

"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 Grindlehawk 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 than 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?"

"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 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 flooberworm 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—"

"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.

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.

And with that final dot at the end of the sentence, she heard tittering 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."

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 redhead 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.”

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter One



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 decreasing. 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 she 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."

"Go fit." 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 dray. 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 prying 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.



"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.

"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.

~*~

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.

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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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



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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 lilted 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, kissing 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

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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.

The Rights and Wrongs Series

Tandem

Volume One

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Three



“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 Wizarding World 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.

"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 Horizontont 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.

"You 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 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 Grill' 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.

"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—"

"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

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.

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.

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.

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 –

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 bites 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, secretly. "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.



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 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.

"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 Grindjow*. 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.

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 snarl, 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.

~*~

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."

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

"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—"

"Grainsworth," 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

"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.

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.

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.

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.



ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Three



Wednesday, January 19, 199�

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!

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 blonde 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

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 filed up about a bloody book.

~*~

Tuesday, September 7, 1999

Kaya 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?"

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.

"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."

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

I stare into her eyes, questioning. The words I've been tossing around in my daydreams flash before my eyes. *Black Consulting Firm. Malfoy-Black Consultation 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.

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 squeched 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 Millicent 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.

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 doof 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.

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

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 snag them senseless." Ginny wiggled her brows.

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

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.

"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."

"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?"

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.

"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 outdone."

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.

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.

"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 comradeship, 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.

"I couldn't agree more," I say.

~*~

"Not at all!"

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—"

"Hmn?" 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 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 knickerers."

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.

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.

Sunday, December 25, 1994

The bitch won't even look at me.

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 whispers 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?”

“How is that fair!” I glare at her across the room. “You can't just go changing your appearance all willy-nilly!”

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.

~*~

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.

"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.

"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.

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.

"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. Him. 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.

"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.

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.

As the sound of other 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 dred 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."

"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

"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.

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 risses 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?*" Leopardizing 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.

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.

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 Shacklebolt 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?"

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."

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

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.

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."

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 snirked 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.

"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.

"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?"

"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

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."

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 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

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 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."

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.



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."

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?"

"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.

"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.

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 curly, 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 blonde with intelligent eyes and wide teeth, and I'm ripping that letter up.

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!"

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. Grit 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?"

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.

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.

"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 galloons 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.



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. Morts 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

“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. Muggles, 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 Crucius 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.

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 murderers.

"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.

"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.

"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.

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.

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

"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 smiled.

"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.

"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.

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.

"It doesn't matter."

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.

"Yes, we formed it just a few months back. You game, Malfoy?" Harry smiled. It seemed so natural, this acquaintance.

Draco snirked. "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 snirked 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."

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.

"Oh! 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.

Pansy.

She smiles at me, like it's only been days since we've seen each other. She looks older.

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! Gryffindor!"

I turn to glare at the voice, and find myself looking into familiar, laughing eyes. My feet stop.

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."

"Oh!" Katie had a thought, then leaned into Hermione. "Did you hear Harry invited Draco Malfoy? What a doit!"

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 wagged 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

"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 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

Horizon Alley & Dragon 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.

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.

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Eleven



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? 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 Comerstone, 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.

"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 McHandy 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 McHandy 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?"

"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 *Mosie 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

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.

"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 been 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 lag 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

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?”

“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.

“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.

"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 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."

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.'

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.

"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 clang 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.

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 main 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.

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 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 maithroom tray delivered an envelope addressed to *Miss Hermione Granger* in a slanted cursive she now knew.

*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 McHandy 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.

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.

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.

"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 snug.

"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

"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 McHandy 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, curtsied 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."

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.

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 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.

"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."

"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.

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?

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.

"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

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 like 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.

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

Analyist and Consult

Department of Magical Law Enforcement

Author's Office

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."

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.

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.

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, curl's 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."

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 self-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 main 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.

"—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.

"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.

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."

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.

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.

"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 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 gleans 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.

"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 musses. 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.

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 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

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 Rokharts 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

~*~

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'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.

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."

Draco.

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.”

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...

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 Jacqueline 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.”

"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.

"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?"

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?"

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?"

"... 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.

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.

"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.

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.

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."

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

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 smogging Granger on the front page of the *Prophet*." He grins and leans back on his hands. "Thought it was time I checked in!"

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.

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 dol'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?"

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.

"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.

"Portugal," Draco said dryly. 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."

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.

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.

"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?"

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.

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.

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 thestral’s 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

“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.

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 minis 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 of *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.”

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?

"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

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."

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 Fortesque’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

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.



"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

“*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!”

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 tilted 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 Matilda 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.”

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.

"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!"

"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?"



The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Fourteen

"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.

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.

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?

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.

"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.

"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.

"... 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 crumpled 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 Drao 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?

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."

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?

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."

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.

“‘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.

If you need a dictionary for this, the harpy at Cornerstone Books said she’d gladly provide it.

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.

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 – pigtailed 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 Kaya 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 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 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!"

"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.

"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:

Karya,

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!"

"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 steeped under her chin.

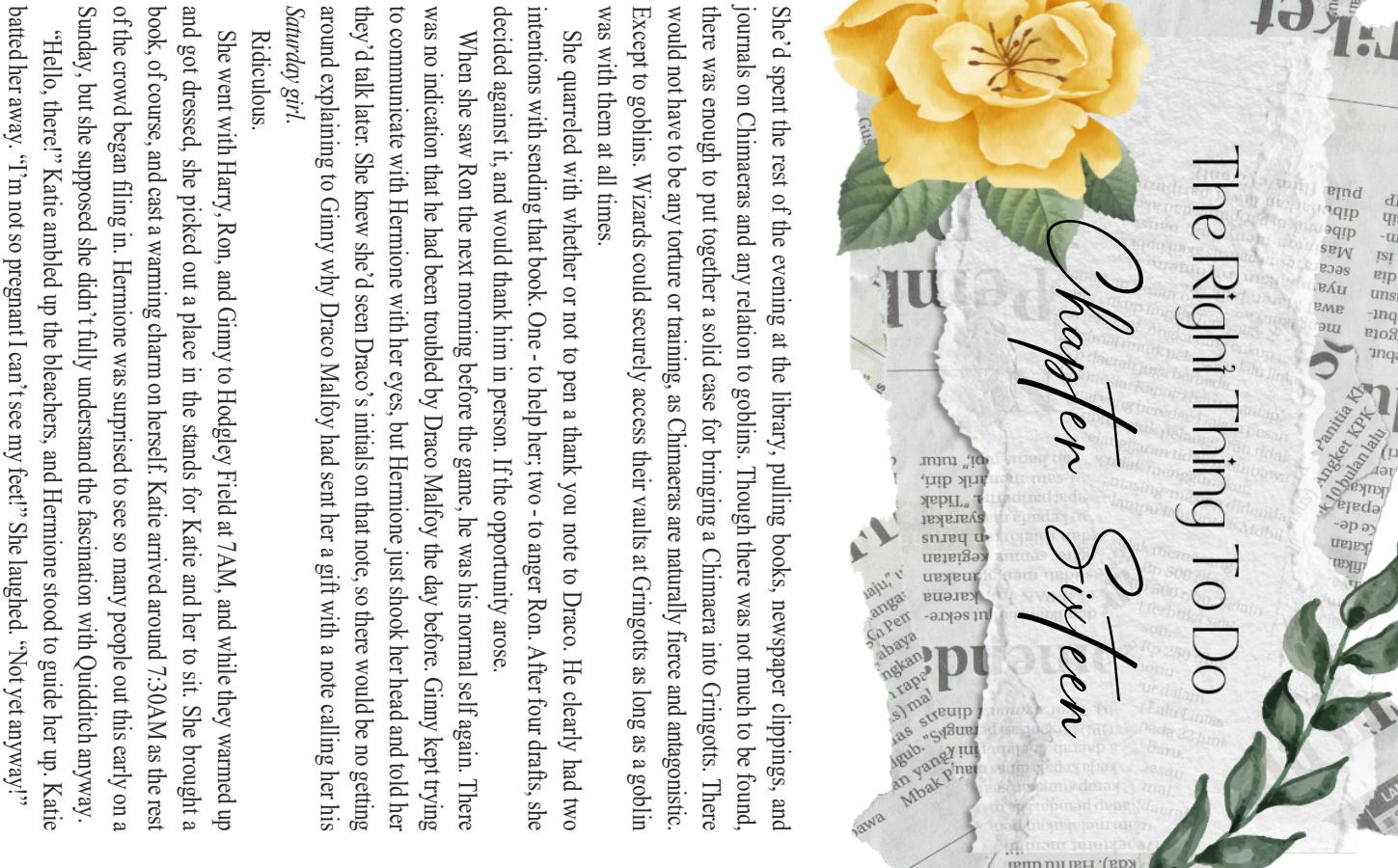
She's studying me.

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.



The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Sixteen

"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 gustled 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."

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—*"

"*Snap 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.

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.*"

"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.

"Like Quidditch just fine!" Hermione yelled over the crowd.

"You're lying!" Katie sat back down and knocked her elbow playfully. Hermione grimmed.

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?"

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 hunched 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?"

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 *Prophete*? 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.

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.

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.

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 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.

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's 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 hurdle 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. Siting 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.

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 Chinaeras. 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 Chinaeras, 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.

"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.

"Y'ou'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.

"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 swings 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?"

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 Gollum 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.

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 behoves 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

"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 fine 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 *minis?*"

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.

"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

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 cafe.

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 Grinklehawk, 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

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. 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."

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.

"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. 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?"

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.

"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."

"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."

"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.

Touche.

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.

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."

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.

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...

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.

"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 smirched. "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?"

"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 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 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 Legitimency.

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.

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 Greypack, 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 Muggelborn.

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.

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 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 pointed.

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.

"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.

Mr. Malfoy. So good of you to stop by.

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, pllopping 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.

Obain me?

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.

Our 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.

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.

"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 enchant's 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.

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.

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

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, nor 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.

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.

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.

"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. and turned to the doors as the first tears fell.

"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.

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 coincidentally 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."

"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 prickling 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.

suit 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, drawing 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.

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, “*Speculus 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, “*Dominis 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.

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 choose 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

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.

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."

Herviens 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.

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 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 snarled 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 Weizengamot just eight weeks ago and has been working for the Ministry on probation since. But once a Slytherin, always a Slytherin, and his ambitions 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

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

Elegant table manners

Stilted in hosting

Witty

Charming

Leader amongst social peers

Beautiful

Fashionable

Levelheaded

Financially knowledgeable

Obedient

Trained in decor

Practiced dancer

Intelligent

Cool tempered

Pure-blood

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.

Nicety, 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 atten."

"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

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.

Magical Accidents and Catastrophes before moving up to the Muggle Liaison Office and then over to D.M.L.E. for Misuse of Muggle Artefacts."

Matilda smiled at her. These were all Ministers. *Minister*.

"It is wise, Miss Granger," Matilda 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 send?

"That is definitely something to think about Matilda. Thank you."

"I wanted to let you know," Matilda stood and began opening shelves, pulling files, "that Robards is quite impressed with you."

"Gavain 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 Matilda 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?

No 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.

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.

"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 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 Katy had gone out again last night. They'd had dinner at a cafe 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 weaselded 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.

"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. 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.

A voice in her head chuckled at the bare bones of the situation. What had he wanted from her?

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 unwanted 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—"

"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 porty 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'm sorry. I just..." She looked down. He was disappointed. "I wanted to return home by myself."

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 Narcissa 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 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.

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?"

"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 shugged. "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."

"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.

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 Juggson.

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

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?"

"Min-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.

I look away from her.
She's blushing.

"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.

"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 spills 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 babbling. 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.

"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.

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 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, fighting 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.

"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.

"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."

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'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 skin 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?

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. "Not 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."

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 out?"

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 outraged 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.

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 breathes 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.

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 beaters 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 Apparition 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 starwell, 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..."

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.

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." 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 our 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

"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."

"... 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.

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, clutching 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."

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!"¹ 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."



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.

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 wagged 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.

"O!" 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. "T'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.

"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-Shout?"

"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."

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.



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?

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 signed, 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 stunned. 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 *Magglies*. 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 chose 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, zigzagging 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 saliva 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 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 claved 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 scrunches 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 Legitimency.

"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 Amatus 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 Peusieve 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 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 begun 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 maybe, 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 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."

".... 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."

"Well..." Harry murmured. They looked at him.

"'Well' what?" Ginny demanded.

"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.

"She stopped, heart beating. "What happened?"

"Well... I... I saw him in the elevators on Thursday. I asked him about his business and told him to have a good day."

"Harry looked like he wished he hadn't spoken. "Well... what was the last conversation the two of you had?"

"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 sit 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 falked 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 ippecac. 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 ippecac 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 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 slumped, 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 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 grimmed 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 naïveté.

"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 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.

Scribble

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 reparate 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.

Afright. 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. A challenge was there.

"No, I do." She wrapped her hands around the glass. "Just slowly." She met his eyes and a 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."

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?"

"... 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.

I burn the letter. I take a new parchment.

Father,

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.

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.

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

Site 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.

"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.

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 gallons, 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.

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 Floor.

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.

In nod to her, feeling more air coming into the elevator box now that she’s left it.

Cold air.

“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 wagged 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, hol!" 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.

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 score 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. "Kaya 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

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. ;)"

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.

"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.

"Y ou 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 rabbles."

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?"

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 slit 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.

"Oh..." 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 bitreckless 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.

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 resended 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 lifts, 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 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."

"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."

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 flitted 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 as 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.

"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 jealousy about Narcissa Malfoy's New Year's Eve Gala.

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 turned. 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.

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.