. Nervously. "I used to… never mind. I had something up, but I took it down a few months ago." She sits in the middle of her bed in only her knickers. "I haven't gotten around to redecorating."

I stare at her as she looks to one of her walls with tight eyes.

"What was it?"

She looks at me, and blushes. "It was nothing. I just…" She looks away biting her lip.

I turn her face back to mine with a fingertip. "Tell me?"

Her eyes flicker back and forth between mine, and I see her turn redder. She rolls her eyes and stands. "I… had a… Wall."

"A wall?" I ask, watching as she moves to her old Hogwarts chest in the corner of the room.

"Mm-hmm. I just…" She looks at me. "I told you I wanted to know you. I wanted to understand you." I nod at her. "So, I have…" She shakes her head and reaches into the chest, pulling out the picture of us at Fortescue's with Mother. "I saved a few things. And I was trying to piece together a timeline…" She laughs. "It's stupid really."

I stand, slipping my trunks back on and approach her, hoping she won't snap closed the chest before I can see inside.

may look real, but they won't be able to affect them. The people in the movie won't be able to see them.

Jean laughs a bit. "How silly. Of course not."

I turn to the Pensieve before I can think too hard on it, and pour the silver wisps into the bowl.

Henry, Jean, and I lean forward, and the Hogwarts library swims into focus.

I stand in the middle of it, staring at myself, seated at a table in the corner, working hard on an essay.

Jean gasps to my left. "Oh lovely!"

Almost as if I heard her, the younger version of me looks up, through us to the other side of the aisle.

I turn. Henry is gazing at the vast library, eyes bright with wonder. Jean is staring at the young me with a smile.

And behind them sits a bushy-haired know-it-all, researching a golden egg. I gesture for them to turn and see her.

Henry presses his lips together, inhaling quickly. Jean just tilts her head at her daughter. I watch her expression. A simple smile.

Hermione sits back in her chair, and picks up a blue Sugar Quill. I blush, looking down at the Hogwarts library stones, reminding myself that they can't read my thoughts.

Henry chuckles. I look up, watching him watch his daughter. He shakes his head and whispers, "…rot her teeth," under his breath. He leans in to me and asks, "How old is she?"

"Fifteen," I say automatically.

I encourage them to move closer. Jean is quick to move, but Henry takes slow steps, walking around the table.

"Sweet thing," Jean murmurs kindly when Hermione tries to write with the wrong quill, jumping and sucking the candy into her mouth while she scribbles with the real one.

And some morbid need twists in me. I turn to watch myself watch her. To watch the first moment I'd thought about her mouth consciously.

And it almost knocks me over. The raw desire on my face. The way I lick my lips quickly, gripping at my own quill.

I watch in horror as the younger me watches her. No Occlumency yet. Nothing to shield myself from her. Just an open fixation.

I wait for this boy to tear his eyes away, to look ashamed of himself, but he just stares at her.

I'd always wondered how Blaise had figured it out. And now it's just disgusting to me how blatant it all was.

I spend the rest of the day with the Grangers, downing Pepper-Up Potions like candy. Just before dinner, I take my Portkey back to the U.K., head to the coffee shop on the corner, and walk into the office at 8:45AM with Granger's coffee cup.

I place it on her desk, and tell Carrie I'll be out of the office all day.

I pop back into the Granger's backyard as Jean and Henry serve the lamb chops.

"How was your phone call?" Jean asks, taking my coat.

"Excellent, thank you. Everyone in the U.K. says hello." I grin at Dr. Flanders.

While I do the dishes – with magic, of course; Dr. Flanders disapproves and keeps Jean's attention away from the kitchen – Henry turns to Jean.

"Monica, dear. I think Dr. Flanders and Drake have something exciting to show us."

She looks over at me, and I quickly grab the dish hovering over the sink. "Oh, really? What is it?"

Dr. Flanders grins. "It's like a movie. But it's inside of this bowl." He places the Pensieve on the dining room table. "Drake is going to show you how it works."

I stare into the suds. I still don't like this. Henry is ready, but Jean? She stares out the window when asked a direct question. She laughs at silence. And she's having issues with basic motor functions. She held the remote control upside down for several minutes, pressing "buttons" on the back. She forgot how to hold her fork at dinner. Henry had to cut her pork chops for her.

But Dr. Flanders says her brain is trying to fight the new information. Every time she has some kind of a relapse moment, he smiles, explaining to me that she wants to remember, but the memory charm is fighting her.

I don't like it. She's going to end up in the bathroom again, locked inside with her husband on the other side of the door. She doesn't even remember she had a daughter at this point.

"What a strange invention," Jean says, staring at the Pensieve. I'm drying my hands when she looks up at me and says, "Did you create this, Draco?"

I blink.

Draco, not Drake.

She smiles at me, and I see her daughter's eyes.

"Not quite." My voice is gone. I clear my throat. "But you might see me inside. Er, in the movie."

"Oh, how fun!" She beams.

I move to the cabinet where we stored the vials. Dr. Flanders said we should start slow. Something without action, without conflict. Just her. And preferably no magic.

My fingers shake as I pluck the vial labeled *January 1995* from the shelf. It's not like they'll read my thoughts. They'll just see the physical moment. Dr. Flanders is explaining that things

She bites her lip, and I see newspaper clippings. The same ones that sit in my bottom drawer at home, tucked away under her knickers from the governor's ball and her green silk bra that she left behind.

I smile, but she thinks I'm teasing her.

"I don't mean to be so strange. It's just… I was trying to figure it out. Trying to follow the events." I look at her. "Your blood on my living room walls. The Auction." My eye twitches, and she reaches up to brush the tension away. "I just wanted to know you."

Her eyes are so bright. And they're all mine. Finally.

I kiss her. I reach for my wand, careful not to disturb the ring in my robes. It's not time for that yet. I send the picture of us at Fortescue's to a place on her blank walls. It sticks. She watches as the rest of her pictures and clippings dance out of her chest and stick to her wall, recreating her timeline.

She watches me curiously. And I smile at her.

I'm ready now.

"Let's start from the beginning," I say. I take her hand.

~*~

Sunday, September 1, 1991

The Hogwarts Express chugs us towards Scotland, and I can't help but examine the passengers overstuffed into this train car.

Blaise Zabini is an odd fellow. He likes to figure out how people tick. Theo Nott is less complicated, and Crabbe and Goyle even less so.

But Pansy Parkinson and Daphne Greengrass should really find their own car. Seven of us in one is just obnoxious.

They're talking nail colors and Witch Weekly and really only Theo is engaging with them. Zabini asks me about my family's vineyards and I don't bloody well know, do I?

The door to the car slams open, and a girl our age looks around, searching the floor for the first few seconds while we wait for her to speak.

She's… broad. Everything about her is wide. Her hair is oddly wild like she'd recently been electrified. Her teeth as she opens her mouth are large. And her eyes as she turns them onto me are wide and dark.

She's… unusual. And clearly not well bred if that's how she shows up to the first day of school, slamming compartments open without introducing herself.

"Has anyone seen a toad?" She turns her eyes on Zabini first. He lifts a brow at her.

And I feel like Zabini and I are still waiting to figure out which of us will lead this pack, so I jump on the opportunity before he can even open his mouth.

"One just stumbled in," I say.

Greengrass laughs. Goyle rumbles next to me. And the girl who takes up too much space turns her wide eyes on me.

I smirk.

She lifts a brow. Unimpressed. There's a fire behind her eyes, blazing to fight with me.

"Charming," she says, looking me over. She turns back to the others, and says, "A boy named Neville has lost his pet toad."

She tells them what compartment Neville is in if the toad is found. She introduces herself to Theo when he reaches out his hand. She frowns at Parkinson when she doesn't bother to introduce herself.

But she doesn't look at me again.

"Are you related to Granger the potioneer?" I ask for some reason.

She looks at me. Her eyes sweeping over my hair before returning to my eyes. "No. My parents are Muggles."

And something extinguishes inside me. Ended before it even burned.

The entire compartment shifts, readjusts, turns their back to her. And she feels it. I watch her lips press together, and her feet shift as she says goodbye, not glancing my way again.

The door snaps closed.

People are supposed to cry. They're supposed to feel an insult hit them and crawl away.

I'm good at insults. I know how this works.

I'm still thinking about fire when the train stops, thinking about how I can make her cry instead of challenge me. What button I needed to press.

When the Sorting Hat places Hermione Granger in Gryffindor, her tie changing colors, it makes sense. She fights like a lion.

And there's something gold about her.

The End.

Wendell appears behind her. "Ah! Drake!" He holds her shoulders, rubbing her arms. "Darling, you remember Drake. He stopped by the shop. Taking his honeymoon alone, remember?"

Wendell nods at me over her shoulder, lifting his brows meaningfully. He remembers me, but wants me to go slow with her.

She sticks her hand out. "Sorry, I don't quite remember." She grins. "Monica Wilkins. Lovely to meet you."

I swallow, taking her hand, and find a bandage wrapped around her palm.

"Is Dr. Flanders here?" I ask Wendell. I wonder if he's discovered his real name yet.

"Yes, of course." Wendell ushers me inside, and I ignore the way Monica stands for a second too long at the doorway before closing it.

Dr. Flanders is doing the dishes from breakfast. He smiles at me, like he's been expecting me. While Wendell sets Monica up in the living room with a television show, I turn to Dr. Flanders.

"What's wrong with her?"

"All a part of the process, Mr. Malfoy. There's bound to be relapses."

"Is this my fault?" I ask, watching Monica stare at the remote control.

A hand on my shoulder. "No, no." Dr. Flanders shakes his head. "The mind is a strange network. Even if we had moved forward with the Pensieve, she might have regressed." He adjusts his glasses and says, "I do apologize, Mr. Malfoy. I suppose I shouldn't have assumed you would want strangers prying into your brain."

Ah, why not. It's all the rage.

"What happened to her hand?"

Dr. Flanders looks down. "That's on me, I'm afraid. She was making tea for us and burned herself. I shouldn't have let her use the stove. And I can't heal her with magic until she *remembers* magic, so…"

I watch as Monica giggles at the television box. Wendell smiles at her.

"Wendell remembers?"

"Yes, he's doing quite well. Henry, actually. He's remembered his name."

Henry and Jean Granger.

"What do you need from me?" I ask.

Dr. Flanders says, "Whatever you're willing to give," and gives me a kind smile.

I watch Jean Granger press a hand to her temple, frowning at something.

"All of it," I say. And I echo back her daughter's words. "Anything they need."

~*~

way back to me, and I lift my hand, palm facing her. "And in returning to your original partner, it signifies that you have forsaken all others, and you have chosen your partner for life."

Something shifts in her eyes. She blinks at me, hearing Truesdale's symbolism.

My hand is lifted, facing her, offering myself to her. Choosing her.

And I wait lifetimes for her.

She lifts her hand, and looks into my eyes as she presses her skin to mine.

We spin, moving around each other, connected. Finally.

We're back at the beginning. Our hands drop. I bow. She curtseys. And I could drop to one knee right now, based solely on the look in her eyes.

"Adequate, Miss Granger."

She blinks, breaking away from me. And the moment is gone.

Truesdale offers her a few classes with twelve-year-olds over the summer, to complement the level she is currently at. I smile at the black floors while Granger turns orange with rage.

We exit to the lobby, and I say, "For what it's worth, I think you're on level with *fourteen-year-olds.* At *least*."

She glares at me, and it's just as exhilarating as her smile.

I watch her change out of her shoes and toss her scarf around her neck. I want to take her home. I want to dance with her in a more familiar way, where she's *vastly* more practiced.

But I have things to do.

"Do you and Monsieur DuBois always meet at that café?"

She looks up at me, surprised. "Er… yes, mainly. Why?"

I ignore the question. "And you and Madame Bernard have tea at that French restaurant?"

She's suspicious now. "Why?"

I grin at her. Her scarf flutters around her shoulders, and I need to touch her again. "Like I said." My fingers twist her scarf into her coat, knuckles brushing her neck. "You've been working too long without a partner."

She stares at me, and I smirk, leaving and heading to the Ministry.

~*~

Friday, March 3, 2000

When the door opens, Monica Wilkins/Jean Granger stands there, smiling softly. Her eyes drift over my face.

"Can I help you?" she says, with an amiable smile.

And my gut slices open.

I'm too late.

She doesn't even recognize me anymore.

There's sand in my throat and I can't even begin to explain who I am to her.

The music plays again. And when she's doing better than before, I turn her under my arm. Her feet stumble, but she comes back to me with ease, eyes wide and surprised, and she *laughs*.

And I see a blue dress spinning. And a girl laughing as she stumbles into her partner. Laughing and happy.

Truesdale, of course, has to be a cunt about it.

"The dance floor is no place for laughter, Miss Granger." And then she added under her breath, "Excellent work."

We go through several other dances and styles, testing my memory as much as hers. She trusts me. She watches me. Her eyes stay on mine, not drifting to our feet or to Truesdale.

And then the gramophone plays the French Waltz. She looks at me with wide eyes like we have a joke. Like we've known each other for years and someone has just brought up a simple thing of no consequence to them, and we just smile in our tea at each other.

I bow to her. And she smiles. And when she curtseys, a beautiful dip, steady and low, she keeps her eyes on me, and it's like we were always meant to meet each other this way, in this dance.

She floats into my arms, and it's clear this dance is much more practiced for her. She anticipates my steps instead of letting me push her where she needs to be. She lifts her own arm to spin under. She doesn't squeeze my hand, pressing when she forgets the steps. Instead it just rests against my skin.

We part from each other, and she smiles at me in the reflection of the dance studio mirrors when we greet our new partner. I bring my palm up, watching her, thinking of how she wouldn't touch me. Even after I found a way to orbit her, found a pathway to appear in front of her, closer than I'd had any right to be. I stole her breath, and hoped I could take more from her, and all she had the courage to do was bring her palm within an inch of mine.

Even though she wanted to.

Brave little lion, still waiting for the snake to strike.

She laughs, bringing me out of my thoughts, and as we spin around imaginary partners, we have a moment of facing each other across the room. And she giggles.

It's contagious as Dragon Pox. I smile back at her, loving the sound of it.

"Miss Granger. Keep focused on your new partner."

She laughs outright, and I grin at her.

Truesdale starts in on the metaphoric symbolism of the dance, and I see Granger's eyes dull, in the same way they used to in Trelawney's classroom when she had to hold her tongue.

"The new partner in the French Waltz signifies the end of our youthful escapades," Truesdale sings from across the room, voice carrying over the gramophone. Granger one-two-threes her

I answer in the respectful way, eyes catching on the evening *Prophet* laying on her end table. A picture of my family stares up at me.

She must know who's paying her, right? She must know why she's been required to stay past her usual classes for private lessons with a Muggle-born girl.

Truesdale floats over a chair for me to sit in at the front of the room, and slides over her own stool.

"If you are here to check on her progress, Mr. Malfoy, I am sorry to report that she needs *much* more time and focus to truly compare to girls her age."

And there it is.

I smile at the dig. And I wonder if some of my quips and insults as a child were absorbed through watching Truesdale "teach."

I turn my eyes to see Granger in her final demi plié and grand plié, ankles rolling outward, backside slipping out of alignment.

And maybe there's some truth in the insult.

I bite back my grin.

Truesdale sets up the Viennese Waltz on the floor, guiding Granger through the formations and turns. Her cheeks burn bright as she stumbles. Her eyes pretend I don't exist.

"You see, Mr. Malfoy? She is unfocused and uncoordinated."

You cow. Get stuffed.

"Hm. Perhaps she's been working too long without a partner," I say.

Granger's eyes finally meet mine as I move toward her. There's that ax-murder fear again…

"Er, I don't quite know the steps yet—"

"Come on, Granger," I whisper. "Let me take you for a spin."

I take her in my arms, one hand along her back, one sliding against her palm. She's tense, already in fight or flight mode. She looks down at our feet, eyes flitting around at the footsteps she has to follow.

"Look at me," I say. Trust me.

Her eyes land on mine, and we glide.

My feet guide us, my hand pushes and tugs at her ribs, and her eyes stay on me. Her breath catches as I turn us, and her eyes deepen, like tunnels I can dance through.

It feels nothing like Legilimency. And yet it's everything like it. Connecting to her in this way. This trust she gives me. And the feeling of nothing between us. No space, or bricks, or monsters. No misunderstandings or assumptions. No blood or war.

And when the music stops and Truesdale adjusts her spine and her elbows, she stays in my arms, in my eyes, letting me into her very soul, and searching for mine underneath all the cobwebs and shadows.

Thursday, March 2, 2000 - later

She runs in from the rain, kicking off her shoes, shucking her scarf, and I'm smiling at her. Late for dance class. Like an eight-year-old who desperately didn't want to go.

When she sees me sitting, she gasps, clutching her pearls, like I'm the killer in a horror story.

"What are you doing here?" she wheezes. "Is everything – Is your father doing alright?"

Thinking of me. Going from zero to ax-murder to genuine concern in .07 seconds.

I stand, and before I can answer, she's onto another emotion.

"I'm taking these classes, Draco." She glares at me. "I only have one more week left, and I intend to finish. The inheritance will transfer and that's that. I made a deal."

Stubborn little wench.

I open the door for her, and sweep my hand to guide her entrance. "After you."

She stares at me for a few moments, and then enters.

A sharp admonishment comes from the direction of the gramophone. "Miss Granger, you are two minutes late."

Merlin, fuck that fucking voice.

"I'm afraid that was my fault, Miss Truesdale," I say, and the withered old bat spins around, face cracking into a delighted smile.

"Young Mr. Malfoy! What a lovely surprise." She pats at her grey hair, and slips her hand into mine as I kiss her knuckles. "You have been so missed."

"I'm glad to hear it," I flirt back.

"How is your mother? I was so sorry to hear about your father's incident," she pouts, and then with a wave of her hand the gramophone tunes up and Granger is sent to the ballet bar.

Hermione pulled a slip of paper from her pocket, and slid it across the table to him. She watched him frown at it.

"And what's this?"

"A list," she said. His eyes flipped up to her. "Of qualities in my child's grandfather."

She rested her hand on her belly, and sent him the Malfoy smirk.

Of course, you know me, readers. I have such a voracity for knowledge! I reached out to Narcissa Malfoy for comment.

"Hermione has long felt like a daughter to me. I couldn't be more supportive."

Well, from one friend to another, I must tell you. I think it is safe to say that Draco Malfoy is finally off the market.

We at the Daily Prophet *wish him the best of luck with his Golden Girl.*

Two Years Later

She stepped through the fireplace right on schedule. The guard took her wand, read her the rules, and searched for weapons on her.

She followed a younger guard through the maze until she was brought before a familiar stone door. The guard stood to the side, and Hermione pushed open the door.

He sat at the metal table. Hair pulled back, hands folded. He looked the exact same as he had in the hospital, only two years older.

"Miss Granger." He grinned. "To what do I owe the honor?"

"Lucius." She nodded. "It's Mrs. Malfoy, now."

She walked to the metal chair in front of him and sat. She crossed her legs and leaned back.

"Yes," he grinned. "I was quite taken with the photographs from the *Prophet*. Miss Parkinson's first wedding gown design, was it not?"

"It was. She has several more offers now." Hermione lifted a brow. "It was a beautiful day. Perfect. And you were right about the gardens. The gazebo was the perfect location for the ceremony. Reception in the ballroom."

She clasped her hands together on the table, matching his pose, and managed to flash the Malfoy family diamond at him.

His eyes flickered down to it. He smirked and looked back up at her.

"What is it you are really here for, Mrs. Malfoy."

She grinned tightly. "I hear that you are headed to trial next year to negotiate your sentence down. What with your good behavior and the unfortunate incident of your stabbing two years ago, I have it on good authority that you might stand a chance of getting out of here in five years."

He watched her carefully. "Well, that's good to hear."

She sat very still, just like Draco taught her. "I may be enticed to testify on your behalf. Perhaps even get your ex-wife and son to do the same."

His eyes glittered at her before returning to dead grey orbs. "What is it you want in return."

She grabbed Harry's arm and dragged him past Hermione. She grinned at Ginny, and just before the door closed on them, she heard Harry say, "But I made dinner."

She looked at Draco, standing with his hands in his pockets in the middle of her living room.

"Don't I pay you, Granger?" He looked around the small flat. "Surely with Weasley's Quidditch salary and your measly income, you can afford an upgrade."

She glared at him. "I like this apartment. Besides, I'm barely in it."

He smirked at her and stepped closer. "You outed us to the entire office today."

She winced. "I did. I really did, didn't I?" She pressed her lips together as he stepped closer again, sliding his arms around her waist. "Was there a discussion of what to do with the Love Contract, or will you need to resign."

He smiled as he kissed her. She brought her hands up to his arms, holding him to her. She pulled back.

"Did you really show my parents your memories?"

He looked away. "A few. Just about everyone has seen into my mind now, so I thought, what's the difference?"

She smiled as he lowered his lips to her neck, sucking on his favorite spot. Her pulse sped, and her body began to sing.

"Which memories?" she breathed.

"Wouldn't you like to know." His breath ghosted across her neck.

"Thank you, Draco." She ran her hands up his shoulders and into his hair. "Thank you for bringing them back to me."

"Of course." He pulled her closer to him and whispered, "It was the right thing to do."

She slapped his shoulder, and he laughed. A sound that made itself quite at home.

"HERMIONE GRANGER AND DRACO MALFOY IN LOVE!!"

by Rita Skeeter

A love story for the ages. A romance against all odds.

Yes, that's right, fair readers. Hermione Granger has hooked herself a Malfoy. And Draco Malfoy must be doing something right, himself.

The couple was seen just last week at dinner with a couple that could only be Miss Granger's parents. After saying goodnight, Granger and Malfoy were seen holding hands and canoodling on the way home.

The two have been spotted several other times throughout the week, even on a double-date with Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley. Will there be a race to the altar?

When asked for comment on their new relationship, Draco Malfoy responded, "She's a very important person to me. We're very serious about each other."

Hermione Granger declined to comment. Quite rudely.

who knew Draco's coffee routine. Blaise was grinning like a loon, and even Dorothea had a small smirk on her face.

"Hello, yes. Hi." She sputtered. She gestured between herself and Draco. "Draco Malfoy and I are dating. We, uh… Yes. We're dating. Boyfriend and girlfriend." She nodded at the table. "So we'll need to take a look at that… er, Love Contract business. And just… abolish that, I say."

She shrugged. Blaise gave a "Here! Here!"

"Because… because I love him." She looked at Draco. He was blushing, and trying to fight the smile creeping onto his face. "And he loves me – I think –"

"I do, yes." He grinned at the conference table.

"So. That's that! I'll, uh, let you all get back to it." She waved her hand at Mockridge. "Continue on. I'll be heading to dinner with my parents now."

She nodded at them all, ignoring Blaise's giggling, and left the room.

She heard applause following her. And smiled.

At dinner with her parents, they kept with very easy questions and stories. She asked them about Australia and their life there. They asked her about her current life, instead of the past they couldn't remember. Her mother didn't take her eyes off of her the entire evening.

They were set up at a hotel nearby, so Hermione walked them back and hugged them goodbye in the lobby. They would have lunch tomorrow on her break from Cornerstone.

She Apparated home, climbed the stairs to her and Ginny's apartment, and opened the door to find Draco, Harry, and Ginny visiting around the small dining room table. Before she could process Draco in her living space, Ginny had launched herself at her.

"You won! You WON!" She tightened her arms around Hermione's ribs. She pulled back. "And your parents! Your PARENTS!"

"Er, yes. Both." She looked past the ginger curls to Draco. "Draco told you?"

"Yes, Harry and I will have a session with them tomorrow."

"A session?"

Draco stepped forward. "Dr. Flanders thinks it may help if your parents saw memories of them interacting with you. From an outside observer."

"Like in Diagon Alley, buying books with Mr. Weasley," Harry said.

Hermione nodded, still quite overwhelmed by it all. She was desperate to pick Dr. Flanders' brain about how this all worked.

Ginny looked back and forth between Hermione and Draco in the silence.

"Er, Harry and I are just going to… go somewhere… for a while. Days maybe."

Hermione stared at him. Then her mother moved toward her.

"I'm… slower to the process, unfortunately," her mother said, and Hermione felt another tear fall. "But I do recognize you. Hermione." She touched her face. "And I know you are mine."

Hermione nodded, an empty feeling tearing through her at the idea that her mother needed convincing. She would need to move slowly.

"Tell me how this is working. What do you know already?" she asked.

"Well," her father started. "Dr. Flanders started with our earliest memories. I mean to say, that I remember you quite vividly as a child."

Her mother nodded.

"And then having that boy tell us about you as teenager," her father said. "That was helpful."

"Yes, there were gaps, but Dr. Flanders explained that you were at a boarding school."

"Magic school. Remember, dear? We heard about the magic?"

"Yes, that's right. The magic is newer to me," her mother said, closing her eyes. "But then just two days ago, the boy let us… what is it? Watch a memory?"

"Yes," her father said. "That's it. We swam into a… thing and watched a few of his memories of you from school. Harold didn't like that boy much, did he?"

"Harry, dear. Her friend's name is Harry."

Hermione blinked, feeling her heart crying out. "What boy?"

The floor was dead as she excused herself from her office for a moment. Just a few of the interns and secretaries gossiping in a corner, jumping apart in surprise when they saw her.

Her heels clicked on the way to the conference room. The door swung open for her, and all eyes turned to her as she marched in. Cuthbert Mockridge was standing, giving his report on his department. The senior staff sat in their places around the table and the associates lining the walls, except for Walter who sat in her place at the table.

"Miss Granger," Mockridge said in greeting. "As I was saying…"

Hermione locked eyes on the man at the end of the table. "The boy" as her parents called him. His eyes wary and tense as he watched her walk around the table, heading straight for him.

Mockridge continued his speech. Blaise moved out of her way. And Draco looked like he was prepared to be hit. Her hand shot out and grabbed his collar, bringing her lips onto his.

She heard whistling, sputtering, gasping, but she kissed him. His fingers wound up into her hair, and she smiled against his lips.

She pulled back and looked up. Mockridge was squinting at them, and a few of the male associates looked taken aback. But the women were giggling, including Mockridge's associate