An Unexpected Malfoy

by RiverWriter

Summary

Once upon a time Hermione Granger literally ran into Draco Malfoy in a bookshop. His mother sees a connection between her son and the muggleborn that she can't ignore and determines to get to know the girl. An imagining of how things could have gone if Hermione had been taken under the wing of the Malfoy family.
Prologue

Narcissa Malfoy paced up and down the length of one of the smaller sitting rooms inside Malfoy Manor. A society doyenne of nearly twenty-five years and a consummate Slytherin, she normally never would have allowed her nerves to show so plainly, but this was a life changing day and as only her husband and son were present to witness it she let her guard drop.

Her husband, Lucius, was reclining indolently in an armchair. At first glance he was a picture of casual privilege and ease, but to someone who knew him as well as she did, the tightness around his eyes and the way he was toying with his walking stick gave him away; he was feeling anxious as well.

Her son, Draco, was in an armchair opposite his father, his posture rigid, his eyes glued to the doorway just waiting for his wife to walk back through it and tell them if the plan she and Lucius had been formulating for more than half a decade was still on track. This was the day that would change everything, there was no going back after this, this was the day they threw their lot in with the Order of the Phoenix.

Narcissa suppressed a shudder at even the thought of the organization. This would never work if she couldn’t hide how distasteful she found it and most of its members. But it was just so Gryffindor in all the worst ways, which made sense, given that a majority of the members were a product of that house. Not that she had anything against Gryffindor per se, her son’s wife was one after all, and in their proper places courage and selflessness were noble traits. But to be brave without considering the circumstances, without thinking before acting? Well, that was simply foolhardy and spelled disaster more often than not.

Unfortunately, from everything she’d learned over the past couple of years, that also embodied the way the Order of the Phoenix operated. It was a small, rag-tag group of people fighting a war on sheer nerve and little discernable plan. And this was who they were counting on. At least they were fully committed, even if their methods left quite a lot to be desired.

On her next pass across the room she caught Lucius’ eye quite on accident. But, as usual, she found it impossible to look away. He was the most handsome man she had ever met, and even after all these years he could make her heart race with just one look. She had been pleased beyond measure that Draco had taken after him almost completely. She did not regret for a moment that the only thing she seemed to have contributed to her son’s visage were his slate eyes which were a beautiful combination of her own cerulean and Lucius’ silver. Lucius held her gaze and then snagged her hand as she walked by him. He pulled her to him and onto his lap.

“Please, do not forget I’m here,” Draco intoned, without moving his eyes from the doorway.

She supposed they had been a bit… free with their affections in recent years since the Dark Lord had returned and their son had entered into his own serious relationship. They’d adopted somewhat of a ‘now or never’ attitude. She supposed they did have the influence of Draco’s wife’s Gryffindor tendencies to thank for that, but she could no longer recall why she had once thought it improper to be openly affectionate with her husband in front of their children. On a less solemn occasion she would have been tempted to toy with Draco, make him squirm by reminding him that despite being his parents they were still very much in love. As it was she simply settled against her husband’s chest to wait for her daughter-in-law.
And then she appeared, rather sooner than they’d expected. Despite the fact that it felt like they’d been waiting for ages, she’d been gone less than two hours; that was worrisome, they had been certain she would be required to provide enough explanation to fill at least the morning. Had they rejected the plan without even giving it a proper chance? She knew many members of the Order found her family distasteful, but surely they wouldn't dismiss a chance to finally rid their world of the Dark Lord for such a petty reason.

She smiled tightly at the young woman who was her daughter in everything but blood. She kept a wary eye on her as she settled into Draco’s lap, a mirror image of herself and Lucius. Narcissa usually enjoyed witnessing their easy affection, but in this case it worried her because if she was in need of comfort that could mean bad news. Narcissa studied her for a sign one way or the other, but they’d taught her well, neither her face nor her demeanor betrayed anything. She couldn't help but look at her with pride, this woman upon whose shoulders she’d long ago placed the fate of the future of her family, and who had yet to disappoint her.

She’d come a long way from the child Narcissa had met in a bookshop; she was now a young woman with infinite potential. In blue robes which off set her warm peaches and cream skin complexion and made her cinnamon eyes sparkle, they were custom made, as was befitting her station, and she held herself like a queen, even as she was perched on Draco’s legs and not a throne. Those beautiful curls of hers were just a bit wild as they spilled down her back, pulled away from her face with a dragon-shaped clip. Narcissa couldn't help but smirk at the choice, she approved of the message that sent.

Even better was the picture she and Draco presented together. The royal blue of her robes were perfectly complemented by the midnight blue of Draco’s. Her small frame fit against his long lithe one. They moved as one, anticipating the other's needs. They looked like they belonged together, like they belonged to each other and they carried themselves proudly. One glance revealed them as the powerful young couple that they were.

“Would you please tell us what happened,” Draco groused, a bit of the spoiled child he had once been coming out even as he pulled his wife against his chest, his protective behavior belying his irritation.

“Well,” Hermione smirked, “they were definitely surprised.”
Chapter 1

Chapter 1: Several Years Earlier

It was the first and only time she would be happy that Lucius had been called out of town on business. Though it started out as a bitter disappointment because it meant that he wouldn’t be available to retrieve Draco from Kings Cross with herself and their niece, Claire, who was on her own vacation from Beauxbatons. Especially since it was Draco’s first holiday home from Hogwarts and it had been even more trying than she’d imagined to have him away at school. She’d wanted them all back together as much as possible before he returned to Scotland in just two short weeks. But Lucius’ business associates were oblivious to that desire and had owled to summon him to France just that morning. She’d seen the missive and admitted that the trip was unavoidable; that didn’t allay her irritation. To temper her disappointment she’d planned an outing to Diagon Alley with the children and then dinner out, she knew she would feel Lucius’ absence less if they weren’t at the Manor all night.

They were rounding out their shopping at Flourish and Blotts and, as usual, she’d lost track of Draco. They had a library at home that could rival any in Europe and yet her son never failed to get lost in every bookshop they wandered into and re-emerge with a pile of books that he just couldn’t live without. As happy as he had been to see her, much to her pleasure, he had been even more pleased to be let loose inside of a bookshop (and earlier a quidditch shop), and so she’d given him more free reign than usual- she’d never been able to resist spoiling him.

She started searching for him in earnest when she realized that they were getting dangerously close to missing their reservation. Not that the restaurant would dare give her table away, she was the Lady of one of the most powerful, and certainly the wealthiest House in Britain, one did not want to risk losing her patronage, but it was rude to be late. After a few minutes of searching she spotted his distinctive hair through a gap in the bookshelves and quickly rounded the corner to collect him with Claire trailing obediently behind her. However, instead of hurrying him out of the shop she came to a startled halt when she saw the scene unfolding in front of her.

Her son was standing there scowling at a girl about his age who was still dressed in her Hogwarts robes. Narcissa hid a moue of distaste at the red and gold Gryffindor trim as not to offend the girl. In the end her house loyalties mattered little anyway, not compared to what she saw happening between the girl and her Draco.

Narcissa was not a Seer. She did not get visions of the future, she had never given a prophecy, but she did see more than most other witches. Or perhaps you could say that she saw deeper.

As a small child it had thrilled her; the colors she saw swirling around people, the things she just knew about them instinctively, the energy that pulsed amongst them. But that had turned to fear when she’d grown a little and began making comments about what she was seeing to her sisters and was harshly informed that what she was experiencing was not normal. Luckily, she’d had a governess for a time (they never lasted long, Bellatrix inevitably frightened them off) who realized her young charge’s talent and encouraged it.

She learned to trust her sight and how to utilize it to judge people and relationships. It was how she knew that Lucius was good and that he would love and take care of her despite his family’s dark reputation. She saw the potential for a loving relationship with him the first time they’d met after she’d been sorted into Slytherin despite the haughty way he’d introduced himself.

Her ability was the reason she’d never been close to Bellatrix, but was careful to hide her wariness of her eldest sister lest the dangerous witch catch on and turn against her. Narcissa had watched her
descent into madness on a much more intense plane than most, it had been hard to maintain her stoic mask in the face of that kind of insanity. Her eventual incarceration had been a relief.

She’d known of Andromeda’s connection to a muggleborn Ravenclaw named Ted Tonks for years before they eloped. She'd realized that the only family member she had any real bond with -their parents were largely indifferent to their three disappointingly female offspring- was probably going to be lost to her. It broke her heart. But she never said anything, she learned to keep her own counsel because she had no innocent way to explain how she knew these things. She was careful to appear passive and pliable, the opposite of formidable, so that nobody would suspect how much she was actually capable of. Her gift was powerful and she treasured it, but she knew it could make her vulnerable if the wrong person learned of it.

When she met the Dark Lord for the first time she knew her caution had been justified. What she experienced in his presence made her violently ill for a week. Despite his good looks and the charming and personable demeanor that had won him so many followers, she knew what a monster he was at first sight. It was all she could do not to grab her husband’s hand and flee the scene. But she couldn’t, it was too late to warn him, he’d been Marked for years by then, given to his father’s master like some sort of prize the moment he'd graduated Hogwarts. She had just been grateful for her well practiced societal mask and the fact that she was largely viewed as harmless, a pretty trophy on Lucius’ arm.

When she recovered from the experience she finally began sharing her observations with her husband, she was afraid it was their only chance of survival. He listened, he’d always known there were depths to her that she hid from the world, and together they tiptoed their way through Death Eater politics even as the Dark Lord gradually grew more and more insane. It was only the Potters sacrifice that freed them. Without it she was sure they’d have been dead long ago, and she regularly visited and tended to the young couple’s grave in apology and repentance.

So, she knew that what she was seeing now, during this seemingly innocent encounter in a bookshop, was of supreme importance, especially as it involved her precious boy. This was going to change his life. The power that existed between and within Draco and this young girl was incredible. Their auras flowed around them, mingling and creating something truly beautiful. She was certain she’d never seen two people whose magic was so compatible with each others’ and that included herself and her husband after more than two decades together. The two children in question seemed completely oblivious to the magical connection they shared, despite how palpable it was to Narcissa. The tension between them was palpable as well and it was certainly less pleasant to behold.

That was when she started to become grateful that Lucius was out of town, because the fact that the girl was still wearing her Hogwards robes was a dead giveaway that she was a muggleborn. Any child from a magical family would have been sure to change before disembarking the train. Narcissa couldn’t have her husband flying off the handle until she’d fully evaluated the situation. One look and Narcissa knew that the connection between Draco and this girl was special, but that wasn’t enough information, she needed to do some exploring that would have been just about impossible had her beloved, yet seriously narrow-minded husband been present. At first the girl herself was appeared average, with an insane mop of hair which was unlike anything Narcissa had ever seen before. But a second glance told her something completely different: this girl was as far from average as one could get.

Draco looked at her warily, but as much as he seemed disgusted by her, he also couldn’t seem to turn away from her. Narcissa understood why, their auras sang at their proximity; he did not see what Narcissa saw, but he certainly felt something. And the girl herself radiated power; she would grow into a fearsome witch. But more than that, further inspection revealed her as a blossoming
beauty as well, albeit in the early stages. She was going to be a striking and powerful woman; no
wonder her Draco was drawn to her. And that was exactly the kind of witch that he needed in his
life. As much as she adored Lucius she knew that Draco was a bit too much like him for his own
good. They both needed a formidable witch at their side to keep them in line.

She swooped in to introduce herself before Draco could say something unforgivably rude, as he
appeared ready to do at any moment. The girl was clearly puzzled by her courtesy and kept
shooting Draco surreptitious wary glances. That meant they’d had run-ins at school, she assumed.
At least he didn’t appear to have scared her, he’d probably made his opinion about the
circumstances of her birth clear though, his propensity to run his mouth could be very un-Slytherin
and she’d been trying to curtail it for years.

As it turned out the girl was called Hermione, which was lovely, just unusual enough, and
surprisingly but delightfully un-muggle. She seemed to be unfailingly polite even though her
manners were slightly different from those that Narcissa was used to, which she attributed to her
muggle upbringing. Narcissa reckoned that, having only been exposed to their world for a few
months, she was rather like a blank slate, which was actually quite refreshing. Much better, she
realized, than the majority of the wizarding population who thought they knew what they were
doing but almost always fell short of the mark. Hermione could still be trained properly.

She invited Hermione and her parents, who had been waiting just outside the shop, to dinner. Draco
looked a bit like the world was coming down around him when he heard her issue the invitation,
but one sharp look from her silenced him. She didn’t miss the slight look of triumph Hermione shot
Draco as she agreed to join them for dinner after consulting with her parents, obviously not
intimidated by him in the least, something she’d witnessed with several of his peers. Narcissa
found herself secretly pleased that the girl could already hold her own against her stubborn and
often entitled son.

She watched in silent approval as Hermione performed some simple magic with impressive ease
when they reached the restaurant and Narcissa assured her that the trace would not be triggered in
Diagon Alley while she was surrounded by magic users. Claire befriended her easily and Draco
sulked, but at least he did it quietly. The most pleasant surprise was Richard and Helen Granger
who were poised, polite, and well-spoken. She wouldn’t even find it a chore to spend time with
muggles like these and felt comfortable enough to ask to join in the girls’ day that Claire,
Hermione, and Helen were planning after Claire expressed clear interest in spending some time in
the muggle world. All this time in the back of her mind she was plotting how she was going to
break all of this to Lucius, she didn’t want to give the poor man a heart attack.

She was waiting for him when he arrived home later that night in a nightie which was provocative
enough to entice, but not so distracting as to cause him to want to postpone the discussion they
needed to have.

“How is Draco?” he questioned as he entered their suite and approached the chair where she was
reading to kiss her in greeting.

“He looks well, I can tell he’s pleased to be home. I’m glad he’s getting on at Hogwarts but it’s
nice to know that he misses home as well,” she answered, closing her book.

He nodded absentmindedly and began to unbutton his robes as he crossed the room. She rose and
followed him into their bedroom and then into his spacious wardrobe. He turned and cocked an
eyebrow at her questioningly. He’d only been gone a day and she normally wouldn’t have been so
clingy following such a short absence, but he’d misinterpreted her actions. While she had missed
him and been anxious for him to return home, her behavior was born of excitement and trepidation
over what she had to tell him, not an irrational need to stay close to him.

“I met somebody important today,” she began.

“Oh?” he questioned blandly, turning back to the task of changing his clothes.

“Yes, she’s a classmate of Draco’s and she was in Flourish and Blotts at the same time we were.”

He let out a noncommittal grunting noise.

“I believe she’s Draco’s soul mate.”

He froze for just a moment but then with an air of great deliberance he continued removing his cravat.

“He’s eleven,” he answered, “and a rather young eleven at that. You and I barely understood our compatibility at that age and that was with the advantage of your rather unique insight, not that I knew it at the time.”

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

“I didn’t say Draco realized what she could be to him, I’m telling you what I saw between them using my rather unique insight, as you say,” she said, voice slightly mocking.

He sighed, sounding greatly put upon, and turned to face her.

“Cissa, I know how you worry about Draco finding real companionship, are you sure you weren’t just seeing what you wanted to see?”

It was true, she had worried incessantly about her only child since the moment she’d learned that he was growing inside of her, but especially since he’d gotten old enough to socialize and it became clear what a unique soul he was.

“No,” she said firmly, “maybe it won’t end in romance, but the friendship is worth cultivating, he needs somebody capable of challenging him and I am certain I saw that in her. Have I ever steered us wrong?” she challenged.

“You’re far more intuitive than I, and I don’t want to demean your abilities, but how do you know it’s not wishful thinking? I just don’t want you to get your hopes up.”

She saw the hesitation in his eyes and knew it was not for himself but for her. He wanted to give her the world and couldn’t stand the thought of a possible disappointment. That was good, if she could get him to concentrate on her desires and not Hermione’s unfortunate background, he’d learn to accept her more quickly. She smirked and approached him, running her hands up his bare chest.

“Because she’s a muggleborn,” she’d have to casually drop the fact that she was also a Gryffindor into a conversation at a later date.

He froze once again, his quicksilver eyes hardened and he clenched his jaw.

“Have you completely taken leave of your senses?! he hissed.

She stood defiant.

“Of course not. Times have changed, Lucius.”
“Yes, but I was unaware that my wife agreed with these changes!”

He loomed over her and his complexion was rapidly reddening, but she could never be afraid of him. However, she needed to make her case before he lost his temper and with it the ability to process what she was saying.

“Are you at least satisfied that I wouldn’t imagine a connection between our son and a muggleborn? I am certainly aware of the difficulties her blood status presents,” she said primly.

“Difficulties! This is preposterous! What are you thinking? Draco is not going to become involved with a mudblood in any capacity. Please tell me you have not shared this absurd theory with our son,” he raged.

She huffed daintily and resisted the urge to roll her eyes. He could be so dramatic, Draco definitely got that from the Malfoy side of the family.

“I’d thank you not to use such vulgar language in my presence. In fact I think it’s time that word was purged from your vocabulary.”

Frankly, she’d always hated that term, it was gauche. But she’d also always been good at picking her battles.

“What is the matter with you?” he studied her carefully, meeting her eyes and searching them.

“There is nothing at all the matter with me. I simply want Draco to be happy and I want grandchildren.”

That brought him up short.

“And you think this filth could make him happy? I can’t even speak of what you’re implying about his children,” he spat.

This time she did roll her eyes.

“She’s bright and articulate. She’s going to be a beautiful woman and a powerful witch. Together with Draco the world would be their oyster. Their combined power, his resources, her temperament to keep him in check. It’s everything we’ve ever wanted for our son, for your heir,” she explained reasonably, like she was trying to persuade him to change the drapes in the breakfast room and not his entire worldview.

“She’s a muggle!” he roared.

“She’s a witch,” Narcissa countered firmly, “her parents may not have magic, but she does, powerful magic. What's more, she doesn’t know anything about our world, we would be able to guide her. Would you prefer Draco end up with some half-blood upstart who only wants him for his money and his name? Whom we wouldn’t be able to mold the way we can this girl because she has no other connection to our world?”

“I would prefer we keep the bloodline pure! We have a thousand years of history to preserve. We are talking about the fate of the Malfoy line here!”

And this was the crux of her argument.

“Exactly Lucius, I fear if Draco marries a pureblood that we may be talking about the end of the line. We both know that we’re fortunate to have even one healthy child, I’m not sure Draco would
be that lucky. And I don’t want him to go through what we went through. I don’t think I could bear to watch him suffer like that, to have trouble conceiving and then be told one pregnancy after another isn’t viable. He has a much better chance with a muggleborn and we both know it. We would never keep the Abraxan blood lines so small because we’d never have any healthy foals. It’s time to quit living in denial.”

“You would compare us to animals?!”

She ignored him and plowed on.

“And have you considered Draco’s options? Because of the war there are only a fraction of the students at Hogwarts as there were when we were there and the girls that you would deem acceptable? Let me tell you, the Parkinson child looks as much like a small dog as she does a girl and don’t even get me started on the Bulstrode girl. I hear the Weasleys have finally produced a daughter who will be starting at Hogwarts next year, should we consider talking to Arthur about an arrangement?” she finished sweetly.

“Don’t be foolish. And surely you’re exaggerating, there must be other options,” he huffed. She shrugged delicately, she knew she was getting to him but didn’t want to press her advantage too far.

“We could look abroad, but as far as staying within the Sacred 28, I just don’t think it’s possible. And Lucius, a muggleborn would erase any hint of suspicion about the family, the Dark Lord business would be completely forgotten,” she cajoled.

“And you think tainting our bloodline is worth it?” he sneered.

“I think Draco’s happiness is worth any price, I’m simply pointing out that there are other benefits. And listen, I’m not saying draw up the betrothal contract right now, all I’m asking is that you not poison our son’s mind against the idea. I’m simply going to attempt to cultivate a friendship and see what happens. Claire already considers her a friend,” she explained reasonably.

He gave her a questioning look.

“We had dinner with her and her parents.”

“You ate with muggles,” he deadpanned, but his face was a picture of horror and disbelief.

“We had a perfectly lovely meal, they aren’t barbarians.”

Lucius just snorted and she decided they’d had enough discussion for one night. He would need to think things through, but she was confident that once he did he would at least have to admit that she’d made some good points. He wouldn’t be ready to meet the girl tomorrow but she was certain that, with time, she could persuade him to her way of thinking. She put her hands back on his bare chest and leaned in to place a kiss over his heart. He immediately took her into his arms.

“I am sorry to have upset you,” she said sincerely, it had been necessary but she hated disagreeing with him.

“There is nothing we cannot discuss, even if I am still not quite certain that you haven’t taken leave of your senses,” there was a slight pause, “I am sorry that I could not give you more children.”

She sighed, knowing that would have been extremely difficult for him to say and feeling slightly guilty about the emotional manipulation she’d just used on him about this most tender of subjects.
“I believe I was the one who could not give you more children,” she said quietly, but bravely raised her face to look at him.

He shook his head.

“You gave me an heir, that’s all I could ask for. You were the one who desired to fill the Manor.”

She allowed him his little joke and did not call him on his lie.

“Don’t be absurd, I never had any intention of filling it, I am not a Weasley.”

She felt him wince at the reference and she cringed at her own faux pas. The animosity between the Houses of Malfoy and Weasley went back generations and so it had been an especially bitter pill to swallow to witness Arthur and Molly produce one child after another with almost cringe inducing regularity while they suffered one failed pregnancy after another. If there was anything he hated more than failing at his duty it was disappointing her in any way, and every miscarriage was both, not that she ever blamed him.

True, she had desired children more than he had, motherhood had felt essential to her being in a way fatherhood hadn’t seemed to be to him. Until Draco’s birth he had only been doing his duty and hoping to please her by giving her children; he hadn’t wanted it for himself. His own horrible father hadn’t helped the situation, she knew he’d been afraid that he would turn out the same, but she’d never worried. And she’d been right, he’d fallen in love with his son the moment he’d laid eyes on him that first time, and he’d been a devoted father ever since.

But the way that he doted on Claire, on top of the wretched way he’d mourned for the stillborn daughter she’d delivered when Draco was a toddler left her in no doubt that he’d badly wanted a girl. In fact, she was certain he would have been thrilled with as many children as may have come along after Draco, regardless of sex. Unfortunately, that stillbirth had inflicted so much trauma on her body that it had made the hope of any future children impossible.

“I love you, my wife, and the son you did give us, you are my world,” he finally broke the silence, taking her back into his arms.

She closed her eyes and savored the treasured but not oft spoken sentiment. She knew without a doubt that he loved her, but it was always good to hear the words.

“I love you too my husband.”

“Perhaps now we could retire to bed and find a more pleasurable activity to fill our time,” he said silkily.

He used the hands on her hips to pull her more firmly against him, as if his meaning hadn't already been clear. She looked up at him to find him smirking wickedly at her, she smirked right back, and pointed to the large mirror off to one side and then pushed him down on the large ottoman in the middle of the room from which you could easily see your reflection in the mirror.

“I was thinking we could start right here,” she said as she climbed onto his lap, “still think I’ve taken leave of my senses?”

He chuckled darkly.

“I’m very relieved to see that the really important ones are still present.”
Chapter 2

Hermione was trying to catch up to the whirlwind that had become her life. It all started on her eleventh birthday when a stern woman in old fashioned clothing had showed up on the doorstep of her childhood home, asked to have a talk with her and her parents, and informed them all that Hermione was a witch. Professor McGonagall, for that was the woman -the witch’s- name, invited her to attend a special school where she would learn to wield her magic. She could tell that her parents were surprised but that they were primarily relieved, she knew because she felt it too; here, finally, was an explanation for all the strange things that happened to her, the reason she couldn’t seem to fit in anywhere. She was different, not a freak at all, but special. She spent the next several months floating around on cloud nine, no longer worried about her lack of social life, sure it would all be fixed when she got to Hogwarts.

Then came the incredible experience of Diagon Alley, getting her wand, all her supplies, and especially the books. She didn’t just read them, she absorbed them. She was determined not to be too far behind due to her lack of magical background. When September 1st rolled around she was sure she was ready.

A few hours into the journey and she was feeling a little dejected, but was still upbeat. It had become very clear by then that coming from non-magical parents left most of the student population decidedly unimpressed, but that was okay, she’d gotten the impression that may be the case from some of her books, she’d just be a little quieter about her background. Her mum and dad would understand, she could never be ashamed of them, she simply wanted to fit in.

Which made the next couple of months utterly heartbreaking for the young witch. She had been thrilled to be sorted into Gryffindor, her reading told her it was the best of all the houses and her observations told her that they were the darlings of the school and she so longed to be liked. She was even more pleased to find that she was good at magic, not behind at all but actually surpassing those raised in the magical world in almost every subject. But that didn’t mean she fit in. Nobody seemed interested in putting the same amount of effort into their studies that she deemed necessary, and she was scorned for it.

It was devastating for her to realize that it may not have been magic that made her different. She was as ineffective at making friends with her new roommates as she had been with muggle girls her age. But all they seemed to want to discuss was makeup, and fashion, and boys, which were only of minor interest to Hermione. There were just so many more important things to consider! And goodness, they were only eleven.

By the time Ron Weasley called her a nightmare and pointed out that she didn’t have any friends after she had just been trying to help him, it felt as if her world was falling apart. Nothing was going right. She’d staked all her hopes on Hogwarts and it was failing her spectacularly. That feeling only intensified when she went to go have a good cry in the girl’s bathroom to try and forget her housemate’s callous words, and ended up being attacked by a mountain troll.
When Ron and, of all people, Harry Potter saved her from that troll she found new hope. At least they cared enough not to let her die, and the experience bonded them. They had been especially grateful that she’d lied to the professors and hadn’t revealed the real reason she’d been in the bathroom in the first place.

But the fact was that they were clueless boys, and Harry was muggle raised, as ignorant to this new world as she was. And, despite being a pureblood, Ron was not a font of information about magic. Honestly, she wondered to herself what he had been doing with the first eleven years of his life because he was utterly clueless about the non-magical world too. And, really, wasn't there a limit to how much time one could spend either talking about or playing quidditch and chess?

There was no orientation at Hogwarts, no explanation about the basic tenants of wizarding society. It was like they just threw the muggleborn children into the deep end of the pool and hoped they could swim. Hermione wanted desperately to swim, but with each passing day it became increasingly clear to her that there were things she was missing, unspoken rules that those raised by magical parents knew to follow automatically, and that there were a myriad of background political machinations occurring that went entirely over her head. The manners and rules of etiquette even seemed different to her.

So, when she got off the Hogwarts Express in London for the Christmas holidays she begged her parents to take her to Diagon Alley and made a beeline for Flourish and Blotts. This time she wasn’t seeking spellbooks or potions guides but information about British magical society and customs. What she found instead was a more helpful resource than she ever could have imagined in the form of the mother of one of her most hated classmates. When she'd literally run into Draco Malfoy inside the bookshop she'd expected an embarrassing scene, especially because it had been her fault. She hadn't been looking and had plowed right into him and she just knew he was going to point that out to her in his usual scathing manner. But his mother had other ideas.

If it wasn’t for their matching white-blond hair, which was a color Hermione had never seen on any other person, she would have had a hard time believing that the woman who appeared around the bookshelf just as she was picking herself up off the floor was Draco’s mother. She was just so lovely and kind. She was the most beautiful woman Hermione had ever seen in real life, and she had a casual elegance about her that Hermione knew the silly girls she roomed with would have given their wand arms to possess. Hermione herself was more than a little jealous. Mrs. Malfoy had seemed immediately taken with her, for some reason, and within minutes was inviting her and her parents for dinner. Hermione couldn’t imagine how this woman had raised the prejudiced prat who she knew Draco to be.

He scowled at her all through dinner even as his mother kindly encouraged her to show her parents some of the magic she’d learned and his cousin, Claire, chatted happily to her. They made arrangements along with her mother to have a girls’ day shopping in the muggle world which had the ponce looking like somebody had just informed him that the sky was falling. She could not understand what his problem was.

Despite Draco’s attitude, things were definitely looking up for Hermione as a result of running into the Malfoys. She just couldn’t understand what she’d done to have such a sophisticated witch take
an interest in her. She wasn’t naive enough not to understand that Lady Malfoy didn’t generally keep company with muggleborns. In fact, Claire had confided that her aunt was picky about who she associated with in general, explaining that she was extremely perceptive and simply didn’t like what she saw in most people. The Malfoys belonged to the upper echelons of society so she could afford to be choosy. Hermione wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

The rest of her holidays were great fun. She was thrilled to spend time with her parents and she took comfort in the familiarity of the many Christmas traditions that had become so important to the Granger family over the years. The day out with her mother, Mrs. Malfoy, and Claire in London was a success. Mrs. Malfoy was obviously unfamiliar with the muggle world so Hermione felt more than a little smug about how much she obviously enjoyed their outing.

Only days after she arrived back at Hogwarts after the turn of the new year Hermione received an unexpected package: magical hair products from Narcissa Malfoy. The range and type of products that had been sent indicated that careful thought had gone into their purchase and Hermione was infinitely grateful. It had come up during their day in London that her hair, always unruly, was particularly unmanageable in the castle. That wasn’t particularly surprising, it had been hard to manage in the steady environment of her primary school. Hogwarts, meanwhile, was located in the unforgiving climate of the Scottish Highlands and she regularly traversed the drafty halls between the entrance to the Gryffindor common room all the way up on the seventh floor and the hot, humid dungeon classroom where she had her potions lessons. What else would her hair have been other than a complete mess in that climate? She’d barely managed to keep it out of her way since the beginning of term.

It hadn’t occurred to her before that her hair, like every part of her body, was an extension of her magic. And she’d had no way to know that her muggle products were most likely exacerbating the problem, as they couldn’t work with her magic, and it would have been fighting them, not until Mrs. Malfoy had told her, that is. It had her wondering how many other things, seemingly obvious things to any witch raised in the magical world, she was missing.

The products worked quite well, her curls were still a little wild, but they were distinguishable as curls and not just a bushy mess. Most importantly, she could pull them back and make sure they were out of her face in lessons, especially Potions, and she could see some beauty in the chaos. Really, she quite liked the results. For the first time her hair became a source of confidence, not a beast that could only be unreliably contained.

Mrs. Malfoy wrote her throughout the term, and Hermione corresponded with Claire even more often; it was easy to talk to the slightly older French girl. She explained the increase in the frequency of her post to her friends as the result of a friendship with a girl she’d met over the holidays who attended Beauxbatons. It wasn’t exactly a lie, and Harry and Ron were 11 year old boys with no inclination to question her about a female pen pal. She felt a little guilty about her obfuscation, but she knew enough to realize that a Gryffindor admitting to an association with the Malfoy family would be social suicide, especially considering how hard won her few friends and acquaintances had been.

When she saw Draco he ignored her, or, if forced to interact, he was unfailingly if rigidly polite. He was never friendly and still remained openly hostile with Harry and Ron. But it was an
improvement, his mother had obviously warned him about his behavior towards her and she knew she couldn't complain. Still, she found herself disappointed, and she had no idea why. She’d shared one meal with him, and he’d been obviously uncomfortable the whole time. But for some reason she’d unknowingly hoped that her relationship with his mother and cousin might cultivate one between them as well, or at the very least, a civil alliance. But she couldn't understand why she would desire that, he'd certainly done nothing to recommend himself to her.

So, she was more than surprised when one day in early February he approached her at her usual table in the library (it had taken only weeks after her arrival at Hogwarts for her to establish a usual table). He shoved a letter in her general direction.

“My mother wanted me to pass this along to you,” he explained, not looking at her.

“Oh,” she breathed, surprised, “thank you,” she took the letter, careful not to touch him as she knew he would take offense if she did.

He sighed.

“Why are you writing my mother?” he asked suddenly.

“I like your mother,” she answered, startled.

“I just don’t understand why she likes you,” he snapped nastily.

“Oh,” she responded, for lack of anything else to say.

The comment hurt her, though again she didn't know why. Despite her odd desire to gain his approval she didn’t actually like him, he said cruel things like that all the time, just not usually to her anymore. But being polite to her on his mother’s orders didn't make him a good person. He sighed again, making it very clear that he was put upon.

“Granger, look, it's just weird, okay?”

It wasn’t an apology, not at all, but she got the impression it was as close as he’d ever come to making one, there was at least a hint of regret in his voice. And frankly, she’d forgiven Harry and Ron quite a lot, she could give Narcissa Malfoy’s son a chance.

“I don’t know why she likes me either,” she finally admitted quietly, she’d been asking herself the same question ever since that day in Diagon Alley, no matter what Claire said, she couldn’t understand why such a sophisticated witch would take an interest in her to treat her almost like a surrogate daughter.
“She wants us to be friends,” he said, leaning awkwardly against her table.

“Um,” she said, ineloquently, “yes, she’s mentioned as much to me.”

In fact, she was quite sure that was the reason she’d sent a letter for Hermione along with Draco’s, as opposed to sending a separate owl as she usually did. She was trying to force them to interact: mission accomplished.

“She seems to think it’s important, she’s been very insistent, she isn’t usually like that with me,” he griped.

Hermione bit back a smile. He was so spoiled, she wondered if this was the first time he’d ever been asked to do something he clearly didn’t want to do. He sighed theatrically.

“And the thing is that she’s usually right,” he admitted.

“What?” she asked, losing the thread of the conversation.

“She’s usually right, even about things that don’t make sense. Like being friends with somebody like you,” he sneered, “she always seems to know what's best, even Father says so.”

She flinched, she knew exactly what he meant by that, what he thought of her blood status even if his mother didn’t seem to mind so much. But before she could process the rest of what he’d said he suddenly spoke again.

“Truce?” he questioned, and to her astonishment, extended his hand.

She took it hesitantly. He was warmer than she probably would have imagined given his sharp personality, but his grip was firm and very human.

“Truce,” she agreed.

“This doesn’t extend to your stupid friends,” he sneered, it was his most common expression, and it nearly ruined the goodwill, “and nobody hears about this either,” he added hastily.

She rolled her eyes.

“Of course not,” she agreed, that would be as bad, if not worse for her than it would be for him if their classmates found out.
After that he occasionally sought her out, it was always he who found her, and usually in the library. She was always glad when he did. She tried to put it out of her mind, but the time that they spent together, here and there, made her day every time she got a few minutes with him, and she missed him when she didn’t see him. But she knew better than to go looking for him, this was very much a one-sided relationship, and she was far too cautious to risk pushing him away. And while their interactions were pleasant enough, they mainly consisted of small talk or comparing assignments, it would have been a stretch to label them friends. It wasn't for many weeks that they found a subject to truly bond over and it came from an unexpected quarter.

Draco wasn't at breakfast one morning, his distinctive hair meant that she only had to briefly glance at the Slytherin table to know he was missing. She was immediately concerned, like every other boy their age he seemed programmed to eat voraciously and regularly, and he appeared in the Great Hall at or before 7:30 everyday like clockwork. His absence suggested something was wrong.

Her question was answered with the arrival of the post. Mrs. Malfoy had written to explain that Mr. Malfoy’s father had died and they had pulled Draco from Hogwarts for a few days to mourn with his family and attend the funeral. Hermione was touched that she would take the time to write to her during what she was sure to be a trying time, but her heart lurched for the Malfoys.

She had lost her own grandmother only two years before and it had been exquisitely painful, they had been very close. She didn't know anything about Draco’s relationship with his grandfather, but keeping her own experience in mind she made sure to seek him out when he returned to Hogwarts the following week. She was careful to be discrete though. She found him in an out-of-the-way nook of the library that she knew he favored, curled up in an armchair with a book.

“Hi,” she said quietly.

He looked up and gave her a curt nod in greeting. She was not deterred, that wasn't unusual. If he truly objected to her presence he would make it clear.

“I don't know if your mum told you but she wrote me about your grandfather. I just wanted to pass on my condolences.”

“Mother told me you wrote,” he said, turning back to his book.

“Well, you know, I meant in person, it's not the same in a letter.”

He didn't respond. She took a deep breath, steeling herself, and sat down. He didn't react in any way but she was determined to make sure he was actually okay, and if he wasn't to offer her support. She knew through observation that Slytherins disguised their emotions as a matter of course. Which meant that just as he was reticent to share his feelings, his housemates would be unlikely to encourage him to open up. So, as far a she was concerned, it was up to his one and only Gryffindor acquaintance to make him talk, even if he didn't think he wanted to. She couldn't, in good conscience, allow him to suffer alone.
“My grandmother died a couple of years ago, not long before I got my Hogwarts letter, actually,” she offered a little of her own experience with a sigh, “I really wish she’d gotten to see that.”

Her Grandmère would have been so thrilled. She had been Hermione’s biggest cheerleader, always telling her how special she was. Draco looked up, frowning and studied Hermione very carefully.

“Okay.”

She shifted uncomfortably. ‘Okay.’ What was that supposed to mean?

“I just…it helped to talk about her, after she was gone. I mean nothing made it okay but talking about her made it a little better, made me miss her a little less. So I was thinking, if you wanted to talk, well you could talk to me and I would understand,” she said, stumbling all over her words while she fought her embarrassment and tried to explain it so that he would understand.

There’d was a long- and for Hermione highly uncomfortable- silence. Draco just sat there, book forgotten, frowning at her.

“You really loved her, huh?” he finally said.

She was taken aback, he sounded almost confused by the concept.

“Well yes, of course,” she replied immediately.

She stopped abruptly as she suddenly realized that his confusion might stem from the fact that his feelings for his grandfather were not quite so clear cut.

“I mean,” she started again, attempting to reign in her declaration a bit, “we were really close. Both of my parents work and instead of getting a nanny for me when I was little, I stayed with her during the day. And then when I went to primary school I’d still go to her in the afternoons and she would help me with my homework and get me to my dance classes and piano lessons and such. So it was really hard on me when she suddenly wasn't there, I really missed her.”

He continued to stare at her, his deep blue eyes piercing. She squirmed but refused to look away.

“How did she die?” he suddenly asked.

Maybe she should have been offended by the blunt question, but she wasn't. She’d been pushing him to talk so it only seemed fair, and she didn't think he was trying to be insensitive.
“A heart attack. She was so healthy before that, we were so surprised. She was in hospital for a couple of weeks but it had done too much damage.”

She gave a little shrug. As much as she missed her, her grandmother had lived a good life and to an old age, for a muggle. She had been in good health into her eighties which had allowed her to be an active participant in her only granddaughter’s life. Hermione tried to be thankful for that.

“Grandfather had dragon pox, he held on for over a year but there’s really no curing it in older people,” he explained matter-of-factly.

“I’m sorry,” she replied quietly, assuming the protracted illness had been hard on him.

“I’m not,” he responded immediately and forcefully.

Hermione was glad she was too stunned to respond because she surely would have put her foot in her mouth.

“He and Grandmother moved to France when he was diagnosed, they thought the climate might be better for him. I was glad, glad he wasn't in the Manor anymore, glad he wouldn't be coming back. I hated him,” he spat.

Hermione tried to school her features but knew she wasn't entirely successful. The ice in his voice convinced her that he spoke nothing but the truth and that frightened her. What could have happened between them to make an eleven year old boy declare that he hated his own grandfather? More frightening still, his eyes had taken on a distant quality that made her wonder if he was even talking to her anymore or reliving some horror she didn't even want to consider. She remained quiet both to let him process his thoughts and because she couldn't think of a single thing to say. After a few moments his eyes snapped back into focus and he glared at her defiantly.

Hermione was shocked by his declaration, but she decided that she didn't have a right to judge. She knew nothing of the situation, wasn't sure she wanted to know, and she was not naive enough to think there weren't some terrible people in the world, who’s to say the elder Malfoy hadn't been one of them? And she hadn’t missed his comment about the Manor, if Draco had lived most of his life with a man who'd given him reason to hate him, that was terrible, and actually explained a lot about his bullying behavior. She knew enough about muggle psychology to know that children mimicked what they were taught at home and she found it impossible to believe he'd learned cruelty at his mother’s knee.

“He wasn't very nice?” she ventured hesitantly.

He face immediately screwed into an expression of distaste.

“No, he wasn't. And my father… Father was different around him, I didn't like it.”
It was such a sorrowful admission that Hermione got the impression that he was actually understating things quite a lot.

“You know, Draco, you shouldn’t feel bad. You’re entitled to your feelings,” she said sympathetically, resisting the urge to reach out and comfort him.

He made an odd sound, something between a snort and a sob.

“You won’t tell anybody,” it was an order.

“Of course not,” she said immediately and then, instinctively knowing that this portion of the conversation was over, she abruptly changed the subject to schoolwork.

After that he seemed to give up putting so much effort into acting like he didn't like her. He’d shared a big secret with her, and even if she didn't know exactly what that secret was, there was something between them now. She was surprised to realize how honored she felt by that. She didn’t think for one moment that his trust was something he gave easily and she took it seriously.

Meanwhile, she along with Harry and Ron became increasingly immersed in the mystery of what a Cerberus could be guarding on the forbidden third floor, though she tried to tell herself that she was only trying to keep them out of trouble. She was glad to be helpful, and even better, to be included, but she was happy when the Easter holidays arrived and she could take a break. Her parents had insisted she come home, and while she was worried about her impetuous friends, she couldn’t bring herself to refuse. She hardly got to see her family anymore, and while Hogwarts was quickly becoming dear to her, it wasn’t home. On the way back to London she shared a compartment with Draco.
Narcissa couldn’t remember a time when she’d been happier, or felt so much hope for the future. Merlin, she loved muggle lingerie. One glance and Lucius had capitulated completely on the idea of her continuing to spend time in the muggle world. If she’d known about it at the beginning of her marriage she was confident she would have been able to convince Lucius to move out of the Manor and get a place of their own, at least for a few years. Presently, it was responsible for the not-so-minor miracle of getting her husband to agree to having the Grangers over for dinner while the children were home for the Easter holidays, and even arranging for their transportation, all the while believing he got the better end of the deal. Better late than never, she supposed, it was a wonderful weapon to have in her arsenal moving forward. She’d have to get Helen Granger a present for taking her to that first lingerie shop, maybe she’d like a small holiday cottage somewhere?

On top of that coup was the fact that her father-in-law was dead. She couldn’t even muster up any guilt at being thoroughly joyful over the fact. Abraxas Malfoy was no longer on this mortal plane to terrorize his son and grandson. Even all the way from France where he’d been sick and dying he’d gotten into her husband’s head; cruel and vindictive, making Lucius second guess every move he made. No, she didn’t feel guilty; good riddance to poor rubbish and all that. And if she’d somehow hastened his death due to the sheer frequency that she’d wished for it over the years, well, she didn’t feel badly about that either.

She had been relatively lucky in his treatment of her, the man had seen her as nothing more than the means to an end; notably: producing an heir, and he’d largely left her alone. Once she’d done her duty he’d ignored her completely except to make obligatory small talk at social functions. He’d been quite adept at pretending not to be a monster, it was no wonder he’d worshipped the Dark Lord. No, he’d focused on his son, and to the extent Lucius had been unable to shield him, on his grandson.

While Abraxas drew breath she’d been terrified for her husband and child and the influence he had on them. That had been a major reason she’d been so anxious to encourage a relationship between Draco and Hermione. She saw it as nothing but simple truth that her own presence in Lucius’ life, and to a lesser extent the love that his mother had been allowed to show him, had kept Lucius from becoming his father. She wanted to make sure Draco had a similar influence in his life, even if his father had been far better to him than Abraxas had been to Lucius.

She was so proud of the way Lucius protected their child from their Head of House. He couldn’t keep Draco from the man completely, but he was able to convince him that they were rearing Draco in a way in which he would approve, the way Lucius had been raised, and as a result he stayed out of day to day interactions with the child. Now they were free to treat Draco as they pleased, and they didn’t have to hide away in their wing of the Manor to do it.

Her mother-in-law had removed herself back across the Channel, to the homeland she’d never
wanted to leave in the first place, almost the moment her husband’s body was in the family crypt. After a lifetime trapped in an arranged marriage to a psychopath she’d hardly even laid eyes on before her wedding day, Narcissa couldn’t blame the woman. She and Anneliese had always co-existed tolerably well, though they’d never become close, the older witch having retreated into herself long before Narcissa entered the picture. Still, she felt lighter with her gone, able to be the mistress of her own house for the first time in her life.

And so, she was having muggles over for dinner and she’d even managed to convince her husband that she wouldn’t have gone forward with that idea without his permission. She’d been so pleased to read over the past weeks as Draco and Hermione had both started referencing the other in their letters with increasing frequency and more fondness. Then she’d even seen Draco most solicitously helping Hermione disembark the Hogwarts Express when it arrived in London for the Easter holidays. If she wasn’t Narcissa Malfoy née Black she would have leaped for joy. When she greeted them both with hugs she could positively feel a bond humming between them, no longer latent, they’d obviously become consciously attached to each other over the course of the term. She did so love it when her plans came together.

She had been to the Granger residence enough times for tea or shopping with Helen that she’d was able to apparate in to pick them up for the arranged meal. She brought along a portkey which deposited all four of them into the Entrance Hall of Malfoy Manor. It was showing off a bit, she was aware how impressive that area of the house was. But she wanted to put their best foot forward and show the Grangers how an association with House Malfoy could benefit their daughter. And, eventually, how much Draco had to offer her.

Lucius stood there looking intentionally intimidating. She’d been unable to reason with him on the subject of his clothing. He had donned full dress robes complete with waistcoat and cravat, knee high dragon hide boots, and he was insistently carrying his walking stick, which was usually set aside at home. She herself was in a silk day dress, lovely but simple, suited for a meal with friends rather than a formal dinner party. Draco had been wearing a shirt and trousers when she’d left, but his father had apparently made him put on a set of robes in her absence. Thankfully they were a more everyday set and he didn’t look nearly as formal-read: unwelcoming-as his father. He even had a small smile on his face when his eyes fell on Hermione. When was the last time she’d seen him smile at somebody other than herself or Claire? She’d bet he’d still been small enough to be allowed to sit on his father’s knee at the time.

The greetings were more than awkward, Lucius all but wiped his hands on his robes after taking the Grangers’ hands. Narcissa ducked her head in embarrassment, her husband could be many things but he could never before have been called uncouth. He would pay for that later.

They adjourned to the sitting room for pre-dinner drinks. Draco and Hermione had gravitated towards each other from the moment the portkey arrived and when the group went to depart the entrance hall he immediately offered her his arm. She looked a bit surprised by the gesture but didn’t hesitate to take it. Hermione cast a wary glance at Lucius who glared at her, and then tucked herself even closer to Draco. Narcissa was aware what an intimidating figure her husband was, especially for a young girl, and for her to seek protection from Draco in the face of his own father was quite a display of trust. She sighed happily but sharply pinched Lucius’ forearm in retaliation for his scare tactics when he offered her his own arm. He didn’t flinch.
In the sitting room Hermione and Draco arranged themselves on the same settee and much closer than most girls and boys their ages would have been comfortable sitting, but they appeared unfazed. She saw Draco glance at herself and her husband as they took their seats and then lean in to speak quietly to Hermione; she visibly relaxed. Silence descended on the room and Narcissa realized that she’d been so focused on watching the children and hadn’t considered how difficult this would be, even given Lucius’ earlier behavior. She had erroneously assumed that once they were inside of the house Lucius would behave as the consummate host he usually was and make the Grangers feel comfortable. But, apparently because they were muggles, he had no such compunction, and he seemed content to remain silent while the other three adults floundered for a topic of conversation.

Hermione seemed overwhelmed and Draco seemed uncertain as to how to behave, to follow his father’s lead or his mother’s. Narcissa had bonded with Helen, but it was over things that women had in common, nothing that would draw either of the men or children into the conversation. So, Narcissa did something parents the world over have done for generations, she turned the spotlight on the children.

“Hermione, dear, are you still enjoying transfiguration? Even Draco has remarked to me that you seem to have a particular talent for it.”

“Oh! I really am, it’s just such a fascinating subject to me. Professor McGonagall is supposed to be such a tough teacher but I just feel honored to be taught by a master of her craft like that, I mean she’s an animagus! I’d love to be able to do that,” she sighed dreamily.

Narcissa actually heard her husband sniff in disdain at the girl’s enthusiastic rambling.

“Draco’s really good at potions though,” Hermione ducked her head shyly.

It was sweet that she wanted to compliment their son, but something needed to be done about her obvious self-esteem issues which resulted in an endless need to please.

“I’ve been learning since I was five,” Draco chimed in, with a self-deprecating shrug.

Narcissa almost gaped at her son as he downplayed a talent she knew he was actually very proud of to make a friend feel better.

“We all have different talents, though I’ll tell you a secret Hermione, it’s always good to have a friend who’s a dab hand at potions, an apothecary is no substitute for a fresh brew.” She winked at the young witch who giggled, and she was especially gratified to see Draco sit up a little straighter at her implied compliment.

“But, perhaps, again, you could show us some of what you’ve been learning? I know you can’t use your magic at home,” she addressed Hermione, “would that be alright?” she asked the Grangers.
The couple exchanged a quick glance.

“That would be lovely, if you wouldn’t mind, sweetheart,” said Richard.

“Of course!” Hermione grinned enthusiastically.

Narcissa watched with approval as Hermione carefully removed her wand from the arm holster she’d recommended the young witch purchase. She summoned a teacup and handed it to Hermione with a nod. The girl responded with a beaming smile, placed it on a table, and efficiently transfigured it into a mouse. She let it run about for a minute and then turned it back into the teacup from Lucius’ grandmother’s favorite set of china. It was an impressive feat for a witch of her age, especially given the lack of trouble Hermione seemed to have as she performed the spells. It wasn’t just a matter of power, most first years lacked that kind of concentration.

“I’m sorry,” interrupted Helen, she looked at her husband questioningly and he gave her a subtle nod, “it’s not that we don’t find that impressive. It’s just that after considering what you told me, Narcissa, about what the kids are expected to learn this year, we have some reservations about the practicality of this kind of magic.”

Narcissa breathed in through her nose and prayed to Circe that Lucius had somehow failed to hear that comment. She knew that she couldn’t blame them, how could muggles understand magic? But that was the kind of thinking that she feared would paint them as outsiders forever. It certainly wouldn’t increase Lucius’ tolerance of them.

“It’s instructive,” she explained, with an effort not to sound too terse, “it’s important that they learn these skills as their magical cores grow and stabilize and as they learn to control their magic to build up to more taxing tasks. You’re right, Hermione will probably have no need to transfigure a teacup into a mouse, but the exercise teaches her the skills to perform more complicated and more powerful transfigurations. To conjure items, to transfigured bigger more complicated objects out of rubbish, you need to learn these simple skills first.”

“Like arithmetic to do calculus later,” she heard Richard murmur to his wife.

Narcissa didn’t understand the whole of that statement, but she understood enough.

“Not that simple transfigurations can’t have their uses in everyday life, but the purpose of the course it to learn to control that aspect of your magic and build to something greater.”

“I’ve been working on something else,” Hermione piped up.

“What’s that, Dearest?” Narcissa prompted.

She watched warily as Hermione intentionally set her wand aside, not just back in its holster, but
on the coffee table in front of her. She held out her hand and took several deep breaths, and then there was suddenly an orb of perfectly conjured bluebell flames hovering above her palm. There was a very small part of Narcissa that wanted to gloat, like anybody else she enjoyed being proven right and there was no way that Lucius could deny Hermione’s potential now, but that small spark of delight was viciously extinguished by the rest of her which felt only gut clenching fear for the girl she’d already started to love as her own.

She cut her eyes to Lucius, for guidance or comfort, she wasn’t sure. But he was just sat in his armchair, eyes fixed on the impossible blue flames, mouth slightly open. She wondered how long it would be before he began to plot. It was their son who broke the silence.

“Wicked!” Draco exclaimed, “you’ve got to show me how to do that!”

“No!” she said automatically, more sharply than she would have liked.

Hermione’s proud and excited eyes dimmed immediately. She took a deep breath, knowing she had to tread carefully, both to avoid scaring the children or the Grangers, and to make sure she got her point across without offending anybody or tempting the children to rebel against her word.

“Can you vanish them, please?” she asked Hermione.

She nodded and in the blink of an eye they were gone.

“Is there something wrong?” Helen asked.

She shook her head.

“Not wrong, exactly, just unexpected. There are some things we need to discuss,” she turned to Hermione, “how did you learn to do that? I need you to be very honest with me now.”

Hermione just shrugged her now hunched shoulders.

“I was looking for a way to keep warm when we're outside, the upper years don't leave the best spots for us.”

Yes, Narcissa remembered all the sheltered areas being taken by older students who knew the lay of the land better than the firsties, it was kind of an unofficial Hogwarts initiation. But it was a long winter in Scotland and it was impossible to stay inside all the time, you’d go crazy, so you learned to cope, apparently Hermione had learned better than most. Narcissa nodded for her to continue.

“I read about bluebell conjuration while I was doing a bit of light reading and I thought if I could
figure out how to do it and place them in something to contain them, then I would have a portable heat source. I got it on the first try and figured out a jar was good for keeping them from setting anything else on fire but still spread the warmth around.”

“How did you figure out how to conjure them wandlessly and wordlessly and to keep them in control like that?”

Hermione squirmed and Narcissa’s anxiety grew.

“I don’t know how to explain it,” she said in a small voice.

“Do your best,” Narcissa responded calmly but firmly.

“When I did the spell for the first time I could feel the magic. So I thought if I reached for that feeling again I could do it with just my magic. I mean, all those things I did when I was little I did without a wand,” she answered innocently, if hesitantly- she obviously knew she was walking a fine line, she just wasn't sure why.

It was both a naive and insightful comment. She was going to have to get Hermione to start thinking like a witch and stop thinking like a muggle as soon as possible, lest it put her in danger. But, at the same time, she didn't want to stifle her creativity. They'd give her a safe place, she determined at once. The Manor would be her laboratory.

“And is that what you did? You reached for the magic and then you could...feel the spell?” Narcissa struggled to find a way to word her inquiry, never having experienced such a phenomenon herself.

Hermione brightened.

“Yes ma’am! Exactly like that, and then once I could feel it, it was easy to control, I feel much more connected than when I use my wand,” she bit her lip, “but I've done something wrong, haven't I?”

“Not wrong,” Narcissa answered for the second time, “but you could have put yourself in danger and we need to talk about this. Has anybody seen you do this, wandlessly I mean?”

She shook her head vigorously.

“I've been practicing at night in bed.”

Narcissa sighed.
“Hermione, what made you think that conjuring flames of all things was a good idea while amidst your bedclothes? You could have burned to death.”

Helen inhaled sharply and Hermione’s mouth formed a small ‘o’ of realization.

“What you have done is very impressive, but I want you to promise me you won’t experiment like that again without supervision.”

“I promise,” she said without hesitation.

“Draco, if Hermione can teach you this skill and you have the patience to learn I would be happy for you to, wandless magic is an invaluable resource and Hermione has gotten a good start on it, but you both must wait until this summer when your father or I can oversee your studies. Now please take Hermione and give her a tour of the house, the adults have things that need discussing before dinner.”

The children beat a hasty retreat, Hermione to escape the scrutiny and Draco, no doubt, to quiz her on her accomplishment. She hoped they'd take her warning seriously but at least she didn't think they could get into too much mischief in the few minutes she needed to talk to the Grangers.

“I think from your reaction that we know there's a problem here,” Helen began, looking at Narcissa, they’d built a friendship over the months and Narcissa knew the other woman trusted her not to lie.

“Truly not a problem, but a complication, I suppose you could say.”

She tried to hide the fact that she was chewing her lip while trying to find a way to adequately explain the situation to people who lived outside of their community; she had been a girl the last time she'd resorted to such tactics, but Hermione, just a girl herself, had thrown her for a loop.

“Your daughter has exhibited an ability which most fully trained witches and wizards, at the height of their power, are unable to exert. Wandless magic, as an art, is nearly lost,” Lucius interrupted abruptly.

She noticed a sheen to his eyes and knew that he'd figured out a way to use the poor girl, that would have to be nipped in the bud. She was as Slytherin as he, but his callous disregard for those whose surname was not Malfoy needed to be curtailed; family first, of course, but it wasn’t always that simple. Especially because, one day she fully intended for Hermione to be family.

“My husband has gotten right to the heart of the matter,” she began, a little annoyed at his blunt explanation, “Hermione is exhibiting skills not only beyond what is believed possible for her age range, but also what most witches are capable of at all. The danger here is twofold: that she could
hurt herself, or another, if she continues to use her magic in such an experimental way, especially unsupervised; and that she could become the target of an unsavory element of our society either to recruit her or to eliminate her if it becomes known how powerful she is."

Richard opened his mouth, obviously about to let loose a litany of feelings on that idea but his wife grabbed his hand in warning.

“I won't lie,” she confessed, “a large part of me wants to pull Hermione from Hogwarts immediately, it was difficult enough for us to allow her to go in the first place, but now you're saying she could be some kind of target? But we've been apprised of the repercussions of that decision. I can't, in good conscience, let them take our memory of magic from us and leave Hermione with a lifetime of ‘accidents’ she can neither control nor explain. I assume it would only get worse as she gets older?”

“It would,” Narcissa conceded, “the occurrences would be less frequent, perhaps, adults are better at channeling their emotions in a productive way, but when they did happen- especially given the power Hermione has already demonstrated- as her core strengthened they could be cataclysmic.”

“What would you do if you were us?”

Helen asked at the same time her husband spoke.

“And why should we trust you?”

Narcissa reached across the space between them to lay a calming hand on her own husband’s arm, he would not appreciate her integrity being called into question, but it would not be helpful for him to lose his temper.

“I understand,” she said with great dignity, “that your schedules do not allow you to be home with Hermione during the day while she's home on holidays. If I were in your position I'd allow her to come here during those hours where there will, I assure you, always be a magical adult on hand to guide and watch out for her. I can assume that your society is similar to ours in that there are unsavory elements who would exploit those with talent who are without protection, we would never allow that to happen to Hermione.”

“And why should we trust your word on that?” Richard demanded anew.

She would have been insulted, but she really couldn't blame the man for wanting to protect his family. She also sympathized with the position he was in, until she’d met the Grangers she’d never considered how difficult it must be for muggle parents to let their magical children into a world they themselves had no access to, nor any ability to understand or control what happened to their child whilst there. They couldn't even see Hogwarts.
“Now see here,” Lucius snarled.

She tightened her grip on his forearm in warning.

“If for no other reason than that Hermione is far too important to my Draco to allow any harm to come to her,” she explained as calmly as possible.

Lucius actually growled at this confession.

“They deserve to know,” she told him softly, “he’s correct, they really don’t have any reason to trust us with their daughter.”

“What does that mean?” Helen asked with an air of put upon patience.

Narcissa took a deep breath, it went against all of her instincts to be this open with them, but it was the only way she could think of to get them to understand.

“Being a witch or wizard isn’t always that straightforward, there are a number of other talents we can exhibit as a result of our magic, some are well known, some are almost myth. You are probably aware that the professor of transfiguration at Hogwarts can turn into a cat. There are those who can change their appearance at will- with some restrictions- who are called metamorphagi. There are those who can see the future, called seers. I have a lesser known and little defined talent. I see people, at least magical people, as they are. I see how they interact, I see their relationships. What I saw happening between our son and your daughter the first time I saw them together nearly blew me away. She grounds him, as he does her, and yet they enliven and inspire each other too, I would bet everything I own that Hermione would have been lost in looking for a connection to her magic to conjure those bluebell flames without her relationship to Draco, it’s why I’m certain she’ll be able to teach him.”

“You’re telling us they’re, what, soulmates?” asked Helen.

Narcissa stopped short, startled, she hadn’t expected the woman to make that intuitive leap.

“I don’t know,” she said truthfully, “my instincts say yes, but the idea of soulmates is an old one, but it’s mythical, and I don’t know of anyway to determine that, if it’s even true. I don’t read souls, no I wouldn't describe it that way. I see magic and its characteristics and...potential, I suppose you could say. Nobody’s magic is the same. In the case of our children, their magic is extremely compatible, it interacts instinctively, and that makes them both stronger, and more grounded. With practice I’m fairly certain they could channel the others magic and learn to allow it to work together. But it's certainly a special connection, unique in my experience.”

“So, she would have a choice?”
“A choice?” Narcissa questioned.

Helen visibly hesitated.

“Their magic won’t force them into a relationship or anything like that?”

Narcissa was shocked into silence. How could she think that, like magic was some kind of malevolent power? But, of course, she was a muggle, fundamentally incapable of understanding what it was like to be a magical being. Her understanding was purely academic, simply information gathered from what she’d seen and been told. And she had confided in Narcissa that Hermione’s bouts of accidental magic had terrified her parents, who hadn't known what was happening with their daughter, to the point where they'd decided not to have another child for fear of bringing anybody else into an unstable situation. Viewed from that perspective Helen’s fears were justified.

“Hermione’s magic is her. It is not an outside force that can be used to compel her to do anything. It is a part of her being, she simply has to learn how to use it in a controlled manner, just as we learn to control our bodies: to crawl, then to walk, then to run; our minds to process language, then to read. Learning to use magic is just a part of growing up. So of course they will have a choice, I'm not even certain they will end up in a romantic relationship at all. As I said, I saw potential and it was for something extraordinary. So I encouraged a friendship, but they forged that all on their own.”

“You’re still asking us to take your word for it,” Richard accused.

Lucius growled again and she sighed, she supposed she should be thankful that he hadn't tried hex the man.

“You’re right, for the moment. But ask her, ask Hermione about Draco, see how she reacts. I know that she’s made some friends at Hogwarts and I’m thrilled for her, but I’m telling you, those bonds won’t be able to compare to the one she shares with my son. I can feel it. Did you notice how at ease they are with each other? Draco’s never made friends easily and from what Hermione’s told me neither has she. And yet they act like they shared a cradle rather than really only having known each other a few months.”

Helen glanced at her husband.

“She talks about Draco the most,” she admitted, “far more than anybody else, and I don’t think she even has any idea she's doing it. It's like he's just on her mind a lot. And she seems more settled, how did you put it,” she looked at Narcissa thoughtfully for a moment, “grounded. That's it, she's not so desperate to prove herself, her life doesn't seem to completely revolve around her school work anymore. I thought it was just being at Hogwarts and around other magical people, but after what you just said, I'm reconsidering,” she shrugged.
“Nothing needs to be decided today. The two of you talk,” she looked between Richard and Helen, “talk to Hermione. But please consider allowing her to spend some time here over the summer so that we can help her with some simple control exercises at least.”

“We’ll do that,” Helen said, “and we won't force Hermione into anything, but I highly doubt she'd refuse an opportunity to practice her magic.”

Richard went to say something but his wife interrupted.

“Tell me this isn’t ultimately what we've hoped for for years, for Hermione to have friends, a support system aside from us? We wouldn't refuse to let her visit a friend in our world whose parents we'd met and whose house we'd seen. Are you honestly worried she won't be safe here? Or are you doing the overprotective father thing because Draco’s a boy and Narcissa’s just confided in us that she thinks they might be more than just friends one day? Something, may I remind you, she was under no obligation to share with us, she's being very gracious.”

Richard harrumphed but obviously couldn't argue her point. Narcissa was actually rather glad her husband wasn't the only one behaving unreasonably, it lessened her embarrassment.

They ceased serious discussion for the night after that and adjourned to the dining room for dinner. The atmosphere was tense, conversation stilted, but all in all she thought it went reasonably well. The children seemed content, at least, if a little wary of the adults’ behavior. The elves were especially attentive to Hermione and Narcissa knew that they too had noticed that she was important to their young master.

It was only later that night when she was in bed alone, having banished Lucius to a guest suite until he was prepared to apologize for his churlish behavior, that she noticed something was different. At first she thought it was discomfort at the idea of sleeping alone, but she quickly dismissed that. The change wasn’t bad, but it was significant. She reached out for her bonds with her son and husband. Her connection with Draco was as strong as it ever was due to their proximity and the fact that he was safe and at peace tucked inside the ancient wards of their ancestral home. She felt a little dissociated from Lucius, but he was there and safe, if a little restless, but that served him right. But no, there it was, a new bond, the weakest of the three but present: a new member of her family.

She knew then that she’d been missing something rather vital for months. She had been so busy observing and encouraging Hermione and Draco’s bond that she’d been blind to her own with the girl. She hadn’t just spotted a potential life mate for Draco in the bookshop that day, she’d seen a daughter. She grinned to herself as her heart filled with warmth. She had a daughter now, another child who needed her. She would never attempt to take her from the Grangers, of course, but there were simply things that they couldn’t provide for her. Narcissa could guide her as not just a woman, but as a witch. She almost wanted to giggle, she couldn't wait to see Lucius’ face when he figured it out, their marital bond was simply too strong for him not to accept her as his daughter now that she already had. He would come not just to accept but to love her, and no matter what happened between her and Draco she would always be a part of their family. Despite the fact that
she was sleeping alone and would no doubt have a restless night, it had been a very good day.
Hermione worried that she had upset Mrs. Malfoy. As eager as she’d felt to escape the tense atmosphere in the sitting room, she also worried about what her and Draco’s dismissal meant. She was quickly distracted from this worry because Malfoy Manor was the most wonderful place on earth. While Hogwarts was haunting and mysterious, a true castle; the Malfoy seat was opulent and enchanting, the palace of her fairy tale dreams. She was further charmed by Draco’s surprisingly unpretentious tour. He’d grabbed her hand the instant they’d departed their parents’ company and insisted that their first stop be the kitchens, pulling her along the entire way in his excitement. The house was breathtaking and for the first time Draco was openly behaving like her friend, like she was somebody he wanted to impress.

“Our elves make the best...well, everything Hermione,” he’d insisted.

They’d entered the room, which would have been the height of modernity in any nineteenth century manor home, but catching a glimpse at the floating platters and self scrubbing pans, Hermione suspected there was no suffering for lack of modern appliances. She was less certain about the beings- the previously mentioned elves, she supposed- she saw working about within. They were unlike any creature she’d ever seen and they seemed completely oblivious to their presence, that is until Draco cleared his throat. They turned as one to look at him and it was as if the sun had come up early.

“How will Hermione know how good your chocolate biscuits are?” he pleaded, apparently with
total sincerity.

“Miss,” Jema said with a slight bow to Hermione, “when you return to Malfoy Manor we will be honored to serve you whatever the Little Master wishes, given that Mistress has not ordered a meal.”

She watched Draco’s cheeks pink slightly at the ‘Little Master’ moniker, but she was rather charmed with the byplay, perhaps he was less spoiled than she’d imagined. When she’d wanted a stray biscuit she’d been able to swipe it with stealth, he’d apparently had an army of minders. That was amusing.

“Show me your room?” she asked in an attempt to retrieve his dignity, she was too young to realize that the comment could be interpreted as suggestive.

A smaller elf came racing after them as they exited the kitchen.

“Master Draco!”

“Evie?” he questioned.

“I’ve brought you something,” she said conspiratorially.

She handed him a small parchment wrapped bundle. He laid a hand fondly on her head.

“Thanks Evie.”

“Thank you Evie,” Hermione echoed, a little baffled by the delighted skip/giggle her words seemed to elicit from the elf.

They strolled through the halls, sharing the package that contained a combination of chocolate biscuits—which were, as Draco had insisted, the best she’d ever tasted, and shortbread, which was Hermione’s favorite—and he pointed out an interesting landmark here and there.

“Evie seems especially fond of you,” she observed, unsure what to make of these elves in general, or that one in particular.

He chuckled.

“She’s Rumi’s sister,” at her look of incomprehension he continued, “Rumi is to become by personal elf, officially, upon my betrothal or coming of age, Evie is set to be my wife’s elf. She is anxious for that to happen, she keeps busy enough but she wants a mistress, in the meantime she
dotes on me.”

Hermione couldn't identify it but there was something heartwarming about the way Draco spoke of the elves, there was also something that bothered her about the whole thing.

“You're already preparing for a wife?”

“Well, sure, I wouldn't want to find a witch only to insult her by making her think I wasn't serious in my suit.”

“You're eleven,” said Hermione slowly, like that explained it all.

He just shrugged.

“My parents were betrothed at 14.”

Hermione contemplated this, it wasn’t really that big of a revelation, it wasn’t that long ago that such practices were common in the muggle world, still were in some cultures, and she’d seen enough to know that magical Britain was very old fashioned. Then there was the fact that she had gathered, from Mrs. Malfoy’s own characterization of her husband, and Draco’s various descriptions of his parents marriage, that it was actually quite a healthy and loving relationship. This was admittedly difficult for Hermione to understand, as far as she could tell the man was absolutely terrifying, but she trusted Draco and his mother. And she didn't think Draco’s parents would ever allow him to attach himself to a witch who was unsuited or unworthy of him. No, it was Draco’s very mention of a wife that irked her, almost made her sad, she just didn’t know why.

“This house is remarkable,” she said, to distract herself from her thoughts.

“I know,” Draco smirked, “and this is my suite,” he said, dramatically throwing open a door.

Suite. He had a suite. Hermione was used to nice things. Her parents made a good living, she’d had everything she’d ever needed and most of the things she’d wanted growing up. She'd traveled, had private tutors when her primary school couldn't fulfill all of her educational needs, but this was on an entirely different level. Life was apparently very different for the other half.

It was surprisingly understated. His suite opened into what appeared to be his own personal sitting room which he’d obviously turned into his own personal library; there was a large bedroom, a luxurious bathroom, and a dressing room. The finishes were refined, but not opulent, and the colors were muted. They were on the third floor of the house, overlooking what she could already tell were enormous grounds she hoped to be able to explore sometime. She felt very comfortable in his space. In fact, she was completely envious.
“This is wonderful, Draco,” she sighed.

“I like it,” he shrugged with faux humility.

“I like the blue,” she noted the theme throughout the rooms, she’d expected green or silver, maybe even grey.

“Blue has always represented House Malfoy, since before the emigration from France in the eleventh century,” he said importantly.

She rolled her eyes at his attitude. That was when Raffie popped into the room. Hermione let out a little yelp.

“I am very sorry Young Mistress,” he said with a bow.

She waved him off and didn’t notice Draco’s confused frown.

“Your presence is requested in the main dining room,” the elf intoned.

“Thank you Raffie,” Draco responded and then took her hand and drug her back downstairs.

Dinner was awkward but not as terrible as she’d feared when they’d been dismissed from the adults’ presence. Things were at least civil and the food was delicious. She avoided Lord Malfoy’s gaze at all costs, though she swore she could feel his eyes boring holes through her skull. Draco had grown up with this man as his father and yet it was his grandfather that he hated? Hermione couldn’t imagine how terrible he must have been.

Mrs. Malfoy summoned her back to the Manor a couple of days later while her parents were at work and she knew that she was in trouble. She understood now how stupid it had been to experiment with her magic alone, and especially to practice conjuring magical fire in her bed. She’d read the horror stories, she knew enough about magical accidents, especially in wizards as young as she was, and she should have known better, but she’d just been so excited. She hadn’t considered the consequences. The stern talking to she’d been given had been humbling. The way the older witch had held her to her bosom and let her cry out her regret and humiliation and then absolutely insisted that she refer to her as ‘Narcissa’ was steadying. She was well and truly on Hermione’s side.

“We all make mistakes, dear girl, this one was dangerous, but I have complete confidence that you will learn from it. You are an extraordinary witch, but you must learn how to handle that.”

Hermione had just nodded miserably, despairing at having disappointed this woman she so admired. But Narcissa poo-pooed that away. She spoke to her about the dangers of experimenting
alone, a lesson Hermione no longer needed. And then she talked to her about not revealing her
talents openly. At first Hermione had been appalled at the idea of hiding her abilities, but Narcissa
explained that she would never expect Hermione to purposefully perform badly at school, just that
she didn’t need to exhibit her full power to the entire population of Hogwarts. Narcissa had seemed
particularly distressed by the idea that somebody might spot her apparently better than average
abilities and find a way to exploit her. It was a little beyond Hermione's understanding, but she
trusted Narcissa, so she’d promised.

They’d returned to Hogwarts with every hope of an easy end to term. It was not to come to pass. In
fact, almost everything seemed to go wrong. Only a couple of days off of the Easter holidays and
Hagrid appeared in the library acting strangely, like he had something to hide. Harry and Ron
could not be convinced to leave it alone.

So, they'd visited him in his hut and made a frightening discovery. He had a dragon’s egg- a
dragon’s egg- Hermione could not imagine being more in over her head, even Fluffy seemed tame
in comparison. Especially because Hagrid would not see reason. She liked the man, she thought he
had a good heart, but this was insanity. He thought he could raise a baby dragon in a wooden hut in
full view of a school full of children. Hermione didn't want to turn Hagrid in, but it seemed like by
far the safest option, but Harry’s hysterical reaction made that idea impossible.

They were in Hagrid's house watching the dragon hatch- admittedly a breathtaking sight, even as it
was utterly terrifying- when she saw him peeking through the window. She spotted him long
before anybody else did, she could not miss that remarkable blond hair, and then his familiar face
staring back at her. But just as she could not betray Hagrid or her Gryffindor boys, she could not
betray Draco, so she said nothing. As annoying as his lurking was, they were the ones technically
in the wrong. Harry and Ron spotted him as he was leaving and were incensed, still she said
nothing.

It took her a full day and a half to track him down. He was lounging casually in his favorite corner
of the library and she felt herself suddenly angry. Something about his easy demeanor and
nonchalant attitude, while she was all wound up, irked her.

“You can’t just tell on Hagrid,” she hissed.

He froze and then slowly looked up from his book to meet her eyes.

“You have got to be kidding me,” he spat.

“I. Am. Not. For once in your life think of somebody else! He doesn’t mean any harm! You could
run him out of his job, out of his home!” she defended passionately.

He breathed angrily through his nose and then stood up and threw his book into his chair.

“My name means dragon, Hermione. I’ve been studying them since I can remember. My father
created a section in our library dedicated to dragons so that I could understand why I could never have one as a pet. When I turned six I wanted one for my birthday, we keep a lot of animals on the estate, after all, I thought I should be allowed to keep my namesake. Do you know what I learnt? Dragons, no matter their breed, are dangerous and territorial; they cannot be reasoned with, and they grow at an alarming rate!” he ranted, really building up some steam, “Two years ago while on holiday we visited a dragon preserve, we watched the handlers work. It took twelve fully trained wizards who also had additional dragon handling training to get even partial control over one of the animals in order to do a health check. And that was a fairly tame Welsh Green! That beast in his hut will roast your Hagrid in weeks if somebody doesn’t get it out of here soon, and then it will start in on the rest of us. I don’t intend to be dragon fodder and nobody else is doing anything about it. Did you and your golden boys have some glorious plan I wasn’t aware of?” he mocked.

Oh, how she wanted to lash out, to counter his assuredness, his arrogance, but she couldn’t. Hagrid was immune to their pleas, and the dragon was growing frighteningly large and it had been less than 48 hours. She liked the man but she resented the position he’d put them in.

“What have you done?” she asked in a hushed whisper.

“I’ve written my father,” he said simply, “he’s on the Board of Governors of Hogwarts. I’m surprised he hasn’t been here yet, but perhaps he’s gathering support from the other Governors first, Dumbledore’s slippery.”

“Maybe they think he’s wrong,” she countered half-heartedly.

“You think it’s acceptable for the Hogwarts gamekeeper to attempt to raise a dragon on the grounds in secret?”

“Well no, but he’s a kind soul, and Harry says that he’s very-”

“Would you please stop using Potter as an excuse,” he interrupted abruptly, “I get it, he’s Potter, he saved us all, we should worship him,” he said bitterly.

“No, Harry’s a good person and he doesn't want to be worshipped. I was just trying to say that I didn’t think it was fair to judge somebody for one mistake, it’s my impression that Hagrid’s good at his job.”

“One mistake? One mistake?! This isn't a mistake. He's willfully attempting to raise a dangerous beast in an unsuitable environment and he must know what he’s doing is wrong or he wouldn't be hiding it.”

Well, when he put it like that he had a good point. Oh, who was she kidding, she'd known he'd had a good point all along. She deflated.
“Okay,” she said quietly, “you're right, your father can handle it. Can we talk about something else, I'm tired of thinking about this.”

He gave her a long measured glance and then a curt nod.

“How's your charms essay coming?” he offered.

She smiled at him thankfully.

That night in the middle of dinner Lucius Malfoy strode into the Great Hall. He was obviously trying to make an entrance. Hermione was halfway tempted to hide under the table, it was impossible for her to wrap her mind around the fact that this man was the same one Narcissa spoke of so fondly. Given the fierce look he had on his face now, Hagrid might have been more than twice his size but she actually felt sorry for the giant man having to deal with the Malfoy patriarch. She did notice the ugly way Ron sneered at the man and had to wonder why, as far as she knew they’d never met. Not to mention, there was bravery and then there was stupidity, and in Hermione’s opinion openly looking at somebody who radiated power the way that Lord Malfoy did in such a disparaging way definitely constituted the latter.

He walked purposefully up to the head table and addressed Dumbledore, but the Headmaster immediately put up some kind of privacy ward so the student populace couldn’t hear their discussion. They left the Hall along with McGonagall and Hagrid just minutes later to much frantic whispering from three of the four house tables, Slytherin was notably muted. Hermione didn’t dare say anything herself even as the boys panicked.

They didn’t discover anything until the next morning when, after a hurried breakfast they went to find Hagrid. The large man was a mess and it was rather pitiful to see. Norbert had been removed, turned over to the care of a dragon preserve in Norway, his native land. Hagrid himself was on probation. He had to submit to regular inspections of his hut and of his duties if he wanted to remain at Hogwarts. Hermione thought that was actually completely reasonable given his track record (she hadn’t forgotten Fluffy, she knew the headmaster was aware of the Cerberus but that didn’t change the fact that Hagrid didn’t seem to understand that any of these animals were dangerous) still, she felt terrible. She had been complicit in this.

“He’s been put on probation,” she bemoaned to Draco once she’d found him.

“He should have been fired,” he shot back, “in fact, he was lucky to avoid Azkaban, Dumbledore must have really thrown his weight around.”

“He doesn’t deserve to go to jail!” she wailed, shocked by his callousness.

“Why not? I thought we’d been through this. He did something wrong, not just wrong but illegal, and now he’s just gotten a slap on the wrist. What’s to keep him from doing it again?”
“Well, he is being watched,” she argued half heartedly.

“Not forever,” he grumbled.

“Why are you being so stubborn about this?” she huffed, plopping down beside him.

“You could have been hurt,” he snapped, his eyes locking on hers.

She inhaled sharply.

“I know you were sneaking down there when that thing was still there, what exactly do you think you or Potter or Weasley could have done against a dragon, even a baby one? They're magic resistant. And Hagrid doesn’t even have a wand, but he kept letting you go down there, putting yourself in danger, and all he was worried about was keeping his stupid pet!”

She was shocked by his intensity.

“What do you think my mother would do if she knew? You thought she was upset about the bluebell flames, that’s nothing in comparison!”

“Draco,” she said, suddenly feeling enormously guilty.

She hadn’t considered anybody’s feeling other than Harry, Ron, and Hagrid’s and they had been the ones blatantly flaunting the rules. Why had she not thought of Narcissa, of her own parents? How had it not occurred to her that Draco might actually be worried, she would have been in his place.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to rat you out, it’s over now. But do you think you could stop acting like it’s not a big deal!!”

She just nodded, eyes wide.

“Thank you, Draco, for doing something I wasn’t brave enough to do,” she swallowed thickly, “and for caring.”

It was his turn to nod, and then he ducked his head but she saw his cheeks tinge pink.

“Can I ask you a question?” she asked, remembering something.
“Sure, but I can choose not to answer,” he looked up at her and smirked.

That was more like it.

“What is the deal between your family and the Weasleys? I mean, you and Ron seemed to hate each other on sight. And Ron was looking at your father like he was evil incarnate when he was here yesterday.”

She'd considered asking Narcissa but she wasn't sure if the woman would consider it an impertinence. If Draco didn't want to answer he'd just tell her it was none of her business.

“As far back as I know Malfoys and Weasleys haven’t seen eye to eye,” he said, apparently unoffended.

“How so? Is this about them being poor?” she asked sharply, she'd heard Draco make enough comments on the subject.

He sneered.

“Partly,” he said dismissively.

She opened her mouth to protest when he cut her off.

“Don’t lecture me Hermione. As distasteful as I find their poverty, that’s not the reason that the families don’t get along, at least not by itself.”

“What do you mean?” she huffed.

“Well, first of all, they just assume that we’re evil because we’re all in Slytherin.”

She couldn't really argue with that, Ron and his brothers’ opinions all seemed very decided on the subject of Slytherin House. Though that wasn't uncommon in Hogwarts as a whole.

“Well, you hate Gryffindor.”

“You lot can be obnoxious, but you're a Gryffindor and I like you just fine,” he countered, and she resisted the urge to point out that that hadn't always been the case, “Do you remember the Weasley twins booing Millicent Bulstrode when she was sorted? She was the first placed in Slytherin. How do you think that made the rest of us feel, especially the rest of us who knew we were going to be sorted into Slytherin? Millicent was humiliated, that was the very first thing to happen to her at Hogwarts.”
She did vaguely remember that, but she'd been so worried about her own sorting it was quickly forgotten. And while she sometimes found the Weasley twins funny, a lot of the time she thought how they acted could be described as bullying, especially to the younger kids, and especially to Slytherins. Not that Draco had a lot of room to judge that either, though he had improved, she hoped maybe it was because he didn't want her to be disappointed in him.

“They shouldn’t have done that,” she conceded, “but still, that's just House rivalries, it seems a little thin.”

“They're irresponsible,” he responded immediately.

“Irresponsible?” she asked incredulously.

“Yes!” he snapped, growing annoyed, “they have too many kids.”

“Who are you to judge that!” she exclaimed, her voice taking on an unnaturally high pitch, automatically feeling defensive of her friend’s family.

“They have too many kids that they can’t afford,” he clarified.

“They may not have as much as you, or even me, but they seem to do okay,” she continued to defend, though she felt slightly chastened, she’d seen enough of their situation to know that he had something of a point, but Draco really had no concept of how an average person lived and she thought he was probably exaggerating, if unintentionally.

She was startled by Draco’s sudden sardonic laughter.

“I doubt very much that they would have been able to put even one of their brats through Hogwarts, not without the help of families like mine!”

“What do you mean?” she asked, her curiosity driving the last of the fight out of her.

“There’s a trust at Hogwarts, it’s meant to assure that all children from our community who are accepted to Hogwarts can afford to go. It’s funded, mostly, by a few of the wealthiest families including House Malfoy,” the pride in his voice unmistakable as he finished speaking.

“You’re saying the Weasley children's tuition have been paid by this trust?”

“Yes.”
“But, isn’t that what it’s there for? I mean, that’s what you just said.”

“Yes, but for them to take advantage of it like that, to just take for granted that their children could attend without them having to provide the funds is unconscionable.”

She must have still looked puzzled because he continued.

“I don’t know how it is with muggles, but here children are precious.”

Hermione just nodded. While she’d certainly say that muggles valued children, she’d learned enough to know that it was slightly different in the magical community, which had always been so small that they treasured their children above all else for what they were, the means to pass on their heritage and, quite literally, to keep magic alive.

“To continue to have them, just because you can, when you can’t afford them isn’t just wrong, it’s vulgar. Even my parents wouldn’t have considered so many children, not that they don’t have the galleons, but because they simply wouldn’t have had the time to devote to the grooming and education of them all. Tell me, Hermione, how prepared do you feel Weasley was for Hogwarts?” he asked, knowingly quirking an eyebrow.

And to that she really didn’t have a response, because it shocked her sometimes how little Ron seemed to know about magic, despite the fact that he’d not only grown up in this world, but was a pureblood- which meant that all of his family was magical.

“They don’t teach them about our customs, our way of life. If everybody neglected their children like that I don’t know how we would survive,” he sniffed.

At last Hermione found her voice.

“But what about people like me? I didn’t even know about magic before a year and a half ago. There are so many things I don’t know. Do you think that I’ll never fit in, that I’ll ruin your way of life?” she questioned desperately, truly fearful, because she knew that Draco and his father’s view of muggleborns was not good, and now she was beginning to understand why, and she was terrified that they may actually have a point.

He sighed heavily.

“That’s what I always thought,” he said.

She looked away to hide the tears threatening to spill down her cheeks.
“But my mother says that there aren’t many of you. Only four in our whole class, the rest of us can teach you, that's why it's so important that children from magical families are instructed properly, there's no excuse for the Weasley's neglect.”

“So, my blood status doesn't bother you?”

“Mother also says it’s important that we infuse fresh blood into our society or we won’t have any children at all anymore,” he shrugged, “why do you think Mother’s basically taken you in? She wants you to find a place here.”

She moved without thinking, throwing her arms around his neck and hugging him tight. He stiffened but she barely noticed and only pulled away when, after several long moments, she finally realized that his arms still hung limply by his sides.

“Sorry,” she said, relieved to find that when she looked at him he didn’t appear offended, just confused, and a touch uncomfortable, “I think that’s one muggle thing that magicals should do more of, there’s nothing like a good hug,” she grinned at him cheekily.

He just looked away and squirmed.

“But what about your father?” she asked.

Draco shrugged.

“Father is very protective, especially of Mother. She doesn’t usually take to people the way she’s taken to you, so he worries. But he could never deny her something that was important to her and she’s made it pretty clear that you are.”

“Does that bother you?” she wondered, she wasn’t a fool, she knew Draco wasn’t exactly used to sharing, Claire spent a lot of time at Malfoy Manor but his cousin was one thing, a random classmate he hadn’t even known a year was another.

He looked at her, frowning thoughtfully and then he slowly shook his head.

“No, I mean we’re friends, right? So, if you’re going to be around that’s alright with me.”

Hermione felt herself flush with pleasure but she could tell that Draco was surprised by his own words. She was glad though. She and her parents had a talk after their dinner at Malfoy Manor and they’d told her of Narcissa’s offer to allow her to come over to the Manor during the day over the summer to practice her magic and learn control exercises. She intended to take advantage of that as much as possible without wearing out her welcome, but she had been slightly worried about invading Draco’s territory. Perhaps he would actually enjoy having her around.
“So, Malfoys and Weasleys have fundamental disagreements about what’s important?” she asked, returning to the subject at hand.

He shrugged.

“I guess you could put it that way. And it's been going on for generations so it's...bitter.”

She nodded.

“Thank you for telling me that,” she finally said.

He looked at her thoughtfully.

“You can ask me about stuff, you know? And not just about school, I won't make fun of you.”

Hermione was touched, he could be very thoughtful when he wasn't trying so hard to be a git.

“Thanks,” she turned and grinned at him teasingly, “I guess in return I'll just have to teach you about muggle life.”

He looked momentarily appalled before he hid it behind an emotionless mask. She just laughed at him.

If all she'd had to worry about after the dragon was taken care of was exams it would have been stressful enough, but then of course there was the stupid Philosopher’s Stone. She liked to think she'd learnt her lesson over Norbert and she tried to get the boys to drop the whole thing. She couldn't imagine why Professor Dumbledore felt the need to hide it in the school, but he was one of the most powerful wizards of all time, surely he knew what he was doing. But Harry was obsessed and Ron thought it all some grand adventure, so she settled for doing what damage control she could to try and keep them out of trouble, she just wanted to make it until summer.

But then Professor Dumbledore left school for a meeting and Professor McGonagall hadn't believed that the stone was in danger. Harry was determined to go after Snape and Ron determined to accompany him. She told herself she'd tried her best to get help, and it was too late to write for it. She couldn't just abandon her friends, especially because out of the three of them she was the most logical and therefore the best problem solver, and she knew by far the most spells. She couldn't forget they'd come after her in that bathroom on Halloween. It wasn't until she was participating in a life sized game of chess complete with pieces built to destroy each other that she determined next time she got even a hint of something awry, she was going straight to Narcissa.

The story was out in hours, not the real one of course but everybody knew that she, Harry, and Ron
had been out after curfew on the forbidden third floor corridor, that Harry had been injured in the
course of events, and Professor Quirrell killed. Only the three of them knew the terrible truth.
They’d been wrong about Snape working for Voldemort, it had been Quirrell, and he wasn't just
his agent, he had been sharing his body with him. Voldemort had been teaching them Defense
Against the Dark Arts all year and even now he still wasn't dead.

The first meal she returned for in the Great Hall she learned that Draco was truly his father’s son.
She felt his eyes on her before she even glanced toward the Slytherin table and when she met them
they were so full of betrayal and loathing that it almost physically knocked her backwards. She
knew how it looked to him. Like she'd chosen Harry and Ron over him, put herself in danger again
when he'd bailed her out last time, and once again she hadn't considered his feelings. It only got
worse when the Headmaster awarded herself, Ron, and Harry points at the Leaving Feast, allowing
Gryffindor to steal the House cup from Slytherin at the very last moment. She felt sick with guilt.
He wouldn't talk to her, wouldn't even look at her after that and by the time she debarked the train
in London for the summer she was thoroughly depressed.

Chapter End Notes

I think I've fixed the formatting issues with this story, please tell me if something has
gone wrong. I'm so thankful for those who have read and commented, especially
because the first formatting was hard for even me to read and I wrote the thing! Enjoy
and let me know what you think!
Chapter 5

Panic. It was an unfamiliar emotion for Narcissa. She was a Slytherin, she handled things in a calm and rational manner and she had her equally Slytherin husband at her side to aid her in doing so. Not since 1981, before the Dark Lord had been vanquished and her mad sister had been sent to prison, had she felt so out of control. Abraxas was supposed to be the last obstacle to their freedom and their happiness. She was only given approximately a hundred days to enjoy that freedom.

The frantic almost nonsensical letter from Hermione during the last week of Hogwarts term was alarming. On top of the fact that Lucius had already visited the school in the last weeks to take care of the issue of a dragon on the grounds, it felt especially ominous. Because it meant that all was obviously not well at Hogwarts, and the staff could not be counted upon to keep the students safe. Draco’s terse, one line reply to her inquiry about his well being was more concerning still. His absolute refusal to acknowledge Hermione at Kings Cross was like a knife to the heart. She hugged and kissed the girl in greeting, ignoring Draco’s cold behavior, and to her very great relief Hermione was anxious to speak with her in private and they agreed to meet the next day for a chat.

Draco’s attitude was atrocious. She knew he was upset about losing the house cup but that didn't excuse his behavior. He wouldn't talk about what was bothering him beyond that, but any mention of Hermione was met with a sneer or the occasional snide remark. Lucius seemed to find their quarrel rather amusing, chalked it up to typical childish behavior, though by the end of his first night home Draco’s surly behavior was wearing on his father as well.

Hermione arrived bright and early the next morning and they settled into a sitting room adjacent to the master suite in the wing she and Lucius had inhabited since their marriage for what would turn out to be the longest- literally and metaphorically- discussion of Narcissa’s life. They'd not been in the room five minutes when the story came pouring out of the poor girl. It soon became apparent that there was actually a lifetime of sorrow in this tale, not just the past weeks, because she began by explaining how she'd never fit into her parents’ world, how lonely her childhood had been, how she knew her parents fretted about her accidental magic. Her acceptance to Hogwarts had been a relief for them all. Narcissa knew most of this, primarily from talking to Helen, but the details Hermione gave her that morning made it clear that she'd seriously underestimated how difficult muggle life had been for the young witch and that she'd hidden quite a bit from her parents, not wanting to burden them further.

As heartbreaking as that was, it was worse to hear about her first months at Hogwarts, how alone she felt when she was rejected for her blood status and her studiousness, her despair at realizing she didn't fit in any better in the magical world than she did in the muggle world; because it was the beliefs Narcissa had held for a lifetime, right up until a few months ago, views she'd taught her son, that had caused Hermione this pain. Shame was not a feeling she was accustomed to and she didn't enjoy it. But she held her emotions in check, allowing Hermione to unburden herself without interference.

Unfortunately, it just continued to get worse: her foolish son challenging the Potter boy to a duel which led to Hermione and her housemates being out after curfew and discovering a Cerberus tucked away in a forbidden corridor, hidden behind only the simplest of locking spells; a troll wandering the castle and very nearly killing her precious girl before Narcissa had ever even gotten to meet her. She'd thought the dragon was bad. Well, it was bad, but at least it hadn't been inside the castle.
And then, foolish Gryffindors that they were, Hermione and her friends couldn't let the mystery of the treasure the Cerberus had been hiding go. They'd spent half the school year poking around things they had no business being involved in, things that turned out to be far more dangerous than a giant three headed dog. It was when Hermione confirmed the suspicion that Narcissa had developed as she told her tale that the older witch truly began to panic. The Dark Lord wasn't dead, he wasn't even vanquished from these shores, he had been in the castle with her children all year. The news could hardly be worse.

Narcissa almost wanted to believe this was all the result of a child’s overactive imagination, that she could scold Hermione for telling tales and forget about it. But she didn't really think that Hermione would fabricate such a story, and as she continued to talk it became clear that she wouldn't have been able to even had she wanted. She simply knew too much, too many details, too much about how certain archaic magicks worked. No twelve year old witch could have made this up, especially not one raised outside of their community.

But it didn't stop there. After the traumatic events inside the headmaster’s demented obstacle course the two boys that had been with her had injuries requiring hospitalization, but Hermione had simply been sent to bed without so much as a calming draught. In the following days nobody spoke to her, soothed her, or even punished her for her recklessness. And then at the Leaving Feast they were bizarrely allocated house points for their rule breaking, which pushed Gryffindor over the top for the cup. It was a nonsensical and disturbing series of events. What was Dumbledore playing at?

But it was the wretched way Hermione sobbed Draco’s name, insisting he would never forgive her for doing something so dangerous and then being rewarded for it was the last straw for Narcissa. After everything she'd been through it was the weight of the guilt over hurting Draco that was crushing her. It was further proof that the bond between them was powerful, but here was an unexpectedly dangerous side of that power. You couldn't hurt one of them without hurting the other, disagreements between them could be cataclysmic. At least in this case she could put Hermione’s fears to rest, she knew her son well enough to know this was not beyond repair.

“Sweet girl, Draco will forgive you, I promise you that,” she soothed.

“He hates me,” Hermione insisted as she wiped her eyes with the handkerchief Narcissa had charmed dry for at least the fifth time.

“He doesn’t hate you. He’s upset, and while I will admit he has reason to be upset, he is being rather petulant about it,” she corrected.

“I don’t blame him, he should be mad at me, I would be so mad if I were him,” Hermione insisted. Narcissa nodded.

“Yes, but that will pass. Do you know how I know that?”

Hermione hiccuped and shook her head.

“He’s only as angry as he is because he cares for you so deeply. The issue with the house cup is just an excuse, he knows that wasn’t really your fault. But you scared him and he’s covering that by being angry and sulking.”

“But doesn’t that make it worse?! He’s my best friend, he’s the only one who really listens to me or cares what I think, but I went along with Harry and Ron and I hurt him!” she wailed dramatically.
Narcissa sighed, they truly had a Gryffindor in the family now.

“Sometimes we hurt the ones we love, and sometimes they hurt us, it’s the risk we take in giving parts of ourselves to others. And I’m not going to sugar coat it, there is a lot to be remorseful for in your behavior, we will be having a long talk about that, and about how to avoid getting yourself into trouble like this again. But one thing I know you didn’t mean to do is to hurt Draco, and when he calms down a little he’ll see that too, and he’ll forgive you. He doesn’t want to lose you either.”

Hermione thought about that for a moment and then looked at Narcissa with trusting eyes, nodding slowly. They talked for a long time after that, Narcissa doing her best to impress upon Hermione that she was still young, it was still up to the adults in her life to take care of the serious problems. It had been difficult, but necessary, to point out to her that despite their best intentions they hadn’t even saved the Philosopher’s Stone that night, they’d only put themselves in unnecessary danger. Yes, Quirrel made it through the obstacles but the stone had been perfectly safe hidden by that mirror. Hermione had actually seemed relieved by that revelation. Narcissa could only hope that next time the memory of that would help her remember that she should not take the weight of the world on her shoulders and attempt to solve problems that should be left for others, for adults to take care of.

Narcissa thought that she kept her composure admirably throughout the afternoon, got Hermione back into a somewhat normal state of mind, and sent her home. She made it almost all the way through dinner. She knew Lucius could tell that all was not well, but he was willing to wait for her to come to him. Draco, on the other hand was completely oblivious, and therefore didn’t know that he was treading on thin ice. One snide remark too many about what she and Hermione had been doing locked away all day and she snapped.

“I’m disappointed in you Draco,” she said coldly, “I thought you were a better friend than this. That girl had something utterly traumatic happen to her and yet the thing she’s worried most about is that you won’t forgive her. She needed somebody to talk to and you just turned her away and whinged about losing a silly inner-school competition. Is that the kind of man you want to be, a fair-weather friend?”

Draco’s eyes narrowed and for a moment he looked defiant, but then he looked away, his shoulders slumping. Nobody spoke for the rest of the meal and when it was over Lucius turned to his son.

“Draco, I think it would be best if you retired to your rooms for the night. You are not in trouble, but in the future you will be more respectful of your mother and remember that it is her prerogative to play host to whomever she pleases and it is frankly none of your business. You will also learn to watch your tone,” he said crisply.

Draco nodded eagerly and left the dining room hastily, guilt gripped her heart. He was still very young and his feelings were hurt. She’d meant what she said and yet she should have been kinder, as she had been to Hermione, she had simply been taking out her anxiety on him.

“I think perhaps we should talk, don’t you?” asked Lucius.

She nodded.

“May we go to your study?”

His eyes widened in momentary surprise, she had never before requested the use of his study. The eighteen months or so since Abraxas had become ill and relinquished his Head of House status to Lucius had not been enough time to allow Narcissa to come to view the Lord’s study as a place of refuge. But she knew the wards there were the strongest possible, nobody could enter without
Lucius’ express permission, and if ever a discussion needed to be had in private it was this one. He rounded the table and offered her his arm.

“I was rather harsh with Draco,” she confessed apologetically as she took it, “I will speak with him tomorrow.”

“He was behaving like a spoilt brat, I was about to reprimand him myself. I was only concerned because it was rather uncharacteristic. I believe I can count on one hand the times you’ve lost your temper with him.”

Narcissa sighed.

“I assume your discussion with the girl is your source of distress?”

“She’s not the girl,” she corrected automatically.

“No, your discussion with Hermione,” he amended, exhaling loudly through his nose.

In the weeks since their dinner with the Grangers, Lucius had come to grudgingly accept that Hermione’s place in his wife’s life was not fleeting, but he still wasn’t happy about it.

“It it, but it is not her fault, I do not think she can even begin to grasp the gravity of what she told me.”

They were silent for the rest of the walk. They entered his study and he settled her on the luxurious sofa she’d had specially made for him to lounge on while he read his correspondence. Her reticence to be in the room hadn’t kept her from making every effort to turn it into a comfortable place for him to work, and she was especially glad for that tonight. Lucius went to pour them drinks and she realized that they had an elfin problem to solve before anything else could be accomplished.

“Jema,” she called their head elf quietly.

She popped in immediately.

“Yes Mistress?”

“The master and I need to have a private discussion, please see that we are not disturbed.”

“Of course Mistress.”

“And Jema, please keep an eye on Dobby while we are in here, I fear he can no longer be trusted with the secrets of House Malfoy.”

Narcissa felt slightly guilty asking this of Jema, she knew the shame the rest of the elves felt over Dobby’s behavior, and that they had all avoided him since he’d returned from France. It wasn’t until then that Narcissa had realized how truly insane Abraxas had driven his personal elf, and knew that he could not be counted upon to do his duties and keep their confidence any longer, Abraxas’ cruelty had turned him against them all. Still, it couldn’t be avoided, somebody had to do the job and Jema’s loyalty was unquestioned.

“Yes Mistress,” Jema answered sadly, then in a very uncharacteristic manner she hesitated.

“What is it Jema?”

“Jema does not mean to overstep, but she is concerned, is the young mistress okay? She was very
Narcissa softened, touched by Jema’s concern over Hermione and ever so grateful that Abraxas had, as tradition dictated, allowed his wife to run the household. Because that meant all of the other elves had been treated with respect, despite the last Lord being such a tyrant, and they remained happy and loyal members of said household.

“Oh! Don’t worry about that, Draco and Hermione quarreled and she was very upset about it, but they will get past it and she will be fine.”

Strangely that perked Jema right up. She clasped her hands in front of her and, in a move much more characteristic of juvenile elves, hopped in place happily.

“Oh yes they will! Their bond is strong,” she chirped.

“You can already sense a bond between Draco and Hermione?” she asked, rather dumbfounded, she had assumed the elves treatment of Hermione was simply due to the way that she and Draco treated her; elf magic was powerful but limited, used only to sense and serve their family.

Jema looked at Narcissa like she had lost her mind.

“Of course, the family magic has already begun to call for our Young Mistress. Young Master can sense it, Jema thought Mistress knew? They will do great things, House Malfoy will flourish,” she said with a large grin, trembling with excitement.

Narcissa swallowed thickly, as far as she knew the children hadn’t made any promises to each other that could begin to be construed as binding vows, was it possible that their natural affinity was enough to evoke Malfoy family magic? She hadn’t known that was possible, but perhaps it accounted for her own bond with the girl, and for Lucius’ easy (relatively speaking) acceptance of the situation. Or maybe her own intentions had been the trigger? Perhaps Hermione was just always meant to be a Malfoy, one way or the other.

“I’m very happy to hear that,” she said wearily, she was becoming overwhelmed by the revelations of the day, “but perhaps you and the other elves could just refer to her as Miss Hermione until she and Draco make things more official?”

Jema nodded eagerly.

“Jema understands, the Young Master and Mistress are younglings still, we will not tell them what we know.”

“Thank you Jema, that will be all.”

She nodded and popped away.

“The elves see it too,” she said to Lucius who had his back to her, still pouring their drinks: Firewhiskey for him, and for her a specialty liqueur he’d had developed for her as an anniversary gift the year Draco was born, at the time she’d joked that he meant to ply her with alcohol in hopes she’d forget how much she’d hated him while in labor; a memory which suddenly felt like it belonged in a different lifetime.

Lucius snorted.

“And I assume if the elves condone it we will next be taking in orphaned goblins, lost centaurs, and perhaps baby giants?” he asked sarcastically, without turning from his task.
“Do be serious, Lucius,” she said, any lightheartedness gone from her voice.

It was only when he suddenly spun around to face her that she realized that there were tears streaming down her cheeks, he visibly blanched. Ignoring the glasses he’d prepared for them he strode over to her. She closed her eyes, trying to gain control over herself and so she only felt when he began to nudge her along the sofa, and then he was surrounding her, she was encapsulated by him, he’d pulled her between his legs allowing her to rest against his chest as his arms went around her while his own long body stretched the length of the piece of furniture.

He began to meticulously remove her hairpins, the only sound in the room the ‘plink, plink’ of those pins hitting a side table as he dropped them. Task complete, he ran his hands through her waist length hair, soothingly, hypnotically, the way he’d learnt to comfort her more than two decades ago when Andromeda had left home and never returned, and she’d been absolutely wrecked; as they had been then her sobs were violent but silent. He said nothing, he did not attempt to hush her or offer her empty platitudes. She knew he would do everything in his power to make this better for her, but it was a matter of honor that he would not offer her something that he may not be able to deliver.

Eventually she calmed, she knew it had been a very long time that she’d been crying, that Lucius had charmed his handkerchief dry many times, as she had done for Hermione earlier that day. She had needed that, she had needed him. She was not sure she could live without him, at least not much of a life, and given what she’d learned today that only made her more terrified, because he was bound to an un-dead monster.

“Are you ready to tell me what is the matter?” he asked, she felt the question as much as she heard it, pressed against his chest as she was.

She took a deep breath and steeled herself, the burden of her knowledge had just begun to really sink in and she wished more than anything that she didn’t have to share it with him, but she knew that was not an option. She sat up enough to be able to twist slightly and look him in the eye, she owed him that much. He gripped the hand resting on his chest, instinctively knowing she needed his support.

“He isn’t dead.”

There was a long silence.

“Cissa,” he eventually said, “what are you talking about?”

“The Dark Lord,” she nearly choked over the phrase, “he isn’t gone, far from it, he was in the castle all year with our children.”

Lucius’ entire body froze, his other hand went still in her hair. She waited patiently, she had not expected this to go well.

“Explain,” he said tersely.

And so she did. Every detail of the last year at Hogwarts that she knew, everything felt like a painful confession, even if it wasn’t really her confession. Her hand traveled up and around his neck, finding his hair in a neatly tied queue. She released the tie on the small black ribbon and began to kneed her own way through his hair.

“I am sorry, my darling, but I fear this is all quite a lot for me,” she apologized, and she hated it, she would have preferred to be strong for him.
The Dark Lord’s continuing existence was a nightmare for them all, but Lucius was the one who had a tracking charm/torture device imbedded into his arm. It had become clear during the war that one could not simply ignore a summons, on top of what the Dark Lord may do when he caught you, he could make you wish you'd never even been born while he hunted you. The idea that the Dark Mark was an honor was laughable, it was a brand and those that carried it no more than slaves; only the deranged devoted never saw that. Of course amongst that number were her sister and his father, the Malfoys’ loyalty was supposedly unquestioned. They were in deep, she was not certain the Light would even accept their defection, if they decided to try that route, not without proving themselves.

“What do you suggest we do?”

Narcissa froze, it was not uncommon for Lucius to seek her counsel but for him to so plainly ask for her opinion was unprecedented.

“I do not know,” she admitted, “I’m so frightened, I didn’t see this coming at all, I knew there were rumors, I knew your father never really gave up hope, but I didn’t believe it. There was a body, I didn't think even the Dark Lord could escape death like that.

“Do you want to go to Dumbledore?” he questioned, the man was, after all, the unquestioned leader of the Light.

“No,” she answered automatically, but as soon as she said it she knew it was the right choice, “he will do his best for whatever he sees as the greater good, not for our family. And some of his actions this past year, I cannot begin to explain. It may be necessary to seek him out as an ally at some point, but we need a clearer view of the whole board before we even consider that.”

“I do love your mind,” Lucius observed, almost absentmindedly.

She felt a flush of pleasure, it never got old; everybody thought she was beautiful and well mannered, only Lucius thought she was brilliant and cunning. She didn't mind, saving it for him, but she enjoyed the reinforcement of her worth. It was something she had to, grudgingly, admit that she and both of her sisters had in common: they aspired to more than they’d been bred to be.

“We have to tell the children, it would be irresponsible not to. Not everything, of course, but enough. They must be on their guard,” she added, instead of commenting.

“You persist in including Miss Granger in our plans?” he questioned snidely.

“Hermione,” she corrected once again, “and you do realize that we wouldn't have this information without her? We very well could have been blindsided.”

“She makes things more dangerous for us.”

Narcissa considered this.

“In a way, and in a way she make things less dangerous. What are you planning to do, Lucius? Go back to the Dark Lord when he inevitably returns to power? Because we both know he won't stop until he does, he is as relentless as he is cruel. And then what, lay low and just hope we all survive? That is a foolish strategy and you know it, it nearly got us killed last time, and my understanding is that he has spent more than a decade as a wraith, when he returns to full power he will be more insane than ever. We will need allies on the Light side to help us take him down, and Hermione can help us accumulate them. She's a muggleborn Gryffindor and Harry Potter’s best friend, if I didn't think she was a gift from the gods before, I certainly do now.”
He huffed in irritation but was unable to deny the truth of her words.

“And I know that you don't like it, but it must be clear to you by now that both your son and I love her. We will not discard her.”

“Draco only just turned twelve-”

“She's my daughter, Lucius, go ahead, feel for the bond, I was going to give you some more time to get used to the idea but I guess the fates had other ideas.”

She ran her thumb soothingly over the palm of his hand while he reached for their familial bonds. She knew when he sensed the new one as he stiffened and his eyes popped open.

“I suppose that is what the elves are sensing?” he questioned resignedly.

She shrugged against him.

“Truly I don't know, Jema mentioned Draco’s bond with Hermione, not mine. Perhaps their connection triggered mine and both called for the family magic, perhaps it was one or the other. I don't know and it doesn't really matter, she's one of us now. Though after what Jema said it does seem that they are destined for a romantic rather than a platonic relationship.”

Lucius made a small sound of disbelief.

“You will never convince me you are surprised by that, my love, you have been picturing blond curly haired grandchildren since you set eyes on...Hermione.”

There was a pause before he said it, but for once he didn't stumble over her name.

“You sound less disappointed than I would have imagined,” she confessed.

He let out an aggrieved breath.

“I hope you know by now that I prize nothing more highly than your’s and Draco’s happiness. I am not blind, you were both ecstatic to have her in our home over Easter, and she, in turn, was impressive. I am also not ignorant to the effect she has had on Draco. He has matured since they have become friends, his letters are more detailed and thoughtful; he's putting more effort into his school work; he was entirely solicitous of her when she visited. I have never seen him so caring of another person, except of course you, my dear. It was not an unwelcome change.”

Her eyes fell closed in gratitude, she knew what the world thought of her husband, but he could be the most wonderful man.

“We will explain things to them, then?” she asked.

“Like you said, not everything, I would not burden them unduly, but you are right, they should know there is a danger to avoid.”

“Allies?”

“I do not know who we can trust, perhaps Severus, it would certainly be worth talking to him discreetly. I think for now we must sit back and get the lay of the land. I assume I can count on you to investigate in your circles?”

Narcissa nodded; society wives gossiped and they often gave out information they didn't even know they had, especially the ones who actually were trophy wives and whose husbands spoke
openly in their presence believing that they were too thick to understand, much less pass on, confidential information. It had never bothered her for herself, but now that she had children on the cusp of adulthood Narcissa realized that this was a sad commentary on the state of their society. Nevertheless it was one she fully intended to exploit.

“Of course,” she answered.

“I will teach them to fight,” he said, “their defense lessons have obviously been lacking and Hogwarts will never prepare them if they ever get into a real battle anyway.”

All her motherly instincts fought against it, but she knew he had a valid point.

“Me too,” she said.

He raised an eyebrow in question.

“You'll teach me to fight too. I’m capable with a wand but I only got the training Hogwarts provided in dueling, I won't be the weak link,” she stated defiantly.

“Alright,” he agreed with obvious reluctance.

“And I want to give Dobby to the Grangers.”

There were several moments of complete silence, the hand running through her hair went still again.

“What?” he questioned.

“He cannot stay here, Lucius, it’s not fair to the others, he shames them. I know you don't want to give him clothes but it would not be dishonorable to transfer him to another family with a tie to ours. He’ll be happier there, this house obviously drives him mad. They will appreciate him, his oddities will mean nothing to muggles and he can help protect them. Hermione’s magic is more than strong enough to bond him to her family, he will not suffer being set loose, but he will not be here to cause havoc. It is a brilliant solution, I know you hoped to rein him in but it isn't working. He needs out of a traditional wizarding family; give him the trappings of freedom without breaking the bond,” she hurried to explain, it had just come to her but it made sense, she couldn't have the other elves babysitting Dobby all the time, and it had suddenly become vital that the Manor be absolutely secure, which meant an untrustworthy elf had no place here.

“How will you get them to accept him? They aren't used to house elves.”

Narcissa vividly recalled Helen bemoaning the cleaning up that had to be done after their last Christmas dinner.

“I think once they see what he can do they will have no objections.”

“That is acceptable,” he said, and she thought he was secretly relieved to be rid of the burden.

Abraxas had turned Dobby into a liability, he’d turned him against House Malfoy with his cruelty. However, the elf was still bound to the House, and that led to an untenable situation. None of the other elves trusted him with household tasks, but he would go even more mad without a purpose; Lucius had attempted to take him on, but he was too much like his father and had a short fuse, the elf would never respect him. Narcissa, having largely been raised by elves given the frequent turnover of her governesses and her parents’ general indifference, knew how valuable they could be, and how dangerous. She had been looking for a solution for Dobby’s situation, both unwilling
to let him torture the other elves with his wild beliefs, or to let him suffer the pain and almost inevitable death as a consequence of being dismissed from service; this seemed the perfect solution.

“There is something that I feel now I must tell you, something I'd hoped to spare you,” Lucius said abruptly.

He sat up and gently disentangled himself from her. She watched as he made his way over to his desk and then took out his wand before performing a series of complicated charms on the floor beneath it. A trapdoor appeared and he opened it and extracted a thin, black leather bound volume before shutting it again.

“I know you are aware that upon his death my father left behind many artifacts that the ministry would consider to be Dark, artifacts I must now determine how to deal with.”

She nodded.

“None of them concern me as much as this one. Father did not know or explain the curse it carries, but I know it belonged to the Dark Lord and our House is expected to keep it safe. I had hoped to just get rid of it discreetly, but given what you've just told me that seems I imprudent.”

She arose from the sofa and approached the desk where the book sat, but as soon as she was within three feet of it she nearly flew across the room to escape it. It felt almost as terrible as being in the presence of the Dark Lord himself, just slightly less oppressive.

“You cannot keep that here.”

“What?” he questioned.

“I will not have that in the house. It's...evil.”

He looked at hersearchingly.

“Given Father’s belief in its importance, and your reaction, I think it would behoove us to discover what magic, exactly this book carries.”

Narcissa did not care, she just wanted this disgusting object out of her home and away from her family.

“I understand, but please Lucius, don't keep it here, you can store it at Gringotts or at one of the other properties if you're worried about the goblins, just not where we live,” she begged.

He took a few steps toward her, his features soft with sympathy.

“That is fine Narcissa, I won't have you uncomfortable in our home, I will take it to the cliff house this weekend, it will be easy enough to access there.”

“Thank you,” she said gratefully, and watched with trepidation as he replaced the slender volume in the compartment under the floor, she did not like him touching it.

He returned to the sofa and took her back into his arms. She gratefully melted into his embrace, bone tired and soul weary.

“I know there is much we still need to discuss, but can we put it off until we’ve had some rest? I've had just about all I can take for one day.”
“Of course, the Dark Lord will be very weak after the ordeal which you described, I must credit your Hermione and the Potter boy for giving us the gift of time to figure this out.”

There, at least, was a very small silver lining.
Chapter 6

Hermione spent the weekend with her parents settling in back home and getting caught up with them, but she was at Malfoy Manor bright and early Monday morning. It was ostensibly to start her summer lessons, though she had a suspicion that her scolding over the incident with the philosopher’s stone, as she'd taken to calling it in her head, wasn't finished and that she'd spend much of her day talking to Narcissa. However, it was Draco who met her when she exited the floo. Not that she was unhappy to see him, but she was stunned that he was waiting on her, and given that there appeared to be no spell keeping him in the room, that he was doing so voluntarily.

“Would you like to see something?” he asked anxiously, an uncharacteristically open grin on his face, like he hadn't just spent the last two weeks ignoring her existence.

Well, she wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth, she wanted her friend back.

“I would, but I’m supposed to meet your mother,” she said with some disappointment, she longed to see whatever it was that made him so happy.

“She’s out right now, she told me to see that you were entertained until she came back.”

Hermione had a sneaking suspicion that she’d been set up. She didn’t mind, she was glad for an opportunity to make things right with Draco, she just reminded herself that she had to pay attention around all these devious Slytherins.

He led her through the halls until they reached what she remembered to be his suite, and then on through to his bedroom. She spotted the black lump on his bed almost immediately upon crossing the threshold, because it moved. He walked over and perched on the edge of the bed.

“Meet Nox,” he said as she approached.

The lump moved again, unfurling and stretching to reveal itself as the most beautiful kitten Hermione had ever seen. She had unusual blue eyes, huge ears, and while she was completely black, Hermione could see an underlying pattern in her fur that became visible when the sun reflected on it. She sauntered over to greet the new human and even in the awkwardness of youth she exuded grace that indicated she would grow into a truly elegant cat.

“She’s gorgeous, Draco!” Hermione exclaimed, more pleased than she cared to admit when the kitten let her scoop her up into her arms without protest, “I like her name, very clever,” she complimented.
Draco studied her with undisguised curiosity.

“What?” she asked.

“She let you pick her up.”

“So? She’s sweet,” Hermione cooed.

“She hasn’t let anyone touch her but me, even Mother, much less hold her.”

“Oh,” she turned to address Nox who was cradled comfortably against her, batting at the finger she was waving in front of her face, “picky one are you? You’re well suited to your master then,” she shot a sidelong glance in Draco’s direction, he was scowling at her, but there was no malice in it, “I’m honored that you like me,” she finished sincerely.

Hermione continued to play with the cat in silence for a few minutes before letting her jump back onto the bed and sitting down next to her.

“When did you get her?” she asked.

“Mother and Father got her for me for my birthday, but she couldn’t join me at Hogwarts. The breeder brought her whole litter here over the weekend, Nox chose me right away, she’s a half-kneazle, they’re very intelligent,” he explained proudly.

Hermione resisted the urge to roll her eyes at the way he puffed up his chest.

“Will she stay here during term? We’re only allowed one pet,” she knew Draco had an owl he was quite fond of and used far too often to keep at the Manor.

“That only applies to First Years. After that you can have more than one, but only one can stay in the dorm with you.”

That actually made sense, it allowed older students to keep owls for correspondence purposes even if they had a familiar who was another species.

“Oh, well I’m glad she’s coming to Hogwarts.”

“I had a cat when I was younger,” he said wistfully, “I wanted one last year but then I wouldn’t have had access to an owl.”
“Merlin forbid you use a school owl,” she teased gently.

He sniffed disdainfully.

“I’d think you of all people would know that they are often unavailable, and they are far less reliable than personal owls.”

She was sure both Draco and his parents would consider it nothing short of a crime if their letters weren’t transported reliably. It was pretentious, but the underlying reason was also kind of nice; the family was very close, Draco was missed at home, and she knew it would be a real hardship for them all not to be able to write whenever they wanted. There was a long awkward pause and Hermione knew the reprieve the kitten’s presence had granted her was over. She readjusted her position on the bed and looked at him steadily.

“I'm really sorry Draco.”

He sniffed disdainfully.

“For what exactly?” he demanded.

She sighed, but it's not like she had expected him to make this easy, and deep down she thought she probably deserved to do a little groveling.

“For going along with Harry and Ron and doing something dangerous, at the time I thought I didn't have any other choice, but now I see how stupid that was. And for not thinking about your feelings. I know it probably seemed like I don't care what you think, but that's not true, I care about that more than anything. And, even though I didn't have any control over it, I'm sorry that we got all those house points and took the cup from Slytherin, that was really unfair,” she rattled off her apologies, making sure she covered it all.

“What's so great about Potter and Weasley anyway? I don't know why you're even friends with them,” he asked, voice cutting.

“Well they did save me from that troll,” she argued automatically.

He snorted.

“You were only in danger in the first place because of Weasley,” he said sardonically.

He'd been so upset when she'd told him that story she hadn't had the heart to point out that he'd said
his fair share of insulting things to her before they'd been friends too. She didn't think now was the
time to bring it up either. So, she just reconsidered his question instead.

Truth be told, she was friends with Harry and Ron because they were willing to be friends with her,
and she'd had too few of those in her life to take them for granted. They were nice boys most of the
time, and they needed her, even if if was only for homework help or research, and that felt good. Of
Harry especially she felt protective, and she wanted to be there for him. She wasn't blind, she knew
he didn't have a great home life, and she knew he hated his fame in the magical world; once she'd
thought about it, it must have been particularly terrible to be a celebrity for surviving your parents’
murders. He needed people around him who saw him as just 'Harry' as opposed to the Boy-who-
lived, and she was proud to be one of those few people. When it came down to it she liked them
both, and she didn't want to lose them even if they could drive her mad. But neither relationship
could compare to her friendship with Draco.

It had happened so quickly she almost hadn't noticed it, but despite the fact that she got to spend far
less time with him than she did her Gryffindor friends, Draco had become her best friend. She'd
only acknowledged that after she'd blurted it out to Narcissa. Obviously they'd started out terribly,
that had been inevitable given their house loyalties and the views about blood purity he'd arrived at
Hogwarts believing. But once Narcissa had nudged them towards friendship they'd become close
rather quickly. He was her confidant and she his. He was the only one with whom she felt safe
showing weakness. The only person she didn’t have to be constantly proving herself to. She could
lean on him. It was a much more equal relationship, they took care of each other.

And as she considered this she realized what she'd truly done that night she'd followed Harry and
Ron into that third floor corridor. She'd been afraid of being left out, that their friendship wasn't
strong enough to survive her standing up to them. So, she'd just gone along with them and taken for
granted that Draco would forgive her. He'd been the better friend and she'd taken advantage of that
fact. He felt rightfully betrayed.

“I am so sorry,” she gasped, surging up onto her knees and then forward to wrap her arms around
him.

He didn't respond at first but then, for the first time, he hesitantly raised his own arms and put them
around her waist. She buried her face in the crook of his neck and he sighed.

“After the dragon I thought you understood,” he murmured.

“I know, I just forgot for a moment, but I promise I won't put myself in danger like that again.”

“A professor died Hermione! Everybody knew it was you and your two idiot friends involved, but
there was nothing but rumors going around about who had been hurt and what really happened,
then you didn't even go down to the Great Hall for almost a whole day! I didn't know what to
think!”

“I’m sorry, I really am. Would you like me to tell you the whole story? I'm sure it's not half as bad
He slowly pulled away from her and nodded. She took his hand as they sat side by side on the bed and Nox stretched out across their laps as she began to speak. An hour later she finished talking, and he was clutching her hand so tightly he was restricting circulation.

“You stupid Gryffindors!” he hissed, “that’s even worse than I thought, what is wrong with you?!”

She looked away, shamefaced, and there was a long silence. Finally he sighed.

“Want to take a walk?” he asked suddenly, “you’ve seen very little of the grounds,” he gave her an uncomfortable smile.

Suddenly she was glad that twelve year old boys were so bad with emotions. He had obviously decided he was just going to push past this like it hadn't happened and she would gladly let him.

“Sure!” she said with false brightness.

She was pleased that when they got up to leave Nox leapt off the bed, wound her way between their legs and led them out of the room, clearly intending to join in on their walk. He led her through the walled gardens which were immediately outside the Manor, and then past the lake. He promised to show her the farm another time, today he wanted her to see the stables. His enthusiasm was no longer false, he was clearly thrilled to be showing off his home.

“You have a farm?” she’d asked incredulously.

“Of course,” he'd answered proudly, “this is a self-sustaining estate, that’s how we can support so many elves.”

She again felt the depths to which she was in over her head amongst the Malfoys, but he hadn’t seemed to notice, pulling her along excitedly via their joined hands. They arrived at the stables, dwarfed only by the size of the manor house they'd just departed.

The inside could have rivaled the luxury of any high end hotel, and it certainly smelled nothing like a barn. It was lined with a series of spacious stalls along each wall.

“The Abraxans are on this end,” Draco explained, “my family is renowned for raising them.”

She peeked into the stalls as he continued to drag her along to see enormous but utterly beautiful winged horses inside. Some of them stuck their noses out, interested in the humans’ presence, some of them seemed particularly interested to see Draco but he was on a mission and ignored them.
Until he suddenly stopped short in front of one, seemingly random stall.

“This is Azazel, he’s mine,” he grinned excitedly at her, she was truly seeing a different side of him today than she’d ever seen before, he was never this uninhibited at Hogwarts.

“Yours?” she questioned, as a curious nose poked out from the stall, she looked inside to see an Abraxan, still clearly very young though already a head taller than Draco, peering back at them.

He harrumphed, and snuffled in Draco’s direction who chuckled and reached out to pat him affectionately.

“Yes, mine, it’s a tradition in my family to be given a foal the year we receive our Hogwarts letter. I learned to ride on some of the older mares, but he’s the first to really be meant for me.”

Hermione examined the horse carefully. He was beautiful, like the rest of them, but he was more of a light gold color with black-tipped wings, and if his comrades were any indication his color would darken as he aged.

“He’s beautiful Draco, you have such beautiful animals,” she said, eyeing Nox who had deftly scaled the walls of the stall to sit on top of the door and was batting her head playfully against Azazel’s nose; the Abraxan seemed amused and was being very gentle with the kitten.

At that moment the doors to the stable opened and the elder Malfoys strode in, looking every inch the Lord and Lady of the manor that they were, even as they were both dressed as casually as Hermione had ever seen them.

“Hello Dears!” Narcissa greeted cheerfully.

“How did they know we were here. It must have taken them ages to find us,” she hissed in Draco’s direction, thinking how large the estate was and knowing there was even more she hadn’t seen.

“The elves, they can always find their family,” he answered with a smirk, but then a brief frown flashed across his face, “though I don’t know why they didn’t just send an elf to fetch us if we’re needed.”

“I see Draco has shown you our famous Abraxans,” Narcissa continued as they approached, her husband silent and proud at her side.

“Yes ma’am,” she answered politely, “they are beautiful, everything is so beautiful.”

“You are such a sweet girl,” Narcissa beamed, “do you ride?”
“Once, a pony at a birthday party when I was little, but nothing like this,” Hermione gestured around her.

Narcissa laughed lightly.

“I suppose we couldn’t have expected you to encounter many magical breeds of horses in the muggle world, but would you like to learn?” she persisted.

On one hand she was utterly intimidated, these creatures were enormous, powerful looking, and almost devastatingly beautiful. And then, of course, was the fact that they were clearly capable of flight which was an entirely new thing to fear. But she’d seen Draco’s face light up when he spoke of riding, when he introduced her to Azazel, and she suddenly wanted nothing more than to be able to share that with him.

“Yes, please,” she said quietly.

“Of course,” Narcissa responded, as if it was no consequence, “but for now, if the two of you would join us in your father’s study, there’s something we would like to discuss with you.”

Hermione nodded but when she glanced at Draco he had a look of concern on his face. They followed the adults out of the stable after giving Azazel some parting pats.

“What?” she questioned.

He shrugged.

“Usually being called to the Lord’s study is serious business.”

Hermione worried her lip, was she in trouble with Lord Malfoy now? But why would Draco be involved? He hadn’t done anything.

They reached the house much more quickly than seemed possible to Hermione, and the Malfoys led her to a part of it she’d never been in before. They entered a room that was alternately cozy and imposing, a large desk dominated one side, a sitting area the other. Narcissa extracted her wand from her robes and with an almost lazy flick transfigured two armchairs into one settee. She gestured for the children to take a seat on it while she and Mr. Malfoy took the larger sofa which faced them.

Mr. Malfoy had removed his outer robes before he sat and now, without saying anything, began to purposefully roll up his left sleeve. Hermione watched, sensing something important was happening. She couldn't miss the way Draco shifted uncomfortably beside her which was
disconcerting, because for a twelve year old boy he was very self-contained and generally didn't fidget, and then there was the growing tension in the air. She moved closer to Draco. When the skin of his forearm was fully exposed Mr. Malfoy extended it in their direction and it was all Hermione could do not to gasp out loud. There, marring his otherwise perfectly smooth flesh was something that looked part scar, part brand, and part tattoo. It formed the bizarre image of a snake slithering out of the mouth of a skull. A sickly gray color, it managed to appear both swollen and sunken into his flesh.

“Does that hurt?” she blurted.

Mortified, her eyes snapped to his face, but instead of the censure she expected to see there, his features actually softened.

“No,” he said simply, “it did at one time, but not for many years.”

She felt Draco take her hand.

“I do not believe that Miss Granger,” he paused, “Hermione,” he corrected himself, and though the syllables of her first name sounded odd and stilted rolling off of his tongue, she appreciated the effort at familiarity, thus far he’d done everything possible to keep her at arm’s length, “would have any means of identifying this, but Draco, do you know what it is?”

“The Dark Mark,” he answered immediately in a low hoarse voice that held little resemblance to his usual smooth tone.

“Your grandfather?” Mr. Malfoy questioned.

Draco just nodded.

“I'm sorry son, I should have been the one to tell you about this,” he responded, sounding more contrite and humble than Hermione would have ever been able to imagine him being.

Draco shrugged, not looking at his father.

“It's okay, all he told me was that it was the mark of the Dark Lord and that it was a great honor.”

“Voldemort!” Hermione gasped.

Everyone in the room flinched, but Mr. Malfoy turned to look at her calmly.

“I understand your concern Hermione, I only ask that you hear me out before you judge me too
harshly.”

She snuck a peak at Narcissa who was giving her a reassuring smile, but there was also a hint of a plea in her eyes that Hermione couldn’t ignore. So, she just nodded slowly and allowed Mr. Malfoy to continue. He turned back to his son.

“There was a time when I too considered this mark to be an honor, it took your mother to help me see if for what it really is, a brand of enslavement.”

He took a deep breath and Narcissa reached over to carefully roll his sleeve back down, covering the ugly mark, and then lovingly took his hand in both of hers. He looked at her so tenderly that for the first time Hermione saw a glimpse of the man that Narcissa so clearly adored. She felt a little like she was intruding and she glanced at Draco for direction, but he seemed completely unsurprised, if a little unsettled by the situation as a whole.

“When I was a young man,” Mr. Malfoy began, “only a few years older than the two of you are now, my father introduced me to a friend of his with whom he had attended Hogwarts. I would learn later that he was once known as Tom Riddle, but by the time I met him he had long since been calling himself Lord Voldemort,” he stumbled a little over the name, “his supporters, my father and others, referred to him as the Dark Lord. He was a charming man, he made me feel welcome, and I understood almost immediately why my father was willing to look to him as the leader of their group, despite the fact that they were contemporaries and my father and many others were from ancient and titled families and the Dark Lord was a half-blood with a muggle name.”

“A half-blood, with a muggle father!” Draco interrupted with a cry, sounding absolutely appalled.

Hermione ripped her hand out of his as she whipped her head around to glare at him. His eyes went wide.

“Not that there’s anything wrong with having muggle parents,” he hastened to add, though Hermione wasn’t sure she believed him, she was pretty sure she was still very much the exception to that rule in his eyes, “it’s just that he’s the Dark Lord, everybody knows that he…” he trailed off and looked to his parents for assistance.

“Yes Draco, a half-blood,” Mr. Malfoy said firmly, “that was why he changed his name, so that the public would never know and so that he would seem mysterious, it was all part of his campaign of misinformation and terror. He hid who he really was and what he really wanted behind pretty words and flattery and he was brilliant at it. We all lined up to give him our allegiance, and our influence, and our money; we felt privileged to do so. In exchange he promised us power, that our families would be raised to new heights in our society; he said he would bring back the old ways, and protect our world from muggles.”

“Why would you need protection from muggles?” Hermione wondered.
Mr. Malfoy exchanged a look with his wife.

“Do you know why Salazar Slytherin argued against allowing muggleborns into Hogwarts, Hermione?”

“He was afraid they would tell people about magic and expose our world,” she rattled off ‘Hogwarts: A History’s’ standard explanation, but then hastened to add, “but that was a thousand years ago when people were much more likely to believe in magic, if I or my parents tried to tell your average muggle that I was a witch they would never believe us, they might even think we were insane, we would never say anything.”

Mr. Malfoy nodded.

“The problem has evolved, I’ll give you that, but it has not disappeared. In the millennium since Hogwarts was founded it is my understanding that the muggle population has exploded, whereas ours has remained largely stagnant. We cannot risk our secret getting out, even if the risk is less than it once was, the danger if it did is now much greater, because based on sheer numbers we could never defend ourselves against them. It is more vital than ever that our societies remain separated.”

Hermione opened her mouth to protest, but he held up his hand to stop her.

“I no longer think the solution to this problem is to exclude muggleborns completely, I now understand you are necessary to maintaining our population, but at the time it was a scare tactic he used to manipulate us to great effect.”

She thought about this and nodded, most purebloods were so ignorant of the muggle world she supposed it would be easy to do.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “I didn't mean to interrupt.”

He wave off her apology.

“I believe he began marking his followers a few years before I met him, I know my father did not bear the mark my entire life. What I do know is that it was not difficult to convince any of us to take it, he easily persuaded us into believing it was a mark of brotherhood, and one that only the elite would be allowed to wear. It was a brotherhood of which he was clearly the leader, of course, but a society of equals nonetheless. Something akin to King Arthur and his knights of the round table, and we were all so honored to have a seat at that table. I don’t know how it escaped us that he didn’t have a mark himself, that he used it to call us to him and to see to his every whim, that we had become little more than servants. I myself was marked right after I left Hogwarts, it was excruciating, but I was happy to take the pain, I bore it with pride, it made me feel like I was earning the honor being bestowed on me.”
He took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes as if in pain.

“He began calling us his Death Eaters, I should have realized then that he didn’t care about us, he didn’t care about the old ways, about resurrecting our traditions and the ancient magicks. He only wanted to cause mayhem and seize power for himself in the ensuing chaos, but it was never enough.”

He looked at Draco.

“As I said, it was your mother who helped me realize it, shortly after we were married and she met the Dark Lord, she saw what I could not. That the Lord I had so revered and admired was a monster who was quickly losing his mind even as he grew more powerful. That this brotherhood I had so longed to be a part of was nothing more than a group of slaves and their master; we no longer even had true free will, we were just catering to his desires because we were irrevocably tied to him through these marks we had been so proud of, and sometimes performing disgusting acts in the process with the mere hope that if we pleased him we would at least escape punishment for ourselves and our families. And in the end he was targeting children the same age as our Draco, it was a time of great shame. I never want to be again, what this mark represents,” he rubbed at his sleeve absentmindedly with his free hand.

He seemed almost to have forgotten that they were in the room, his white knuckles a testament to the fact that he was clinging to his wife for the strength to put voice to these words. And in that moment he finally became human to Hermione. There was a long heavy silence. She felt Draco shift next to her, more uncomfortable than ever, and realized he’d once again taken her hand. She squeezed his, hoping to provide some comfort, she couldn’t imagine how difficult it must be to hear this from the father he so admired. Finally, Mr. Malfoy spoke again.

“I do not tell you this to try and excuse my actions, for that is not possible, but merely to explain them. I did not intend to ally myself and our family with a monster. And ironically, the thing I did to preserve our future is the thing putting it most at risk and I will never be able to express how much I regret that.”

There was another long silence.

“You’re telling us this now because Hermione told Mother he was inside Hogwarts this year, aren’t you?” Draco finally asked.

“Yes, because Hermione recently brought it to our attention that the Dark Lord isn’t actually dead, your mother and I discussed it and we believed it was imperative that you know my history so that you can understand the danger he presents and properly prepare yourselves.”

She glanced at Draco, he looked as terrified as she felt, the reality of Voldemort’s continued existence finally starting to sink in. Narcissa reached across the space between them, giving Hermione a gentle smile and placing a hand on her son’s knee.
“It will be okay, my dragon, we will face this together, as a family, that is why we wanted to have this talk.”

Draco relaxed slightly at his mother’s reassurance, Hermione felt herself relax as well.

“What comes next?” Hermione wondered quietly, she’d been wondering about the true purpose for this conversation for awhile now, and could hold back no longer.

“There are some steps we think need to be taken to make sure the two of you stay safe,” said Narcissa.

“You think he’ll be able to come back, like how he was before?” Draco asked.

“It is a possibility,” answered Narcissa.

Hermione automatically cut her eyes to meet Draco’s and she knew immediately that he was thinking the same thing that she was: they weren’t being told the whole truth.

“What does that mean?” she asked.

“We will be taking several precautions,” Mr. Malfoy took over from his wife, “the first of which is that the two of you cannot publicly be friends, it would be far too dangerous for you both if the Scion of a House loyal to the Dark Lord was known to be associated with a muggleborn.”

Draco shrugged, and while Hermione wanted to be insulted, she knew deep down that she probably wasn’t brave enough to openly be friends with a Slytherin, and a Malfoy to boot anyway, it would almost certainly make her a pariah within her own house.

“Second,” Narcissa took over effortlessly from her husband, “we would like to begin training the two of you in defense and in occlumency, you need to be capable of defending yourselves physically as well as your minds.”

They nodded in tandem, Hermione would never turn down a learning opportunity, and she could only imagine that Draco was chomping at the bit to be taught to fight.

“Lastly,” she said, looking at them, holding each of their gazes very seriously for a few moments, “we need a promise from the both of you that you will alert us immediately if you see anything that troubles you. No more keeping things to yourself, trying to handle things on your own. Anything that makes you feel the least bit uncomfortable, you tell us immediately.”

She sat back and Mr. Malfoy raised an arm to wrap around her shoulders, it did not soften the
image the two of them presented, they looked like a couple to be reckoned with and who completely expected their wishes to be obeyed. Hermione knew that she had a lot to process, she was overwhelmed and scared but beyond anything else she felt protected within the bosom of this powerful family.

“Yes ma’am,” she agreed almost immediately.

“I understand Mother,” Draco said at nearly the same time.

“Well!” said Narcissa, too brightly to be believed, both adults looked utterly drained, “we’ve talked through our usual lunch hour but why don’t you and Hermione take a late meal up in your suite, Draco. Relax for the rest of the day and we’ll start lessons tomorrow.”

Hermione knew a dismissal when she heard one, and so did Draco because he hopped up and without another word pulled them out of the room with their still-joined hands. Once upstairs the elves served them more food than they could possibly eat. After the fourth separate elf popped in to check in on them Hermione realized that between the sumptuousness of the food, and the way they were being absolutely doted on, that the creatures knew something serious had just happened, and were doing their best to spoil them. It was strangely comforting.

When they finished picking at their food they moved to a couple of comfortable armchairs and Draco finally put voice to the question Hermione had been avoiding thinking since she realized the meaning of that brand on Mr. Malfoy’s arm.

“Do you think my father hurt people?” he asked quietly, unable to look at her.

She took a deep breath and tried to decide how to answer him. Because at the very least his father had been part of a group whose leader was responsible for the murder of one of her other friend’s parents, as well as many others, and they both knew it.

“I don’t know,” she finally said truthfully, “but I think he’s sorry, and I think if you-know-who comes back he’ll fight against him this time, and that’s what’s important.”

Draco just nodded, but she didn’t think he really believed her, she wasn’t sure she believed herself.
Chapter 7

Narcissa lay back on the chaise, took a languid breath, and basked in the beauty of her children’s combined magic. They were in the solarium. Draco and Hermione were seated on the floor, cross-legged and facing each other working with their magic.

Normally, Narcissa would have found the position rather unseemly, as a general rule Malfoys did not sit on the floor, but they had discovered that these little exercises worked better when Hermione and Draco were focused solely on each other. Even positioning themselves on a piece of furniture could prove too distracting, and disastrous for the piece of furniture. The magical backlash had ruined two sofas and an entire dining set before they’d figured it out.

Draco was now capable of conjuring his own bluebell flames wandlessly, as well as performing some simple levitation and color change charms. But what they were capable of separately paled in comparison to what they could do together. When they worked in tandem Narcissa had found that she could sense their magic from several rooms away.

Currently, they had their arms extended in front of them and their palms pressed together; they appeared to be glowing. It looked beautiful and felt soothing. Narcissa didn’t even know a structured spell that could produce the same effect. That was another thing they’d discovered: if they tried to use specific spells when they worked this way it only held them back.

According to their descriptions they relied on the feeling of what they wanted to do and manipulated their magic into making it happen, no Latin words or wand movements necessary. It was their magic working in tandem, each magical core feeding the other to produce a desired effect. It seemed the whole was greater than the sum of its parts.

By their own explanation sometimes Hermione led, sometimes Draco, but usually they worked as one. Narcissa could only theorize about the phenomenon. They trusted each other without question, it was humbling to watch. She imagined it had something to do with the bond they shared, which seemed to have grown into a tangible thing between them. They were as much the other as they were themselves, at least they were when they opened themselves up to work together as they were doing at the moment.

She believed that, theoretically, any magical being was capable of this, but she hardly envision another pair who would trust each other enough to accomplish it. It was the most intimate thing she could possibly imagine. They were completely at each other's mercy, absolutely vulnerable to the will of the other. However, she also knew that it never occurred to either of them to exploit it, their connection was too pure.

Claire was also seated on the floor, but several yards away from them, watching them in abject fascination. Her golden hair in a plaited crown around her head that Hermione had crafted earlier that morning when the three of them had been sharing some girl time.

Her niece had just arrived from France three days before with a plan to spend a couple of weeks in her uncle’s home. As a child she had spent the whole summer in Narcissa and Lucius’ care, Lucius’ sister Adele was a lovely woman, but she took after her own mother and was a rather aloof parent. Claire had preferred to spend her free time with her more doting aunt and uncle and the cousin she thought of as a little brother.
Adele had apparently never worried about Claire being exposed to Abraxas. He’d ignored his eldest child in favor of his heir who had come along just eighteen months after her birth, and had sent her off to be educated in France without a second thought. He had been even less interested in his granddaughter than he had been his daughter, and if Narcissa hadn’t occasionally heard him mention the girl to an associate like the loving grandfather he’d pretended to be, she would have wondered if he even knew Claire’s name, he certainly never addressed her directly.

His disinterest had never bothered Claire either. She was a clever girl and she knew it was better that way. And she was happy to stay ensconced in her uncle’s wing in rooms that had been designated for her at birth for weeks at a time without becoming homesick.

That had slowly changed. When she started Beauxbatons she spent some of her summer at home, so that she could see her friends over the holidays, but the majority of the time was still spent in England. This was the first summer the opposite was true.

Narcissa had dreaded it for years, the day that the two and a half year age gap and gender difference would catch up with the cousins. At nearly fifteen, Claire had little in common with a twelve year old Draco, except their shared history. It made Narcissa more thankful for Hermione than ever, not only did her presence make Claire’s absence less obvious, but she was helping bridge the gap between them that Claire was here. Closer to Draco’s age and a fellow Hogwarts student, it was clear she also looked up to the older girl and Claire seemed to enjoy taking on something of a mentor role with her, and they seemed to feel at ease spending time as a threesome.

The first month of the summer preceding Claire’s arrival had passed in a rush. Narcissa had the difficult task of deciding how much to tell the Grangers about the current situation in magical Britain, and the less difficult task of getting them to agree to accept Dobby into their home; she’d never known anybody to refuse the services of a house elf, they were simply too helpful.

In the end she told them the truth, well she told Helen the truth and let the poor woman find a way to explain it to her husband. But she only explained the situation in general terms. She could tell how upset her friend had been over it all, but she accepted things with grace, and Narcissa realized that she simply hadn’t had much choice.

As muggles the Grangers couldn’t do anything to change things in the magical world. And if they pulled Hermione out of Hogwarts they would all have their memories altered, leaving Hermione vulnerable as a known muggleborn and an untrained witch. It must have been a terrible thing to realize that they were essentially stuck.

To an extent Narcissa could sympathize, she was feeling rather helpless too. She could take Draco out of Hogwarts, send him to Beauxbatons with Claire, but even France seemed too far away. Unlike her sister-in-law, she wasn’t content to leave her child’s care to another, even his own aunt, uncle, and grandmother.

And then there was the fact that as a muggleborn Hermione would not be allowed to withdraw from Hogwarts, even to transfer to a different magical school, until she’d taken her O.W.L.s. If Draco was sent away they would be separated, and that seemed cruel.

Actually, she had a feeling they would both react quite strongly to even the suggestion. Narcissa noticed that Draco tended to be rather listless on those days when Hermione didn’t come to the Manor. A long term separation would surely be painful for them.

She could take the drastic step of smuggling them both out of England, but they’d have to go half a world away to be safe. The Dark Lord had influence all over the Continent and she didn’t think she
could bear to be more than apparition’s distance from them. That meant she would have to accompany them, and she could not abandon her husband.

No, for all their wealth and power they were in many ways absolutely stuck too. And their plan for the Dark Lord’s eventual return was sketchy at best. They simply didn’t have enough information, and the information gathering was slow and tedious.

On a positive note the Grangers had gratefully accepted Dobby into their home. Even if they had been a little overwhelmed by his abilities, and especially his enthusiasm. But he was thrilled to be in charge of his own household and Narcissa rested a little bit easier when she saw how quickly he took to each member of the family, knowing he would do anything to protect them.

Also, Draco had finally stopped flinching and averting his eyes whenever his father entered the room. Lucius had pretended this only bothered him because it demonstrated Draco’s inability to mask his emotions, but she knew it tore at his heart every time his son showed such open fear and disapproval of him. He had been a strict parent, but he had wanted Draco to respect him, and to want to please him because of that respect. He’d never wanted to be feared as he’d feared his own father.

Their other lessons were going well, not just these little forays into magical experimentation, but dueling, occlumency, and some more informal work in herbology and potions; interests that she and Draco shared which they were now also sharing with Hermione. Lucius was alternately exasperated and bursting with pride in the two of them. Narcissa was just proud.

Hermione had a way of getting Draco interested in his political training that Lucius had been unable to inspire in his son and therefore envied. But he had been so thrilled to have an enthusiastic student that he included Hermione as often as was appropriate. When they were discussing topics that needed to be kept between Lord and Scion he would subtly pass her to Narcissa who had quietly begun to teach the girl how to fulfill her own eventual role as Lady of this House.

But it was in their fighting lessons where Lucius most often found himself at loose ends. Because while quick and powerful individually, they automatically defaulted into a joint fighting style that was unlike anything he’d ever seen before, and they were far more powerful and efficient that way.

“They have to be able to defend themselves on their own,” he’d groused to her, “in the event of an attack there is no guarantee they’ll be together. But at the same time I can’t ignore how effective what they are doing is, and they are only twelve, once they reach maturity they will be a force to be reckoned with.”

He’d eventually settled on holding some of their sessions one-on-one, him with each of them in turn, so that they didn’t have the option to rely on each other; and some consisting of the three, or the four of them. Narcissa had not forgotten her desire to make sure she knew how to fight.

As they spent more time together in these various activities Narcissa had the pleasure of watching her husband and Hermione forge their own bond.

“You’re wrong,” Hermione had said huffily, nearly throwing herself into her chair before lunch one rare afternoon when all four of them had been in attendance for a meal, glaring at Lucius with narrowed eyes.

The room had gone silent, she could practically feel her son shrinking in on himself. Even she was wincing internally at the girls daring words. She even forgot to scold her for her unladylike behavior.
But then the oddest thing had happened, her husband had started to chuckle. Low and genuinely amused it was something she rarely heard outside of their private chambers.

“Spitfire,” he'd murmured fondly.

“Would the two of you like to share with us what this disagreement is about?” she asked daintily, never letting on that she was on the edge of her seat.

Lucius caught her eye and the slight upward tick to his lips reassured her that all was well.

“Lucius,” Hermione pronounced his name very primly, as if she was still testing it out, “thinks that I need to learn to ride a broom,” she said petulantly.

Narcissa nearly dropped her fork. Draco actually did.

“Any witch worth her salt knows how to fly, Mignonette.”

“I just don't think it's for me,” she pouted, “you should see me, I'm useless.”

Draco was now staring open mouthed between them.

“I have seen you,” Lucius responded, tapping one finger against his temple, “you are not lacking talent or power, you were simply ill-taught and on top of that you have had some frightening experiences. It has ruined your confidence. We will get you a proper training broom, and teach you how you should have been taught in the first place,” he'd paused dramatically and looked at his wife, “I might have to have a word with the Board, they aren't even properly teaching children how to fly at Hogwarts anymore.”

She tilted her head regally in agreement, too flabbergasted to do anything else. She was certainly thankful for it, but she couldn't imagine what had occurred between Lucius and Hermione in the past couple of hours that had them addressing each other so informally, and dare she think it, affectionately. But she was distracted when Lucius then turned his attention to Draco.

“And Son, were are going to be having a discussion about your behavior at school.”

Draco cringed and Hermione shot him a sheepish look.

Narcissa anxiously awaited her husband in bed that evening, because it was the first opportunity they had to speak privately and she very much wanted an explanation.

“What was that?” she’d demanded, seated so that the bedclothes intentionally covered her up to her armpits.

“What was what?” he wondered, and she almost would have assumed the inquiry to be innocent except for the way he slowly removed his dressing gown, teasingly revealing his upper body to her.

She crossed her arms over her chest defiantly, knowing he was having fun toying with her, but it was a poor attempt at distraction.

“She called you Lucius, Lucius, how did you get her to do that!? I can barely get her to stray from your title, ‘Mr. Malfoy,’ is as informal as she's ever been.”

He climbed into bed and tried to pull her into his arms, but she stopped him with a hand to the bare chest he'd been taunting her with.
“Hermione and I have come to an agreement.”

“Oh?” she asked with a pointedly arched brow.

He sighed.

“Surely you’ve noticed that I've been...warning to her presence in our lives.”

Narcissa nodded. Lucius had been more than impressed by Hermione’s magical abilities and her dedication to learning right from the start. And he'd been happy enough to act as her teacher. It was overcoming a lifetime of prejudice and accepting the presence of a muggleborn into his home and into his family that had been holding him back from forming a more personal relationship with her.

But as he spent more time with her over the weeks Narcissa had noticed a growing tenderness in his demeanor towards her, so subtle that she was probably the only one who could have noticed it, but it was definitely there. She hadn't said anything because she wanted it to progress naturally, and because she didn't it want to make Lucius, who could be surprisingly sensitive, self-conscious about his behavior.

“I expected her to loathe me,” he said, “after that day in my study, I did essentially confess to being a member of a group that endorsed the wholesale slaughter of her kind, after all. I’m not sure she fully understood that, but she understood enough to have good reason to hate me.”

“It was more complicated than that,” Narcissa interrupted quietly.

He shrugged.

“Perhaps, perhaps not. Still, I expected to feel open fear from her, at least to the extent Draco demonstrated after that day.”

Narcissa wanted to say something comforting, but he just continued on before she come up with anything appropriate.

“But she never flinched, at first I assumed it was Gryffindor bravado that would wear off, but she came here, day after day, week after week, she trusted me to use offensive spells on her in order to teach her how to fight, she sat at my table and ate my food, she loved my wife and my son. But she never flinched or showed any emotion aside from being slightly intimidated by my presence, and being eager to please me. I could not help but admire it, and be grateful that she didn’t use the influence she clearly has on Draco to turn him against me.”

“She wouldn’t do that,” Narcissa hurried to assure him.

“I know that now. She holds him too dear to take his father from him. And she is just essentially kind. And she is a pleasure to have around, sometimes she’s overly enthusiastic, but I suppose she gives me hope that we will survive this, whatever it is exactly that's coming.”

Narcissa just smiled to herself.

“And then this morning, Cissa, she trusted me to test her mental defenses.”

Narcissa gasped quietly. She’d known it would have to happen eventually. They had been teaching the children occlumency using a series of mental exercises to help them to learn to organize and defend their minds, but they would never truly know how far they’d come in their efforts until they tested them using legilimency.
Narcissa was a skilled occlumens. She’d been instructed in the basics of the art as a child, as most pureblooded children of means were. And then she’d perfected her abilities by practicing for thousands of hours over the years, to be sure she could hide her gift from anybody talented enough to sneak into her mind.

But legilimency was a separate art, part natural ability, part learned skill, and she simply lacked the natural ability. She suspected her sensitivity to magic actually hindered her in this, because it rather blinded her to the subtleties one needed to be able to pick up on to enter another’s mind.

Lucius, on the other hand, was a skilled legilimens, having been taught from a young age by his father to unobtrusively scan thoughts. It had been Abraxas’ most effective political tool. It also meant Lucius would have to be the one to test the children, and they’d been putting it off for that reason. Draco could barely look at his father, it could do real damage to his psyche to allow him into his mind before they were back to a more trusting relationship.

“Why did you ask her to let you do that?” Narcissa wondered.

She knew Lucius had simply planned to practice shielding with Hermione that morning while she was at the healer’s with Draco for a routine appointment. He’d also planned to allow her some time in his private library as a treat. There had been no mention of legilimency.

“That’s just the thing Cissa, I didn’t, she requested it,” Lucius explained, his silver eyes shining in the candlelight.

“What?” Narcissa gasped.

“She said she knew that she couldn’t be sure of her progress until she was tested and she didn’t want to keep working for it all just to come to nothing. She’s sharp, she knows her mental shields might be important for keeping her association with us a secret, and she’s worried about it. She didn’t come right out and say that, but it was obvious, and she was absolutely determined. In fact, I think she intentionally waited for a time when both you and Draco would be out of the house in case I tried to refuse her so that she would have more opportunity to convince me,” he smirked with obvious pride.

If he was right, then perhaps their resident lion was more of a snake than she’d imagined.

“And you agreed?” she asked, certain his initial reaction would have been to put her off.

“I was hesitant, I made certain she understood what it would entail, and that she trusted that I would not look any further into her mind once I breached her defences. I did not want to risk her becoming panicked and end up hurting herself fighting me. But she was absolutely insistent, Narcissa, she almost reminded me of you, so proud and stubborn,” he chuckled fondly.

She felt a flush of pleasure at his analysis, on Hermione’s behalf, as well as her own.

“So we sat down,” he continued, “and she took my hand, completely trusting. I had told her that skin contact made the process easier and less stressful for us both, but I never expected her to do that. I simply intended for her to have as much information as possible so that she would be comfortable,” he took a deep breath, “it’s as we suspected. She has a natural talent for the art. It stands to reason that her mind is organized, being such a talented student, it made sense to her to add defences on top of the organization she already had in place.”

“And you saw something in her mind that has increased your fondness for her?” she surmised.

“I know that your understanding of legilimency is largely academic, so I must impress upon you
that it is unlike your gift. I see memories, thoughts, impressions, but I do not feel anything. Any belief I gain about things is through observation and intuition, not emotion.”

“I know this, of course Lucius, it was this that led you to be able to mislead the Dark Lord when you started to have doubts.”

“I just wanted to make sure you remembered that. That you understood that despite the fact that I could not feel her emotions she made quite an impression.”

“Alright,” she ventured hesitantly.

“Just from perusing her surface thoughts I learned much. She has an impressive mind, in more ways than we knew, her memories are rich and detailed. She adores you, Narcissa, almost above anybody other than her parents. There was a grandmother who was very important to her as well. But you are prevalent in her thoughts, I had not realized she’d become quite so attached.”

“Does that bother you?” she asked, it didn’t seem to, but Lucius could be very possessive of his family.

“Not at all, I was just startled, I was foolishly concerned that my misdeeds would make her recalcitrant with you.”

He took a deep breath.

“I hope it does not injure you to hear that this barely compares to the way that she thinks of Draco.”

She finally allowed herself to curl into his side.

“No, I’m certainly not upset, but I am interested to hear what it looked like from your point of view, and why it doesn’t anger you.”

He huffed but placed his arm around her and drew her even closer to him.

“Her thoughts revolve around him. It might be troubling if it wasn’t so reassuring. Because it is not an obsession, it is just connection and consideration, he is the most important person in the world to her, and that is reflected in her thoughts. I assume I would see something similar in his thoughts, I saw enough to know it is not one-sided.”

“And that doesn’t bother you, further proof of their connection?”

“She is powerful, smart, thoughtful, she seems meant to be for us,” he conceded, but he sounded far from unhappy about it.

She looked at him dubiously, that seemed almost like capitulation, and she didn’t believe he was capable of that without irrefutable evidence.

“What did you do?” she asked, a foreboding feeling arising within her.

“Nothing beyond what you would approve,” he defended quickly, “I simply asked if I could see more. She is already talented enough to be able to choose memories to show me, rather than just having me wander around in her mind. So, I asked if she would do that for me, show me some of her time at Hogwarts this year. She agreed, she almost seemed anxious for me to see. She is so trusting, it is as refreshing as it is disconcerting,” he said almost wistfully.

“And?” she promoted, too anxious to address that at the moment.
“It was almost all Draco, it was clear that it was simply her first inclination to think of him, because I’m sure there are a few she would have left out if she had been sorting them more thoroughly,” he chuckled, his eyes far away and obviously lost in thought, probably remembering the things Hermione had shown him.

“I suppose that’s what your sudden desire to speak to Draco about his behavior stems from?” she guessed.

He nodded.

“We may have underestimated how badly we spoiled him, Narcissa. He can be an entitled bugger. His behavior has not been a credit to the Malfoy name,” he groused, but he didn't sound too terribly disappointed in their boy.

She hummed in agreement.

“He has gotten better though, I truly believe that, Hermione smooths his rough edges.”

It was his turn to hum in agreement.

“You were right, on the very first night you met her you were right,” he admitted.

“And about what?”

“About Hermione, about what she is to Draco and what they have and could be together, it is all I could ever want for my son. She could be for him what you are for me, it is comforting to know, given recent events, that even if something should happen to me she will be here for him.”

She turned her face to kiss the place over his heart to hide the tears in her eyes, but she was unable to speak. They lay there for several moments in silence, her forehead pressed gently against his bare chest.

“So, when she finished feeding me her memories we had a long talk,” he resumed his story.

“And you told her to call you Lucius, was that the agreement you came to?” she asked, grateful to have regained her ability to speak without betraying her emotions.

“Amongst other things. I let the conversation go where it wanted, I realized I’d never spoken to her before without a very specific purpose.”

“I take it, it went well?”

“It did, she rather forgot to be intimidated by me, and once she remembered, she had said enough to realize that I would not punish her for speaking her mind. I found it rather refreshing, only you and Severus are really comfortable doing that, and talking to Severus can be like walking through a maze filled with booby traps,” he noted dryly.

They both laughed lightly.

“Well, that’s wonderful,” she sighed.

He chuckled.

“It was a surprising morning.”

“And that pet name you called her? ‘Mignonette?’”
She looked up to see his reaction, and she couldn’t be sure in the low light of their bedroom, but she would have sworn she saw his cheeks pinken slightly.

“She has a fierce heart, but she is just so small, it seemed appropriate,” he shrugged helplessly.

She looked back down so that he could not see the large smile she could not prevent from blossoming on her face. She thought this made it official. Her body might have failed her, but she’d gotten them a daughter anyway.
Chapter 8

He had only been sitting there a little while when Claire found him, as he'd known deep down she would, considering he was in their spot. She was dressed for dinner with her hair still pulled up in some fancy way Hermione had put it in that morning; they'd been doing each other's hair and the styles seemed to get more intricate every day. He couldn't deny that she looked pretty. She was pretty.

He felt conflicted about that, on one hand he was proud of her, she was his cousin; on the other hand she was his cousin and he now knew how guys at school talked about pretty girls. And he didn't have any way to protect her at Beauxbatons all the way from Scotland. It was frustrating, life was becoming very frustrating.

"Okay Cousin," she said, seating herself beside him on the tangle of branches that used to be a perfectly sized bench for the two of them, but was now getting to be a tight fit, "what's wrong?" she demanded, "and don't bother lying to me, I know you, you've been pouting since I got here. Four days is a lot of pouting.

"I don't pout," he retorted.

She burst out laughing.

"'I don't pout,' says the pouting dragon," she mocked.

"Care…" he whined.

It slipped out, it really did, the moniker he'd given her as a small child when he couldn't properly pronounce her name, but he was feeling a lot like that little boy at the moment. She sobered immediately.

"Well, now I know it's serious, when was the last time you called me that?" she studied him carefully, he could feel her eyes on him but he stubbornly refused to look at her, "I know you're not a little kid anymore, Draco, you don't have to act all tough around me. I mean, it's just me," she bumped her shoulder against his, "tell me what's the matter?"

"Nothing," he insisted.

"Are you mad at Uncle Lucius? Because you usually spend a lot more time with him."

"I spend plenty of time with him," he responded automatically.

"When you have to, for lessons and meals, otherwise you've been avoiding him."

"Well he has Hermione to talk to now," he groused, and was immediately embarrassed by his admission.

Claire just stared at him, blinking slowly, obviously processing that, "are you jealous of Hermione’s relationship with your father?" she eventually managed to ask.

"No," he objected automatically, but there was a pang somewhere in the vicinity of his chest at her words.
She continued to stare at him, clearly disbelieving. Her knowing blue eyes were too much. He looked away uncomfortably, stripping a leaf off a branch and shredding it in agitation.

“I don’t understand how she did it,” he admitted

“Did what?”

“He likes her!”

“And that's a problem? You like her. I like her. Goddess, Aunt Cissy has practically adopted her,” she stopped short, “is that why you're mad?”

“No! It's different with Father.”

“Why?”

“This time last year he wouldn't have allowed her in the house.”

“And you wish he wouldn't let her in the house?”

“Stop it Claire, you know that's not what I mean!”

“So what do you mean?” she wondered, with manufactured wide eyed innocence.

He resisted the urge to shove her.

“I could never talk to him the way she does.”

“Well, that would require you to actually talk to him,” she quipped

Draco actually growled in frustration.

“She gets to tell him what she thinks, he allows her to be almost impertinent with him.

“So?”

“So? He'd never allow me that kind of latitude.”

“Well you aren't her.”

“Exactly.”

“No, you're missing my point, you can't expect him to treat you the same way he treats Hermione. He's never treated you and I exactly the same, and that's never seemed to bother you in the past.”

“But you're different,” he objected.

“Why?”

“Because you're my cousin.”

“So now it’s a problem that Hermione isn't a Malfoy? Because technically I'm not either, I'm a de Verley,” she reminded him.

He rolled his eyes.

“No, I just mean that you grew up here, she's been here for a few weeks. He would barely have an
audience with me alone until
I was eight or nine,” he trailed off miserably.

Her eyes fell closed, “oh Draco,” she said sympathetically, “he loves you, you're his son, his heir. You know this.”

“Yeah like he was Grandfather's heir, I'm not so sure that's such a great thing.”

There was a long heavy silence filled with many things they'd never dared speak aloud. Claire looked around frantically, and then moved even closer to him so that she was speaking almost directly into his ear.

“Uncle Lucius isn't Grandfather.”

“Oh yeah? Have you seen that mark on his arm?” he snapped.

He cringed even as the words were leaving his mouth and then it was his turn to look around frantically, he couldn't even imagine what would happen if they were overheard. And that was the crux of the matter, he didn't know what to think about so many things anymore.

There were things that just weren't spoken of, that had been an ironclad rule at Malfoy Manor his whole life, a rule his parents had broken that afternoon in his father’s study when his father had shown them his Mark. As a result, he no longer knew which side was up. And he envied Hermione's ability to just bounce back from that, to befriend his father when he, his own son, had trouble looking him in the eye.

“That doesn't matter, it's not the same,” she whispered.

“It doesn't matter?” he burst out, much more loudly than he'd intended.

“Shhhh!” she hissed.

“Do you even know what it is?” he dared.

“The Dark Mark,” she admitted glumly.

“Who told you that? Not Grandfather,” he discounted that possibility immediately, his grandfather and cousin never talked.

“I heard about it, the war and all, at school and then I asked Mother and Father.”

He stared at her incredulously, he couldn't believe she had the gall to question her parents about such a taboo topic.

“Well,” she defended, “I'd been looking at it since I was little, and it's obviously not a normal tattoo. Then I heard kids at school talking and I just had to know.”

“So you know what they did, they killed people Claire, people like Hermione.”

“Yeah,” she murmured, playing with the hem of her sleeve.

“And now all of a sudden he's okay with Hermione, treating her almost like family. I mean before he was just letting mother have her way, but not anymore. And I just don't know what happened!” he blew out a frustrated breath.

“I think you need to talk to Uncle Lucius,” she said quietly, then she gave a little laugh when she
saw the disbelieving way he was looking at her, “I'm serious Draco, he's your father, you can't avoid him forever.”

“Weren't you mad, when you found out he was a Death Eater, I mean?”

She nodded.

“I didn't notice anything, you never seemed mad.”

“I guess I'd gotten over it by the next time I came here.”

“Oh yeah, how'd you manage that?” he scoffed.

“Well, Mother said that it was complicated and that even though he had done bad things that he wasn't a bad man,” she paused, chewing on her lip, “she didn't say the same thing about Grandfather,” she added in a whisper.

“And you just believed Aunt Adele?

“No, not exactly, it meant something that she said that, and that my father agreed with her, but it wasn't that simple. But when I started thinking about it I realized that Aunt Cissy would never be with somebody, and love him the way she loves Uncle Lucius if he was, I don't know, evil. And I know him too Draco, he's always been wonderful to me and I've been welcome here, I was more their kid than I was my own parents’ most of the time. And I love him so I just, I don't know, forgave him? And even after I knew the truth I didn't see him as a Death Eater; he’s Uncle Lucius you know? I mean, what do you see?”

Draco thought about that for a long time.

“I don't know,” he eventually concluded; she made a small strangled sound at that pronouncement and wrapped her arms around him.

They sat like there for awhile after that, her arms wrapped around one of his, her head resting comfortably on his shoulder, until an elf popped in to call them to dinner.

The meal was uncomfortable, Claire was too preoccupied with shooting Draco encouraging glances to do anything to break up the tension that constantly lingered between Draco and his parents these days. Unfortunately, his mother spotted the odd byplay.

“Is there something the two of you would like to share with us?” she asked in a tone that made Draco cringe.

Claire gave him one last pleading look and he knew that if he didn’t say something, she would rat him out, and that would just be pathetic.

“Father,” he said, gathering his courage and looking him in the eyes, “may I speak with you after dinner?”

“Of course, Son, will Claire be joining us?” he looked at his niece pointedly.

“No,” Draco assured him, “just me, I, well I wanted to speak to you privately.”

“Very well.”

When the last of the plates were cleared his father stood and rounded the table to offer his mother his arm.
“Did you have a particular venue in mind for this discussion, Draco?”

“No, sir.”

“Then I’m going to escort your mother and cousin upstairs, please meet me outside the door to my study, there’s somewhere I’d like to show you.”

Draco was surprised but he kept his face carefully blank.

“Yes, Father.”

“Lucius, you two go ahead, Claire and I will be just fine on our own.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yes, in fact I think I might like to spend some time in the solarium, it’s so lovely this time of year.”

“Alright,” he acquiesced.

But before they parted they exchanged a glance that Draco didn’t understand himself, but he knew said more than a thousand words between them could. His father squeezed his mother’s hand that was resting on his arm, and then released it and made his way over to Draco. Draco turned to follow him obediently out the door.

His father set a brisk pace, the kind that Draco used to have to run to keep up with him. Now he just walked very fast. The older wizard must have noticed this change too.

“You’re getting tall, you’ve grown several inches just this year. You’ll need all new robes for the fall.”

He turned his head to look at his son, his lips lifted slightly at one corner and Draco’s heart soared at the little inside joke.

“We both know Mother would have insisted on new robes anyway, if only to torture us with the shopping,” he responded, playing his role in the joking exchange.

“That witch,” his father chuckled fondly, “is the only woman in the world who could make clothes shopping a mandatory outing for the entire family and make it sound like a perfectly logical request, I only argue with her anymore because she expects it. Don’t tell her I said that, by the way.”

Draco grinned internally.

“I won’t,” a beat of silence as they crossed out of the house and onto the grounds, Draco looked around curiously, wondering where his father could possibly be taking him, but he knew better than to ask, if he’d wanted him to know before they reached their destination he would have told him, so he asked another question instead, “Father, do you think I’ll be as tall as you?”

He did not even glance at him.

“I think given the rate you are already growing and your mother’s height, that you have a good chance of surpassing me.”

“Oh,” said Draco dumbly, that had never occurred to him and he was rather floored by the idea.
They walked for a few minutes in silence before his father came to an abrupt halt at a spot by the lake. Draco looked around in confusion, it was a rather picturesque area, near his and Claire’s favored spot, actually, but he couldn't imagine what was so special about it that his father had led them out here.

“I know that you mostly resemble me in appearance and manner,” his father said suddenly, “I know that you’ve been told your whole life how much of a prototypical Malfoy you are,” he had been looking out over the water but he turned and looked directly at Draco, “but sometimes you are so like your mother that it takes my breath away and I am eternally grateful for it.”

Draco was aware that he had just been given a very great compliment, his father held nobody in higher regard than his mother, he just had no idea what to say to it. Luckily he just continued on speaking.

“Did you know we were married here?” he asked, gesturing around them.

Draco shook his head. Frankly, he was surprised. He'd seen pictures of his parents wedding, of course, but either they hadn’t been taken at the sight of the binding, or Draco just hadn’t been paying attention. He’d known they’d been married at the Manor, of course, as Malfoys had been for hundreds of years, but he would have expected a more formal location, the main ballroom, or at least the formal gardens.

“Cissa was absolutely adamant, this is where the magic was right, this is where we were to bind ourselves to each other,” his eyes were distant and Draco wasn’t sure he was even really talking to him anymore, he so rarely heard his father use that diminutive of his mother’s name and it felt strangely like he'd overheard something intimate, but then he snapped back into focus and actually smiled at his son, “I know now, after nearly twenty years of witnessing her plan social functions, that she was surprisingly laid back about the wedding, but this was one issue on which she wouldn’t budge”

“That sounds like Mother,” Draco mused hesitantly.

His father made a small sound of agreement.

“Your grandfather was appalled, he didn’t think we could hold a ritual here that would be befitting of a Malfoy, called the idea ‘provincial’ if I remember correctly.”

Something inside Draco roared up in protest at the slight against his mother, and it must have been reflected on his face because his father chuckled.

“I felt exactly the same way, and so I put my foot down. It was the only time I ever did that, the only time I refused to bend to his wishes and fought for what I truly wanted, and I only had the strength to do it because it was for your mother.”

Draco was now completely at loose ends. Nothing in his upbringing had taught him how to respond to this kind of open confession from his stoic father.

“Was he angry for long?” he ventured to ask.

His father actually snorted, albeit quietly, it was still a clear sound of derision.

“He forgot about it almost immediately, the wedding meant very little to him in the end, and he had other things to attend to. Actually, as it turns out, I’m sure you are aware that your mother and grandmother both have exquisite tastes, and our wedding ended up being the event of the season. It was the beginning of a trend of outdoor weddings, at least I’m told; your mother was vastly amused
by that. The old man probably convinced himself it had actually been his idea in the end,” he practically growled, Draco took an unconscious step back at the sound and his father winced, reached for him, and then seemed to think better of it.

“That is the last thing I want from my relationship with you, Son. For you to feel like you can’t disagree with me, or talk to me. I do hope that I have earned your respect, and that I continue to do so, but I do not want you to mindlessly follow me, or feel like you cannot tell me when you think I am wrong.”

Draco just peered at him nervously, not knowing what to make of that little speech, of this whole situation.

“Draco, I know that there have been things weighing heavily on your mind these past weeks, maybe even longer than that. So with what I just said in mind, will you tell me what you wanted to discuss with me? Or, should I say what Claire thinks you need to discuss with me?” he asked with the cock of one brow.

Draco felt himself grow red at being called out.

“I’m sorry, Son, that was not a criticism, I was merely teasing. I am glad that you have people to confide in, Claire and Hermione are both good options. You are right to value both of their opinions. I’m glad you gave into Claire’s obvious prodding and asked to speak with me.”

Draco bit his lip and considered his options, ultimately deciding he'd probably never have a better opportunity to speak freely to the man.

“May I ask a question?”

He gave a sharp nod.

“You said that I’m like Mother, I was wondering what you meant by that.”

His father actually smiled then and pointed to the copse of trees where he and Claire had hidden themselves earlier and had their talk, to their spot.

“I’ve watched you play there since you were a toddler. Your mother used to bring you down here, as I said the magic feels good to her in this area. But as you got older you returned on your own, I know that you and Claire favor those trees. I think you feel something similar to what your mother feels here, you have something of her intuitive nature. And the two of you look so alike when you are feeling unfettered, are capable of inspiring such joy, I know how much I enjoyed watching you in those moments,” his smile and his voice were wistful as he spoke.

Draco reeled, the surprises just kept on coming. He had no idea his father had watched him play, and had approved; he had not been opposed to his son having fun, but he’d always favored more regimented activities: riding, flying, even swimming. It had been his mother who insisted he be allowed to more or less run wild once in awhile.

“And then there is that smile,” Draco was brought out of his reverie and realized he was smiling broadly, “that is your mother through and through, I had nearly forgotten, it had been so long since I’d seen a true smile from you before Hermione entered our lives.”

Draco digested this gratefully and then realized that he was never going to get a better segue.

“Why are you okay with Hermione?” he blurted
That brought his father up short.

“I assume you are speaking of her blood status?” he asked tersely.

Draco nodded and swallowed thickly. His father had turned towards the lake and gone completely rigid. But then he took a deep breath and turned back to his son, words nearly tumbling out of his mouth.

“It almost didn’t happen, our wedding, not because your grandfather objected to the location, but before that, for most of the year after I graduated from Hogwarts, your mother’s last year there, I was worried that he was going to void our betrothal contract. I know that he considered doing so for months.”

Draco gawked at his father, of everything he’d learned this evening this was the most unbelievable. In his world there was one thing that was solid and indestructible: his parents. Not each of them in turn, with their formidable personalities, but them together as one entity. He wasn’t sure if he was so much disturbed by the idea that he would not have existed had his grandfather acted on his threat, or just that his parents would never have been married, would surely have been paired with other people; he thought it was mostly the latter. Because he couldn't imagine a world where they weren't together.

“Why?” Draco gasped

His grandfather may not have cared that his parents loved each other, but the things he did care about were present in the match too. On paper they were a perfect couple. A Malfoy and a Black: two of the oldest and most respected families in England, both had perfect pedigrees, both were Sacred 28, both Slytherins, both had the same values and life objectives. Draco couldn't imagine why he would want to prevent such a marriage from coming to pass.

“You are aware that you have aunts, other than your Aunt Adele of course?”

At this point, finally exhausted by the weight of the things they were discussing, Draco actually dropped to the ground. He expected to be reprimanded, and was more than surprised when his father removed his outer robes, threw them onto the ground, and transfigured them into a blanket. He settled himself onto it carefully and encouraged Draco to do the same. He moved warily, but followed his father’s direction.

“Yes, I know that Mother had two sisters,” he answered warily- the other two Black sisters were yet another subject that just wasn't discussed in their family, until now, apparently.

“Has,” his father corrected, “they are both still alive, but they have each been alienated from us, though in very different ways. By the time your mother was in her final year at Hogwarts her eldest sister Bellatrix was largely considered to be unstable, if not completely insane. On the surface she was an obedient pure blooded woman, but her true nature was hardly disguised. She was married off to the only man who would have her, and he was equally disturbed. Theirs was generously described as a marriage of convenience and they barely kept up appearances for propriety's sake. It was an embarrassment to her family. She is in Azkaban now.”

“Yes I know,” he said, leaving unspoken that he also knew that she was in Azkaban for crimes committed as a Death Eater.

“But the real blow was Andromeda, your mother’s middle sister who, despite being promised to another, ran off and married a muggleborn wizard just after our graduation from Hogwarts. She fell pregnant shortly thereafter, the scandal was enormous and my father would have been, legally and
magically, well within his rights to cancel the contract for your mother. Her family was considered untrustworthy at that point.”

“But he didn’t?”

“He didn’t, your mother is a remarkable creature, and she was still a Black, despite most of her generation being disgraced, there were few families that could compare to that pedigree. In the end she managed to convince him that she would still be a credit to the Malfoy name, and she has proven herself more than admirably, Father certainly never complained.”

There was a long beat of silence as Draco absorbed this.

“I’m sorry Father, I don’t understand what that has to do with Hermione.”

“I never wanted to see you in that position, feeling like you may have to choose between your family and the woman you love. Not because of her family, not even because of her blood status. I don't even want you to miss out on a friendship that makes you happy because of me and my opinions. Hermione has proven herself a strong, powerful, loving witch; I won’t stand in your way if she is what you want. And as I said Draco, I don’t want to be my father, it was clear to me that you and your mother loved her, so I endeavoured to get to know her. I was pleased with what I found. Do you disapprove of my relationship with her?”

Draco felt simultaneously shamed and alarmed, he'd underestimated his father, but was the man actual suggesting he might marry Hermione?!

“No, I just… this time last summer you would have called her a mudblood and forbidden me to associate with her.”

His father sighed heavily.

“Earlier I encouraged you to trust the opinions of the people you trust. I will add to that and say that should you find a woman you love and respect, you should follow her opinion above any other. I have found that with your mother, she convinced me to give your Hermione a chance and the witch has acquitted herself well. As usual your mother was right, your friend is more than worth our time and attention.”

“I just, I don't get it, you're so different with her!” he blurted.

“Am I?” he questioned, like the idea had never occurred to him.

“You talk to her like she's a friend, not like a kid. And every time I think you are about to scold her for impertinence you just laugh!” he immediately ducked his head against the expected fallout.

“Draco, look at me.”

He immediately obeyed and turned his head to see his father looking almost pained. Then with slow deliberate movements he reached over and laid a hand on Draco’s shoulder.

“It is important to remember, however much I have come to enjoy her company over these weeks, that I am not her father and therefore I am able to afford her a degree of...leniency that I cannot offer you. However, I do believe I may have erred on the side of formality in my interactions with you. Your grandfather would not have approved of me treating you as anything like an equal, and I did want to ensure that you learnt respect. But while you are still young, you are no longer a child, and you deserve to be shown some respect of your own, you have earnt it. I will endeavor to do so.”
He paused to let his words sink in, Draco just stared at him in disbelief, he’d never heard him speak like this.

“I hope you know how proud I am of you,” he continued, “You performed impressively at Hogwarts this year, and you have adapted to a myriad of changes in your life in a short time and with little complaint. I was especially impressed with the maturity with which you handled the situation with the dragon at school. I am aware that there were many ways you could have taken advantage of that to cause mischief, instead of just coming to me. You handled that like a man, a wizard with honor, and not a boy.”

Draco was simultaneously willing away a blush and fighting back tears.

“Thank you,” he eventually managed, his father squeezed his shoulder and finally let his hand drop.

They sat their in silent solidarity for a few minutes, before his father began to speak again.

“Hermione is an extraordinary young witch, you would do well to remember that and hold onto her.”

Draco looked at him, blinking rapidly in confusion.

“Father you keep speaking as if you expect me to marry her.”

He gave an elegant shrug of one shoulder, “expect, no, but I do see it as a possibility and I certainly wouldn’t want you to take for granted what you have with her and ruin your chance. You would certainly be hard pressed to find a witch your mother approves of more, and I challenge you to try and bring a woman into this house of whom your mother does not approve,” he chuckled to himself.

Draco was barely listening, he decided to put off thinking about his best friend in this new light for another day, he had enough to consider at the moment.

“And you would be okay with that? I mean, she’s muggle born. Our children would be half-bloods.”

His father looked at him with penetrating eyes.

“I’ve learnt that there are other, more important factors than blood. Your happiness for one.”

“Is that the reason you won’t be returning to the Dark Lord, if he returns?”

Draco couldn’t be sure, but he thought he saw him flinch at the question.

“There are myriad reasons not to continue to follow the Dark Lord, not the least of which is that he is unhinged and dangerous, and would certainly be more so if he was able to come back, but that is one as well.”

There was a long uncomfortable silence.

“You have questions about my time as a Death Eater,” it was a statement, not a question.

Draco hesitated. Could he really ask about this, and did he actually want to know the answers? With a resigned sigh he admitted to himself that had to ask or he’d always wonder, and it would be a thing that was always between them.
“You said something when you were talking to me and Hermione about performing horrific acts...did you hurt people?” he said in a very small voice.

“Yes,” he answered, voice heavy with an emotion Draco had never heard before.

“Did you,” his voice caught momentarily in his throat, “kill people?”

“Yes,” Draco couldn’t look at him, “and it does not excuse my actions, but although I now realize I was on the wrong side of it, we were at war, and it was a matter of survival.”

Draco struggled to regulate his breathing.

“If you would like for me to leave you alone now so that you can think, I will. I do not expect you to understand or to be able to forgive me right away, but I hope you will be able to one day. Please know that you have nothing to fear from me, I am not perfect, but I am your father and I love you.”

Draco could hold back no longer, he sobbed and reached for his father blindly. In moments he was surrounded by his father’s familiar scent and the unfamiliar comfort of his arms around him. He let himself go and just cried. They sat there for a long time as Draco finally released the pent up emotions that had been eating at him. When he had finally cried himself out he went to pull away, embarrassed by his childish behavior and the way he’d soaked his father’s shirt. But his father’s hold on him just tightened.

“Do not, for one moment, be ashamed of yourself for that.”

He nearly started crying again at that sentiment from a man who had always expected him to hide his emotions, but he just nodded against his chest.

“And if you take nothing else from this talk, know that I would gladly burn the world down if it meant keeping you and your mother safe and happy, you are all that matter.”

Draco thought, if his father had said nothing else to him, that would have been enough, and he sagged against him in relief.
Chapter 9

It was a magical summer in every sense of the word. Hermione finally learned how it felt to belong. It was glorious. Her own parents were wonderful, but trying to fit into their world had been like trying to don an ill fitting dress: wrong and uncomfortable. It had made her magic itch.

Malfoy Manor fed her every need. Hogwarts had been adequate but the Malfoy seat fulfilled her. When Narcissa had unceremoniously led her to a suite she’d never been inside before, announced it now belonged to her, and then started chatting happily about decorating the rooms, Hermione actually burst into tears.

“Dearest don’t cry,” the older witch had said in her regally maternal way, “I simply wanted you to have a space of your own here, you are not a guest.”

Hermione only cried harder.

After which, she’d gotten a crash course in interior design by the force of nature that was Narcissa Malfoy. It would have been frightening if she had not already started to become accustomed to the witch’s fervor. Sooner than it would have been possible without magic she had a suite decorated to her tastes in the family wing of Malfoy Manor.

She did not spend the night often. The evenings and weekends were her time with her parents. And even when she did, it felt more like a slumber party than going to bed at home, but that didn’t matter, she was blown away by the thought behind the gesture. And though she never would have admitted it, she felt a bit like a princess. The rooms were opulent by anybody’s standards but Narcissa had behaved like they were nothing more than what she rightfully deserved.

The mornings were largely spent in lessons with Lucius or Narcissa, sometimes both. Draco was somewhat surly about it at first, he’d been expecting a couple of months of freedom. Not what, when it came down to it, was just more schooling. But when he noticed that she was consistently outperforming him, his competitive streak emerged and he became fully invested in what his parents were trying to teach them. If only to prevent himself from being completely outdone by his muggleborn companion.

As for Hermione, she knew that she didn’t have a lot of experience with magical people, especially magical adults. However, she’d read more than enough to know that both of the Malfoy parents were exceptionally gifted, if in different ways. She was lucky to have them teaching her and refused to take that for granted.

And it was all so fascinating. Apparently both she and Draco were naturally talented at occlumency, which set her mind at ease. She knew it was important that they learned to shield their thoughts, had a terrible feeling that one day their ability to do so might be the difference between life and death. And she knew she wasn’t meant to use them except in an emergency, but her defensive lessons made her feel safe in a way she never had before.

Lucius (she had warmed to the man and found him to be surprisingly good company, but she still stumbled over his first name, even in her head, because he was just one of those people who naturally commanded respect and it seemed inherently wrong to address him so informally) was actually an amazing teacher. His lessons ended up being less frightening than she’d worried they would be. He was curt with her at first, but he was with Draco as well so she couldn't accuse him of
prejudice, and it was soon clear that he just took matters very seriously.

He gave them books to read. Many of which she suspected would not have met the approval of the Hogwarts staff. This troubled her at first, but he explained that it was important to understand what you were fighting against. He also argued that the line between right and wrong was often fuzzy, and that when it came to spell casting, it had a lot to do with how you intended to use said spell. For instance, a cutting curse was not inherently evil, it could be used to chop vegetables as easily as it could harm another human being. Even the killing curse could be used to humanely euthanize an animal.

He was also insistent that dark magic held an important place in the world. ‘Dark’ did not mean evil, it was as natural as a storm on a sunny day. The storm may appear to ruin the day, but the rain was essential to enriching the land. There could be no light without the dark, no day without night, and the ministry's whitewashing of magical history had done their society no favors. It had led to Voldemort's first rise as he had, rightly, been able to argue that the delicate balance had been disturbed. If the ministry had accepted the nature of magic in all her facets there would have been no void for Grindewald or Voldemort or any other supposed dark lord to fill.

Hermione spent many hours lying in bed staring at the ceiling of her bedroom wondering if she should be worried about how readily she agreed with his analysis. She let it all sink in, determined to learn as much as she could and use her time to analyze it later, even as she knew, deep down, that she’d long ago decided to trust these people. Even as she reveled in the knowledge he fed her.

In the afternoons they were afforded more freedom.

‘I have no intention of forcing you out of childhood before your time,’ Narcissa had quipped at one point.

So, they also spent many hours enjoying the innumerable wonders that Malfoy Manor had to offer them. Swimming in the lake or the pool; running about on the grounds; trekking about in the woods. Her suburban neighborhood, posh enough, simply couldn't compare.

Lucius and Narcissa had the most amusing arguments about teaching her how to ride, arguments that actually terrified her until she’d noticed Draco barely suppressing a smile when he’d witnessed them. After that she’d largely listened to Narcissa’s advice. She thought there was probably something to her assertion that there was a difference riding as a woman. She still dutifully paid attention to Lucius to avoid conflict and giggled internally as Draco sent her conspiratorial looks the whole time, and quietly whispered his own advice. She swore to herself that she'd never tell him, or especially his parents, that his tips were the most helpful.

But none of that began to compete with the joy of practicing magic with Draco. It was like nothing she’d ever experienced before. Better than when she’d been given her Hogwarts letter, better than finding her wand, even better than seeing Hogwarts for the first time; when her magic was stimulated as it never had been before because it had stagnated in the muggle world.

But this was more than that. It was like she came alive with him, was connected not just to her magic but to herself and to him. The best thing she had to compare it to was the first time she’d read a book that had really touched her, it was where she was meant to be. It wasn't just Malfoy Manor, it was Draco. There was something between them that she wouldn’t put voice to words, it was sacred.

She had a suspicion that Narcissa was keeping a secret from her. Actually, she was certain the witch was keeping many secrets, she admitted as much, claiming that they were too young to worry about certain things. It was just this, whatever it was that she shared with Draco, that she
was certain the woman was refusing to discuss specifically. But that was okay, she would never tell Narcissa about the way she felt about this link with Draco either. It was not intimate in a way that his mother could ever object to, but it was still unbearably personal.

The summer passed. It all seemed to happen in the blink of an eye, a blink of an eye which felt like a dream to Hermione. And it was a dream she was rudely awoken from long before she was ready.

At the end of August, Ron had written her to inform her that his family would be shopping for school supplies the following week along with Harry, and asked if she wanted to join in. She wasn't particularly keen, but she also felt pleased because hadn't needed to invite her, but he still had, and that felt nice. In addition, it was an excuse to visit the Alley.

She, of course, needed her school supplies, and she obviously couldn't visit with the Malfoys. Though she felt guilty over the sentiment she wanted to avoid bringing her parents, who stood out. They actually viewed the invitation as an opportunity, they dropped her off to do her necessary shopping while they ran errands in London. She was plenty clever enough to get her supplies and they had the necessary exposure to the magical world through the Malfoys, they didn't feel the need to follow her around while they had other things they could accomplish.

Harry and Ron had been reliable if slightly dull correspondents over the summer. Ron because it was becoming increasingly clear that they didn't have anything in common other than being Gryfffindors in the same year who were best friends with Harry, and Harry because he seemed to be truly bored by his relatives and simply didn't have much to tell her. She certainly couldn't elucidate on what she'd been up to over the summer. They'd surely found her letters as boring as she'd thought theirs, or even moreso, given her propensity for encouraging them to do their schoolwork.

She had been relieved to hear, just over a week before her invitation to meet them in the Alley, that Harry had been allowed to go stay with Ron. She had been anxious for him, wanted him out of his relatives' house. And she wasn't foolish enough to think he'd be allowed to stay at her house, should she have offered, being a muggle household. She tried not to let that reality chafe.

The Malfoys were wonderful, but they couldn't stop the prejudices of the world she inhabited from hurting. She also wasn't stupid enough to think that they hadn't contributed to them. What if they turned on her someday? What if Draco turned on her someday? Every fiber of her being told her it was impossible, but she was still scared. Nothing would be worse than that. She put to out of her mind.

She met the Weasleys at the Leaky for an early lunch, they'd spent the morning getting fitted for robes. She was infinitely grateful that Narcissa had assisted her in sending an owl ahead with her measurements and some orders for new school robes and some other outfits, and so she hadn't needed to be present for that part of the trip. She knew Draco was deeply envious that she'd avoided a shopping trip with his mother.

It was good to see Harry and Ron again. It was also somewhat disconcerting to be amongst the Weasley family. Harry was sweet, as usual, if awkward. Draco may have been somewhat uncomfortable with physical contact, but Harry was actually alarmed by it, a fact which bothered her immensely.

Ron's manners, always jarring to her, actually made her cringe over lunch. Percy was Percy, almost outrageously arrogant but hardly worth a thought. She was wary of the twins since Draco had pointed out their bullying behavior to her, and found it telling that even their own siblings seemed to feel the same way.

Mr. Weasley seemed very nice, but the way he quizzed her about muggles made her cringe. He
studied them like muggles studied animals in a zoo. He was apparently the ministry’s leading expert on the non-magical population and yet he could not even pronounce ‘electricity’ correctly. Even Lucius knew better by now. It was no wonder their society was prejudiced against muggles.

Ginny was sweet, but the way she gazed worshipfully at Harry was disturbing. Hermione had seen shades of it before, he had a lot of other fans at Hogwarts, but never to this extent. She guessed the little girl’s crush had only been encouraged by all those terrible boy-who-lived stories that she'd learned were so common in magical Britain, as well as the fact that the object of that crush was staying in her house and was best friends with her brother.

She was…reticent as she went shopping with them. It wasn't anything that anybody did, but she felt like a spare part. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw Draco and Lucius enter Flourish and Blotts a few minutes after she’d accompanied the Weasleys into the shop. Draco sent her a little grin and Lucius actually winked at her when he was sure nobody was looking. She felt her heart grow full as she recognized that their appearance was not a coincidence, but a designed show of support.

She couldn't shop with them but they were still here for her. They could have come to do their shopping on any other day. Instead they'd made an appearance just to make sure she felt secure.

The animosity she felt throbbing between Lucius and Mr. Weasley was palpable and a little frightening. As a result the handsome author who was holding a book signing in the shop barely registered to her. Even if she did feel a bit overcome that Gilderoy Lockhart was to be her professor in a few weeks. What an unbelievable step-up from Quirrell!

She left the Alley with many questions about the Weasleys. But she was excited for the new school year even as she hated to see the summer come to an end. Those few minutes in Flourish and Blotts gave her some insight into just how difficult it was going to be to pretend like she wasn't friends with Draco, much more difficult than it had been the previous year.

A few days later when Narcissa entered the drawing room where Hermione and Draco were having morning tea, she took one look at the books sitting on a side table, gave a decidedly out of character snort, whipped out her wand, and set them on fire.

“Narcissa!” Hermione yelped.

Draco just looked on with wide eyes.

“Relax my dear, while kindling might be all those books are truly good for, I wouldn’t destroy them, I know you need them for school,” another flick of her wand and the flames were extinguished, the books undamaged, “honestly, shouldn’t you of all people know that magical flames aren’t always destructive?”

Hermione was both chagrined and curious, mostly curious, “what do you mean, why did you do that?”

Narcissa sighed.

“Dumbledore used to be a great wizard, if a bit prone to bias when it came to his precious Gryfffindors, but now I suspect he’s going senile,” she said, apropos of nothing and Hermione looked at her, even more confused, “tell me Hermione, what do you think of this Mr. Lockhart?” she waved her hand towards the books with a little moue of disgust.

“Well, he seems brilliant,” she responded, suddenly unsure, “I haven’t finished the first book yet
but if the others are like that one then he’s done a lot of amazing things. I can’t imagine he’d be so famous otherwise.”

Narcissa scoffed.

“You’ll learn as you get older that public adulation isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, people are easily led. However, I don’t want to prejudice you, I want you to read these books, carefully, with your eyes open, and when you’re through I’d like you to tell me if your opinion of Mr. Lockhart stands.”

She just nodded dumbly. Narcissa wasn’t asking her to do anything she hadn’t planned to do on her own, but she couldn’t imagine what the older witch was getting at. She’d be going through those books with a fine toothed comb though. Draco was hunched over in his chair doing his best to disappear, obviously hoping to avoid being commanded to read the entire set of books before school even started, she bit back a snort at the sight. However, his ploy worked.

Just hours later Hermione was nearly in tears, she was a mere three chapters into the second tome in the series. How could she have been so blind? The man was a fraud, his stories full of holes and contradictions, his boasting outlandish. She felt as if her trust had been personally violated. Books were sacred to Hermione and for him to use them to so thoroughly deceive the public repulsed her.

What was worse, she had a sinking feeling that she would never have seen it had she not been warned by Narcissa. She'd been blinded by the pretty face gracing the covers and the even prettier way he wove his ridiculous tales. She also understood the woman questioning Dumbledore’s mental state. How could he hire such a buffoon to teach them to defend themselves? They were about to waste another year in DADA, and now that she knew for certain that the spirit of Voldemort was out there waiting to return to power, the idea not only wounded her studious soul, but scared her. Thank Merlin for their private lessons.

Narcissa was, as always, kind about the whole ordeal. She simply gave Hermione a warning about being tricked by appearances, but she didn’t make her feel like a fool. Hermione still felt like one. Imagine having a crush on a teacher!

She hadn’t been at Hogwarts a week before Draco was pulling her into an alcove. He was grinning, and dressed for quidditch, a look she’d become accustomed to over the summer but couldn’t account for on Hogwarts grounds as he wasn't on the house team.

“I did it!” he crowed, practically bouncing on the balls of his feet in excitement.

“What is it that you did?” she asked carefully, refusing to allow her ignorance to ruin his good mood.

"I’m the new Slytherin seeker! We’ve just had tryouts, it was the only position open and Flint made his decision on the spot. I think I was the obvious choice,” he preened.

She hadn’t known Slytherin was holding quidditch tryouts but, then again, that wasn’t the sort of thing she kept track of even in her own house. She did wish that she’d known he would be trying for something that was so important to him. But, because she knew it was important to him, she also wouldn’t allow the feeling of having been left out temper his happiness in any way. She viciously stamped out her jealousy of his housemates who got to talk to him all the time and grinned at him happily.

“That’s amazing Draco, congratulations!” she leaned forward and hugged him eagerly, feeling victorious when he didn’t flinch, or stiffen in any way, but hugged her back immediately, he'd take
her hand without a second thought but hugs still seemed to freak him out for some reason.

“I have to go,” he said, still practically bouncing, “but I wanted to be the one to tell you,” he gave her one more of his sly grins and was gone.

He walked away, as usual, without looking back and not knowing how his casual words warmed her heart.

Harry and Ron griped for days after they found out that Draco's father had bought the entire Slytherin quidditch team new brooms.

"I'm just saying it's wrong!” Ron groaned for what seemed like the thousandth time.

Hermione snapped.

"It's actually not. If it was, Harry would never have been allowed his broom last year. In fact, they made an exception to the rule for Harry because first years aren't supposed to have brooms at all. What the Slytherins are doing isn't against any rule,“ she explained, tired of hearing about it.

Harry and Ron stared at her like she'd just told them she was transferring to Slytherin house, and she immediately regretted her words.

"How can you say that?” Harry asked, sounding hurt.

"Whose side are you on!” Ron raged at the same time.

She took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry, I'm on Gryffindor's side, of course. I'm simply saying that it would be hypocritical of us to complain. Harry didn't do anything wrong last year, and they aren't doing anything wrong now. If you think it's unfair, then you need to advocate for a change in the rules that forces everybody to ride the same model of broom so nobody is given an advantage based on their equipment. As it is the Slytherins are only acting like Slytherins, this is a very cunning way to give them a boost without breaking any rules."

She knew the gift to the Slytherin team had only been Lucius’ way of showing pride in his son, and rewarding him for his hard work in making the team. Malfoys always had the best, so he’d purchased the best. It wouldn't have crossed his mind that it was wrong, it was simply a different way of thinking than Harry, Ron, and most other Gryffindors used. Ron looked absolutely furious, Harry still looked hurt, but also thoughtful.

At the end of the first week of classes Hermione was lounging in the common room reading one of the muggle novels she'd dared to bring with her this year (last year, with the exception of a few pieces of clothing, she'd only brought items from the magical world with her to Hogwarts) when she noticed that Harry was sitting next to her just staring at her- Harry was far less restless than Ron and was certainly capable of just sitting quietly, but he never studied her the way that he was now.

"What?” she asked after a few minutes.

"You're different," he commented, "but I can't quite put my finger on how."

"What do you mean?” she flipped her book shut to give him her full attention.

He frowned.
"Like I said, I don't know exactly. I think, maybe, you seem calmer?" he speculated.

"Calmer?" she asked slowly.

"Yeah, like you don't seem as frenzied about school work, you don't have to be the one to answer every question in class," he pointed to the book on her lap, "you're reading a book, just for fun, a muggle novel. Last year you considered 'Hogwarts: A History' to be light reading," he shrugged, "like I said, different."

"Oh," she said thoughtfully, "well I suppose this year I feel more comfortable at Hogwarts. Last year I didn't have any idea what to expect."

He nodded.

"That makes sense," he paused, looking at her thoughtfully, "it's nice, you know. Not that I didn't like you before, of course, but you were always so stressed, it was sometimes stressful to be around you."

She gave him a small smile.

"Thank you Harry," she bit her lip teasingly, "but I make no promises about my behavior come exam time."

He laughed.

"Fair enough."

He got up then, undoubtedly to go find Ron and find something more interesting to do than stare at her.

She hadn't thought Harry was that observant, he was a twelve year old boy, after all. Then again, very little about Harry was typical. However, she felt slightly guilty about the lie of omission she had just told him, and that she was continuing to tell all of her friends. Nobody knew of her connection to the Malfoy family, nor could they, of course. She knew the tutelage she'd gotten about the wizarding world, and just spending so much time with such a sophisticated magical family had done a lot for her confidence, and created the calmness that Harry had noticed. She just felt more comfortable in her own skin, and in her abilities. It was wonderful, but hiding the truth tugged at her conscience. Then again, there was nothing to be done about it.

On the morning of her birthday a couple of weeks later a petite and beautiful owl she'd never seen before brought her a thick letter. It contained greetings from Narcissa as well as Lucius, though she had no delusions he'd actually contributed to its writing, many exclamations about how she was missed around the Manor, and a final note telling her that the owl was actually her birthday gift. The bird had apparently been specifically trained to discreetly deliver letters in muggle areas.

Her eyes filled with tears. Her parents had always been worried about using owl post, she was sure this would do much to quell that fear. It was an extraordinarily generous gift, expensive, yes, but mostly it was enormously thoughtful. It gave her a means to write not only to Claire and Narcissa more reliably, but especially to her parents from whom she feared becoming isolated, even given their extended access to the magical world thanks to the Malfoys.

Also, there was the fact that, in the five minutes since she’d appeared in the Great Hall and perched daintily next to Hermione’s plate, she’d fallen in love with the little bird. She caught Draco’s eyes across the room, and he shot her a brief questioning look, before quickly turning his
attention elsewhere.

“I’ve been sent this owl as a birthday gift!” she exclaimed happily, to the Gryffindor table at large, since she couldn’t go over and talk to Draco, and perhaps thank him in lieu of his parents, she’d have to settle for writing them later.

“That’s great, Hermione!” Harry said enthusiastically.

She shot him a grin in thanks. Ron just grumbled under his breath about hand me downs, and how it must be nice to get a pet picked especially for you. She felt a brief surge of annoyance, but quickly put it behind her.

Draco pulled her into an alcove later that afternoon, he really had gotten very sneaky about that.

“Mother sent you that owl for your birthday?” he questioned.

“Yes,” she grinned, “I’m ever so excited. It’ll be so nice to have a way to speak with my parents. You were the one who pointed out how unreliable post owls could be, and they were concerned about having such large owls flying to the house regularly, it tends to draw undue attention, muggles don’t use owls after all.”

He rolled his eyes.

“I actually did know that,” he said condescendingly.

“I didn’t know owls could be trained to stay out of sight of muggles.”

He looked surprised and she grinned in triumph.

“I’m guessing you didn’t know that one,” she said, “well, anyways, thank you.”

“For what?”

“The owl.”

“I didn’t buy you the owl, Hermione. I didn’t even know about it.”

“Oh, I just assumed it was from your family,” she explained with a shrug.

“No, this is from me,” he shoved a package she’d yet to notice into her hands.

“You got me something?” she questioned, determined to keep the emotion out of her voice.

“It’s your birthday,” he answered, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

She hadn’t bought him anything for his birthday in June, unsure about the bounds of their relationship at that point, and she’d been sure that, if nothing else, would dictate his behavior on her birthday. She ripped through the paper to find an assortment of sweets. On one level she was unsurprised, Draco had an undeniable sweet tooth and the packages he received from his mother on a regular basis were noticed even at the Gryffindor table. But he’d selected only those that he knew she liked. She hadn’t realized he could be as thoughtful as his mother, at least in his own, clumsy, twelve year old way. She really couldn’t judge, she’d only just turned thirteen.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

“You’re welcome,” he shrugged, “so have you named it? The owl, I mean?”
“Atalanta,” she said happily, hoping for his approval, he gave it immediately with a nod.

“I like it,” then he smirked at her, “is it because she eventually turned into a lion, Miss Gryffindor?” he nudged her playfully.

She suppressed a triumphant grin at his casual touch.

“No,” she responded primly, “it’s because she was so swift none of the boys could catch her.”

He rolled his eyes, "One of them did, eventually, and she married him."

"Yes, but he had to use trickery to do it."

"You better be careful," he warned, "not all of us are so noble to be above trickery," he smirked at her.

She could only stare at him in shock.

"Slytherin, Hermione," he said pointing to himself, "there's a whole house of us."

She just nodded wordlessly, he rolled his eyes.

“Happy birthday,” he said, grabbing her in a quick and surprising hug and then looking quickly around and darting away without a backwards glance.

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Narcissa sat with her hands clasped together to keep them from shaking, her wand at the ready in case Lucius needed her to come to his aid. He was casting every detection spell she'd ever heard of, and a few he'd just told her about, on that blasted journal. The thing was malevolent, even more so than she'd originally believed. It made her skin crawl to know that her husband had been alone with it, and she was so glad he'd asked for her assistance this time. Next time they'd bring an elf along as well, the more backup they had the better. Just thirty minutes in the same room with the thing and Narcissa feared, had she or Lucius been less skilled occlumens that they would already have been tempted to do something very stupid like write in it.

She was so glad she'd asked Lucius to remove it from their home. She was also happy they'd waited until Draco and Hermione had returned to school to start running these experiments. They'd learned very little about the object, but what they had was frightening and disheartening and she didn't have it in her to go home and pretend for them. No, she'd go home and have an early night with her husband all the while quietly cursing Abraxas to the deepest pits of hell for getting them into this mess.

Then, tomorrow she'd turn the lady’s boudoir within their suite where she'd never slept, and never planned to, into her own study and research lab. She'd figure out how to get that taint out of her husband's arm if it was the last thing she did. After that she planned to pack her family off to an unplottable island somewhere and let somebody else deal with slaying the monster.
Chapter 10

Lucius watched his wife from a discreet distance as she combed through the attics carefully for something. He was chagrined to say he had no idea what that might be.

He feared he'd lost touch with her in the last weeks. He couldn't help but feel he'd let her down. He knew she was fretting about the threat the Dark Lord presented, and he was only a danger to her because of him. Married to a different man and she'd be free, as would her children. He wasn't usually one for self deprecation, but the feeling of letting his family down was a hard pill to swallow; he'd managed to smooth things over with Draco but now he was afraid that in the meantime he'd inadvertently alienated Narcissa.

It started out simply enough, after Draco returned to Hogwarts she claimed that the house elves were restless. Because it had been years, if not generations, since they'd had so few people to care for. He didn't know how she determined that, they seemed the same as usual to him, but they were under her direction and he respected her opinion. So she set upon several projects to keep them all busy and as a result the Manor was in a state of frenzy.

He had thought, at first, that she was merely bored and missing Draco and Hermione. There had been a similar adjustment period last year when Draco had gone away to school for the first time and she'd missed him terribly. They both had, if Lucius was being honest. He assumed that essentially losing two children this year would be just as, if not more, painful for her. But while last year she'd planned and hosted several social events to keep herself busy, that was not an option this year, because the House was officially still in mourning for his father.

So, he said nothing when she had the elves start to reorganize the library, according to her instructions, even as his fingers actually itched to put a stop to it. The library was much more his territory than hers and he liked the way it was arranged. But he didn't, she'd never let him down before when it came to managing their home, and if worse came to worse he could always set it back to rights if her new system proved disastrous.

After that she took on the task of closing down the wing where his parents had once resided, something she'd put off out of respect. But when his mother made a short visit over the summer and it became perfectly clear that she was happy to stay with them upon further visits, Narcissa declared that it was time to put that area in stasis until it was needed once more. It was an intensive magical process that kept her occupied for over a week.

When she was done with that she started concentrating on making some changes to the public areas of the house. Areas that had, until very recently, been his mother's domain as Mistress of the Manor. His mother's tastes were fussier than his wife's and he knew she'd been wanting to put her own mark on things for years. He could hardly fault her for that so he didn't even complain about the string of decorators she brought in to assist, even though he loathed having strangers in house. As long as she was content he would just bunker down in his study and bear it.

But he'd become concerned when she'd begun redecorating her boudoir. She hadn't even said anything about it, just had the elves strip the room of its old furniture. She'd spent only a handful of nights in that room the entire length of their marriage, and then it had only been when Draco was an infant and unwilling to settle; she'd taken the baby to sleep in the next room to avoid disturbing him. It had never been her regular bedroom, the one set aside for the Master was their's.
He remembered that decision like it was yesterday. In the months leading up to their wedding she’d toured the wing where they were to live with his mother, so that she could have it decorated to her liking. She laughed with him later about her boudoir, called it ‘superfluous.’ And then she’d done something he’d never seen before; she’d become very shy. She hesitantly asked him if he wanted them to keep separate bedrooms. He hadn't hesitated to deny it, and that had been the first time he’d consciously processed how different his marriage was going to be from that of his parents. It set part of his soul free.

She had her boudoir redecorated all those years ago along with the rest of the wing to keep from scandalizing his mother with the idea that they planned to share a bedroom, but that was the only reason. So, her sudden interest in the room felt like a punch to the gut. The elves restlessness was not going to be a good enough excuse for that.

He’d gone searching for an explanation and he found her in the attics along with Jema. He paused when he caught sight of her to take the opportunity to observe her unnoticed. Twenty years together and she still stopped him in his tracks. He resolved that he was not letting her go, even just to the next bedroom, without a fight.

Fall had come and there was a crispness in the air, but she still wore only a light day dress which accentuated her willowy figure, unaccompanied by robes. Her face was flushed with exertion and her hair was piled on top of her head as haphazardly as he’d ever seen it. It reminded him of the way she looked at Hogwarts on the rare moments he’d found her buried in her school work, and was not perfectly put together as she usually was; or the less rare moments when he’d found them some privacy, and his hands had become the reason for her dishevelment. He considered winning her to be one of his greatest achievements, second only to Draco, and he loved that he was the only one she’d willingly allow to see her looking so natural.

She could still easily pass for a woman in her mid-twenties. She momentarily took his breath away. But then he remembered why he'd sought her out and his course became determined.

“Could you leave us?” he addressed the elf as he stepped fully into the space.

“Of course Master,” she curtsied.

“I'll call you back when I need you Jema, thank you,” said Narcissa, eyeing him in silent censure that he’d overstepped his purview and undermined her authority with the elf.

Jema nodded, gave one more curtsey and popped away.

“Lucius,” she frowned, “is there something the matter?” she was a combination of annoyed and concerned.

He was aware that he generally left her to her own devices during the day while he saw to his own responsibilities and that his sudden appearance was odd, and he was also aware he'd just overstepped his boundaries in dismissing Jema when she'd been assisting Narcissa. She would forget about the impropriety immediately, she understood the relationship between the newest Lord and Lady, but some of the younger elves others would not if they were to have witnessed it. The last thing he wanted to do was make them think he didn't respect their Mistress. He sighed. It was beginning to feel like he was mucking things up at every turn

“I apologize. I was not thinking, it will not happen again. I was simply anxious to speak with you.”

She nodded graciously and waited patiently for him to explain himself.
“To answer your question, I don’t know if something is the matter. What is going on here?” he gestured around them.

She released her hair from its baret and it fell down all around her to her waist, shimmering even in the low light of the attic; damn witch, she knew what that did to him. But she seemed completely unwitting of her actions as she automatically just started pulling it up again without looking at him, lost in thought.

“What do you mean? I'm looking for a desk, it seems a waste to buy or have one made, I just need something practical. I'm sure there's something acceptable up here.”

And now he was lost.

“A desk, whatever for?”

“For the lady’s bedroom in our suite.”

He blinked at her as he attempted to solve that puzzle.

“What does the bedroom need a desk for?”

“I'm turning it into a study,” she said, though her tone of voice suggested that what she was really saying was, ‘do please keep up!’

That caught him flat footed.

“A study?”

The feeling of tightness in his chest that he hadn't even been aware of before began to loosen.

“Yes, I need a place to work where nobody can just stumble upon what I'm doing, the wards in that room make it the best possible choice as only you or I can enter on our own. Why, what did you think I was doing?”

He hesitated, feeling more sheepish by the moment, but he knew if he didn’t admit it, it would just be a matter of time before she figured it out, and that would be even more embarrassing.

“I thought you were redecorating in preparation for moving in there.”

She froze and just stared at him, the only thing moving were her rapidly blinking eyelids, until she suddenly took three very determined steps towards him and looped her arms around his neck.

“You ridiculous man! Why would you ever think I would want to move out of our bedroom?”

He shrugged with practiced nonchalance, it was an automatic reaction, the act would be useless on her, she could read him like a book.

“Much has changed as of late. I thought perhaps, however unintentionally, I may have been neglecting you.”

It would not be an exaggeration to say that more things had changed in the last year and a half than had stayed the same. His father fell ill, which led to his parents quitting England. Draco had gone off to Hogwarts. His father had died and now his mother lived permanently in France. They practically adopted a muggleborn witch and his niece had cut down substantially on the amount of time she spent at the Manor. Then last, but certainly not least, they had learned that the world was not free of the Dark Lord. And the only one of these events he’d been even slightly prepared for
was Draco going off to school.

He’d fully expected to have thirty years or more before he became Head of House, at the very least he’d expected Draco to be out of Hogwarts and be able to share some of the responsibilities of the House. But his son was only twelve, which left Lucius to fulfill the duties of Lord and Scion both, while finding the time to train Draco for his eventual duties, which was more important than ever now with the news of the Dark Lord. Should something happen to Lucius he needed to ensure Draco would be prepared.

And then there was all the time he’d spent training Draco and Hermione over the summer, they had been quite busy. He would only spend more in the future as their magical cores grew and stabilized and could withstand more stress. He may have to look into hiring some discreet tutors, though he refused to trust them to others completely. He’d have to be even better organized in the coming months and years to make sure nothing fell by the wayside.

It would have been a lot of responsibility even if everything was going smoothly, but it was not. In both the Wizengamot and on the Hogwarts Board of Governors, Dumbledore seemed determined to thwart him at every turn. In terms of gathering information about the Dark Lord, it didn't seem to matter how many feelers he put out or how many palms he greased, he couldn't seem to find anything. He didn't know if that meant the evil wizard was just that deeply underground, or worse, that he'd lost the trust of his vast network of contacts and informants, which would mean they were truly flying blind. And don't even get him started on that Merlin forsaken journal of the Dark Lord’s. No, when he took it all into consideration it was not out of the realm of possibility that he'd been neglecting his wife.

“I have no complaints, it was wonderful to watch you with the children this summer. And I understood the consequences of your added responsibilities. I am perfectly capable of keeping myself occupied. If I ever did become discontented you would know about it long before I contemplated moving to a new bedroom,” she said, laying a hand over his heart.

“I am just concerned I am going to drop the quaffle somewhere along the way, perhaps without even noticing.”

She chuckled, “that’s what you have me for, to point out those things to you. Honestly Lucius, I’m so proud of the way you’ve comported yourself over the past year,” there was a beat of silence, “I don’t sleep well without you, you know, even when you’re simply away on business for a night or two. I'm not going anywhere, not even to the next room. You’re my constant and my touchstone, I hope you consider me to be that for you as well.”

“The thought of you even one room away turned me into a Hufflepuff, Narcissa, of course I feel the same way.”

Her trilling laughter was music to his ears.

“The last thing you could ever be, Husband, is a Hufflepuff, you’re simply not soft enough,” she poked his firm chest for emphasis.

He chuckled and kissed the top of her head.

“So, why the need for such a well guarded study?” he wondered, she had her own already, though she didn’t use it often, preferring to tend to her correspondence in a sitting room.

“I’m sorry,” she sighed, “I should have told you more of my plans, but as you said, you’ve been so busy lately I didn’t think you needed more to occupy your mind. But to answer your question, I am
formulating contingency plans.”

He frowned, “Contingency plans for what?”

“For everything. You remember the last time, the worst thing about when the Dark Lord was in power was how trapped we felt? All we could do was keep our heads down and hope to survive?”

“Yes,” he replied, full of shame, he'd been helpless to protect his young family.

“I don’t ever want to experience that again. My original intention was just to find a way to get that mark out of your arm,” she reached down and cupped his forearm above his Dark Mark.

His heart lurched, there is nothing he could desire more than that. If she could accomplish it, he could keep his family away from the Dark Lord, but he didn't think it was possible. It seemed too much to hope for.

“But then I realized it would be foolish to put all of our eggs in one basket,” she looked at him apologetically.

“No, you’re absolutely right. So, what other plans?”

“Well, I started thinking about all the things we have to take into account. The Grangers, for instance, they'll need protection. Dobby is a good start, but probably not enough.”

Lucius nodded thoughtfully.

“And then there is Draco and Hermione, it's one thing to train them but they are still so young. We believe we have time before the Dark Lord can return to full power, but it may be even longer until they're capable of defending themselves in any significant way. The last thing I want to do is send them away, but we still need to plan for it, because we may not have a choice.”

“Whatever keeps them alive,” he conceded.

“And then there's Claire, she's vulnerable as well, even if she would probably be in less immediate danger.”

He sighed, so much to consider that he hadn't thought of, Narcissa was more of a gift from the gods everyday.

“I take your point, there are a lot of angles to consider.”

“I assume you would have told me if you had any news of the Dark Lord?” she questioned.

“Yes, unfortunately I just keep hitting dead ends.”

She nodded, obviously unsurprised, “I was also thinking of something Hermione told me.”

“What's that?”

“Apparently the Dark Lord, even in Quirrell's body, couldn't touch Potter. According to Dumbledore, when his mother sacrificed herself for him it left a blood protection against the Dark Lord on the boy. And it is so powerful it stopped him all those years ago, and it killed Quirrell and drove Him away once again in June.”

“Love and sacrifice, that's powerful magic,” he admitted thoughtfully, it was also something the Dark Lord never would have thought of, given how dismissive he had been of the old ways.
“A mother’s love,” she clarified.

He froze.

“Cissa…”

“No, Lucius, if there is even the slightest chance, I must at least look into it. And not all blood magic requires sacrifice, a witch’s magic on behalf of a child can be very powerful on its own. Most of it had been lost though, it will take some work to uncover the possibilities.”

He closed his eyes, fighting back his panic. He didn't know what he'd do if he lost her, but he also couldn't blame her for being willing to do whatever possible to protect Draco…and Hermione too.

“Alright,” he conceded, “but promise me you will not do anything foolish.”

“I already told you I don’t plan on going anywhere,” she gave his arm a reassuring squeeze.

That would have to be good enough for now.

“That leads me to one last thing. Do we know why the Dark Lord was after Potter? I do not believe his mother's sacrifice would have worked to protect him unless he was after the baby specifically, she had to be exchanging her life for his. I had just been under the impression he wanted to eradicate the family for defying him so often, but that no longer makes sense.”

Lucius winced.

“There was talk of a prophecy.”

He hadn't wanted to believe the Dark Lord could be so foolish, people who chased prophecies often spelled their own doom. Not that he'd cared if the wizard had condemned himself, he just hadn't wanted him taking the rest of them down with him. But Narcissa had a point, it sounded like the fool had been after baby Harry Potter.

Narcissa snorted, “he was really revealing himself as a half-blood, then.”

A wizard from a magical family of any substance knew to be wary of prophecies, it was too easy to trigger the foretold events, Oedipus being a prime example, but their histories were full of similar tales.

“That's something to consider though, it explains why he is apparently still after the boy. Otherwise you'd think he'd want to avoid the person who caused his vanquishment. Quite unfortunate for Hermione.”

“Are you certain she can't be convinced to distance herself from the boy?”

“She is aware of my concerns, but no, she would view it as an abandonment. She has and too few friends in her life to consider that. On top of which, she is very fond of him, speaks of him almost like a younger sibling. She has a big heart and she decided somewhere along the way that it is her job to make sure he's taken care of. I can't exactly fault her for that.”

“I suppose not,” he sighed, “we should have Severus over for dinner.”

“You think he knows something?”

“I think he is close to Dumbledore, even if it's just in proximity. And I think I'd like to get what impressions he is willing to share about the situation at Hogwarts. The Board of Governors only
gets things second or third hand, he will speak more candidly to us directly, even though he is as slippery as any snake.”

“That seems wise,” she bowed her head in agreement.

He smirked at her, “I’d also like to hear what he thinks about our Miss Granger.”

Narcissa scoffed.

“She's a Gryffindor, she may be the most brilliant student to come through that school in a generation, but his thoughts still won't be favorable,” she rolled her eyes, and then something seemed to have occurred to her, “I don't know if you remember this, but when they came to Hogwarts, Severus was quite close to a girl called Lily Evans, they were childhood friends. She later became Lily Potter.”

Lucius reared back in surprise.

“You think he may have his own vested interest in the Potter boy?”

“I think he will at least be watching him closely, and Severus is very observant.”

“We will have to tread carefully, but that is, indeed, very interesting. It might be the very thing we need to begin making progress, he may be stuck in Scotland for most of the year, but if anybody knows anything it will be Severus.”

“I'll have the elves prepare his favorites, he's especially fond of Raffie’s ginger cake.”

“I'll leave the details to you, now I do believe I know of a desk that will fit your purposes, I believe it is this way,” he said taking her hand and leading her to find the requested piece.

“How do you know that?” she wondered.

“I used to play up here as a boy.”

“I didn't know that!”

“I think I'd forgotten until now, I can't be sure but I believe Mother suggested it, there is plenty to explore and nobody would have thought to search for me here.”

“Draco would have had fun amongst all this,” she gestured around them to the varied assortment of old furniture, “there would have been an array of creative forts, I believe.”

He pulled her close, “I would be sorry, but perhaps we can preserve this secret to share with his children, I quite relish the idea of being the fun grandfather.”

The blinding smile she rewarded him with upon this request was so much more than he ever could have hoped for when he'd sought her out, and it bolstered his spirits: they would find a way through this.

Draco was lonely, it was not a feeling he was accustomed to. As an only child who rarely went out in public, and grew up in a household where he'd been expected to be seen and not heard, he'd learned to appreciate his own company. As much as he loved Claire, she was an only child as well, and they enjoyed their time together but they mostly existed in their own separate, if parallel orbits. It was one of the reasons they got along so well, they both appreciated their solitude.
Hermione had gone and ruined that completely. He'd gotten used to her for Salazar’s sake! Not just used to her, he'd grown sadly dependent on her company.

It was hard to watch her with her friends. He'd never hated Potter and Weasley more. And now there was even Longbottom, who she was spending more and more time with. She told him it was just because he was nice, quiet company. That didn't really make him feel better. It also made it impossible to ignore that, aside from Hermione herself, he didn't have any real friends.

He had plenty of influence, especially inside Slytherin, even as a second year, but that wasn't the same as companionship. Crabbe and Goyle were mere space fillers, they gravitated towards him as their fathers did towards his father, but they could barely string a couple of sentences together. Draco was continually surprised they had enough magic to warrant getting Hogwarts letters. Pansy was an obnoxious sycophant, she obviously already had a betrothal in mind, almost certainly at her parents’ instruction. The Parkinsons could use a boost from the Malfoy name and vaults, and Pansy didn't seem to have any interest in actually getting to know him. But he wanted a marriage like his parents’ and goodness, if he was going to consider marrying anybody at this juncture, well it most certainly would not be his prissy housemate.

Blaise had his own agenda and Nott kept to himself to the point that Draco regularly forgot he was around. The other girls in his year were mere faces in the crowd. And it wouldn't do to socialize outside of Slytherin, if the prejudiced masses would have even deigned to speak to him.

That left Hermione, and he wasn't allowed to be seen with her. He knew that wasn't her fault, in fact she made an effort to seek him out whenever possible. That didn't take the sting out of his loneliness, or keep him from being annoyed. But he couldn't do anything about it but bide his time until the holidays.

When a school owl landed in front of him at breakfast one morning in November, he barely suppressed a sneer. It was best not to insult a post owl, they could be vicious. However, he'd never received a delivery from a Hogwarts bird before and it made him wary. But then he'd seen Hermione’s distinctive scrawl on the parchment, and he'd quickly grabbed the letter and then carefully—he valued his fingers—fed the owl some of his bacon. It made sense, if she needed to send him an owl she couldn't use Atalanta, the little bird his mother had chosen for her was very distinctive. He'd have to think of another means for them to communicate lest the regular reception of school owls sully his reputation.

Still, he was pleased to get her not and upon her request he met her in a back corner of the library that night, just half an hour before curfew.

“Hi!” she beamed at him, “we’ll have to be quick, but I have something to show you,” and without further ado she grabbed his hand and pulled him along around the perimeter of the library.

She eventually stopped in front of a bookcase that looked like it hadn't been touched in a hundred years. It and all the books it stored were covered in a thick blanket of dust that made Draco’s nose itch. Did the harridan of a librarian refuse to let the castle elves clean in here? Surely they wouldn't abide by this.

Hermione pulled on a book about the medieval ogre wars as if to remove it and murmured the word ‘veritas’ just loudly enough for him to hear it. He then heard a quiet ‘click’ and she turned them with a tug on his hand so that he could see that the wall next to them appeared to have cracked open. She stuck her fingers in the crack and a section of the wall swung open easily, surely as a result of magic, to reveal a chamber behind it.

It was a small turret, the starry night sky was clearly visible from above, as the upper portion of the
circular room was almost entirely composed of windows. There were a few study carrels pushed against the walls, a couple of armchairs and a sofa in the middle of the floor on top of a plush looking oriental rug facing a cozy fireplace.

She pulled him inside and he looked around in amazement.

“I’ve found us somewhere to meet where nobody can find us or bother us!” she bounced on the balls of her feet in excitement.

He couldn’t even make fun of her lack of compartment, this was too amazing.

“How?” he wondered, voice barely above a whisper.

“I’ve been chronologically going through all the editions of ‘Hogwarts: A History,’ most people don’t know it, but with each subsequent addition they remove things to make room for new information so the book doesn’t become too long. So, there are things in some of these books that time has essentially forgotten. I found one with an alternative blueprint of the library. I noticed it looked different than the others I’d seen, and I spotted this room. With a little deciphering I figured out how to get in.”

“And nobody else knows about it?” he asked, eyes wide, he could quite believe their good luck.

“I’ve been keeping watch for two weeks, nobody has so much as approached the bookshelf where the entrance is. So I reset the password and sent you an owl.”

She bit her lip and waited, clearly hoping for his approval.

“You brilliant girl,” he grinned, she beamed back, “‘veritas?’” he questioned.

She shrugged.

“It seemed appropriate, we can be our true selves here.”

He didn’t think about it, he just swept her up in his arms.

“I take it you approve?”

“Brilliant, brilliant girl,” he repeated, hugging her tight.
Chapter 11

‘His eyes are as green as a fresh pickled toad, And his hair is as dark as a blackboard,’ Hermione sang to herself trotting along toward the library, the tune was oddly catchy, but she still rolled her eyes as she remembered the musical valentine Ginny Weasley had sent her friend.

‘What had the girl been thinking?’ she wondered, ‘Didn’t she know how much that would humiliate Harry? Had she actually thought those were compliments?’

Hermione had tried to talk to the younger witch about her crush on more than one occasion over the past several months, but had never been successful. She suspected Ginny saw her as a rival for Harry’s affections.

It was a shame. She would be happy to help Ginny actually get to know Harry. He could use more friends, and he would be more comfortable visiting Ron without having to endure his sister’s hero worship.

Though today's disaster wasn't really Ginny’s fault, she was just an eleven year old girl trying to get her crush’s attention. No, for this, like so many other things over the course of this school year, she placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of Gilderoy Lockhart. Without his stupid Valentine’s Day crusade and those awful dwarves, Ginny never would have had the opportunity to embarrass Harry in such a way. (Though, admittedly, she couldn't wait to write Narcissa about today’s shenanigans, the witch would be comically appalled, but she still wished it hadn't happened.)

Truly, Lockhart was a walking disaster, a preening, self-involved, ridiculous disaster. More of an idiot even that she'd imagined when she'd read his books over the summer. She took his behavior as something of a personal affront, she did not take the sin of printing lies lightly, and she wanted to see him served his just desserts.

So she and Draco had formulated a plan and it had worked like a charm. She was so proud of the way they tag teamed the wizard in class with their oh-so-innocent questions about the claims he made in his books. Playing off each others thoughts and questions perfectly, but because it was coming from a Gryffindor and a Slytherin he never suspected they were working together. It had gotten to the point where he nearly trembled in fear whenever he saw one of them raise their hands. It was imminently satisfying. What was less satisfying was how few students saw through him, most continued to just see his face and his fame.

At that disappointing thought she reached the library and readjusted her bag on her shoulder. Raising her chin, she walked into the vast room. She was late to meet Draco in their turret room and didn’t want to waste any time; she’d learned a lot about sneaking around in the last year, the primary lesson being that it was important to look like you were not sneaking around at all. If you moved with confidence nobody questioned you. And, as expected, she wasn’t given a second look as she strode purposefully through the library.

After she pulled on the required book and murmured the password she quickly ducked through the opening in the wall. Draco was already there. But he wasn't studying or amusing himself in some other way, he wasn’t even sitting with his eyes trained on the door just waiting for the opportunity to pounce and taunt her for being late. No, he was stretched out on the sofa fast asleep.
His robes were discarded, thrown over the back of the sofa. His bag tossed haphazardly to the floor, books and parchment spilling out of it. And on the coffee table in front of him was what appeared to be an elegantly wrapped present topped off with a pink rose. It was obviously a Valentine’s Day gift.

Stupidly, she had not considered that somebody might send him something.

She nearly tripped over her own feet in shock, she had to drop her own bag to keep the weight of it from pulling her down. He sat up at the sound, clearly startled.

“Hermione?” he questioned, blinking at her slowly through heavy lids.

“Hi, sorry, dropped my bag,” she said stupidly.

He reached out a hand to her, beckoning her towards him, but she could only stare at him. He looked so handsome like this, hair mussed, clothes rumpled; despite their close relationship she rarely saw him so disheveled. He was usually quite fastidious.

It was striking and that was disconcerting.

Because she’d never thought of him in that way before, he was just Draco, her best friend who happened to be a boy. Of course, she wasn't a fool. She'd heard the girls in her house talking. Though she was the odd one out in a dorm with two sets of best friends, she had ears. All of her roommates thought he was ‘cute’ and they were Gryffindors; which made him largely off limits to them, she could only imagine what the girls in other houses were saying.

She also couldn’t bear the term ‘cute,’ at least for him. It was reserved for small animals, and maybe Harry with his messy hair and crooked smile. But not for the wizard before her. No, he was handsome, even at twelve. That fact had just never affected her personally before.

“You’re sleeping?” she questioned, attempting to distract herself from her thoughts.

He was not a morning person but once he was awake he was a veritable ball of energy, she couldn’t believe she’d caught him napping in the afternoon.

“Somebody set off a bunch of dungbombs in our dormitories last night, Snape would have had it cleared up straight away, but it somebody set it up so that the discovery of one triggered the next one to go off. I spent most of the night in the common room.”

“That sucks,” she commiserated.

“I don’t suppose you would know anything about that?” he asked pointedly.

She sighed and gathered up her bag to walk fully into the room and collapse into an armchair.

“If a Gryffindor was responsible I’m certain I would have heard about it by now, the twins don’t always take credit for their pranks but they would definitely have circulated the story anonymously if they had done it.”

He nodded.

“Any reason you felt the need to taunt Ginny about that musical valentine she sent Harry?” she asked her own question.

In her opinion it had been unnecessary to point out Harry hadn’t liked it, all Draco had done was
just draw more attention to the situation, and increase everybody’s embarrassment, he really could be such a git.

“That wasn’t even a taunt, Hermione, I was just pointing out the obvious, the bloke was clearly uncomfortable,” he said with faux innocence, actually pouting a little, “What is wrong with that girl? She has no sense of propriety.”

Hermione secretly agreed, but it would do her no good to say as much, she had no intention of encouraging him.

“You enjoyed making them both squirm,” she countered.

He shrugged, unconcerned.

“That doesn’t make me wrong. And like either of them wouldn’t take any opportunity they could to do the same to me,” he retorted.

She sighed; he wasn’t wrong. She couldn’t expect him to be civil to her friends and not ask the same of them, which she was in no position to do. There was just so much animosity between them that it was impossible to regulate.

Especially since she could not appeal to her Gryffindor friends directly. So, the run ins were becoming a tedious, if predictable, routine between the two groups. She had at least convinced Draco to leave Neville alone, the poor boy was scared of his own shadow.

“You got a Valentine’s Day present,” she asked, gesturing to the gift atop the table, attempting to change the subject, but realizing too late that she’d walked into even more dangerous territory.

“Oh, that’s for you,” he said, almost offhandedly.

She was glad she was sitting, had she been standing she absolutely would have done something embarrassing like fall down in shock.

“It is?” she gasped.

“Don’t look so surprised Hermione,” he chided, “you’re my best friend and Father says that a lady should always be treated specially on certain days. Today is one of those days.”

Hermione didn’t know what to make of that. She knew that Draco put great stock in what his father said, she did too, for that matter, he’d earned her respect. But she didn’t know what it meant. Did he simply not want her to be left out of the Valentine’s festivities? Or was it more?

And then she had another horrifying thought. Had he given another girl a present? A present that really meant something while just making a friendly gesture to her?

“What’s wrong?” Draco asked, sounding genuinely alarmed.

She was ripped out of her thoughts by his voice. She looked around only to discover that she’d drawn her hands into fists and was tensed to pounce at the nearest threat. She could only imagine the expression on her face, one which she quickly schooled, though she knew it was too late, he’d seen it.

“Nothing,” she hurriedly explained, letting be hands fall open and bare her palms in a gesture of innocence, “I was just thinking of Lockhart and how he’s turned this school into a madhouse in one day,” she tittered on; she was becoming a terribly good liar.
Thankfully he had no way of knowing her true thoughts and he bought it completely and laughed.

“What an idiot,” he said each word with purpose, “Father told me to ask him to demonstrate the patronus charm in our next class, it’s supposed to be notoriously difficult and he can’t even round up a bunch of pixies. Not to mention that there’s no documentation to indicate that a patronus can actually be used to drive away, must less capture, a flukeman like he claimed. Why does he make up such easily disprovable lies?”

“More rubbish from a Defense professor,” she sighed in defeat.

“At least we’re getting the better of this one,” he said gleefully.

She giggled in response and thought of all the ways they'd gotten the better of Lockhart. The elder Malfoys had helped tremendously. They could be very strict, but they were also increasingly feeling like the fun aunt and uncle everybody wished they had. They would not tolerate incompetence or laziness, and they held themselves and those that they loved to that standard, which she respected immensely.

And the way they encouraged herself and Draco had her appreciating the Slytherin mindset more and more. It felt revolutionary for her to think outside of the box. To consider the fact that people in positions of authority might not be the bastions of virtue she’d once believed them to be. After all, what had Dumbledore ever done other than award her a few House points, and with dubious reason. And not one professor at this school had ever protected her when she needed it.

Lucius and Narcissa were, at the very least, always there for her if she needed something. And they were not above encouraging mischief when appropriate. They had sent her the most gorgeous scarf in Gryffindor colors as a reward for flustering Lockhart so completely that he’d dismissed class early for three class periods in a row. She knew Lucius had been battling for the man’s removal from his teaching post with little success, apparently nobody wanted the job, so in the meantime he and his wife supported the guerrilla warfare she and their son were waging.

Draco handed her the prettily wrapped box which she could only stare at, “are you going to open it?” he asked.

“Of course,” she quickly shook herself.

She carefully removed the rose, with every intention of discreetly saving it, untied the bow, and undid the wrapping.

“So careful,” he chuckled.

She shrugged and touched the place where the compact he’d given her for Christmas, equally carefully unwrapped, was safely tucked in the breast pocket of her robes.

She’d been so proud of the discovery of their room, but she had to admit it paled in comparison to what he’d presented her with as a Christmas present. She had merely gotten lucky, he’d been almost unbelievably thoughtful. It was an elegant silver compact engraved with her initials. She'd initially been dismayed that he'd believed her so superficial, until she read his note which explained its true purpose: a communication mirror, and he possessed its twin.

He had had the compact commissioned just for her, and then he’d charmed it, with his mother’s help using a Black family spell, to be able to communicate with the one he had made for himself. She had been glad he’d owled her the gift for her to open on Christmas morning rather than waiting until he could watch her open it himself, or she was certain she would have made a fool of herself.
There had been tears and she was grateful only her parents had been there to witness them.

Now she talked to him every night before bed, tucked safely away behind her silenced bed curtains. It was so nice to be able to contact him discreetly and whenever she wanted. Because secret place to meet or not, sometimes they simply didn't have the opportunity to get away and it had felt lonely to see him across a classroom or the Great Hall and be unable to speak to him.

She finally opened the box of this most recent present, it was filled, as she had assumed, with chocolates, but they were the most beautifully decorated chocolates she’d ever seen. These were not sweets he’d picked up from Honeydukes, these were miniature works of art. He knew how she loved chocolate despite her parents feelings about sweets. Yet another incredibly sweet gesture.

“I asked Father for some recommendations, Mother isn’t wild about chocolate, so he wrote to Aunt Adele, the French make the best chocolate, you know,” he explained uncertainly, and she realized she’d just been staring at the gift for far too long.

She physically shook herself again and tried to appear calm while internally, she was throwing a pitching screaming fit. Because they were just best friends, which was wonderful, and she wouldn't trade it for the world. But it also meant that, if not today, one day another witch would be on the receiving end of his sweet gestures. How could she ever share him? She couldn't. He was hers.

Oh sweet Merlin.

He was hers, what was she thinking?!

She was in so much trouble.

She looked at him and gave him a brittle smile, “thank you Draco, they're so pretty and I bet they're delicious. That was really thoughtful of you.”

He relaxed slightly at her words, and while she wanted to stay with him and reassure him further, just spend time with him, she knew she couldn't at the moment. She stood up and leaned over to give him a rather wooden hug, being sure to hold her body away from his as much as possible.

She avoided his eyes as she pulled away, “I've just remembered I told Neville I'd help him revise for potions, I have to meet him in the common room.”

She refused to look at him as she quickly, but with great care when it came to her present, gathered her things, and fled the room.

So much for being a good liar.

How was she going to face him again, knowing what she now knew? She'd have to find a way, she would not lose him.

Narcissa apparated into the Grangers back garden, to her usual spot between the shed and the fence where she was safe from being spotted by unsuspecting muggles. She strode to the back door only to watch it be thrown open before she could even reach it. Helen stood in the doorway smiling at her, she was, of course, right on time.

“Narcissa!” the other woman greeted enthusiastically.

She pecked her on both cheeks in greeting.
“It’s always lovely to see you Helen.”

“Come on in,” she responded, leading her into the now familiar living room, “please have a seat and tell me how Greece was!”

They tried to meet at least bi-monthly for lunch or tea, shopping if they had time. But she and Lucius had been out of the country for nearly three weeks and so it had been almost a full month since they’d gotten together.

Narcissa now considered Helen to be a good friend. But their meetings had started with Narcissa acting as something of a translator for Helen, and by extension her husband, to the magical world. Hermione was a deeply committed correspondent, but no matter how detailed her letters, there was context she wouldn't think or couldn't know to include for her parents that Narcissa provided. She had nurtured the connection for Hermione's sake, and because she believed they were good people, even if they weren't exactly her kind of people.

She had never expected to get anything in return. She now saw how deeply arrogant that had been. Helen offered her something she'd rarely experienced in her life: true friendship and a different perspective, just over a year into their acquaintance and the woman was a trusted confidant. So, she was not surprised by her first question, and she knew the other woman was not expecting to be relegated by glamorous holiday tales, but genuinely intrigued to hear about what she'd discovered in Greece.

“I spent nearly the entire fortnight and a half shut away in the library, honestly I thought constantly of Hermione and how jealous she'll be when I tell her. It was fascinating, but tedious.”

Helen chuckled in understanding, “Did you find anything?” she wondered.

“Nothing obvious, I have copious notes, I've just begun the process of editing and organizing them, but it's anybody's guess if it amounts to anything.”

She and Lucius were running into dead ends all over the British Isles in terms of information gathering on the Dark Lord and how he'd survived Halloween of 1981. Even her husband’s contacts on the continent, who theoretically should have been less afraid of the Dark Lord than those at home, either knew nothing, or weren't talking about his whereabouts or his powers.

They'd managed to cajole Severus into coming for a meal at the Manor a couple of times, despite his concerted efforts to duck their invitations. It had become clear that gaining his trust would be an even longer game than they'd imagined. Though, Narcissa hadn't helped their campaign. She was ashamed to admit that Lucius had practically had to drag her out of the room to keep her from punching the man in his crooked nose over his description of Hermione, it was embarrassingly Gryffindor of her, and she knew she'd only made him more suspicious of them with her reaction.

So, she and Lucius had decided to focus their attention for the time being on their more cerebral tasks: research into blood magic, connective magic that might lend any clues to understanding and eliminating the Dark Mark, and, to a lesser extent soul magic. Though Narcissa had largely kept that last one to herself, it was even more taboo and more esoteric than blood magic, but she was convinced that Draco and Hermione were connected down to their very souls, and she wanted to know anything she could about it, if only just to hide it from anybody who might seek to exploit or harm them.

In search of knowledge they'd gone to Greece. The ancient Athenians had been vociferous in their search for knowledge, and they'd not limited that search to just their specific western brand of magic. They accumulated a magnificent library, added to in the centuries since that time, though
occasionally rather neglected, but it was still almost without parallel.

Unfortunately, the modern Greeks were as intent on hoarding their knowledge as their ancient counterparts had been to accumulate it. It had taken Lucius months to get access to the famed archives under the Acropolis. He’d had to formulate new business relations in Greece to excuse the trip and account for the amount of time they had intended to spend in the country. So, as far as research went, she’d largely been on her own while he tended to this manufactured business.

Helen made an appropriately consoling noise, “were you at least able to wrangle some romantic time with your husband? Greece is so beautiful.”

“There were some lovely evenings,” she said with a smirk and a wink.

They were interrupted by Dobby popping in, carrying a tea service.

“Mistress Narcissa,” he greeted with a bow, and then stood unflinching, tall and proud.

“Dobby, it’s always good to see you,” she responded with a smile, happy and unafraid, he was a different elf.

He arranged their tea for them and then with a bow for his mistress and another for Narcissa, he was gone.

“Things were lovely in Greece. Lucius and I were able to spare some time to be together and though we’ve visited before, it’s always nice to have the opportunity to explore further. I am lucky, or so I am told, that my husband is very thoughtful,” she specified her earlier answer.

“Your friends are rubbish,” Helen tutted, and then she winced, “that was perhaps a bit harsh.” Helen knew that the people Narcissa was referring to when she said she’d been told her husband was thoughtful were the jealous society wives that Narcissa unfortunately spent far too much time with.

Narcissa laughed, “no you sound like your daughter, always refreshingly honest. And you’re right, except I can no longer be sure that I consider any of the people I associate with to truly be my friends.”

“I'm sorry,” Helen responded sincerely.

“It is what it is. I should know better, I've had true friends in the past, my sister Andromeda firstly. It was out of my control at the time, but I regret her loss deeply. And my best friend at Hogwarts, Marguerite, she died suddenly and unexpectedly of Doxy Influenza more than five years ago. Her son Theodore and Draco are the same age, in the same house at Hogwarts and yet they hardly know each other…” she trailed off wistfully.

“Narcissa, that's terrible,”

She could only shrug in faux nonchalance.

“It's true to an extent in the circles I run in as well,” Helen admitted, “I'm ashamed to say I'm more readily accepted now that Hermione is off at school, it's easier for them to ignore how odd they found her now that she's out of sight.”

“Poor child,” Narcissa reflected quietly, she didn't blame the Grangers, she couldn't begin to imagine how it must have felt to be in their position, but she knew it must have been terrible not understanding what was happening with your child, but she ached to think about the way Hermione
had most likely suffered through her first eleven years.

“You're right, we should endeavor to do better by this generation, encourage true friendships and tolerance…” she trailed off thoughtfully.

“We should,” Narcissa agreed, but internally she was cringing at the tolerance comment.

“Which reminds me of something I wanted to discuss with you.”

“Oh?”

“I was initially hesitant to bring it up, I don't want to break Hermione’s confidence, but I know that she trusts you and that his won't go beyond this room anyway.”

Narcissa nodded in agreement, touched by her confidence.

“I think she's realized that her feelings for Draco are more than just friendship, and she's struggling. I get the impression that she's terrified of losing him more than anything.”

“Has she said as much?”

“No, but I can read between the lines.”

“I had actually gathered the same thing. But I wouldn't worry, at least about Draco's reaction. I assure you he feels the same way.”

She thought she saw relief in her eyes but couldn't be sure of it before her attention was diverted by her husband entering the room. Narcissa would normally consider Richard to be a good looking man; taller than average and he'd kept himself fit despite being nearly a decade her senior, and a muggle at that. He still had a thick head of curly chestnut hair-Hermione had him to thank for that particular trait, to be sure- and striking blue eyes.

Except he was dressed in the strangest outfit that made him look slightly ridiculous. White trousers and a brightly colored top, he appeared to be headed out. Helen didn't seem to find anything odd about it.

“Hello love, hello Narcissa,” he greeted, “I’m off now. You ladies have a good afternoon,” he stopped alongside Helen and bent to kiss her.

He strolled out casually.

“Where did you say he was going again?” Narcissa asked, her eyes following that bright shirt out of the room.

“To play golf.”

Narcissa remembered now, Richard had tried to explain the game to her once. She’d tried to act appropriately interested, but she left the conversation completely baffled how as to how that was an activity that one would find enjoyable. Especially for an intelligent man like Richard Granger.

Helen flicked her eyes to hers momentarily before she began to laugh, “I'm sorry, I don't mean to make fun of you, it's just the look on your face, I know how you feel, after twenty years I still only understand it slightly better than that.”

Narcissa shook her head ruefully, it was unlike her to allow her thoughts to show so plainly. Though it was nice that she knew she could trust Helen.
“Back to Hermione and Draco, though.”

Narcissa nodded.

“Do you think that we should be concerned? They are awfully young. And they are so close, Hermione has certainly never had another friend like Draco. What if they decide to give a relationship a try and it doesn’t work out? I know what you’ve said about their connection, but nothing’s guaranteed. And like I said, they’re so young…”

Narcissa sat back and contemplated this.

“I don’t think I’ve ever told you that Lucius and I have actually been together since we were about their age. And we were actually betrothed at 14, since the end of my third year and Lucius’ fourth. I’m aware that they are a very different pair from Lucius and I, but I say this because ours is not an unusual story within our community. I believe that it’s partially a cultural difference, but there is also the fact that we have magic, which is an extra sense that often leads us to a compatible life mate at a you age.”

Helen seemed to absorb this information.

“It’s difficult,” she said thoughtfully, “I can see what magic can do, and it’s results, but I’ve obviously never experienced what it truly feels like. So I hear what you’re saying, but it’s just so hard to understand.”

Narcissa’s heart went out to the other woman.

“Perhaps over the holidays we can talk to Hermione. And perhaps Lucius could speak to Draco as well. Caution them at least to treat their friendship with care and assess what they’re thinking.”

Helen nodded, “I would feel better at least addressing the issue. I remember what it was like to be thirteen, it’s a confusing time and I wouldn’t want them to lose sight of what’s important in the face of teenage drama.”

Narcissa nodded, it was clearly difficult for Helen to sit on the sidelines, not that she blamed her. She would be miserable in her shoes. And that made her think.

“Helen,” she said after a moment’s consideration, “would you possibly be interested in helping me organize and catalogue my notes and other materials from Greece?”

She saw the woman’s eyes light up and knew she’d hit upon something. She should have considered it before. Hermione now spent most of her free time at Malfoy Manor, the Grangers couldn’t teach her about magic or magical society. They understood the necessity and had been almost effusive in their thanks to herself and Lucius, but it was natural that they feel left out and scared, knowing their daughter was in danger.

“Would I be helpful though, not being a witch?” Helen asked hopefully.

“You wouldn’t have the background to do any analysis, but organizing and cataloging the information, I think you could be very helpful with that. It would save me a lot of time, it’s a lot to go through.”

“I’d be happy to help then,” she said cheerfully.

They sat there for a few moments, just enjoying their tea.
“Thank you Narcissa,” Helen said quietly.

She looked up and met her eyes and knew that magic or not, mother to mother they understood each other.
"Oh my," Narcissa gasped when Raffie handed her a copy of the Daily Prophet and she caught a glimpse of the front page which featured a prominent picture of her estranged cousin raging and shaking the bars of his prison cell; a cell which no longer contained him.

For the first time an inmate had broken out of Azkaban, and it was Sirius Black.

She had to admit, if anybody could do it, it would be Sirius. She was almost proud of him. He could deny it all he wanted, and he'd tried to run from it, but he was a Black through and through.

"Is something the matter?" asked Hermione.

Narcissa looked at her breakfast companion and sighed. Hermione would be fourteen in a matter of weeks, certainly old enough to hear this story, and if Narcissa didn’t tell her she’d just hear rumors when she returned to Hogwarts anyway. But it wasn’t a discussion she particularly wanted to have.

So many past demons coming back to haunt them.

She steeled herself and pushed the paper across the table so that Hermione could read the headline. It was Hermione’s turn to gasp. She hadn’t known Sirius of course, but his appearance was shocking enough on its own.

“He’s your cousin?” she asked.

Narcissa nodded, “yes, my first cousin, though we were never close, he’s several years younger than me. When we were children the age gap seemed larger than it actually is. But also, our mothers didn’t get along, so I didn’t see him often.”

“He was a Death Eater?” she ventured hesitantly.

Hermione knew about Bellatrix, but Sirius had never been mentioned. She assumed Hermione had probably read his name once or twice in the magical genealogy books she’d studied, and it was natural that she would assume, as a Black, that he’d been a follower of the Dark Lord.

“No he wasn’t, in fact he was a member of Dumbledore’s, well I suppose one would call it a resistance group, The Order of the Phoenix.”

Hermione let out an indelicate snort, Narcissa raised an eyebrow in response.

“You disapprove?”

“Well it sounds rather grandiose, doesn’t it? And I understand the symbolism of the Phoenix rising from the ashes, but in order to rise it first has to burn. I’m not sure I’d want to be reminding people of that in the middle of a war. Doesn’t seem great for recruiting purposes,” she wrinkled her nose.

Narcissa let out a trilling laugh, this child was so delightful.

“Well it was quite a small group, as I understand it, all personally loyal to Dumbledore. He could have called it ‘Dumbledore’s Army’ and they would still have joined him,” she said wryly.

Hermione made a face. Narcissa bit back another laugh, the girl had barely blinked an eye over his
responsibility for the incident with the philosopher’s stone, but she was never going to forgive her Headmaster for employing Lockhart.

“Anyway, as I was saying, Sirius was a well known light sided wizard. He may have been the first Black ever to be sorted into Gryffindor, and he was best friends with James Potter.”

Hermione inhaled sharply, “I'm not going to like how this ends, am I?”

“I’m afraid not, dearest.”

“I’m sorry, go ahead.”

“Well, Sirius had a combative relationship with his parents which only got worse after he went to Hogwarts. He finally ran away from home when he was 15 or 16 and the Potters took him in. He considered them to be his family. Though he was never formally disowned by his grandfather, the Lord Black, he never reconciled with the family either,” she took a calming breath, “Now, what do you know about the night the Dark Lord was vanquished?”

She shrugged, “almost nothing.”

“Well the story goes that the Dark Lord wanted the Potters to join his ranks. James’ parents were dead by then, so I’m speaking of James and Lily when I say ‘the Potters.’ Potter was an old and powerful family, and both of them were known to be powerful and talented as well, exactly the kind of followers he wanted.”

“Even though Harry’s mum was a muggleborn?” she asked, mouth pursed in confusion.

“Even considering that,” she confirmed, “he tried to recruit them but was rebuffed, apparently more than once. So he decided to eliminate them instead. Now, keep in mind, things had been disorienting for a long time. There were spies on both sides, people had doubts about the loyalty of their closest friends. So, when through one of the Order’s informants they found out that the Dark Lord was after them, they went into hiding. It was the sensible thing to do, once he set his sights on you, you generally didn't survive for long.”

She looked at Hermione to gauge how she was handling this, but she was just nodding along.

“What the public believes happened next is that Sirius had, at some point, turned spy for the Dark Lord, and that he gave up their location and led the Dark Lord to them that Halloween. He was tracked down by aurors later that night, he had just killed one of his other best friends, a man named Peter Pettigrew. Thirteen muggles were caught in the crossfire and killed as well. He was apparently ranting about how it was his fault that the Potters were dead. He was immediately arrested and sent to Azkaban.”

Hermione listened, her eyes narrowed in thought.

“You said ‘what the public believes happened.’ May I assume that means that’s not what really happened?”

“Smart girl,” she smiled fondly, “when I first read the story I knew that it had to be wrong.”

“How? I thought you said you didn’t know Sirius very well.”

She tilted her head in acknowledgment.

“I knew enough, I knew the type of person that he was. You see, everybody thinks Sirius and
Andromeda are alike, the Black family blood traitors,” she said mockingly, “but it’s actually Sirius and Bellatrix who are alike.”

Hermione's eyes went wide.

“I know how that sounds, but allow me to explain. Andromeda is quiet, deliberate, the consummate Slytherin. I was the only one who had any inkling that she was even seeing a muggleborn wizard, much less that she planned to run off and elope with him, until she had done it. Sirius and Bellatrix are the opposite. Brash, they wear their hearts on their sleeves and they say what they think and do what they want. If she'd been so inclined Bellatrix would have made an excellent Gryffindor,” she glanced at Hermione, “I know how ironic that seems, and I mean no slight on your house.”

“There is good and bad in the traits of all the houses,” she responded quietly.

Narcissa just nodded and continued, “As a child Bellatrix felt neglected by our parents. As the eldest I believe she felt the disappointment of not being a boy the most. She was desperate for their attention and to please them, but it never worked. She was always unstable, but I think that constant disappointment is what started her on the road to true madness.”

‘Wow,’ Hermione mouthed to herself.

“So, eventually she went looking for somebody who would give her the attention she craved, who would encourage her and appreciate her efforts. What she found was the Dark Lord. And Merlin did she worship him! She would have done anything for him, and in the end she nearly did. She would never have betrayed him,” she explained confidently, “When he was vanquished she became so desperate that she allowed herself to be caught torturing two aurors trying to find out what had happened to him. I know it sounds heartless, but she never would have behaved that carelessly before.”

“That’s why she’s in Azkaban,” Hermione said with dawning realization.

She nodded, “I was relieved, to be honest, it wasn’t safe to have Draco around her;” she took a sip of tea; after all these years it was still difficult to talk about Bellatrix, she didn't approve of her sister’s choices, but she often wondered if she had ever really had a chance to be better, now that she was a parent she understood how badly her parents had failed their eldest child; it was as sad as it was terrible.

She braced herself to continue; convincing herself that she would not similarly fail Draco and Hermione.

“Sirius could never please his parents either, but instead of trying harder to do the impossible, he rebelled; got himself sorted into Gryffindor and became more and more outspoken against his family’s ideals. He finally found a place with the Potters. James’ parents considered him a second son and James a brother. It was an established fact in our social circles, they did everything but adopt him. He would no more have joined the Dark Lord, much less betrayed the Potters, than Bellatrix would have turned spy for the light.”

Narcissa cut her eyes to Hermione, she was rapidly growing into a mature woman, but in many ways she was still a child, and this would be trusting her with a lot. But, what it all boiled down to was that she did trust her.

“It just didn’t make any sense,” she commenced her story with a sigh, “Not that there isn’t darkness in him, and he’s obviously capable of great violence, but he would have died before he gave up James, Lily, and Harry. When I shared my suspicions with Lucius he confirmed that, though very
few people knew it, Peter Pettigrew had actually been the spy who revealed their location.”

“And that’s why Sirius went after him,” Hermione broke in almost immediately, but she was frowning, “but how did he know it was this Peter Pettigrew? Surely it could have been any number of people? And then why did he say it was his fault that they were dead if he didn’t do it?” she asked, with obvious frustration.

“Good girl Hermione, don’t ever take anything at face value,” she gave her an approving nod,

“And the answer to that, it turns out, is that it could only have been Peter after all. You see, the Potters used a very obscure and complicated charm to hide in plain sight. This charm is called the Fidelius, and it can be used to hide a dwelling from everybody except those who have been told the location from a person called the secret keeper. Peter was the Potters’ secret keeper, so he was able to reveal their location to the Dark Lord. Sirius knew because he was one of the people who had been told the secret. I can’t tell you exactly why Sirius said those things, but people say all sorts of things in the throes of despair. Perhaps he felt guilty for not being the secret keeper himself. I would think he would have been the natural choice, but it’s very possible he wasn’t trusted within the Order because he was a Black, and so the task was passed to Pettigrew. Nobody seems to have doubted that Sirius was capable of turning to the Dark Lord, even after all this time, so that stands to reason.”

She sat, eating quietly and watched while Hermione absorbed it all.

“You said that Sirius and James thought of each other like brothers?” Hermione questioned.

“That was my understanding, yes. As I said, in public the Potters treated him like a member of their family. You see, House Potter is powerful and well respected, treating him as such gave Sirius some protection from the ire of House Black. My Uncle Arcturus, who was Lord Black at the time and Sirius’ grandfather, wouldn't have wanted to start a feud between them over what he considered to be mere teenage rebellion.”

Hermione frowned and pushed her food around on her plate thoughtfully, Narcissa resisted the urge to reprimand her.

“But that means that Sirius would have been like Harry’s uncle,” she said slowly as she worked out the connections in her head, “maybe Harry would have gotten to go live with him instead, if he hadn’t gotten sent to Azkaban.”

“That’s a possibility,” she conceded, frankly she had never understood why some magical family hadn’t been found for the boy, a concern that only escalated after the issues Hermione had shared about the boy’s problematic home life; he didn't belong with muggles, much less muggles who didn't even want him.

“Poor Harry,” she sighed sadly, Narcissa could practically feel her hurting for her friend, her aura had dulled significantly over the course of the conversation.

Narcissa decided she might as well get all the bad news all out at once.

“I’m afraid there’s more,” she confessed.

“More?” she wondered, clearly taken aback.

“The two aurors Bellatrix was caught torturing?”

“What about them?” she asked, visibly hesitant.
Narcissa’s eyes briefly fell shut; she hated this.

“They were your friend Neville’s parents,” she admitted.

Hermione’s hand flew to her mouth to stifle her horror-filled gasp and Narcissa found herself avoiding the younger witch’s gaze, it wasn’t her fault, but she still felt greatly ashamed.

“I don’t understand. Neville never talks about his parents, I know he lives with his grandmother, so I was under the impression that he was an orphan. What happened to them?” she cried.

Narcissa deliberately uncrossed and the recrossed her legs, and readjusted her posture, making sure it was as straight as ever.

“They are not dead, though they may be better off if they were. It wasn’t just Bella by herself, it was her husband, his brother, and another Death Eater by the name of Barty Crouch. Between them they managed to torture the Longbottoms past even the point of insanity. They are lost in their own minds, they are permanent residents of St. Mungo’s.”

Hermione closed her eyes as a tear fell down her cheek. Narcissa stood up and rounded the table, gently taking the younger witch’s arm, helping her up and leading her into an adjoining sitting room. She settled them on a sofa and let her cry it out. When she calmed, Narcissa rubbed her back soothingly.

“I don’t think I need to tell you that this is sensitive information,” she eventually said.

“Of course, it’s not like I could explain how I got it anyways. But I can tell Draco, right?” she sniffed.

“I would never ask you to keep anything from Draco,” she paused, “except maybe for the contents of a birthday or Christmas gift, he can be so nosy and impatient,” she said, hoping to inject some levity into the conversation.

It worked and Hermione giggled.

“I wish he was here,” she said rather pitifully, then her head flew up in alarm and she met Narcissa’s eyes, “not that you’re not good enough, and I’m glad he’s getting this time with his father, I know he was excited, even though he pretended to think it would be boring,” she hastened to explain.

Narcissa chuckled. Lucius had taken Draco to America on business for a couple of weeks. She had intentionally bowed out of the trip to give them some time alone with the excuse that she needed to stay home and continue Hermione’s lessons, as the girl was going on an extended holiday with her parents and would already be missing that time.

“It’s perfectly okay for you to miss Draco, I’m not insulted. In fact, I understand. These wizards of ours are hard to live without, even for a little while.”

“Draco’s not mine,” she responded automatically.

Narcissa pulled away slightly so that she could get a good look at the girl.

“Isn’t he?” she asked archly.

“He’s my best friend, but not, you know, more than that,” she squirmed.
“Would you rather leave him to another witch?”

“No!” she cried and then, too late, she clapped a hand over her traitorous mouth.

Narcissa suppressed a smile, she had expressed such a sentiment to Hermione on several occasions before, and while the poor girl had always looked like she’d rather throw herself off the Astronomy Tower than lose Draco to another witch, she’d always refrained from verbally expressing the sentiment.

“Relax, sweetheart, I have eyes, you are not telling me anything I didn’t already know, that I haven’t known for awhile,” she soothed.

“Who else knows?” Hermione asked, closing her eyes in mortification.

“Lucius, your parents, and I imagine Claire as well. I think the only person who doesn’t, is the one who really should.”

She groaned and buried her face in her hands.

“But what about what you and mum said, about not ruining our friendship?”

She and Helen had had their planned talk with Hermione over her Easter holidays, but the young witch had still been deeply in denial at the time, so Narcissa hadn’t pushed the issue in the months since, even as she continued to watch her growing closeness with Draco. They were already in the midst of a romance in every way but name.

“There is more than one way to do that than by rushing into a relationship. You could always wait too long, leaving him to interpret your reactions as a rejection. Do you remember how you acted when he presented you with your Valentine’s Day gift?”

“I ran away, I was so confused,” she moaned, “but I tried to make up for it, to reassure him,” she said desperately.

She patted her hand consolingly.

“As did his father and I when he wrote home to ask if he’d inadvertently insulted you in some way,” she soothed, “There was no lasting harm. My point is that if you continue on like this there are bound to be more misunderstandings and eventually it will begin to strain your friendship.”

She sat patiently as Hermione absorbed this.

“What if he doesn't feel the same way?” she eventually asked, once again on the brink of tears.

“I truly don’t think that will be a problem, I know my son even better than I know you,” she took a deep breath, she didn’t want to alarm the poor child, “Just think about it dearest, it will be several weeks before you see him again. You have time.”

“Oh I’m such a mess!” Hermione cried dramatically, throwing herself back on the sofa with an arm thrown across her face.

Narcissa chuckled lightly, carefully filing away this conversation to tease Hermione with in the years to come.

Draco was on pins and needles, his magic was so restless he doubted he’d be able to cast so much as a ‘lumos’ without massively over powering it. He was finally going to see Hermione today. It
had been more than three weeks.

His trip with his Father had overlapped with the holiday she was taking with her parents. He needed to find some way to ensure that never happened again, because her absence had him crawling out of his skin.

“Draco!”

His head snapped up to see his mother looking at him from across the breakfast table, a little smile of amusement on her face. His father was smirking at him from behind the morning paper.

“Yes Mother?”

“That’s the third time I’ve called your name, does something have you distracted?”

He looked away from her uncomfortably, “I apologize, I was just thinking.”

“Oh?” she asked, she clearly didn’t believe it was that simple.

“Yes,” he responded firmly.

“Hermione will be back today, I know that I for one am anxious to see her, and it has been longer for you,” she said knowingly.

His father made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a snort.

“Yes, I am excited to see Hermione,” he conceded, refusing to appear bothered by the ribbing.

She left him alone for a blessed few minutes.

“May I ask you a straightforward question?” his mother suddenly asked.

He resisted the urge to groan out loud.

“Be careful how you answer, Son,” his father warned, “your mother is a dangerous witch,” he lowered his paper to wink at him.

Draco sat up a little straighter. He was seeing a whole new side of his father since their time away. He'd begun to treat him at times more like an associate than a child, and had even started asking his opinion on occasion. But he wouldn't save him from his mother.

“Of course Mother,” he wasn't foolish enough to think he really had the option to answer in the negative.

“How do you feel about Hermione?”

“She’s my best friend,” he answered automatically.

His mother gave him a long measuring glance.

“That is not what I asked, how do you feel about her?”

Draco frowned and considered this.

“Well, I like her, she’s great. I mean she’s brilliant and fun, and she has such a Slytherin streak, even if nobody else sees it,” he smirked, the witch really could be ruthless, “Like I said, she’s my best friend.”
“But is that all?” his mother persisted.

“What do you mean?”

“I rather thought you were beginning to have deeper feelings for her, more romantic feelings.”

Draco felt his face begin to flush.

“Mother…” he started to object.

“May I ask you another question?” she asked, as if she hadn't even heard him.

“Okay,” he swallowed nervously, there was no escaping this conversation, his mother was like a dog with a bone.

“You are about to enter your third year, you’ll be able to visit Hogsmeade. I know that you're excited about the experience, I also know that you're aware that students often use the opportunity to take others on dates.”

“Well, yes, of course that's true,” he said, no longer following her train of thought.

“How would it make you feel if Hermione was asked, and agreed to visit the village with another wizard?”

Draco was momentarily stunned, and then rage unlike anything he’d ever felt before flooded his system. He viciously bit his lip and dropped his utensils to grip the arms of his chair in an effort to stop himself from storming away from the table to go after this hypothetical wizard.

He saw his parents exchange an amused glance and tried to school his expression but, strangely, he didn't feel ashamed of his reaction.

“Oh Son,” his father chuckled, “you should see your face.”

“My dragon,” his mother said softly, “perhaps you could consider the idea that Hermione means more to you than just a friend.

“Mother,” he objected.

“No, dearest,” she interrupted tersely, “she is a beautiful and powerful witch. If you wait too long you will miss your chance.”

Draco was brought up short.

“It is quite common in our family to discover our spouses at a young age,” his father interjected.

Draco’s mind was racing. It’s not like he’d never considered Hermione in such a way, both of his parents had mentioned it on multiple occasions, but when it came down to it, he’d thought he’d have more time to figure things out.

He hadn’t thought about other wizards, about Hogsmeade’s visits. He hadn’t anticipated the desire to destroy things at the very thought that she might agree to go on one of those visits with anybody other than him.

Which had been foolish of him, in retrospect. His mother was right, Hermione was beautiful and powerful, and even more wonderful than she seemed at first, once you got to know her. Just because he hadn't noticed other wizards looking at her in that way didn't mean they wouldn't, and
And if they made a move before he did, well then what would she think? He was her best friend, after all. He should be the one to notice her first if he was interested. So, she would probably decide that he wasn't interested if he said nothing.

Which was a big problem, Draco realized all of a sudden, because he was interested. He really, really was.

As if on cue Evie popped into the room.

“Master, Mistress, Master Draco,” she addressed them in turn, “Miss Hermione has arrived.”

Hermione no longer needed an escort so she’d be making her way into the room any moment. The fact that Evie, the elf marked to one day take care of his wife, was the one who usually saw to Hermione’s needs, suddenly had a whole new meaning. The elves did tend to just know things.

Hermione entered the room then, a bounce to her step and a large smile on her face. It was all Draco could do to keep his mouth from falling open.

She looked like Hermione, but better. She was wearing a deep blue dress which revealed more of her figure than usual. At Hogwarts she was always covered from head to toe, even out of her robes the only bit of skin that was ever visible were her knees. But even over the summer she usually dressed more conservatively.

Now he could see what all that material had been covering; she had curves. And they were distracting. He tried to keep his eyes from drifting to the rather low cut neckline of her dress, but they didn't seem to want to obey him.

He did notice that she had a lovely tan, her skin was several shades darker than normal, and it almost seemed to glow. There were streaks of gold running through her hair which he'd never seen before; perhaps they were another effect of being in the sun. They shown in the bright light of the breakfast room. She also smiled so much more now since the beginning of the summer when she and his mother had finally convinced her parents to allow her to alter her teeth with magic; she'd been so self-conscious about them. The cumulative effect was all very...pretty.

She approached his parents first, and they rose to greet her. His mother embraced her and kissed her on both cheeks. She walked towards his father without hesitation and wrapped her arms around his waist. He stiffened and the whole room seemed to freeze for a moment, until he wrapped his arms around her and bent to kiss her forehead.

“Hello, Mignonette,” he greeted.

She went up on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek.

She then turned towards Draco and grinned. She took a step towards him before visibly hesitating, but then she lifted her chin and walked into his arms. Sooner than he would have liked she pulled away.

He fought away his disappointment; she was hardly ever the one to pull away first.

“Hello Draco,” she said quietly, peering up at him through her lashes.

He wasn't sure when he'd gotten to be so much taller than her. He was sure they’d been roughly the same height when they’d become friends. It was startling and he felt something well up inside of
him, some urge to protect her maybe? She was so small. He'd have to keep that under wraps, she'd throttle him just for the thought.

“Hi,” he responded, rather stupidly.

They just stood there staring at each other until his mother interrupted. Right, his parents were still in the room. Great.

“Have you had breakfast Hermione?” she called.

Hermione bit her lip and turned to face his parents, “No, actually I was hoping to eat here, I’ve missed Jema’s breakfasts. I hope that’s okay, I’m early enough, aren’t I?”

“Of course dear, you know you're always welcome here, and you’re in plenty of time.”

They settled around the table, and much to Raffie’s irritation Jema came in from the kitchen to bring Hermione a plate and welcome her back. She chatted to his parents about her holiday but she didn’t say much to him, and she seemed to be avoiding his gaze. Or maybe he was just paranoid because he felt hyper aware of her all of the sudden.

“Well, we’ll leave you two to catch up, we can do some work after lunch,” his mother said when the meal was concluded, and then his parents rose in concert and swept out of the room before anybody could say anything else.

Draco sat stunned. They were alone.

“I guess it’s just you and me then,” she echoed his thoughts.

He turned to look at her at the sound of her voice, she was biting her lip again. Had she always done that?

He nodded, and stood, extending a hand to her. She looked down at it, contemplating it, and then instead of taking it she stepped towards him and wrapped her arms around his waist more tightly than before.

He held her for a few moments, and as wonderful as it was to feel and smell her again, he regretfully pulled away when he realized that those newly discovered curves of hers were having an even more pronounced effect on him when they were pressed against him.

“I really missed you,” she confessed.

He cleared his throat, “me too. Come on, let's go find a place to talk,” he extended his hand again, and this time she took it.

As an experiment he twisted it within her grip and intertwined their fingers more intimately. She looked at him questioningly, but just gave him a squeeze which he took to mean that it was okay. He led her out of the room and considered his options. The library, as much as they both loved it was too public, all of their favorite places outside seemed too far away, and both of their rooms also seemed somehow wrong. And then he thought of the perfect place.

There was an out of the way alcove in their family wing. It was surrounded on three sides by windows. He’d discovered it as a child and fallen asleep curled up on the floor in the warm sunshine. The elves had discovered him and been appalled at the sight of the little master on the ground, but he’d loved the cozy nook and often returned; so they’d built him a cushioned window seat. And he'd frequented it ever since.
When he’d shown it to Hermione she’d been delighted with the bright comfy place. She'd even liked his stacks of books tucked into the corners. And while it was technically out in the open, his parents respected it as his space and would let them be.

They walked along quietly, she swung their arms happily between them. He didn’t tease her about it as he usually would have. He was too busy panicking because he knew with an inexplicable certainty that he had to say something to her, something to indicate how he felt, that it was urgent. But at the same time nothing had ever frightened him more.

“I like your hair,” she said after they’d settled into his nook, she was leaning against him, still holding his hand.

He ran his other hand through the new, shorter cut. He’d seen the style while in America and decided to give it a try. Claire had been teasing him about how much gel he used on his hair for years. This shorter look kept his hair out of his eyes without the aid of product.

“Thanks, I thought it looked, I don’t know, more grown up.”

She nodded in agreement, “it’s very handsome,” she said, barely above whisper.

He grinned to himself, but before he could say anything she began nattering on again.

“How was your trip with your father? I imagine it was fascinating. Did you learn a lot about his business?” she asked cheerily, but her voice sounded strange.

“It was good,” he said offhandedly, “Hermione, can I ask you a question?” he blurted.

She giggled.

“Of course, you don’t have to ask if you can ask me a question Draco.”

He huffed out a breath, he was already bumbling this. There was a reason he hadn’t been sorted into Gryffindor. Still, he steeled his resolve.

“Mother was talking about something this morning. Did you know that we get to make trips into Hogsmeade this year?”

“Oh yes! I’m so excited, I’ve heard wonderful things from the older students. It’s the only all-magical village in Britain, you know. Do you think it will be like Diagon Alley?” she burst out exuberantly.

He just blinked at her.

“Um, I think it’s quieter,” he said, a little dumbfounded; sometimes her unparalleled enthusiasm for almost everything still threw him.

“That’s what you wanted to ask me?” she asked with a disbelieving giggle.

Onwards he bumbled.

“Well sort of, did you know that sometimes people go together?”

She frowned, “well, sure, I don’t think I’d much like wandering the village alone,” she said slowly, clearly communicating that she thought he was being rather stupid.

He shook his head even as she was speaking.
“No, that’s not what I meant. I meant like sometimes a wizard will ask a witch to accompany him.”

Her eyes lit up in understanding.

“Oh you mean like a date!”

“Yes, exactly like that. I, um, I was just wondering if you think that you’ll do that?”

The frown was back.

“Go on a date?”

He nodded and she considered it.

“Well, I hope I will one day. But for now I’ll probably just go with Harry and Ron, you know, as friends. I don’t think there are any boys interested in me like that.”

“But what if there were?” he insisted.

She looked away from him, “well I guess that would depend on who it was,” she said in an oddly small voice.

He bit his lip to keep from huffing in frustration.

“But there are guys you would be interested in?” he demanded, more harshly than intended.

She whipped her head back around to look at him, “what are you getting at Draco?” she was obviously close to tears, and he couldn’t stand it.

“What if it was me, what if I wanted you to go to Hogsmeade with me?” he exclaimed.

She tilted her head, examining him, “But we can’t go to Hogsmeade,” she responded.

“Hermione!” he roared in frustration, because she wasn’t this thick, “what if we could?” he pressed.

“If we could go to Hogsmeade and you asked me?”

“Yes,” he breathed out through his nose.

“As more than just friends?” she clarified.

He closed his eyes, “yes,” he couldn’t look at her.

There was a long pause, longer Draco was sure, than he’d ever experienced in his life.

“I would say yes, definitely.”

One beat, then two as he absorbed this.

Then his eyes flew open and his mouth was curving into an embarrassingly large grin, which she matched with a surprisingly impish one of her own.

“Really?”

“Really,” she confirmed.
They chuckled together for a moment in mutual understanding and embarrassment.

“But Draco, like I said, we can’t go to Hogsmeade, we can’t be seen together like that,” she lamented.

“I know,” he said sadly.

She eyed him, and then the impish grin returned, “but we could maybe try being more than just friends,” she suggested with cautious eyes.

“How would that work?” he asked carefully, this all seemed to be working out too well.

She shrugged, “I don’t know, but it’s us, we could figure it out, right?” and then she suddenly became very shy, “I mean if you want,” she finished hesitantly.

“I want,” he responded immediately, “but I don’t want things to be weird between us.”

She tilted her head, seeming to become lost in thought. Then she did the oddest thing, she made a fist and held it out towards him with just her pinky finger sticking out.

“What are you doing?” he grimaced at her weird behavior.

“It's a muggle thing called a pinky promise, we link pinkys and make the promise, and then kiss our hands to seal it. I propose that we promise that things won't get weird, and that we'll always be friends, no matter what.”

“That seems really odd. We could just make a wand oath,” he countered, eyeing her hand speculatively.

She shook her head vigorously, “I don't want us to be magically bound to this, I just want your word.”

She looked at him with that familiar gaze, begging him to understand.

So he considered this odd muggle request, feeling touched at the sentiment, and then nodded in agreement. He followed her instructions and they sealed their vow to each other.

“So friends, and also more than friends,” she grinned at him.

“Well, we did pinky promise,” he teased with a smirk.

She looked at him with such a wonderful smile of delight on her face that he almost wanted to kiss her. But he'd more than depleted his reserves of bravery for the day, possibly for the year, so he didn't.

But then she laughed and snuggled into his side and the icy fear in his veins melted away. He settled his arm around her. They could do this.

Downstairs in Lucius’ study Narcissa canceled the monitoring charm and let out an undignified squeal.

“Well, that was positively uncomfortable to witness,” Lucius commented drily.

“Oh hush, it was adorable,” Narcissa answered as she rushed towards the door.

“Where are you going?” he wondered.
“To owl Helen of course, I have to tell her about this! Oh,” she sighed dreamily, “we are going to have the most beautiful, gifted grandchildren.”

She was fanning herself dramatically as she left the room. When the door closed behind her with a decisive ‘click’ Lucius allowed himself a moment of reflection, his eyes lifted towards the heavens and he sighed.

“Gods help me live to see it,” he whispered into the ether.
Chapter 13

Hermione smiled down at the creature who had sat himself directly in front of her, his bottle-brush tail twitching, a smug look on his face. He was gorgeous.

“Well, I guess you're for me then,” she said, and with a decisive nod she bent over to scoop him up.

She took him to the register and placed him on the counter so that she could complete her transaction.

The shop attendant told her with a slight air of disdain that he'd been in the shop for years and that his name was Crookshanks. Hermione resisted the urge to sneer at the crotchety woman and inform her that there was nothing wrong with him, he had just been waiting for her.

She left the shop cradling Crookshanks like a baby in one arm and clutching his pet carrier with various supplies stored inside in the other hand. She knew he wouldn't try to run away from her.

He was at least part-kneazle, probably half, like Nox. He had all the features of a kneazle that she did not, with that bottle-brush tail and mane-like fur. He was ginger colored and as large as she was sleek; nevertheless Hermione was certain that they would be wonderful companions for each other, as well as herself and Draco.

While at Hogwarts the year before, Nox had started visiting her at night when she had her monthlies, curling up against her abdomen in what Hermione was convinced was female empathy. It had been lovely to have a nighttime companion, and Nox was like a tiny furnace, warming her against the harsh Scottish winters. But she wouldn't think of taking her from Draco more than a few days a month, so she'd decided to look into getting her own cat.

When her father had given her some galleons to pick out a birthday gift she'd decided to check out the Magical Menagerie. Crookshanks had sauntered over to her almost the moment she'd entered the door.

She made her way to the Leaky Cauldron to look for Harry and Ron. The Weasleys had extended an invitation for her to meet them in Diagon Alley to complete her school shopping and then they would escort her to Kings Cross the next day. She was happy for the opportunity to meet up with her friends and was glad her parents could be spared the trip to the station in morning traffic and so she'd happily accepted.

But she'd arrived intentionally early that morning via floo from Malfoy Manor so that she could shop on her own. The Weasleys were nice enough, but trying to get all her school supplies amongst the chaos of the family had been a bit much for Hermione the year before. She had also wanted to search for a cat without any outside influence. According to Draco that was very important, and considering how well he was matched with Nox she trusted his judgement.

She found them sitting in the pub, apparently the Weasley family had already eaten and they were just waiting for Harry to finish his lunch. Harry grinned when he saw her and immediately stood up.

“Hermione, it’s so good to see you,” he beamed.

His body language was open and relaxed so she set the cat carrier down and stepped into his arms.
“How are you Harry, I was so worried when you wrote about what happened with your aunt!”

He hesitantly put his arms around her, but his laugh was natural, “you might have mentioned that a time or two in your letters. I really didn’t mean to do it, and I’m not in trouble, plus it’s been brilliant, staying in the alley.”

She was simultaneously pleased that he seemed so happy, and outraged that it was staying alone in a pub that had made him feel that way. He deserved a loving family. She couldn't even think about what the Ministry was doing- allowing him to stay by himself when they believed a mass murderer was after him- it made her too angry.

“I’m glad,” she said simply.

Ron had also stood, he gave her a genuine smile, but she was relieved that he didn’t move towards her; she too maintained her distance.

“Good summer then, Hermione?” he asked.

She nodded, “and you?” He returned the gesture.

She’d only exchanged a couple of letters with him, between her holiday in France and his in Egypt one of them had been abroad for most of the summer, and while she hadn't particularly missed him, it was good to see him.

At that point Scabbers stuck his nose out of Ron’s pocket, presumably to investigate the newcomers. Crookshanks, who had previously been languid in her arms, not even bothered when she hugged Harry, hissed and leapt at the rat.

Hermione caught him just in time and Scabbers scrambled back into Ron’s pocket.

“What the bloody hell!” Ron exclaimed, “what is wrong with that monster!?”

Thirty seconds it had taken him to irritate her, that was a new record.

“He’s not a monster!” Hermione defended hotly, “he’s only doing what comes naturally.”

“Language Ronald!”

Hermione looked up to see a plump red-headed woman actually wagging her finger at Ron, Hermione had seen her from afar at Kings Cross and knew that she was Ron’s mother, “hello, dear, you must be Hermione,” she said as she approached, “it’s lovely to meet you, but perhaps you could take your cat up to your room so that he doesn’t frighten Scabbers any further.”

It was phrased as a request, but was clearly an order, and Hermione fought back the urge to bristle at her audacity, or to make a comment so snarky it would make Draco proud. She may have been a child, but she hadn’t done anything wrong, and she was there on her parent’s sickle. The Weasleys were merely her chaperones, this was a public place.

It further chafed that, technically, Ron was in the wrong, and Percy before him. At least in bringing Scabbers to Hogwarts. It was something she’d wanted to mention the first time she’d realized Ron had a rat: rats were not on the list of Hogwarts acceptable pets, and for a very good reason. Cats ate rats. But at the time their friendship had felt too tenuous to mention it, and after she hadn’t wanted to rock the boat. Now that she had Crookshanks it was a different story.

She took a deep breath and looked at the creature cradled against her chest, once again he seemed
completely at ease, “what do you say Crooks, would you like to spend the afternoon in my room? I’ll just be out shopping.”

He mrrrowwwed agreeably so she excused herself and took him upstairs.

She set him on the bed in the nice double room her parents had splurged on for her to enjoy on her last night without roommates. She put out some food and water for him and was turning to leave when she spotted the plush toy she’d given a place of pride on the center of the bed. She picked up the miniature Welsh Green dragon and presented it to Crookshanks.

“This is Duke, he belongs to my best friend Draco, he’s letting me take care of him. Please treat him kindly, and take a good sniff.”

Hermione had found Duke tucked away in Draco’s bedroom months before and often pulled him out to cuddle when they were hanging out in Draco’s suite. He was soft, Draco had had him since he was a baby, and he smelled good, like Draco. When Draco had shyly offered to allow her to take him with her to school she had been incredibly touched, he may pretend to have outgrown stuffed toys, but she knew Duke was actually very special to him. Crookshanks obediently smelled the soft fabric and purred. Hermione smiled.

“That’s how Draco smells, now you can find him. If you need anything you can go to him, you can always trust Draco. He has a cat too, her name is Nox, you’ll like them both, I promise, they won’t be insulting like Ron,” she watched as the smart animal seemed to absorb this information and then rubbed himself against the toy affectionately, “good boy,” she crooned, setting the dragon down and watching with satisfaction as Crookshanks curled himself around it. “I’ll be back this evening, go out if you need to hunt, just be back by the morning, we have a train to catch,” she said, certain he would understand her instructions.

The afternoon was predictably chaotic, but Hermione was able to step back and enjoy it even if it was slightly overwhelming, all the while patting herself on the back for getting her shopping done early. They had a loud but happy dinner and Hermione curled up with her new familiar- who seemed perfectly content to stay with his new mistress for the time being- that night and fell into a blissfully deep sleep.

She was up the next day without even the need for an alarm. She made it downstairs, had already finished her breakfast and was sipping her tea when Harry blearily made his way into the room. He eyed Crookshanks, who was stretched out on top of her trunk, his front paws dangling over one edge, the very picture of feline contentment.

“She shouldn’t you put him in his basket?” he asked.

“Why?” she questioned, “He’s perfectly happy like that, he’s not causing any trouble, why should he have to go in that thing before it’s necessary?” she challenged

“Well with Scabbers…” he trailed off sheepishly.

“Maybe Ronald is the one who should reconsider bringing a rat into a castle full of cats,” she snapped.

He recoiled and she instantly felt bad, she didn’t want to put him in the middle of this brewing confrontation.

She let out a long breath, “I’m sorry Harry, but I won’t apologize for my cat behaving like a cat.”

He nodded but they sat in tense silence until Tom delivered Harry’s breakfast.
“Where’s your owl?” he asked hesitantly.

“Oh, I left her behind, it was easier that way, she’ll make her way to Hogwarts on her own,” she shrugged, avoiding telling an all out lie.

She knew Harry would assume she’d left Atalanta at home with her parents. In truth she was in the Malfoy owlery and would fly up to Scotland with Draco’s owl, Aeolus. They would probably make a game of it, and it was vastly preferable to dragging the poor bird onto the train.

Harry frowned thoughtfully as he chewed a sausage, “do you think Hedwig would rather fly?” he wondered.

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes and gestured to the beautiful owl who was caged just feet away from them, “why don’t you ask her?”

Harry gave her an inquisitive look.

“She's a magical owl, Harry, she can take letters at your instruction, you think she can’t understand a simple question like that?” she asked, with a concerted effort to keep the bossy tone out of her voice.

Harry looked surprised at this, but then turned to his familiar, “Hedwig, would you rather fly to Hogwarts?”

She bobbed her head so vigorously that they both laughed.

“Go on, take her outside, I’ll guard your breakfast from any Weasleys who might come along,” Hermione joked.

He returned with Hedwig’s empty cage and a delighted smile on his face just as the Weasleys arrived downstairs en masse, barely in time to have breakfast. Hermione couldn't fathom what they'd been doing, surely they'd already been packed, but she didn't say anything. She assumed the dynamics of such a large family just escaped her.

The ministry cars they took to Kings Cross were interesting, she’d never seen such a modern muggle invention outfitted with magic. They got them to the station much faster than a normal car could, and Hermione was left with more questions than answers. But she didn't have time to ask because despite the efficient transportation, they were still almost late, and Hermione was shocked to see three very familiar blonds still on the platform when she burst through the barrier from the muggle world.

When she looked at them Narcissa just gave her a small smile, Lucius a nod, and Draco tilted his head in an attempt to see inside her pet carrier. He knew of her plan to look for a cat, but they hadn’t known if she’d find a compatible familiar in the shop. She ignored of the fleeting, futile wish to go and greet them, and just tried to be grateful she'd at least gotten to see them and boarded the train.

And then, late as they already were, Harry nearly missed the train when Mr. Weasley held him back to speak with him. Ron actually had to pull him onboard after they had already started moving. She suppressed a huff of annoyance at the irresponsibility, and just looked for a free compartment. As late arrivals the best they could do was a compartment with one, sleeping, occupant.

“Professor R. J. Lupin,” she declared, once they were settled and Ron wondered out loud who he could be.
“How do you know that?”

“It’s on his trunk,” she pointed to the worn piece of luggage, the letters of his name peeling at the edges.

She then inspected the trunk’s owner rather suspiciously. Even asleep he looked tired, scars littered his face, and he appeared to be going prematurely grey. He was dressed in well worn, much patched robes; if his clothes were beyond repair with a spell, then he was truly in dire straits. What had happened to this man who was apparently going to be their professor, and why was he taking the train to Hogwarts? With the exception of the trolley lady she’d never seen an adult onboard before. It was all rather fishy.

“What do you think he’ll teach?” asked Harry.

“Defense against the dark arts,” she said automatically, still rather lost in her musings, “it’s the only post open.”

Both boys frowned at her.

“How do you know that? What happened to Lockhart?” they asked at the same time.

She cringed. It was the first time she’d really slipped up and admitted to knowing something she shouldn’t.

“Well, I just assumed, everybody says there’s a jinx on the DADA job and all the other professors have held their jobs for years.”

In truth, at the beginning of the summer Lucius had come home from his end-of-school-year Governors meeting with quite a story to tell.

“Apparently he had an encounter with a boggart,” he’d said, “he couldn’t be convinced it was just an illusion, wouldn’t even consider extending his contract for another year,” he’d smirked proudly in her and Draco’s direction as he spoke. He never said anything else about it, but a rare book for Hermione and the latest seeker’s armour for Draco had appeared in their respective rooms the following week. Hermione almost felt bad taking credit. It had been all Draco’s idea.

Growing up in a massive, old manor house he was no stranger to boggarts. He knew how to recognize the signs of an infestation and he had come up with the idea of using one as yet another way to challenge Lockhart.

At the Manor the elves took care of boggarts, so Draco knew that they could capture one, which was exactly what he requested that the Hogwarts elves do to a boggart he’d found in the dungeons. But instead of getting rid of it, he’d asked them to bring it to him in a suitcase he’d provided. As it was not in an elf’s nature to ask ‘why,’ his request was granted post haste. Then, with Hermione’s help, he’d transfigured the suitcase to look like an elaborate gift and trusted Lockhart’s ego to do the rest.

They’d simply left the ‘gift’ on his desk before leaving for the summer. They had expected to give him a bit of a fright as a year end parting gift, they’d never expected the spectacular success of running him out of the castle. They eventually concluded he must have seen something truly horrific, such as somebody else winning Witch Weekly’s Most Charming Smile Award, to have done the job.

But Harry and Ron accepted her supposed deductive reasoning without question. She tried to
ignore the pang of guilt she felt about lying to them so baldly, but it was hard, and it only got worse when Harry confessed what Mr. Weasley had told him, and what he'd overheard the night before.

He, and the whole magical world, believed that Sirius Black was after him. But Hermione couldn’t set him to rights without revealing her sources, there was no innocuous explanation for her knowledge. Not to mention, she didn't know what Sirius Black was up to, Narcissa conceded that all that time in prison could have addled his brain, it was possible he was after Harry.

Because she knew it to be untrue, she was glad Harry didn’t know of Sirius’ connection with his parents, that he didn’t think he’d betrayed them and just thought that he was one of Voldemort’s deranged followers. But it did bother her how little Harry knew about his past. Surely his parents had other friends. And many of the professors had taught his parents, and yet Hagrid was the only one who’d made any attempt to inform Harry about his background.

Any witch or wizard who picked up a newspaper regularly over the past decade or so knew more about Harry’s past than he did. It wasn’t right, she just didn’t know what she could do about it. Maybe there was a book, something besides just a simple wizarding genealogy text that she could find for him to read about the Potters.

Their ride was fairly uneventful. Even though Ron continued to eye the place where Crookshanks was lounging beside her suspiciously, and patting his pocket protectively, he didn't say anything, so Hermione ignored him.

Eventually a familiar blond slid the door to their compartment open with a bang. Hermione rolled her eyes at his dramatics. Surrounded by his enormous minions, he might have looked menacing if Hermione hadn’t known him so well. Instead, she thought he just looked like a cliche. She was set to ignore him, but Crookshanks raised his head in obvious interest.

“Well, look who it is. Potty and the Weasel,” he said in his most arrogant voice

Merlin but he was predictable. He met her eyes and smirked. She sent him her best disapproving glare.

“I heard your father finally got his hands on some gold this summer,” he mocked Ron, “did your mother die of shock?”

Ron stood up to challenge him, knocking Crookshanks’ basket to the floor in the process. Lupin made a noise in his sleep.

“Who’s that?” Draco asked, apparently noticing him for the first time.

“New teacher,” said Harry, “what were you saying, Malfoy?”

She saw the moment he changed his mind about this confrontation. He wouldn’t pick a fight in front of a professor, even a sleeping one. Though she rather thought it would serve him right to get in trouble, he’d come here for that very purpose after all.

The three of them retreated quickly. Ron went on for awhile after that about how he was going to get Malfoy. How he wasn't going to take anymore from him. How much he hated him. Hermione didn’t bother to try and make him be quiet. Draco was her favorite person in the entire world. She knew there was a whole other side to him that neither Harry or Ron had ever seen, but as he’d just demonstrated he could also be a first class prat, and if it made Ron feel better to mouth off, she really didn’t care.

The train came to a sudden, lurching stop about thirty minutes from Hogsmeade, by Hermione’s
watch. There was only a moment to be puzzled by the unexpected turn of events when all the lamps went out. She and the boys fumbled around in the dark for a little while, trying to get their bearings and figure out what was going on before Neville stumbled into the compartment, closely followed by Ginny who was searching for Ron.

And suddenly Professor Lupin was awake, holding his lit wand aloft, ordering them all to sit down and be quiet. He strode towards the door, but it opened before he reached it. She had just enough time to notice an enormous cloaked figure standing in the open space, a desiccated, decayed looking hand reached out towards them before she felt herself begin to sink into despair.

The air turned frigid and she wanted to run, but she was frozen in place. She saw the black hooded specter enter the compartment completely, but she was too caught up in memories of Draco being thrown from Azazeal earlier that summer, by the horror of seeing his momentarily unmoving body, to care about the thing in front of her very much, even as her entire body was screaming at her to get away from it. She sobbed and swayed in her seat. And then she watched in helpless horror as Harry lost consciousness entirely and fell to the ground.

It only lasted a few moments but it felt like an eternity before Professor Lupin banished the dementor- for she had known that’s what the creature was the moment it had begun to affect her-from their compartment. As soon as it was gone she threw herself at Harry. If what the dementor had made her feel left her unable to move, she couldn't imagine what it had done to her friend. Various hands tried to push her aside but she refused to let go, Harry needed human comfort right now.

“Miss,” said an unfamiliar hoarse voice, “could you let Harry up, you could both use some chocolate,” Professor Lupin, she assumed, she still hadn’t taken her eyes off of Harry who had regained consciousness and was looking around blearily.

“Why did he faint?” she heard Ron ask.

Hermione was too drained to glare at him. She also had to admit that he probably had no idea what a tactless question that was. She seriously doubted the Weasleys had sat their children down and told them about the dementors and the effects they had on people, as the Malfoys had done with her and Draco. They seemed more likely to coddle than inform.

“That was a dementor, they make you relive your worst memories. Can you imagine how terrible that must have for him?” she snapped.

“I heard my mum, pleading with Voldemort not to hurt me,” her recovering friend responded quietly, his voice hitching, as they helped each other up off of the floor.

Hermione’s heart skipped a beat. She had just assumed he'd been reliving that awful night in their first year when he'd come face to face with a possessed Quirrell, she had never imagined he'd remembered his parents murder. That was beyond terrible.

The professor fed them some chocolate. On the bright side, at least he knew what to do, and he’d gotten rid of the Dementor, which was supposedly quite difficult. They might finally have a competent DADA teacher. He may have fallen on hard times for some reason, but he'd just saved their souls.

The chocolate helped Hermione feel better, but she continued to worry about Harry. He was clearly rattled, but she couldn't think of a way to offer him more support without hurting his pride. He could be so prickly, she was certain he'd only shared the memory he'd experienced because he'd been in shock. So, she just stuck close to him and breathed a sigh of relief when they debarked the train, boarded the horseless carriages and got out at Hogwarts’ main doors without incident.
She noticed Draco's distinctive hair glowing in the moonlight almost immediately. He was waiting on the steps to the main entrance of the castle, still surrounded by his minions. She almost stopped in her tracks she was so startled by the look of abject fear in his eyes, it made his face look so stark that to anybody else he probably appeared angry. But she knew instinctively that he was actually terrified for her, the Hogwarts rumor mill worked quickly, he'd surely heard that she'd come face to face with a dementor. She attempted to send him a reassuring look and continued on with her fellow Gryffindors.

He'd be writing to his parents the first chance he got, she couldn't blame him, she'd be doing the same thing. Everything they'd warned them about the dementors seemed horrifyingly true. She hoped Draco’s letter to Lucius and Narcissa could somehow help convince the Ministry to remove the Dementors from Hogwarts.

Lucius had been absent, still on his business trip in America along with Draco, when an emergency Board of Governors meeting had been called to decide how to deal with the threat of Sirius Black. Despite Dumbledore’s objections they'd decided Dementors were the best option to guard the school. Lucius’ reaction had actually been frightening to witness when he'd realized there was no talking the Board, or the Ministry, down from this course of action.

“They're more afraid of your poncey cousin,” he'd ranted at Narcissa, “than soul sucking monsters who couldn't keep him contained in the first place!”

If she hadn't been before, Hermione was now firmly on Lucius’ side. She didn’t want to be on the same continent as those disgusting things.

Her mirror had vibrated three separate times, signaling that Draco was trying to reach her, before she had the opportunity to answer it later that night; she couldn't disappear behind the drapes of her bed too quickly, especially on the first night back, without arousing suspicion.

“Hi,” she breathed, when she was finally able to answer.

“Are you okay?” he asked frantically, eyes panicked, “there was a dementor in your train compartment.”

“I'm fine, I promise.”

His eyes danced over her face for a long time before he breathed a sigh of relief, and then his entire expression changed.

“I can't believe Potter fainted,” he snorted.

She glared at him, he could be so insensitive.

“Have some compassion, can you imagine what it must be like for him?” despite the fact that she knew nobody could hear her behind her silenced curtains she looked around furtively, “he heard his parents dying,” she finished in a hushed whisper.

He sobered immediately.

“Don't mock him for that, Draco,” she added quietly.

He looked away uncomfortably, “no, that,” he cleared his throat, “that sucks. I can't believe he remembers that, he was just a baby.”

Hermione shrugged, “maybe it has something to do with the dementors, maybe they can trigger
things you only remember subconsciously.”

They were silent for several long moments.

“I've already written Mother and Father, those things obviously can't be trusted, the Ministry needs to do something.”

She smirked to herself at how well she knew him, but just nodded.

“I'm still feeling too tired to write tonight but I'll get up early, and do it, make sure they know exactly what happened since you weren't there, I can send Atalanta off before classes.”

“Was it awful?” he asked in a hushed voice.

Her eyes filled with tears, “the worst feeling in the world, like happiness didn't even exist. And I was just frozen in place even though I wanted to get far away. I saw you,” she choked on a sob.

“Me?” he wondered.

She sniffled, “I remembered when Azazeal threw you and I thought you might be…” she couldn't say it, “it was the only other time I've ever been that scared.”

He suddenly started talking, “They said that one of the dementors went into Potter’s compartment. It was all ‘Potter this’ and ‘Potter that’ but I didn't care about stupid Potter, I just knew wherever he was, you would be too, and I didn't know what might have happened to you.”

She understood that this was his way of telling her that he knew what it was to be afraid for her life, that he understood how much it hurt her to be afraid for his.

“I’m okay,” she said, reaching out to touch his face on the surface of her mirror, “I wish I could come down there.”

His expression immediately morphed into a wicked smirk.

“And what, sleep with me?”

She bit her lip and shrugged, “yeah actually, it would make me feel better,” she admitted.

He grew serious again at once, “me too,” he nodded.

They hadn't talked about what they were, hadn't put a label on it. They'd admitted that they had more than friendly feelings for each other, but in the days since that discussion their relationship had changed very little. Perhaps their touches had taken on an additional meaning, but they had already meant everything to each other. You couldn't get much more serious than that. And right now, the desire to crawl into bed with her best friend had nothing to do with her burgeoning hormones.

“You can't die Draco,” she blurted.

“I wasn't planning on it,” he was trying to make light of things, but his smile was brittle.

“I'm serious. Your favorite hobby involves flying around at high speeds and having heavy balls hit at your head. Plus teenaged boy can be...just don't be stupid, okay? Promise me?”

She may have sounded a little desperate, but she felt desperate. On top of the unsettling encounter
with the dementor was a fact that she was usually able to keep in the back of her mind and avoid thinking about. But tonight it wouldn't be locked away.

There was a war brewing. One in which they would automatically be placed on opposite sides, with Draco and his whole family far too close to a maniac for her liking. She knew Lucius and Narcissa would do everything in their power to protect them, but the older she got, the more she realized it might not be enough.

He seemed to understand because he didn't even attempt to argue with her, “I promise,” he said, “we can even do that weird pinky thing again if you want.”

That startled a laugh out of her and she decided it was past time to change the subject, because sneaking into the Slytherin dorms and crawling into bed with Draco was not an option, and she’d never sleep if she grew anymore morose.

“Do you always have to cause trouble?” she asked, she had a bone to pick with him over his earlier behavior.

“Trouble?” he asked innocently, “I don’t cause trouble, I’m an angel, just ask Mother.”

She snorted, “right, like Narcissa didn’t spend half an hour lecturing you for tracking mud into the house the other day.”

He just shrugged.

“I’m serious though, do you have to go out of your way to pick fights with Harry and Ron? I mean, don’t tell me you didn’t come into our compartment for that very reason.”

“I wanted to see you,” he countered, “and I was only being polite and saying hello to Potty and the Weasel, I hadn’t seen them all summer, after all,” he explained, as if butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth.

She rolled her eyes.

“Sure,” she said, voice dripping with sarcasm, “but you do realize that however much fun it might be for you, when you act like that I’m the one who suffers? I either have to step in to keep them from trying to hex you to high heaven, or I have to listen to them grumble for hours afterwards about how much they hate you and how they’ll get you next time.”

He sniffed disdainfully, “Let them try to hex me, they're both pretty useless with a wand.”

“Draco!” she growled in frustration, “Please, for me, do you think you could at least stop going out of your way to annoy them. If they start it, I would never ask you not to defend yourself, but come on, you’re better than this,” it never hurt to appeal to his innate sense of superiority.

He pretended to consider that for a moment, “and what do I get in return?” he asked.

She let out an exasperated breath, “you want a reward for not acting like a spoiled child?”

“I’m looking at it more like I’m doing you a favor, so I want something in return.”

“You’re such a Slytherin, okay, what do you want?”

He sat back tapped his chin, like he was thinking about it, but she was certain that he’d had something in mind long before he’d even made the request.
“A kiss.”

“A kiss,” she repeated.

He nodded.

She just blinked at him stupidly, “from me?” she squeaked.

“Well I certainly don’t want to kiss Potter or Weasley,” he sneered.

She stared at him, her mind reeling.

A kiss. He wanted a kiss.

She didn’t understand. She had fully expected him to exploit this opportunity to get her on a broomstick, or something equally unpleasant. Why would he waste it on something that she would willingly, happily give him?

But then she noticed that he was shifting around nervously on her screen. He also wouldn’t quite meet her eyes, another telltale sign of unease. And she understood.

The silly boy wasn’t sure that she would want to kiss him. He was testing the waters. Such a Slytherin.

She found herself grinning uncontrollably, “well, Mr. Malfoy, you drive a hard bargain. But you have yourself a deal.”

The brilliant smile he gave her in response was a much better remedy for the aftermath of dementor exposure than chocolate.
Chapter 14

Sirius was confused. In some ways things seemed to be the same, but in so many others the world appeared to be a completely different place from the one that existed when they'd thrown him into Azkaban and thrown away the key. He wasn't sure he knew which way was up anymore. He really should have learned from Peter, things were not always as they seemed.

He’d arrived in Hogsmeade just days after the Hogwarts Express did. He had been traveling non-stop for weeks and he was as tired as he’d been when he had first made it to shore from Azkaban. But he couldn’t stop until he’d seen with his own eyes that his pup had made it safely to Hogwarts, and that the rat hadn’t done him any harm.

In his animagus form he was easily able to sneak onto Hogwarts grounds, and he settled himself at the edge of the Forbidden Forest to student watch. A long few days later his patience was rewarded when he spotted an unmistakable head of messy black hair amongst a group coming down from the castle for a Care of Magical Creatures class. He appeared happy and healthy, certainly better in his Gryffindor (Sirius had just known it!) robes than he had in the oversized muggle clothing Sirius had seen him wearing around his relatives house.

Satisfied for the time being, he retreated into the forest to a small meadow where he and the other Marauders had spent hundreds of hours over the course of their tenure in the castle. He settled beneath a willow at its border and finally let himself really rest.

He awoke, hours or days later, he really couldn't have said, to the sight of two felines staring at him. One blue-eyed, the other a haunting orange, they appeared to have been waiting for him to wake up. They just gazed at each other for several minutes before the blue-eyed animal- a sleek black part-kneazle- stood up and cautiously approached him. He didn't move, just watched her warily as she leaned over and gently rubbed her small face against his muzzle. Sirius' breath caught in his throat.

It was the first time anybody- human or creature- had touched him with anything like affection in twelve years. His head fell to his paws and he whined. He hadn't realized how deprived he'd felt. The cat seemed to understand and she lay down, stretching out against him.

The ginger monster who was her companion stayed where he was, but rolled onto his back. By exposing his belly he was making himself extremely vulnerable, it was a clear display of trust in Sirius, and he wasn't sure what he'd done to earn it. But he didn't care, they had apparently decided they wanted to be friends, and he was in no position to refuse a little companionship.

Sirius strongly suspected that they knew he was not a normal dog, but it didn't deter them. They came to see him regularly, and seemed to be able to find him wherever he was hiding out. They were remarkably efficient at sneaking scraps out of the castle for him, which were vastly superior to the rats that he could catch on his own. He was better fed than he had been in more than a decade. He'd forgotten what a nearly full stomach felt like.

It was bittersweet, being back at Hogwarts. His best memories had all been made on the school grounds. And it was easy and pleasant at night to dream of them, finally away from the influence
of the dementors, but devastating to wake up and realize those days were over, and so many of those memories now ruined. He credited the cats for keeping him sane through the emotional maelstrom and he couldn't help but think that they knew that he needed them and had sought him out for that very reason.

And then one day, a few weeks after he'd first met them, they brought a human along with them to visit. It was a boy who appeared to be about Harry’s age. He was wearing Slytherin robes and had hair so pale Sirius knew that he had to be a Malfoy.

He remembered that his cousin Narcissa had a baby boy not long before Harry was born, he'd considered sending her and her prat of a husband a half-eaten bone as a congratulatory gift. But Lily had said that was juvenile, and she was not a witch one wanted to cross, especially when she was pregnant, so he resisted.

Sirius assumed that baby was this boy. He almost retreated back into the woods because of it. He didn't particularly want to socialize with the son of a Death Eater, even as a dog.

But he was curious about what his two intelligent and kind feline companions were doing with the Slytherin. Because he'd hardly ever met anybody sorted into that house that he could stand, and he'd certainly never heard of a Malfoy who wasn't a bad egg, but kneazles were notoriously good judges of character. And it had been a long time since he'd had anything to be curious about.

The boy came to a startled halt when he spotted Sirius, and looked at the cats, “is this what you wanted to show me?” he asked, tilting his head curiously.

They came and sat deliberately on either side of him in solidarity.

“You know, cats and dogs aren't supposed to get along,” he said with a smirk, but he seemed amused enough.

He reached out a cautious hand, “hello, boy,” Sirius leaned into it and let out an unconscious whine, because the food the cats had managed to smuggle him had been wonderful, but this boy’s bag smelled like heaven, or, even better, the Great Hall.

“Are you hurt?” his dark eyes were wide and worried.

Sirius resisted the urge to shake his head, knowing the gesture would appear too human, and he didn't want to scare off this person who smelled like he had a feast with him, Slytherin or not. So, he just snuffled at his bag.

“Of course, you're hungry,” he sat down carefully and began to remove items from it, “I brought lunch with me because these two,” he jerked his head in the direction of the cats, “absolutely insisted that I follow them rather than eat, but you look like you need it more than I do.”

There were a couple of sandwiches, some crisps, a couple of apples that didn't much appeal to Sirius in this form, treacle tart, and miracle of miracles, pumpkin juice. Oh how he had missed pumpkin juice! If dogs could cry, Sirius would have.

They sat quietly as he ate. Occasionally, the boy would comment on something or other, and eventually he pulled out an arithmancy text and started reading. Sirius found himself reading it over his shoulder. Arithmancy hadn't been his favorite subject, but after years of nothing to look at but the walls of his cell, anything seemed fascinating. The boy left when his lunch period was over, much to Sirius’ disappointment, but at least he patted Sirius’ head and promised to return.

And return he did, regularly, and with baskets of food. To Sirius’ surprise- because he had been
right, he was a Malfoy- he was compassionate and thoughtful, and very good company. He took note of the foods Sirius preferred and made sure to include them (or, more likely, asked the elves to do so.) And while he didn't seem to have considered the possibility that Sirius was an animagus, he did sense that he was a magical creature and spoke to him as one intelligent being to another.

He called him ‘Shadow,’ which Sirius didn't mind, it was nice to be called something. He eventually thought to introduce the cats. Nox was the appropriately named black one and she belonged to Draco, and Crookshanks was the ginger beast (it was the weirdest name Sirius had ever heard, but oddly fitting) and apparently he was Draco’s best friend Hermione's familiar.

Draco. That was the boy, and once he said it Sirius realized that he'd heard it before. He was definitely Narcissa’s child. When he'd seen the birth announcement he had been surprised that Lucius Malfoy would allow his wife to name their child using the Black family tradition. He'd always seemed the controlling type.

Sirius had considered the possibility that in the chaos at the end of the war Lucius had been killed- he knew he wasn't in Azkaban- and that Narcissa had raised Draco on her own. He remembered his cousin as a snob, and a blood purist to be sure, but she'd always been kind to him; without her Death Eater husband’s influence Sirius could imagine her being capable of raising a child like Draco. But Draco spoke of his parents with a great deal of love and respect, they were both, not simply alive, but obviously very involved with their son’s life.

So Sirius was confused. And that confusion only grew when one Saturday a girl appeared in lieu of Draco, and Sirius hadn't needed her to introduce herself to know that this was Hermione. She was a petite thing, pretty, with a wild head of curly hair. But what shocked him was the muggle clothes she wore, and the Gryffindor scarf draped around her neck.

The Scion to the Ancient and Noble House of Malfoy was best friends with a muggleborn Gryffindor. Had things really changed that much since he'd been in prison? Or did the Black family have another rebel?

From the moment she arrived Hermione began chattering away to him so quickly that Sirius barked out a laugh, and she was so worked up that she didn't even seem to hear him. She practically radiated fire and passion-very much a Gryffindor- and he imagined she was a good complement to Draco’s cool reserve. He liked her immediately.

Apparently, the reason she was there in place of Draco was that he had landed himself in detention for the day. She was very annoyed with him over it, but Sirius wished he could thank the boy for the entertainment. Hermione looked like an angry kitten as she ranted, and it was the funniest thing Sirius had seen in a very long time.

After that she began to visit regularly as well. But she and Draco never came together. And Sirius made another assumption that was quickly proven false. He had thought they were trying to prevent word of their relationship from reaching Draco’s parents. But Hermione spoke of the elder Malfoys even more often than Draco did, and with a great deal of affection. They were obviously well aware of their son’s connection to a muggleborn.

She would often bring writing supplies with her and read him the letters she wrote to Lucius and Narcissa as well as her own parents, he heard all sorts of stories about the goings on in Hogwarts. And so, he began to anticipate her visits even more than Draco’s. Not because he liked her better, but because through her stories he’d learned something very important about her: she loved his godson.

She seemed to have appointed herself to be something like an older sister to him. Clearly she
thought it was her job to take care of him. And when she talked about him, it resonated with Sirius. Their feelings for his pup were similarly affectionate, and he imagined there was little she wouldn't do for him.

He was terribly grateful for the two teenagers and their familiars. And he considered enlisting their help. They trusted him, it would be simple to nick one of their wands, transform, and force them to hear him out. But he’d grown fond of them, and he didn’t particularly want to involve them in the mess, or scare them. But he had to keep Harry safe.

So he compromised with himself. Halloween was coming up, everybody would be attending the feast and he would use the opportunity to sneak into the castle. Hopefully he could get into Gryffindor tower and find the rat. If that didn’t work, he would reconsider his options.

Getting the rat was his one clear objective, he had to concentrate on that, because everything else was so confusing.

Chapter End Notes

On Monday this story surpassed 1,000 followers on fanfic.net, which is kind of blowing my mind, and is so far beyond what I could have imagined not even four months ago when a I threw a 1,500 word prologue out there on a wing and a prayer. I’m so, so grateful to you all, (even you lurkers I’ve totally been there!) so I’ve written you a little present. It kind of came out of nowhere, Sirius wasn’t going to appear for awhile yet, and I had no plans to write from his POV, but here it is! Don’t freak out, this is truly an interlude, when we get back to the main action it will be starting from where we left off, I won’t deprive you of that kiss. Thanks again wonderful readers!
Chapter 15

The morning of September 2, 1993 brought about an unprecedented event in Wiltshire. Narcissa Malfoy, Lady of the Ancient and Noble House of Malfoy, and daughter of the Ancient and Noble House of Black, lost her composure at the breakfast table.

It started out as all second-day-of-Hogwarts-term mornings did, with a letter from her son. Lucius was gracious enough to always allow her to read these letters first. Aeolus, her son’s owl, knew this and flew straight for her. She took the letter from him and he was finishing off the rasher of bacon she’d given him in return when she shrieked.

The poor owl, who was not used to such dramatics from the woman, gave a panicky flap of his wings and immediately took off for the owlery where it was safe. Her husband had leapt out of his chair and rounded the table so quickly he was able to catch the parchment, which was the cause of her distress, before it fell to her plate.

She didn't even seem to see him. She just pushed herself up and out of her chair, and had started to charge out of the room when he caught her around the waist.

"Cissa, what are you doing?"

"I'm going to remove our children from that death trap of a school!"

He kept one arm wrapped firmly around her waist and used the other hand to deftly unfold the parchment. He quickly read his son’s words, and his reaction was the opposite to his wife's. He went completely still.

Narcissa seized on his distraction as an opportunity to escape, wrenching out of his grasp. He caught her again in moments, with his hand like a vice around her upper arm. She struggled relentlessly but it seemed there would be no escaping him this time without the use of her wand.

"Cissa, you need to calm down."

"Calm down, you're telling me to calm down!" she hissed, "there were dementors on that train with our children,” she spat in his face, “I'm through, it's time to get them out of the country."

He took a deep breath.

"I'm just as upset as you are, but we need to discuss this rationally."

She continued to squirm in his grasp, "obviously you're not if you can be rational right now,” she accused, her face a mask of disbelief.

"Listen to me Narcissa,” he barked, shaking her slightly.

She froze, he'd never treated her so roughly and it immediately got her attention. Her eyes snapped to his

“We have to tread lightly right now, marching up to Hogwarts and yanking Draco out of school
won't help anything,” he barked.

“At least they'd be safe,” she countered.

“No, my love, not them, just Draco. You have no authority to take Hermione anywhere.”

There was a beat of silence.

“I'll write the Grangers, I'm certain I can get their permission.”

“I’m sure you could, but that changes very little. She is still a muggleborn, she is not a legal part of this family, no matter how we view her. You would just be exposing her as being under our protection, something we have no good explanation for. The ministry will have her obliviated before she's allowed off of the grounds. And if we could somehow find a way to sneak her out, past the dementors guarding the place, we'd be dooming her to a lifetime of running and hiding and leaving us all exposed for having taken in a muggleborn in the first place.”

She deflated, “Perhaps just Draco for now, until we can come up with a plan.”

“He’ll never forgive us for that, I know my son, he will look at it as us abandoning her when the chips were down and he’ll never fully trust us again. This new development in their relationship means that with each passing day we come closer to the point where, if forced to choose between her and us, Draco will choose her, if we haven't already passed it. If we want to keep this family together, as a team, we have to consider them as one now. This is what you hoped for, we have to deal with the reality of it now.”

Just then Atalanta flew in and landed on Lucius’ shoulder, settling in and extending her leg to allow him to remove the letter she was carrying. She looked at Narcissa, big eyes full of questions.

“Hello girl,” he said gently, “I suppose Hermione has sent us her account of what happened?”

“I promise not to storm off to Hogwarts before we've discussed this,” Narcissa said quietly, head pounding with emotion, and nodded towards the owl, he released her arm.

He untied the letter for the owl’s leg and looked at her, “I'm through here, how about you?”

“I certainly don't have an appetite anymore.”

He sent Atalanta off to rest before returning to Hogwarts, and took her arm, much more gently this time, “perhaps we should retire to my study, just to be safe.”

She just nodded in agreement, but thought that the need for privacy and secrecy was becoming too common of an occurrence.

They sat side by side on his sofa and read Hermione’s letter together. It was, as expected, a much more detailed account. Narcissa's eyes welled with tears when she read about the effect the dementors had on her. She assumed she would experience something similar if she was ever faced with one.

Also, beneath her fear, there was a little bit of pride that they'd cultivated a relationship with the young witch that was strong enough that she'd written to them so openly and honestly, trusted them with something so private. Hermione wasn't stupid, she knew how revealing it was that in her greatest despair it was Draco she'd feared for.

“Well, they are at least safe in the castle for now, and if she was experiencing any lasting effects
from the encounter she might have glossed over it, but Draco wouldn't have,” he held up a hand to stop her before she could interrupt, “I know this is far from ideal. I will go see the Minister and the other members of the Board today, see if I can't convince them to change their stance now that these creatures have proven how untrustworthy they are. Fortunately, Dumbledore is on our side in this, and as much of a judgemental interfering old man as he is, he is at least a mighty wizard who is not going to sit back and let creatures of such darkness over run his school.”

“You're trusting Dumbledore with this,” she peered at him incredulously.

He sighed, “I do not see how we have another choice.”

She took a deep breath and made a concerted effort to uncurl her fists, her fingernails were digging into her palms and they were beginning to sting. She looked down to see that she had drawn blood. Lucius reached over and gently took both of her hands in one of his. Drawing his wand, he muttered an incantation over them and they both watched as her flesh neatly knitted itself back to its previously pristine alabaster.

He then took her face in his hand and forced her to look at him, “I am sorry I cannot do more, darling.”

She leaned heavily into his hands, and then turned her face to kiss one palm before pulling away.

“This is not your fault, I just can’t stand feeling so helpless.”

“I know what you mean,” he sighed.

“Were we terribly naive, thinking that we could handle this? That we could walk this tightrope between the light and the dark?”

“Once again, Cissa I’m not sure we had any other choice. What were we to do? Cut ties with Hermione? Forbid Draco from seeing her? I may not see their connection as you do, but I know that would have been a fruitless endeavor. He would have continued to see her and resented us, and your heart would have been broken.”

She just sat there, nodding miserably in agreement.

“And then what?” he continued, “Would we have gone crawling back to the Dark Lord and just hoped we remained in his good favor for the rest of our lives? Watched as he slaughtered people like our Hermione? Fought Hermione herself? Because you know as well as I do, that girl is a fighter, she won’t sit back and let him take over, and Draco goes where she does. No, Narcissa, we must carry on and hope that we have luck on our side along with our resources and, if I do say so myself, prodigious skill,” he winked at her at that last bit.

She rewarded him with a tight smile.

“I love you,” she whispered, leaning forward to rest her forehead against his, “I’ll be beside you, until the very end, whatever that might be.”

He picked up her hands and brought them to his mouth.

“Being your husband has been the greatest privilege of my life, and I will do everything in my power to make sure that end doesn’t come for at least another century.”

“That's not long enough,” she murmured.
It was, however, so much better than the alternative.

When he awoke on the first morning of classes Draco was of two minds. Firstly, he was thrilled. He had managed to get the promise of a kiss out of Hermione (and, more importantly, she seemed as happy about the prospect as he was) and he was actually quite excited to be starting classes. He wasn't the swot his best friend was, but he did like learning, and he was especially excited to start on his elective courses.

But the day before had rattled him to his very core. It had been bad enough when Hermione had been in danger at the end of their first year. That had been nothing in comparison to how he'd felt when he'd heard that there had been an actual dementor in the same small train compartment as her. It took everything he had to keep from falling apart at the seams before he could lay eyes on her and assure himself that she was still...her.

And then came the realization of how very much he needed her. That he quite literally didn’t know how he would have continued on without her. That had created an entirely new kind of fear. If her plea from the night before was any indication she felt the same way. Was that normal, for another person to be your world? His parents did seem to almost orbit one another, was this how they felt? He’d always wanted a relationship like their’s, but his was so much more than he ever could have imagined.

So, he was doubly anxious to get to breakfast. He wanted to get his course schedule, and he wanted to reassure himself that his best friend wasn't suffering from any lasting damage from the day before. And if he also wanted to see if she seemed as anxious to see him as he was to see her, well that was secondary.

He absently conversed with Crabbe and Goyle, who flanked him, but had very little to say, as usual, and with Pansy and Daphne, who he was sure had intentionally seated themselves across from him, as he ate. Hermione was already seated at the Gryffindor table. She was a naturally early riser and he reveled in the opportunity to observe her without her two stupid friends.

He surreptitiously watched as she made her tea just the way he knew she would. Before she began loading her plate she glanced up and caught his eye. She smiled at him, only slightly, but her eyes danced happily.

He bit back an uncharacteristic grin when he read the course schedule Snape handed him. Apparently, few enough people had signed up for Arithmancy and Ancient Runes that all the houses were combined in one class. And, as luck would have it, Slytherin and Gryffindor were paired to have Care of Magical Creatures together. That meant an additional three classes with Hermione, and for the first time, two of them would be without her friends.

Arithmancy was first. There were only two Slytherins in the class other than himself: Theo Nott and Tracey Davis. While he and Theo were not friends, though he knew that as girls their mothers had been best friends, their Houses had been allied for generations, so It made sense for Draco to seat himself with the quiet boy. He was happy to see that the numbers had worked out so that the other houses were all paired up amongst themselves and Hermione, the only Gryffindor, had to sit with Tracey. Draco didn't know her well, but he was aware that she was a half-blood and a good student, and she would at least refrain from blindly hating his best friend.

The class was interesting enough, but he swore he could actually feel Hermione radiating happiness from across the room and knew he would be getting an earful from her about it later. Transfiguration was normal. It wasn't his favorite but it came much more easily to him since he started working with Hermione. McGonagall could be annoyingly strict but, though he wouldn't
admit it under pain of death, she was both fair and a good teacher.

After lunch came the class he'd really been looking forward to: Care of Magical Creatures. Draco had always loved animals of all sort. He didn't know if it had started due to his fascination with his namesake, or if that was just a symptom of what was already a larger interest, but even as a very small child he'd been obsessed with magical creatures.

His parents had indulged him. The majority of his story books were about animals, his mother has regularly taken him down to the stables to visit the creatures his family housed there, and when he'd gotten a little older they'd taken him to various sanctuaries all over Europe. He'd been looking forward to taking CoMC at Hogwarts since he'd learned the course existed.

When they gathered in the clearing where the class met, Draco used Crabbe and Goyle’s muscle to push people out of the way so that he could stand near Hermione under the guise of annoying Potter and Weasley. But keeping in mind his promise to Hermione from the night before, he didn't actually say anything to them. It was enough that he knew that his presence would irritate them.

The new CoMC professor was a stout woman by the name of Grubbly-Plank. She was dressed more like a dragon tamer than a professor, and seemed imminently capable. Draco was so thankful his father had spearheaded the campaign to keep that oaf, Hagrid, from getting the job.

Usually the Headmaster had complete control over hiring and firing at Hogwarts, but because Hagrid had been on probation, and hadn't even completed his O.W.L.s much less receive a N.E.W.T. in his specified subject, Dumbledore had been obliged to apply to the Board to get permission to hire him. After Lucius had spoken and reminded them of the reason Hagrid had been on probation in the first place, they'd apparently soundly denied the request.

Draco knew Hermione had felt some guilt about that, but he didn't care. She tended to have a soft heart. But Hagrid was the last person Draco wanted standing between himself and a dangerous creature, because he didn't seem to have a reasonable understanding of the word ‘dangerous.’

As a first day treat the professor set them up to work with nifflers. Draco dutifully removed his signet ring and watched his niffler retrieve as much buried shiny junk as it could. His was one of the most successful, it was a fun lesson and Draco was happy it hadn’t been a disappointment.

After dinner he waited for Hermione in their turret room as they had previously agreed to meet. He knew it might be a little while, she often had trouble getting away from Potter and Weasley, though he hoped it would be easier for her tonight. They didn't have so much homework that they'd demand her help with yet.

He hadn't been waiting long when she arrived. She didn't quite smile at him when she ducked into the room but he could tell that she was happy to see him. She unceremoniously dropped her bag from her shoulder and fell onto the sofa next to him, automatically molding herself into his side.

“Hey,” she muttered, stifling a yawn.

“You didn't sleep well?” he worried.

He wrapped his arm around her and something in his chest unfurled. She wriggled around trying to get comfortable, huffed in exasperation and jumped back to her feet. He watched her with amusement and a little bit of concern as she irritably shucked her outer robes and then grabbed the soft royal blue blanket his mother had sent along with them after the last Christmas holidays, and draped it over them after she’d flopped back down on the sofa. She arranged herself against his side, he put his arm back around her.
“Sorry, I’m restless.”

He chuckled, “yeah, obviously,” he drawled, “did you not sleep well?” he repeated.

He felt her shrug.

“I had a lot to think about.”

“But you’re okay, right?”

“I’m good.”

“The dementor?”

“Actually, there’s this boy…”

“Oh?” he questioned vaguely, wondering where she was going with this and mildly worried.

“Parvati says he’s dreamy,” she sighed rather dreamily, it was very uncharacteristic, “he grew over the summer and got a haircut, it’s all they could talk about.”

There was a heavy feeling of dread in his stomach.

“And what did you say?” he had to know.

“That he might be nice enough to look at if he wasn’t such an unimaginable prat.”

He just sat there blinking at her, not knowing what to make of that.

She grinned and shoved him playfully, “I’m talking about you, you goof,” then she ducked her head, “and I quite like looking at you, but I couldn’t very well tell them that. But I am not calling you dreamy.”

He could feel himself grinning, “you’re telling me your roommates have a thing for me?”

She nodded, “for at least a year now, but don’t let it go to your head,” she poked him for emphasis.

He grabbed the offending hand, “is that what kept you up, you’re worried Lavender Brown or one of her ilk is going to steal me away?” he teased.

She shook her head, “I hope you have better taste than that, and anyway, I know you wouldn’t do that to me,” she finished more quietly.

She was right. He'd rather stab himself in the heart than hurt Hermione by getting involved with one of her roommates who were vapid and often cruel to her. He was beginning to think he'd never want anybody but her anyway.

“So, what about me kept you up?” he pressed teasingly, he was extremely curious but he was trying to keep things light.

She bit her lip and began toying with the fastenings of his robes.

“Whatever it is, you can tell me,” he said seriously.

There was a long beat of silence, the only sound in the room the crackling of the fire. She continued to fidget until she finally turned her face up to look at him, she was blushing but she also appeared determined.
“Don’t you see? They all want you, but I’m the one you asked for a kiss. It made me feel special, I was excited,” she was getting more and more red as she spoke, “is this weird? I mean you’re my best friend, so you’re the one I’d normally talk to about stuff like this, but we’re talking about you. I mean I’m glad it’s you, that you’re my best friend and now more than that—” he could tell she was rapidly spiraling out of control, usually when she got like this he would hug her, she was a very tactile person and always responded well to physical affection, so he thought he would try something new.

He ducked his head and brought his lips to hers firmly, cupping her cheek, with one hand. She inhaled sharply through her nose in surprise, but she didn't resist and then he felt her place in hand on her shoulder and the other went tunneling through his hair.

It was nice, her lips were soft, she smelled good, as always, and he liked how intimate it felt, liked the possessive way she held onto him, and that he knew she’d never been this close to anybody else. He wasn’t ready to turn this into a full on snog, but he pulled back and then gave her one more sweet peck before pulling away completely.

She stared at him for a few moments, and then she licked her lips and started to smile.

“I liked that,” she confessed huskily.

“Me too,” he said, licking his own lips, he could swear he tasted her there, “and just for the record, you are special and you can talk to me about anything.”

She nodded, “okay, and, um, you could do that again sometime if you wanted.”

He smiled, “I think I’ll take you up on that offer...sometime.”

He gathered her even more closely against him and she placed her head on his shoulder and they spent the time until curfew just sitting quietly together enjoying each other's company.

Three days later was their first Defense Against the Dark Arts class and Draco was quite interested to see how it would go. He'd seen the professor in the Great Hall, of course, and around the castle as well. Hermione had described him as looking to be “down on his luck.” He would have been more likely to say that the man appeared to belong on a street corner rather than their school, but he’d also saved Hermione’s life, so he'd reserve judgement...for now.

He was pleased when Professor Lupin told them to put their books away; that they'd be having a practical lesson. He had learned a great deal from his parents about the Dark Arts, and defending himself against them using practical methods. And he was feeling optimistic about their chances of actually having gotten a competent professor as the man led them into the teacher’s lounge. But then he got a look at the wardrobe that housed the subject of their lesson and began to panic.

He barely heard the professor’s exchange with his Head of House, who had been sitting in the lounge, and he tuned out Lupin’s lesson about boggarts. He already knew, very well, what was inside of that wardrobe. He noticed some of the other students- his fellow purebloods and some of the half bloods- looked similarly nervous.

This would have been bad enough, just a week before when he'd thought his worst fear was of snakes due to a childhood run-in with a garden snake. Given his house loyalties that would have been humiliating. But now he knew better. The moment Hermione had confessed to him that she'd seen him when faced with a dementor, he knew that his worst fear had also changed. Nothing would be worse than losing Hermione.
As humiliating as it would be to reveal something so personal in front of all of his classmates, that was nothing in comparison to how much danger revealing their secret could put her in, and that was not to be born. He didn't care who thought him a coward.

“I'm not doing this,” he declared suddenly.

Lupin turned to him calmly, “Mr. Malfoy, is it?” he asked.

“That's correct.”

“If you refuse to participate in the lesson I will have no other choice but to give you detention.”

“If you must, but I think it's a deplorable lesson, forcing us to reveal our worst fears in public. Would you like yours aired, sir? I didn't see you volunteering to get things started,” he sneered, keeping his Malfoy facade firmly in place.

The air was thick with tension, it was rare for a student to openly defy a professor, and Slytherins rarely acted so boldly.

“Boggarts are part of every day life, Mr. Malfoy, it is my duty to teach you how to deal with the danger they present.”

“You're to teach us how to defend ourselves against vampire and werewolf attacks too, are you going to cart one of them in here as well?”

The room exploded in whispered conversations and loud protests. Lupin blanched but he barely paid the man any attention.

“Detention Mr. Malfoy, for back talking a teacher.”

He couldn't have cared less, he was too busy trying to catch Hermione’s eye to communicate what he was doing. She could no sooner face a boggart in front of an audience than he could.

When he finally got her attention he could tell she was panicking as well, her eyes were wide and her breathing heavy. She kept stealing glances at the wardrobe where the boggart was trapped, and he knew she'd come to the same conclusion he had. He tried to reassure her with a confident expression. She gave him a slight nod and swallowed heavily. This would be difficult for her.

Lockhart had been one thing, but it would be against her every instinct to defy a professor she'd already begun to respect.

“I agree with Malfoy,” she said, her voice even as she determinedly looked away from Potter and Weasley who were glaring at her like she'd just committed murder, she attempted to smile, but Draco saw how brittle it was, “perhaps not in his manner of addressing you Professor, but that doesn't make him wrong. In theory I think this is a wonderful idea. But I just can't agree with having our fears exposed so publicly, we may be young, but that doesn't mean we haven't had traumatic things happen to us. There could be psychological damage to one student, or to us all should you proceed in this manner. If we're to do this at all it should be done in private.”

He regarded her steadily.

“Very well Miss Granger, I shall just take volunteers then.”

Draco stepped away immediately, as did the rest of the Slytherins. None of them, not even Crabbe or Goyle (and that was saying something) were stupid enough to give up such a tactical advantage for nothing.
Hermione also shifted to the side despite Potter’s open mouthed incredulity, and Weasley’s beet red rage. She paused only to murmur something to Longbottom who heaved an obvious sigh of relief and followed her out of the path of the boggart. She grasped his hand in support and for the first time he felt no jealousy over the affection she gave one of her friends.

Given what he knew about Longbottom he hadn't relished seeing his boggart. Lupin really should have considered this more carefully. As much as Hermione's objection had been personally motivated, she'd also made a really good point.

Draco had never thought Potter was the sharpest knife in the potions kit. But when he stood there, willingly facing a creature which would show him his worst fears, just days after experiencing the effect a dementor had on him, well he knew he was a bona fide moron. There was brave, and there was stupid, and Potter was apparently the latter.

It was over pretty quickly, with the professor stepping in front of Potter before he could take his turn (so he'd intended to protect Potter but none of the rest of them?) He stormed out of the room the moment they were dismissed.

She ran past him a minute later, obviously upset and unencumbered by any other Gryffindors. She brushed his arm as she went by but that was it. He wished he could offer her more comfort.

And he was shocked when a hand reached out and hauled him into an alcove. It was a place he'd met Hermione several times before, but not in nearly a year. She looked around to make sure they were alone and when she determined that they were, looped her arms around his neck.

“Thank you for the warning, that could have been bad.”

“We have to be so careful,” he muttered, pulling her closer; it was beginning to feel like an impossible task, this secrecy.

She burrowed against him, wrapping her arms around him beneath his cloak, she was so close her lips brushed against his neck.

“I’ve been thinking about transferring schools after O.W.L. Year,” he said tentatively.

“You mean when I can come with you?” she clarified.

“Yeah,” he said sheepishly; the laws regarding muggleborns he'd been raised to appreciate now chafed like shackles.

There was a long pause and he hugged her closer.

“Let’s talk to Lucius and Narcissa about the possibilities, after what just happened, well I’m not sure this is a good place for us, it may be dangerous to the point of foolishness.”

He was happy to hear her concede that much.

“I won't go anywhere without you,” he vowed.

“Me either,” she swore.

They were just thirteen, and not really in any position to make that promise to each other, but it was all that they had. So, he just concentrated on the way she was playing with the hair at the base of his neck and was holding him like she never intended to let him go. He'd find a way to make it happen, with or without his parents.
“You’re not mad at me for getting detention?” he asked suddenly.

She craned her neck to look him in the eyes, “you have a reputation to maintain, it would have been suspicious if you'd been polite. When your parents find out why you did it, they won’t care.”

“So you’ll back me up to them?”

She chuckled, “yes, Draco, I’ll help you stay out of trouble,” she smirked at him and looked around, “I should go before somebody comes looking for me,” she went up on her toes to kiss his cheek, “see you later.”

He closed his eyes so he didn't have to watch her walk away from him.

Chapter End Notes

I just wanted to apologize to the people who have commented so far and gotten no response. You see, I'm a fanfiction.net girl and I'm still getting used to this site and how things are done. I didn't realize it was normal to just reply in the thread, I'll do that from now on. I'm sorry I don't have the time to catch up, but I read and appreciate every comment.

In the interest of full disclosure, not only do I also post on fanfiction.net but I post there first. Because, as I said, I'm more comfortable there and I have to change my formatting before I post here. Everything will make it's way here eventually, but if you're interested in my immediate updates I'm RiverWriter there too. Thank you!
Chapter 16

Lucius looked around the small home carefully and tried to disguise any distaste he was feeling. But he was apparently doing a poor job of it because his wife elbowed him painfully in the ribs. He had finally been convinced (cajoled, bribed, blackmailed) into attending dinner at the Granger residence.

As much as he admired- loved- Hermione he was still not comfortable in the muggle world or even, most of the time, with her muggle parents. They’d come to the Manor many times, tagging along with Hermione using the permanent portkey they’d given her. He’d long ago disabled the floo connection between the two homes and had done what he had to do to assure nobody could ever prove it had existed in the first place, it was far too dangerous for anybody to know.

And he’d even gotten over his discomfort with having muggles in his home. But being in a world that was just so thoroughly mundane was another story. It actually made him cringe that Hermione had grown up here. It wasn’t dirty or derelict, the way he’d been taught as a child that all muggle dwellings were. But it was still so far beneath such a magically gifted child that it was hard for him to comprehend- and this was a household with a house elf! Salazar save him from imagining what their girl had to endure before Narcissa had taken her on.

He knew that Narcissa had grown quite close Helen Granger, so he tried to concentrate on how much his presence here meant to his wife instead of on how out of place he felt. And he wasn't foolish enough to believe he could avoid this forever. Hermione was fully entrenched in their lives, he couldn't wholly avoid her parents’ world. And if he was being very, very honest, he didn't want to lose her respect by attempting to do so.

Not to mention that Narcissa regularly came into the muggle world to spend time with Helen. And he couldn't complain about the shopping she'd done there, both because it made her so happy, and because muggles apparently had very different ideas about modesty than wizards, and he was fortunate enough to enjoy the benefits of that in the privacy of their bedroom. Though, if she decided to start wearing those denim trousers he might have to object.

Draco too enjoyed the time he'd spent with the Grangers over the summer, though he was more circumspect with his enthusiasm. But he'd been particularly chuffed by something he'd called a ‘television’ that Lucius was actually interested to see as well. On top of that, Richard was teaching him a sport called ‘football,’ and he'd arrived home several times pink-cheeked and sweaty and looking just as happy as he did after an afternoon of Quidditch. The last thing Lucius wanted was to be left behind by his own family by remaining ignorant of these new parts of their lives.

However, Richard Granger seemed almost as uncomfortable with the situation as Lucius himself was. He was obviously ill at ease from the moment they arrived. And almost as soon as they sat down to dinner he pounced.

“Are there actually monsters who are capable of sucking a person’s soul out of their body guarding the school our children attend?” he demanded suddenly.

He heard a sharp inhale and looked up to see Helen glaring at her husband. He knew that look well,
the man would definitely be sleeping alone tonight. But apparently Richard had decided this was a battle worth waging because he just stared right back at Helen, refusing back down.

“That is unfortunately true,” Narcissa conceded, shifting in her seat so that her knee rested against his under the table in a patently obvious attempt to keep him calm, and acting like she didn't even notice what was happening between the other couple.

“And your government supports this plan?” Richard insisted, “What is wrong with you people? Does your magic make you crazy or something? Because, if so, maybe it would be better if Hermione forgot about it,” he laid his utensils on his plate with emphasis, obviously anticipating a fight. He didn't seem to care about the way his wife was attempting to eviscerate him with her eyes.

Lucius bristled in indignation, even though he had to admit he'd had quite a similar reaction when he'd first learned of the situation, he didn't like to be lectured by anybody, much less a muggle. But then he noticed the look on the man’s face. Normally, he did not greatly resemble his daughter, she looked much more like her mother, but there was something about his expression in that moment that was just so Hermione. Something that helped him to empathize with him and the fact that he was lashing out. They shared the same fear for their children. Lucius couldn't blame him for that.

“The Ministry thinks that using dementors to guard Hogwarts is the best plan, but we do not agree,” Narcissa interjected.

“But why? How could they possibly think that’s a sound plan?” Richard prompted.

He could tell that Narcissa was contemplating a response and he placed a gentle hand on her thigh to stop her. There was no way Richard was going to be happy with the answer, and there was a good chance he would blame the messenger. Lucius thought that if anybody was going to alienate themselves from these people it should be him, “I believe they are more afraid of Black than they are of the dangers the dementors present, they simply won't be swayed on the issue, believe me I tried. I pulled every string I could think of both before term started and after the incident on the train.”

Richard let out a cynical little laugh, “You mean the incident where my daughter nearly lost her soul to one of these monsters? Tell me, was it a coincidence that it entered the compartment where there was a child of non-magical parents? I know your society tends to be less than impressed by Hermione's heritage,” he said, voice scathing.

The room went silent. Richard’s face was red with anger but he did not look away and was obviously daring them to contradict him when they all knew he was right. It was the elephant in the room they'd all managed to avoid acknowledging until now. Helen’s eyes were closed in mortification and he could practically feel the shame radiating off of Narcissa who was grasping his leg like her life depended on it. She would never forgive him if he lashed out in return and damaged, possibly irreparably, their relationship with these people. He'd humbled himself for the daughter, now he would have to find it within himself to do it for the parents.

Lucius cleared his throat, “I will not attempt to defend the position of many in our society when it comes to muggleborns, you are right, a prejudice exists,” so, he was understating things, it was the best he could honestly do, because he still thought that in most cases muggleborns should be regarded with suspicion, “But what happened on the train was a coincidence,” he continued insistently, “it is not in a dementor’s nature to care about such things.”

There was a long uncomfortable silence and eventually, as if by mutual unspoken agreement both women began eating again. It did little to alleviate the tension.
“That still sounds nuts,” Richard eventually said, apparently Hermione's fire and determination were inherited traits, “It's my understanding that man Black is insane, but he is still a man, isn't he? I could see how he would present more danger to us muggles, but he's just like everyone else with magic, correct? How can he possibly be more dangerous than a creature that can steal your soul!”

There was a look on Helen's face that indicated that while she did not at all agree with the way he was handling this, and he would surely be hearing about it later, that she also very much wanted to hear the answer to this question.

“I believe this is a case of preferring the devil you know versus the devil you don't,” Lucius answered, he'd given it a lot of thought as he tried to wrap his mind around this very idea, “the Ministry believes they have command of the dementors, whereas they believe Black is a deranged murderer whom they cannot locate, much less control or predict how he will act.”

“But, just so I have my story straight, he's not actually a deranged murderer?” Richard challenged.

“No, he is, he's just not guilty of all of the crimes he's been accused of. We're not sure what he's up to, actually, but he could very well be dangerous. Even if he wasn't crazy when he went in, twelve years in Azkaban could drive anybody over the edge,” he glanced at Narcissa, worried that she was thinking of Bellatrix, a sore subject with her, to say the least.

“He still seems less worrisome than a species that can literally suck your soul out of your mouth.”

“I won't disagree with you there, but you have to understand, very few wizards have ever come in contact with a dementor, their knowledge is purely academic and they don't truly understand the effect they can have on a person. They rest assured in the idea that they are controlled by the Ministry and that their terrible nature keeps our worst criminals in check.”

“I just wonder if Hermione wouldn't be better off away from this all, even without her memories.”

“If you're thinking of pulling Hermione from Hogwarts please at least warn us,” Narcissa said in a rush, panic in her voice, “It wouldn't be our first choice, but we can hide her in ways that you can't. We can find a way to preserve her memories, let us help,” she begged.

Lucius found himself, once again viciously suppressing his anger—his wife did not beg—so he bit his tongue, but only because he knew that he would probably make this worse for her if he said anything.

“We’re not taking her out of Hogwarts,” Helen said firmly, her nostrils flaring in indignation.

“Why not?” her husband asked, but it was clear to Lucius that this was not the first, or probably even the second time they’d had this argument.

“Well, for one thing she is a witch, would you steal that from her? Would you not only keep her from her birthright, but doom her to a lifetime of magical accidents? Never fitting in, never understanding what was happening to her? Or, if we take the Malfoys up on their offer, relegate her to a life of running and hiding? And then what about Draco, would you really part them?”

“What about Draco? They are only thirteen, there will be other boys!” Richard hissed, the couple had turned in their chairs to face each other and Lucius was fairly certain they had forgotten that they were not alone.

Lucius could understand their predicament. Especially given that he'd had a nearly identical conversation with Narcissa only a week before. But he was suddenly more frightened than ever for Draco’s future. He hadn't considered that the Grangers had any real power, being muggles, but he
now saw that wasn't true.

They could take Hermione away. And if they did, he knew that Draco would never fully recover. He could alter their memories, or remove them from the picture completely, but that would come at the expense of the love and respect of his family, and the girl he had begun to consider a daughter. Narcissa had never been more right when she said that they were walking a tightrope, not just between light and dark, but between two different worlds.

“What boys?” asked Helen waspishly.

“I don't know Helen - Any. Other. Boys.” he responded, jaw clenched.

She snorted, “And that's what you want for her?”

“A chance at a normal life?” he snapped, “A life where she can go to school without literally risking her soul and can get an education we are actually allowed to talk about with our friends?”

Helen let out a long sardonic laugh and Lucius felt his eyes go wide in surprise, Narcissa’s hand snuck into his own and squeezed.

“Ah, so that's what this is about. You want to be able to brag at your stupid golf club.”

Lucius made a mental note to ask Narcissa if she knew what that was.

“I want her to have a normal childhood.”

“Setting aside the fact that she really isn't a child anymore and that you're prepared to ignore that she's a witch, what about her relationship with Draco, you don't think she'd miss him? Even if she didn't remember, Narcissa is right, they have a powerful connection, we've all seen it, I'm certain she would feel his absence. She's never had a friend like him, or really any friends at all before Hogwarts. Don't you remember how hard that was to watch? Face it, she never really fit in our world and I can't imagine it would be any better now, especially given that she's been away for two years. I think her happiness is worth the risk.”

“I think she deserves to have many boyfriends before she settles down,” he retorted.

“So what you're saying is that you want her to have her heart broken many times before she finds someone who will treat her with love and respect like Draco already does?” she asked with heavy sarcasm.

That seemed to bring him up short.

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“Admit it,” she prompted, “that's what this is really about, you're angry that you didn't have more time as the most important man in her life. But you're looking at this the wrong way, Hermione is so lucky,” she turned to them and sent them a strangely conspiratorial smile, “he's been planning the ‘hurt my daughter and I’ll kill you’ speech since the day we found out we were having a girl, and now he realizes he’s probably never going to have the opportunity to use it. We couldn't have anticipated her magic, or your Draco. I know that I, for one, am immensely grateful for him,” she turned back to her husband, “don't take that from her, Richard.”

There was a long pause before he finally gave a resigned nod, “but I reserve the right to revisit this topic in the future.”

Helen chuckled, “of course, Honey,” she patted his hand condescendingly.
That was when Lucius understood why his wife had found such a friend in the woman. Like her daughter she was uncommonly kind and compassionate and strong, even for a muggle she was admirable. It was comforting and irritating, he didn't appreciate that he was in danger of liking the woman.

She had a free period. She knew Draco had assignments to work on and Harry clearly wanted to be alone with his thoughts after last night's activities, so she wandered around the lake hoping to run into Shadow. He had the uncanny ability of showing up when she or Draco wanted to find him. In anticipation, she'd brought him a stack of bacon sandwiches and a thermos of pumpkin juice that she knew he- oddly- liked and that she'd hidden away in her bag during breakfast.

After their late night and subsequent sleepover in the Great Hall nobody paid any attention to her hoarding food. She knew now that the elves would have no problem helping feed the poor stray, but for some reason she relished bringing him something she'd scraped together herself. Probably because she had so much to unload on the poor mutt. There was nobody else.

She found him sitting beneath a willow on the other side of the lake, he appeared to have been waiting for her.

“Hello boy,” she greeted, flopping down next to him and setting her knapsack aside.

He stretched out next to her and rested his chin in her leg. She pulled out his snack for him, but he didn't seem immediately interested in it and so she just started to run her hands through his shaggy fur. For an animal who, as far as she knew, lived outside all of the time he kept himself surprisingly clean.

Draco told her he'd found him bathing in the Black Lake on more than one occasion. But it was November now, surely it would soon be too cold for him to do that. In fact, it seemed like it would be too cold for him to live outside at all. Whatever his breed- or combination of breeds- which they had never been able to determine, he wasn't native to Scotland, she couldn't imagine he could survive a whole winter here.

“I hope you'll go home with Draco over Christmas,” she told him, her best friend had grown very attached to the dog and had determined weeks ago that he would bring him to the Manor over the holidays if he was willing to come, “You'd have the run of the estate, and its much warmer in Wiltshire than it is here. I'd miss you, but I'd worry about you less. Plus, we can hang out over the summer, and the Malfoy elves will take good care of you.”

He let out a low whine.

“I don't know if that's a 'yes' or a 'no.' Draco says that you're a magical creature and you can understand us, and I trust his judgement with these things, he's really good with animals. So, at least promise me you'll think about it, okay?”

He nuzzled her hand and made a woofing noise which sounded suspiciously like agreement.

She giggled, “I'd bring you home with me, but we don't have nearly as much space and Mum and Dad work all day, I don't know that they'd agree to a dog. Lucius and Narcissa won't bat an eye, there are already so many animals on the estate, and I know they've had dogs in the past. You can help the elves keep gnomes out of the crops, that sounds like fun, doesn't it?”

He licked her hand and then begun snuffling around the napkins his sandwiches were wrapped in. She watched him carefully pull them out and eat one with gusto, and then he looked at her and
licked his chops appreciatively. She chuckled, he really was very expressive; it was nice, it made her feel like she was having a real conversation. He nudged his nose at the thermos on the ground in front of them so she picked it up and screwed off the top, offering it to him. He lapped up the juice eagerly and then returned to the sandwiches.

“I’m worried about Harry,” she sighed.

That got his attention. He quickly gobbled the rest of his snack and looked at her, as if encouraging her to continue.

“I don’t know if you noticed anything unusual happening up in the castle last night, but after the Halloween Feast we went back to Gryffindor Tower and we found out that the Fat Lady had been attacked. It was Sirius Black, he slashed her portrait with a knife trying to get in. We all slept in the Great Hall while the teachers searched the castle for him. They didn’t have any luck.”

She absentmindedly played with his ear and a thought occurred to her, “hey, you haven’t seen anybody suspicious have you, trying to sneak in or out of the castle?” he cocked his head and she smiled, “Let me know if you do, okay?” he placed his head back on her leg and she scratched him affectionately, “I know you would, you’re a good boy.” She gave him a firm pat for emphasis and continued her lament, “He’s been brooding all year, not that I blame him, but I wish he would accept some comfort. And then last night happened and it makes it worse that it was Halloween,” she huffed out a laugh, “honestly, I’m starting to hate Halloween too. Remember I told you about the troll? Well, that happened on Halloween, so it’s not turning out to be the best day for me either.”

She sighed again and started braiding his fur.

“I hate keeping secrets from Harry. I mean first there’s Draco and now this. But what would I tell him? ’Listen Harry, the reason everybody thinks Sirius Black is after you is because he was your Dad’s best friend and they think he betrayed your family’s location to Voldemort and now he’s coming to finish you off. But it turns out it was your parents’ other best friend who betrayed them, so at least there’s that. And I don’t know what Sirius is up to, or whether you should worry about him or not. Oh, and I got this information from Narcissa Malfoy,’” she snorted, “not exactly good news all things considered. And he’d probably never speak to me again, anyway. He hates Draco so much, I can hardly even blame him, they really are terrible to each other. But there’s nothing I can do about that either. I really think Draco’s my future, and it would be so dangerous for anybody to find out what he means to me, so I guess I’ll just continue keeping my mouth shut.”

She scratched his head, petting him was very relaxing.

“And I can’t go to Draco for advice about how to help Harry, or even just to vent because he gets so jealous of him. And if I went to any other Gryffindor I’m afraid it would get back to Harry, they aren’t the best at secrets,” she sighed.

He headbutted her hand insistently, and then nuzzled her palm.

She chuckled, “that’s right, I have you.”

He huffed in agreement, and she smiled, then they sat there staring at the lake for as long as she could, he providing quiet comfort.

“Thank you for understanding,” she hugged his neck before she got up to leave, “like I said I can’t talk to anybody else, and you’re the best. I’ll see you later,” she pecked the top of his head and pushed herself up off of the ground, she would need the full fifteen minutes she had left of her
break to make it to class, but just as she picked up her bag Shadow whined and she turned back to look at him, he walked forward and ran into her, almost knocking her over. He nuzzled his head against her abdomen and leaned into her affectionately, it was exactly what she needed.

She decided then and there that if she had to find a way to capture him and force him back to the Manor where he would be safe and well cared for that she would do exactly that.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry it's been so long between updates, I don't plan to make a habit of it, things just piled up and I got behind. If you don't have me on author alert or follow me on Tumblr you may not know that I posted the first of what is going to be a series of one-shots revolving around this story. The collection is called ‘Beyond An Unexpected Malfoy,’ and I would love for y’all to check it out if you're not already sick of me! Okay, that's it, thanks for reading!
She arrived looking uncharacteristically flustered. She unceremoniously dropped her bag in the middle of the room and began to pace. He set his book aside and watched her.

“We have a problem, oh Merlin, Draco do we have a problem! A really, really big problem!” she wailed, gesticulating wildly.

He suppressed a smirk, she looked rather cute like this, all disheveled, hair wild around her face. But he could feel how erratic her magic was at the moment and knew she was truly upset. On her next pass in front of him he reached out and snagged her hand and pulled her onto the sofa with him.

“So, what I’m hearing is that we have a problem,” he teased, gently tucking her hair out of the way so that he could fully look at her.

“This is serious Draco, it’s a big problem!”

He couldn't suppress his smile this time, sometimes she could be such a Gryffindor, “Yes, you mentioned that, would you like to tell me what it is so we that can see if there's anything to be done about it? Or do you just want to go on and on about how bad it is?”

She glared at him, “I'm not afraid to hurt you, you sarcastic prat!”

“Just don't mess up this beautiful face, I know how you like to look at it,” he deadpanned.

She whacked him on the arm, it was a pretty good shot but he just laughed at her, linking their arms and pulling her so that she was seated more comfortably next to him.

“Oh, really, tell me what's going on?”

“It's about Lupin,” she swallowed thickly.

“What about him?” he asked warily, she'd either forgotten or refused to use his title, either way it meant that whatever she had discovered was, in fact, very bad.

“He's a werewolf,” she sagged against him at the last word.

To say that Draco was stunned would have been understating things quite a bit. He knew that werewolves were real of course, but for one to so casually exist in society, to be their teacher, almost defied belief.

“Say something,” she begged, her voice raspy, Draco's eyes automatically snapped to hers and, sure enough, she looked like she was about to cry.

“Are you sure?”

“It's the only reasonable explanation.”

“Because first year you thought Snape was after the Philosopher’s Stone,” he countered.

“Professor Snape,” she corrected automatically, “and Harry and Ron were the ones to come up with
“You set his robes on fire,” he reminded her.

She huffed in frustration, “it was reasonable for me to believe at the time that he was the one jinxing Harry’s broom.”

“Exactly, and there might be another explanation for whatever is making you think he’s a werewolf at this time. I mean werewolves don’t get jobs as teachers, or jobs at all for the most part.”

“Fine,” she snapped, “How about this: he's already been sick twice this year. Both times it was severe enough for him to miss more than one day of class, and both were on the full moon. Tonight is the full moon, and I checked last month’s lunar chart against my DADA notes from when I remember Professor Sprout substituting.”

“I assume that's not all?” He sighed, he should have known she wouldn’t come to him on a mere hunch and while she could be dramatic, she wasn’t prone to exaggeration.

“Not even close,” she held one hand up and began ticking off her points on her fingers as she made them, “first, he went to school with Harry’s parents which means he's still young, in his early thirties, around five years younger than your parents but he could pass for ten years older, don't you think?” he could only nod in agreement, “second, he has scars, a lot of them. There's only so many things that will leave scars like that. They are curse scars, like a werewolf bite or scratch.”

“There are plenty of other creatures that could do that,” he argued, “or maybe he just used to be a dueling champion or something, you can curse somebody with a wand too.”

“But as many as he has? You'd have to come in regular contact with the creature, especially because you can tell some of them are very old but some are new. And I think we would know if he was a dueling champion, everybody knows about Professor Flitwick. Anyway it's just another piece of evidence, I know that’s not definitive on it’s own. Third, there's his clothes.”

“More like rags,” Draco snorted.

“Exactly! He’s a competent and qualified teacher, there must be some reason that he's been out of a job so long that his clothes are too worn to even be fixed with a spell.”

“Maybe he had a potions addiction or something.”

“That would account for that one thing, but when you put all these things together, is says something different. And that brings me to my final point: Professor Snape’s assignment.”

“Which is maybe the reason you have werewolves on the brain?” he suggested pointedly.

“Yes, you’re right, it is. I think that was intentional. I think he was trying to tell us something without directly telling us, probably on Professor Dumbledore's orders. If he's a werewolf it would be hard to hide it from the staff, and Professor Snape is a potions master, he's probably brewing the wolfsbane for Lupin. Harry mentioned Professor Snape brought him a goblet of something when they were having tea last weekend, he thought it was really suspicious, he thought Professor Snape might be trying to poison him. But anyway, Professor Snape skipped half a year’s curriculum to give us that assignment on werewolves.”

“He hates substituting, he was taking it out on us,” Draco said, but his arguments were beginning to sound empty, even to his own ears.
“If he wanted to do that he would have continued on teaching us about hinkypunks. They're boring, werewolves are far more interesting. He obviously doesn't like Lupin, I think he's trying to get him into trouble without directly going against the headmaster.”

Draco considered this. He'd known his head of house his entire life, not too well, but enough to have a fairly good understanding of the man. Enough to know that he didn't do anything without a very good reason; except for maybe pick on Gryffindors, Draco was pretty sure he just enjoyed that. So given that, on top of all of her other evidence, it was hard to deny.

“Fuck,” he breathed quietly, this was not what he had planned for his night; he had his first quidditch match of the year tomorrow morning, and he'd asked Hermione to clear her night for that very reason. He'd planned to spend the evening with her relaxing and hopefully sneak in a few kisses in for luck, he did not need to be worrying about a werewolf roaming the grounds.

“Draco!” she screeched, she could be terribly puritanical.

“What?” he defended with a laugh at her scandalized expression.

“Language!” she hissed.

He rolled his eyes. “You're right, this is a problem, but Mother and Father will be here tomorrow for the match. I'll talk to them then. I'll make sure he's gotten rid of.”

“No!” she yelled, almost bouncing onto his lap in her fervor.

He grimaced at her volume, “why ever not?”

She looked around furtively, like she was afraid somebody would overhear them, “that's what I wanted to talk to you about. I was hoping you would help me convince your parents to keep Lupin on.”

He just stared at her, dumbfounded, “didn't you just go through a great deal of effort to convince me that he's a werewolf?”

She folded her hands primly on her lap and refused to meet his eyes. “Well, yes, because I wanted to make sure you knew what you were getting into when you agreed to help me.”

“And you wanted me to help you convince Mother and Father that there should be a werewolf on staff?”

“Yeah,” she squirmed, obviously uncomfortable.

“And why would you ever think I'd agree to that?”

“He's the best Defense teacher we've ever had, by far!”

“Which I would be grateful for, if he wasn't deadly!”

“Only one night a month, and there are ways to reduce those risks.”

“Reduce the risks,” he breathed deeply and huffed out through his nose, “reduce the risks?!” he shouted incredulously, losing the fight to hold his temper.

“Yes, you know this. The wolfsbane for instance and-”

“That is a treatment, not a cure, it doesn't even stop the transformation,” he interrupted.
“But he would keep his human mind, and I'm sure he doesn't want to bite anybody.”

“You don't know that Hermione. You don't really know anything about the man. Plenty of werewolves embrace it, I know he doesn't seem like the type, but Quirrell didn't seem like a wizard who would lend his body to the Dark Lord either. And even IF you're right about his intentions, the potion only works IF it's brewed correctly, and IF it's taken to exact specifications. And that's only IF he's getting the potion at all. That's a lot of ifs to risk the safety of an entire school on.”

She slumped in defeat and he looked at her speculatively. It was unlike her to be so illogical. She must have known she was going to lose this argument. Which made him wonder what was really going on.

“It's not his fault, it's just a disease he has,” she said pitifully, and then she actually batted her eyelashes at him.

Oh, his bleeding heart of a best friend- it was cute, and very annoying.

“It's not a cerberus’ fault it's a cerberus. It's not a dragon’s fault it's a dragon. But that doesn't keep them from being dangerous creatures. You had no problem admitting they didn't have any business at Hogwarts. What's so different this time?”

She bit her lip in a nervous way that gave him the distinct impression he was not going to like whatever she had to say.

“Harry really likes him, and he finally has somebody to talk about his parents with. I don't want to be the one to take that away from him, especially when he's already having such a difficult year. I know we have to tell your parents about this, I wouldn't betray their trust by trying to keep it from them, but I was just hoping that maybe they could be talked around.”

Draco scoffed, “why does it always come back to Potter, Hermione?”

“I don't know what you mean,” she said, her voice unnaturally high.

He pulled away from her, “yes you do, this is not the first time we've had a discussion like this. You always put Potter first, before your safety, or mine or anybody else's. And how does he repay you? By sitting back and letting Weasley treat you like dirt half the time? Use you for help with his homework? Ignore you when he has better things to do? Tell me, what's so special about him?”

Her eyes filled with tears as he spoke and he felt a pang of regret, but not enough to take it back.

“It's not like that Draco.”

“Then explain to me how it is,” he said coldly.

“Harry's had a hard life, I just hate to see something that makes him happy taken away, especially if it's my fault.”

He sniffed derisively, “so, that's it then. Tell me Hermione, who were you hoping would win the match tomorrow, me or Potter?”

She frowned, “wha- what?” she stammered.

Her clear hesitation was the last straw.

“I asked if you were really on my side, or if you would be cheering for your precious golden boy. It
wasn't a complicated question.”

Her mouth dropped open, “what!?” she shrieked, “you caught me off guard is all. We were talking about Lupin and then you just dropped that on me. Of course I want you to win!”

“Whatever Hermione,” he sniffed, gathering all of his belongings within reach and stuffing it all in his bag, he couldn't be bothered with the rest of it. He walked to the door and wrenched it open.

“Draco, wait!” she called.

He just huffed and stormed out of their room without looking back. Walking away from her was uncomfortable, like a rubber band being pulled taut and then quickly stretched too thin, on the verge of snapping, all his senses urged him to return to her before it was too late. He ignored every one of them.

When he entered his dorm he immediately threw his satchel onto his bed and began digging through it. He found his communications mirror and shoved it into a drawer of his bedside table. He couldn't talk to her tonight, and he wasn't going to risk the temptation, nor did he want to endure the guilt he’d feel when she inevitably tried to call him.

It was very dark behind his bed curtains but that didn't help him sleep. He tossed and he turned and with each passing hour he began to despair more and more about his prospects for success in his quidditch match the next day. He wondered, somewhat pitifully, if Hermione would even care.

He didn't allow himself to linger in bed the next morning, he knew a good breakfast would be more important than the measly twenty minutes of extra sleep he might be able to manage. He sat, uncharacteristically, with his back to the Gryffindor table. He couldn't afford to be distracted by her. When a few brave souls dared ask why he wasn't in his usual seat he'd just glared at them. They could think what they wanted, quidditch players were well known for having quirks.

He made his way down to the pitch by himself. Thankfully, unlike Wood of Gryffindor who was infamously interfering as team captain, Marcus Flint let his players alone as long as they delivered— and he had been the best performing Slytherin seeker in a long time, catching the snitch in two out of three matches last year with ease, and only narrowly beaten out by Potter in the third. He was determined to redeem himself for that one misstep this year.

He donned his uniform with stilted movements, just going through the motions, but when he realized what he was doing he sat down and cleared his mind. He was a well trained occlumens, his parents would never forgive him if he stupidly went flying, much less in a quidditch match, without a clear head. Certain that he was ready he took a deep breath and lined up to fly onto the pitch with his teammates.

Somewhere around sixty minutes later Draco was staring at the snitch struggling in his hand in shock. At first he thought that he had been less sure of his own abilities than he’d thought, but then he realized that it was not the fact that he'd caught the snitch that was wrong, it was everything else. He looked around to see black hooded figures flooding the pitch, he could see his own breath in the air, and his mental defenses were getting battered against the despair the creatures brought. But most terrifying of all, he was frozen there hovering.

And then he saw it.

A figure clad in red, which he immediately identified as Potter, fell from the sky. He had been flying a good fifty feet higher than Draco. If he hit the ground it would be a fatal fall. His brain screamed at him to do something, save Potter, save himself, but he couldn't make himself move.
And then, to his immense relief, came Dumbledore's booming voice and Potter’s descent slowed. Then a host of ghostly animals suddenly appeared and started chasing off the dementors. He breathed a sigh of relief, the whole thing had happened in less than a minute, but it had felt interminable. He landed as soon as it seemed safe, met by congratulations from his teammates. He couldn't enjoy them. He was distracted watching the crowd gathered at the other end of the pitch until Potter was levitated out of it in a stretcher. He then glanced bitterly at the snitch still clutched in his hand- he would never get any credit for catching it from most of the school now- and stalked off towards the changing rooms.

His mother was waiting for him when he emerged, his hair still wet. He winced when she saw her because he knew that she would not at all approve of his appearance. He approached her cautiously and she reached out and cradled his face in both hands, studying him carefully, confirming that he was okay. After a few minutes she nodded to herself and dropped her hands.

“Is there something wrong with your wand?” she asked instead of a greeting, looking at his hair with a little twitch of her lips.

“My magic is just a little off at the moment,” he said, his cheeks blooming pink in embarrassment.

She regarded him shrewdly and then laid a gentle hand in his arm, “allow me?” she asked quietly.

He nodded and she led him far enough away from the entrance to the dressing rooms so that no one would interrupt. She began carefully applying a drying charm to his hair leaving him feeling stupidly like a little kid.

“The dementors or Hermione?” she asked suddenly.

He couldn't mistake her meaning and he felt his eyes go wide with surprise. Did he have any secrets from his parents? Because he was under no illusion: if Narcissa knew something, so did Lucius. So he just shrugged sheepishly, not wanting to admit that his best friend had upset him more than a bunch of dementors swarming his quidditch match.

“Hermione then,” she said with a nod to herself.

“Shall we retire to the castle?” his father asked, appearing behind his mother, seemingly out of nowhere.

His mother turned around, “did you get everything sorted?”

“Dumbledore is calling the rest of the Governors. I'm confident we can convince them this time that the dementors are a danger to the school. I don’t see how the Ministry can ignore the wishes of the entire Board. With any luck they'll be back to Azkaban by this evening,” his father was keeping it reigned in but it was obvious to Draco that he was quietly seething. “We can wait in the Board’s meeting room for them to arrive.”

“And Mr. Potter?” his mother asked.

“Will be fine, Dumbledore was able to slow the fall in time to avoid serious injury. They’ve taken him to the infirmary to rest.”

She nodded.

He looked at Draco, “your owl said you had something you needed to discuss with us?”

“Yes, sir.”
He stepped forward and briefly placed a hand on Draco's arm, “and you're okay? Do you need to be seen by Madam Pomfrey?”

“I'm fine, thank you Father.”

He gave him a sharp nod and turned to begin walking briskly towards the castle, his walking stick clicking loudly on the path, a sure sign that his temper was barely controlled. Draco almost felt sorry for the Governors who had ignored his father’s warnings about the dementors. He was unlikely to forget this incident any time soon. His mother quietly cleared her throat, he turned to her, and she was looking at him meaningfully. He shook himself out of his reverie and offered her his arm and they began strolling at a much more sedate pace up to the school.

His mother patted his arm affectionately, “I'm proud of you,” she said, her voice a low hum he remembered from his early childhood. He must have looked confused because she chuckled and tugged him closer to her, “seeing you fly today, it hit me how much you've grown up, you are no longer that little boy who used to zoom around the garden. You've become an admirable young man.”

“Thank you, Mother,” he said, touched.

“You remember that your father and I had dinner at the Grangers’ a few weeks ago?”

Draco just nodded, he couldn't possibly forget. Hermione had been a nervous wreck about it, and so had he, though he hadn't told her that, but he knew how his father could be. He'd breathed an enormous sigh of relief when both of their mothers had reported that it had gone well.

“You should have heard Helen talk about you, I've never been so proud, it's an honor to be your mother,” she sighed wistfully, “your childhood was such a joy, I just don't know where the time went.”

The teenager in him wanted to roll his eyes at her sentimentality, but the boy who had always adored his mother was brought up short. They didn't talk about it, and he was certainly too afraid to ask, but he had overheard and observed enough to know that his parents had experienced several disappointments in their efforts to give him a sibling. He remembered specifically when he had been about three years old that his mother had been heavily pregnant. There had never been a baby.

The horror of that suddenly hit him along with the weight of his future responsibilities. He had always known it would be his duty to provide an heir for his father’s House. But he’d never considered that if his mother was ever going to have grandchildren it was up to him. Somehow, that felt like a much more serious responsibility. He just leaned over and kissed her cheek, she looked surprised, but pleased, and said nothing.

They walked the rest of the way in companionable silence and when they reached the appointed room off of the Entrance Hall they found Lucius pacing, his walking stick click-clacking even louder than before against the stone floor. Draco hadn't particularly wanted to have this conversation in the first place, but now that his father was so agitated he was really dreading it. He seated his mother at the long conference table but remained standing. Lucius stopped pacing and looked at him expectantly.

He took a deep breath, “Hermione came to me with something last night. At first it was impossible for me to believe but she convinced me. It seems that Lupin, the new DADA teacher, is a werewolf.”

The room went completely still and silent, and Draco was tempted to hold his breath to avoid being
“Explain,” his father finally ordered through clenched teeth.

And so he did, laying out all the evidence Hermione had presented him with the evening before. When he was finished Lucius didn't say anything, he just strode for the door.

“Where are you going?” his mother called out.

“To Severus for confirmation, and then to practice a new curse I uncovered the other day on Dumbledore.”

She just looked at his for a long moment and nodded, “we’ll just stay here then.”

He nodded in return and departed.

“Have a seat Draco.”

He was antsy and didn’t particularly want to sit, but didn't dare argue and so he took the chair next to her, “aren’t you worried?”

“Your father knows what he's doing,” she explained, apparently unperturbed.

“When did you learn to talk like that?” he blurted, and immediately looked away in mortification at his gall. But he couldn’t help but be wildly curious, they'd exchanged just a simple glance, yet he was certain they'd understood each other completely. An entire conversation in one look. He'd seen them communicate in such a way his whole life, but this was the first time he'd envied it, and he just had to know.

“What do you mean Draco?”

“You and Father communicate so easily, with just a look, how did that happen?”

She laughed lightly, “that comes with time, dearest, and intimacy.”

Draco felt his cheeks heat.

She laughed again, “not that kind of intimacy. I was referring to emotional intimacy, though in the right circumstance the emotional and the physical feed off of each other. You and Hermione will get there, of that I am certain.”

“Yeah, I’m not so sure,” he murmured petulantly.

She just gave him a knowing look, “would you like to tell me what you quarreled about? Or is this something you would rather discuss with your father?I know you're getting to that age that talking to me might be...awkward.”

He immediately caught her meaning and he felt like his whole body was alight with embarrassment. “Mother! It's nothing like that it’s, I mean, we've kissed and that's all!” he put his face in his hands and tried to figure out why he was telling her this, willed himself to just shut up.

“Oh okay,” she soothed, and he felt her begin to run her fingers through his hair, “I simply meant that now that you are a teenager, and in a relationship, I recognize that you may prefer to confide in another man. I understand and won't be offended.

He nodded to indicate that he’d heard her but didn’t turn to face her.
“But back to my original question. Would you like to discuss whatever happened between you and Hermione? I can tell it has you quite upset and it never does you any good to stew, Draco, you just get in a temper.”

He huffed, torn and irritated that she could read him so easily, “is it that obvious that we fought?”

“I’m your mother Draco, it is literally my job to know when you are upset. Between that and the fact that Hermione didn’t so much as glance in our direction the entire match, it wasn’t hard to deduce.”

He sighed dramatically. He was still mad at Hermione. But the dementors had scared him, his mother had caught him off guard, and now he just felt out of sorts.

“She wanted me to help her convince you and Father not to have Lupin fired,” he finally admitted.

There was a long beat of silence.

“Well that was foolish and illogical of her, but one of Hermione’s most endearing traits is her big heart. I’m not completely surprised that she wouldn’t want to be responsible for somebody losing his job, even if he is a werewolf. But I’m unclear as to why this upsets you so.”

“Because she did it for Potter,” he spat the last word, “she’d be willing to let a werewolf stay in the castle just because Potter likes him! I swear Mother, it’s like everything is about Harry bloody Potter, she’s supposed to be-” he stopped speaking abruptly when he realized what he’d been about to say.

“Language,” she admonished, but there was no real censure in her tone, “and she's supposed to be what, love?”

“Nothing.”

“Were you going to say that she is supposed to be yours?” a knowing lilt to her voice.

He clenched his fists at his sides but didn't respond. However, he knew his silence was telling.

“You never did share well, but I guess you've never really had to,” she continued.

“Can't you just be on my side,” he snapped, cringing even as the words left his mouth.

“Draco Lucius!” her voice was so sharp he automatically whipped his head around to look at her, her face was set in the stony mask he often saw her don in public, it was almost like looking at a stranger, “I am always on your side. No matter what, for the rest of my life, have I ever given you any reason to doubt that?”

He sheepishly shook his head.

She let out a long breath and her features relaxed. “In this case I don't think there are sides to be taken, I am simply trying to save you from yourself. It is normal to sometimes experience jealousy, but if you let it overwhelm you, if you try and drive a wedge between Hermione and other people she cherishes, you will only breed resentment and you risk driving her away completely.”

“I just don't understand what's so special about him,” he groused.

“Does it matter? Hermione values his friendship, that's what should be important to you,” she reached over and covered one of his hands with hers, “I'm sorry, I know this is difficult for you, but
you and Hermione are very different creatures. Usually it's what makes you so good for each other, you complement each other. But it also means that sometimes you can't understand the other’s point of view.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I know that you would be happy in just our small family circle for the rest of your life. You have a confidant in both Claire and Hermione and that's enough for you. In fact, you don't think very highly of anybody else you don’t want anybody else to intrude. Your father is the same way. Hermione is not like that, she craves the approval and affection of others. Would you really begrudge her something that makes her happy?”

“I feel like she's enough for me, but I'm not enough for her,” Merlin help him he sounded like such a girl.

“Don't look at it that way, my dragon,” she said gently, “we all have different needs, it is no a reflection on you or your relationship. You have interests outside of Hermione too. How would you feel if she suddenly started to take issue with, say, you playing quidditch? How would you feel if she wanted you to give up something you love, just so you could spend that time with her?”

Well, when she put it like that he felt like a selfish bastard.

“And I know it's more difficult when it's another person, especially another wizard. Like I said, it is normal to experience jealousy. But I think it's clear that you are by far the most important person to her, she would never chose anybody over you, just like I know you'd never choose anybody over her. And that's what relationships are about, choosing the other person over and over, everyday, even when things are hard.”

On one hand she was making a lot of sense. On the other his fight with Hermione still felt like an open wound.

“She wouldn’t even tell me that she wanted me to win the match today over him,” he said, tracing the grain of the table in front of him in an effort to keep his hands busy and avoid his mother’s eyes.

“I find that difficult to believe,” she answered after a long pause.

“She said that I caught her off guard when I asked her, but shouldn’t that be an automatic answer? Like, of course she wants me to win, right?”

She tugged on his arm to encourage him to look at her, “were you in the middle of a fight when you asked her this?”

He nodded.

“Is it fair to say that she was upset at the time?”

He nodded again, more reluctantly.

“I wasn’t there Draco, but I think it’s quite possible that she was telling the truth, that she was upset and not thinking straight and you just caught her off guard with your question. Because I can tell you this, when I wasn’t watching you during the match, I was watching her, and that girl never took her eyes off of you.”

“Really?” he asked, hating how insecure he sounded.
“Yes. I wouldn’t toy with your feelings about this. But listen sweetheart, you need to talk to her. Not to make her feel guilty, but so that she knows how you feel, and because she’s the only one who can fully answer your questions. Otherwise this will just fester.”

At that moment his father and Professor Snape entered the room.

“Promise me you’ll do that.”

He took a deep breath and nodded.

“You're never going to believe what Severus has just told me,” his father announced.

Draco didn't even care, he just wanted to lay his head down on the table and take a nap. It had already been the longest day, and it was only 11am.
Chapter 18

After she visited the hospital wing and assured herself that Harry was going to be alright - he was more upset about his stupid broom than anything else, which she decided was a good indication that there was no lasting damage - she got herself some lunch and then headed up to her dorm. She gathered a plethora of books and, even though she felt slightly pathetic about it, also stuffed Duke into her bag. Then she made her way to their room in the library.

She was pleasantly surprised to find two beings already inside. Crookshanks was stretched lazily on his back on the rug in front of the fire, while Nox had situated herself along the back of the sofa, she twitched her tail in greeting. Hermione had long ago stopped questioning how animals could access areas of the castle that normally required passwords. She went and picked Crookshanks up, cradling him in her arms. He purred appreciatively, and then she made her way over to Nox and ran a loving hand down her back. She plopped herself into an armchair with Crookshanks on her lap and determined to wait Draco out. He couldn't ignore her forever, could he? He wasn’t that angry, was he?

She had spent more than an hour the night before trying to reach him on his mirror until finally deciding to leave him alone so that he could rest up for the match. When he'd sat with his back to her at breakfast she’d made an involuntary noise of distress in the back of her throat that had Neville sticking to her like glue for the rest of the morning, convinced she was ill. Good friend that he was, he was difficult to get rid of, especially in the wake of the dementors’ appearance at the match. Thankfully, he was also a sensitive soul who understood when she hinted that she preferred to deal with the effect the odious creatures had on her on her own.

She limited herself to only trying to contact Draco on his mirror once per hour. He had never ignored her like this before and she didn’t know how to feel about it. Anger, annoyance, crushing grief were all prevalent; it was a rollercoaster of emotions she wasn’t enjoying and she changed her mind one moment to the next as to how she would receive him when he finally deigned to speak to her. She understood that he had gotten his feelings hurt but this seemed like excessive punishment, it had been a long time since she'd been the target of his cruelty and she didn't like this reminder of his mean side.

When he finally appeared, well after dinner (which she’d skipped) was over she was about ready to snap and torn as to how to respond to him. She was so relieved that he was finally here, so happy to be able to confirm that he was okay. But she was also so angry with him. When he turned his head to look at her she was filled with such fury that she utterly lost control.

She stood up, dumping Crookshanks off of her lap and breathed in deeply through her nose.

“You stupid boy!” she shrieked, striding towards him, she felt her magic coil but she thought nothing of it, “I was so worried!”

He frowned, “worried? What could you possibly have to worry about?”

Once, when she was four years old, her parents had taken her favorite toy from her as punishment and she’d blown out the windows of their front room. That was the only time she’d felt such
palpable anger. Her magic struck automatically.

She was about six feet in front of him when he was suddenly thrown back, and landed on his bum. The look of shock on his face would have been comical if she hadn’t been so horrified. She choked on a sob and rushed towards him.

“Are you okay?” she asked frantically, he was sprawled out on his back, he sat up leaning on his elbows, she straddled his waist as she ran her hands over his body, checking him for injuries. “Merlin, Draco I didn’t mean to hurt you!” she was absolutely horrified with herself. She knew better than to allow her magic loose like that.

“I’m okay,” he assured her, “you caught me.”

“I threw you across the room.” She choked on the words and absentmindedly wiped away the tears streaming down her face, he reached up with one hand and cupped her jaw.

“Hermione, I’m very familiar with your magic, I can feel it as easily as my own. You did throw me across the room, but you also caught me, it didn’t hurt. Wanted to get my attention then, huh?” He questioned with a teasing little smirk, “you really didn’t have to create such an elaborate ruse to feel me up though,” he leered.

She realized then the position they were in; she was sitting on his abdomen in a very suggestive manner and had been touching him everywhere she could reach with no consideration for propriety. She pushed herself up and off of him. He just continued to gaze at her from the floor, he didn’t even attempt to disguise the way his eyes were perusing her body. And then her temper flared again.

“How can you be thinking of that at a time like this?!”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m thirteen, I’m always thinking about that,” he responded with a shrug, “and what do you mean, ‘a time like this?’”

“I was so worried. I didn’t know if you’d gotten back to your dorm safely last night until you came to breakfast this morning, and then you wouldn’t even look at me. And then there were dementors at your quidditch match! For Godric’s sake Draco, you could have at least answered your mirror to let me know that you were okay, it would have only taken a minute, was it really necessary to just shut me out? I mean Harry almost died!”

His expression immediately soured and he jumped to his feet and took a couple of strides forward until he was looming over her. She resented his attempt to intimidate her, but there was no way she was going to back down. She lifted her chin defiantly.

“So we’re back to Potter, are we?” He hissed, “you know I was in that match too.”

“That’s my point!” She went up on her toes to scream right into his face, pointing at him accusingly, “you were also a hundred feet in the air! You could have fallen too! And I couldn’t even check on you because you got your feelings hurt, because you couldn’t even be bothered to answer your stupid mirror! ‘Hello Hermione, I’m fine. Talk later,’” she mimicked him, “how long did that take? That’s all you had to do, how would you have felt if you were me? I know you can be selfish, Draco, but this really takes the cake!”

He rocked back on his heels and his face went slack, “I didn’t think of it like that. I left my mirror in my bedside table and I haven’t been back to the dorm because I was with my parents, I just, I didn’t think,” he repeated.
“How self-centered can you be? I’m guessing the reason it was in your bedside table is because you were throwing a tantrum and avoiding me last night?” she huffed, “and it must have been lovely to see your parents, how are they?” she mocked, “I was hoping to see them myself today, could you at least be bothered to tell them ‘hello’ from me?” she snorted derisively, “must be really nice to have your parents come to Hogwarts at all, I wouldn’t know how that feels,” she finished bitterly.

Even as she spoke she knew that she was taking things out on him that were beyond his control, but he was usually her haven from the injustices of their world and he’d failed her today. She didn’t like how easily one day without him had her coming unglued.

He opened his mouth, closed it again, then reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a folded piece of parchment. He handed it to her and she immediately recognized the script spelling out her name on the outside. She opened and read it.

Dearest,

Please hear him out. If it’s any consolation, he’s a mess. Also, I do not presume to insert myself into this quarrel any further, but I think there has been a misunderstanding here about the nature of your relationship with Mr. Potter that needs to be talked through. Try to remember that you love each other.
I do apologize that we were not able to see you whilst we were here, but the day became much more hectic than we had ever anticipated. You looked beautiful in your new cloak, that color blue really suits you. Please write soon, I am always here for you.

Love Always,
Narcissa

P.S. Lucius sends his love.

She sighed and walked over to the sofa, plopping herself onto a cushion. It wasn’t a surprise, but she was still uncertain how she felt about the fact that Draco had told his parents- or at least his mother- about their fight. It was embarrassing. But at least Narcissa hadn’t simply taken Draco’s side.

“You told your mum,” she said, a little petulantly.

He sat down carefully beside her, leaving several feet of space between them. “You know how she is, Hermione, there was no keeping it from her.”

“And she doesn’t think I’m a huge bitch?”

He snorted, “my mother, seriously? Of course not.” He frowned, “why? Do you think you’re a huge bitch?”

She huffed in frustration. She had been working hard to maintain her anger with him, but there was a part of her that felt this whole thing was her fault. Narcissa’s words addressing a possible misunderstanding about the nature of her relationship with Harry just added to that guilt. “I don’t know, I’m confused.”

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“And she doesn’t think I’m a huge bitch?” he ventured, settling himself more comfortably in his seat.

“I knew that you were...jealous of Harry. But I also thought that it was silly and I didn’t want to fight, so I just ignored it. But then you got so mad, and at the drop of a hat. I think you overreacted, but I also think it was wrong of me to ignore something I thought was bothering you.”
He seemed to consider this, fidgeting uncharacteristically as he did so. She nearly reached over and stopped him from running his hands down his thighs yet again.

“How would you feel if I was friends with a girl the way you are with Potter, or Longbottom or Weasley for that matter?” he asked suddenly.

“Pansy Parkinson is always hanging all over you,” she responded automatically.

“But you know I don’t like her, I don’t have any respect for her and I avoid her as much as I can.”

“She still thinks she has a chance with you,” she countered.

He sighed and turned his body to face her more fully. “Well it’s not my fault she’s delusional, Hermione. She doesn’t have a chance and I thought you knew that. If it makes you feel better I told her there’s a witch in France whom I’ve started courting. I made it clear that I was serious in my suit and that we were working towards a betrothal. If she has any respect she’ll back off, I don’t know if she will, but that’s the best I could do.”

She reeled back in shock, in the pureblood world what he’d said to Pansy was a very serious declaration. “You made up a girlfriend to get Parkinson off your back?”

He looked at her for a long time. “Well, it was my impression that I actually had a girlfriend, I had to fudge the details, of course, but I thought you would understand that.”

She swallowed. “And is that how you feel about me? I mean you’re that serious?”

He sighed in obvious exasperation. “Witch, you’re my best friend, you know things about me nobody else knows, even my own mother who is practically omniscient when it comes to me. You practically live at my house over the holidays. And I know you’re clever enough to realize that my parents have been training you to be the next Lady Malfoy since the summer after our first year. If I wasn’t serious I never would have even approached anything more than friendship, it would have been far too risky.”

She suddenly felt very young and stupid; she was used to feeling somewhat superior in maturity compared to Draco even though he was, honestly, far more mature than most boys their age. She looked down at her feet. “I guess you weren’t the only one feeling jealous and insecure,” she admitted very quietly.

He leaned over and bumped their shoulders together, “I kind of like it on you,” he confided in a low voice.

She looked over to see that he was grinning at her and her own face erupted into a relieved smile. She fell into him, curling herself into his side. “Why does Harry bother you though? You don’t seem to care about Neville or Ron.”

He put his arm around her. “It would be a very cold day in muggle hell before either Longbottom or Weasley were any competition,” the sneering tone of his voice a bitter contrast to his gentle actions, “Potter might be rather clueless but he’s from an ancient House and he’s not a terrible wizard when he puts his mind to it. Plus, I don’t know, you just seem to dote on him like you don’t the others.”

Hermione resisted the urge to defend her friends, anything she said at the moment would just set him more against them. “There’s no competition, Draco. And it’s just a coincidence that he’s a wizard. The way I feel for him, I expect it’s a lot like the way that Claire feels about you.”
She watched him digest this information, saw the moment that it began to make sense to him.

“I still feel like he takes advantage of you. Weasley too, but you don’t put up with it as much when it comes to him.”

She considered how to explain this to him, and she had to admit to herself that she let Harry get away with things she never would allow Draco to, or anybody else for that matter. And she had to consider why that was. It certainly wasn’t that she cared more for Harry than she did for Draco. There really was no competition. But Harry needed her in ways that Draco didn’t, and never would. And that was the heart of the matter.

“Do you know what I was doing in Flourish and Blotts the day I ran into you and met your mother?”

He shook his head.

“I was looking for books on wizarding etiquette and politics, and anything else that might be useful in trying to get by in this new world I’d just entered. They don’t teach any of that here, and it was already really clear to me that my muggle background made me stick out. I suppose I would have found a way to muddle by on my own, but your mother, your family saved me from that.”

He frowned, seeming to consider this and drew her closer to his body.

“Harry doesn’t have a Narcissa Malfoy. Harry doesn’t have anybody. There’s not a single adult in his life that he can go to and confide in. He has no way to learn about his background or his future responsibilities. And it’s sad, he deserves better than that. I think his fame is disgusting, but the fact is that this world owes his family a huge debt, they’ve had twelve years of peace because of the Potter’s sacrifice, and how have they repaid them? By keeping their son on the outside. So, I just feel like if I can be even a little bit for him like your family has been for me, well that’s the least I can do. And I’m sorry if it made you feel like I was putting him above your safety when I asked you to help me talk your parents into letting Lupin keep his job, but I swear that never occurred to me. It just seemed like a small favor for a friend who was in dire need of it,” she shrugged helplessly, it sounded a little pathetic when she said it out loud, but she felt so protective of Harry and she wanted to help, but never at the expense of Draco’s safety, or even his feelings.

They were quiet for awhile, she wanted to give him time to actually absorb her words and not pile on what she’d already said.

“Okay,” he finally said.

“Okay?”

He nodded, “that actually makes a lot of sense, it’s sad actually,” he looked at her and smirked, “congratulations you’ve made me feel sorry for Potter.”

“So, we’re okay?”

“We’re okay,” he confirmed with a nod and a squeeze of her shoulders.

“May I ask what happened with Lupin? And please tell me your parents finally got rid of the Dementors?”

“The Dementors are gone. The Board was furious, don’t ask me why they didn’t feel that way after what happened on the train, but I’m guessing the fact that Black has been in the castle went a long way to convincing them that the dementors weren’t doing their job in the first place. Idiots,” he
murmured, she couldn’t disagree. “Lupin’s gone too,” he said more gently, “even if you’d convinced me to try and talk my parents out of it, it wouldn’t have helped. The first thing Father did when I told him about your suspicions was go find Professor Snape to get confirmation. Not only did he confirm that Lupin was a werewolf, but he told Father that when they were all in school together that apparently Lupin was good friends with Sirius Black.”

Hermione gasped, “I should have realized, I knew Lupin and Black were both friends with the Potters, of course they at least knew each other.”

“Not just that, Black knew Lupin was a werewolf, and he knew where he went to transform every month. I guess Black and Snape didn’t get along and so he set him up to come face to face with Lupin on the full moon. He barely escaped with his life.”

“That’s terrible! Your mother said that Sirius was capable of great violence, and I guess so, I mean he killed thirteen people, but who would do that to a classmate? Was Lupin in on it?”

He shrugged, “I don’t know, does it matter? That just shows how dangerous it is to have a werewolf around a school full of unsuspecting children. Especially with Black on the loose, I mean he knows Lupin’s secret, he could find a way to use that. I’m not sure I’ve ever seen father quite so angry.”

She was quiet for a long time. “You know I never had to deal with these things in my muggle school.”

His body stiffened against hers. “Do you wish you could go back?”

“Never,” she said immediately, fervently.

He relaxed. She bit her lip and reached over to snag Duke out of the armchair where she’d dumped him when Draco had come in, and pushed him into Draco’s arms. He cocked one eyebrow in question.

“Would you just put him inside your robes and sit here with me?” she ordered.

He was unintimidated. “Inside my robes?”

She felt herself go beet red but knew that she’d never escape this conversation without explaining herself, and that it would only be worse if she dragged it out. “He’s losing his smell,” she confessed.

“Yes! He smells like you, okay? But he’s losing it because he sleeps with me, and I really wanted him to smell like you today! So, just put him in your robes, he’ll get the smell back quicker like that.” She stared at him daringly, he grinned but didn’t say anything and opened his weekend robes, putting the stuffed toy inside between them and his shirt.

He graciously didn’t taunt her, just cleared his throat. “Actually, I have something for you.”

“For me?”

He nodded and pulled something out of his pocket, clutching it tightly. He carefully opened his fingers but kept the object caught between his thumb and forefinger. She gasped. It was a snitch, undoubtedly the one he’d caught at the game earlier, but she’d never seen one up close. It was a
“I didn’t expect them to be so beautiful,” she said with wonder, eyeing the gold filigree body.

He chuckled, “not sure I’ve ever heard somebody describe a snitch like that, but I’m glad you think so. I know you’re not crazy about quidditch, but like I said, this is for you.”

“Me?” she asked again. “And I like watching you play quidditch, when you’re not scaring the life out of me you’re a beautiful flyer.”

Her blush, which hadn’t fully receded was back in full force and she couldn’t bring herself to look at him, just stared at the snitch whose delicate silver wings were flapping almost lazily. Draco was radiating smugness, but then he shifted uncomfortably and she automatically looked to him.

“I guess I should have realized that you wouldn’t know this, but it’s kind of a thing: presenting a snitch to a witch.”

She felt a grin start to emerge on her face as she took in his very serious words and nervous demeanor. “This means something, doesn’t it? This is one of those things that says you’re serious?” she asked, carefully enunciating the last word.

He nodded, never taking his eyes off of her’s. She reached out and grasped the little golden sphere carefully and then craned her neck to give him a gentle kiss.

“I’m proud of you, you know, you were wonderful today. You kept it together even after the dementors appeared.”

“I didn’t feel very together,” he admitted, just above a whisper as he worked one hand into her hair. “And I am sorry, I overreacted last night, and I should have trusted you more about Potter. And I’m especially sorry for today, I never meant to make you worry, I know I would have been beside myself.”

“Accepted,” she said as she leaned into his touch. Since they’d decided to become more than friends he’d become somewhat obsessed with playing with her hair. She assumed most boys would have been clumsy about it, but he was so gentle, it was one of the most relaxing things in the world. “I’m sorry too, for being a coward and not talking to you about Harry. And for earlier, I was harsh.”

“Also accepted,” he leaned in and kissed her again and if she didn’t know better, she would have said that the snitch in her hand vibrated happily.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Weestartmeggie for beta reading this! Thanks to all the rest of you for reading!
Chapter 19

Narcissa regarded her son’s new pet out of the corner of her eye and resisted the urge to call an elf and have him herded out of the breakfast room. Frankly, the dog was much better behaved than she’d expected, and he seemed perfectly domesticated despite the fact that, according to Draco and Hermione, he had been living outside for months.

Yesterday, she’d sent an elf to pop him back to the estate from Hogsmeade where Draco had escorted him before boarding the Hogwarts Express for the journey home for the Christmas holidays. She had not for one minute considered forcing her tender-hearted son to leave the animal behind when he had been so clearly worried about him. But she’d fully anticipated that he’d be a little wild and would need to stay outside.

But he’d docily allowed the elves to give him a bath and a haircut and Narcissa had to admit that once he’d been cleaned up, he was a handsome dog. Then, according to Jema, he had gratefully taken the bone they’d set aside in preparation for his arrival, and curled up in front of the fire in the kitchens and napped until Draco arrived home.

He won Narcissa over when she saw how devoted he was to her son. He had followed him around all evening and slept at the foot of his bed. He even seemed to love Nox, and she him in return, which was just bizarre to witness. Narcissa had never seen a kneazle get along with any canine. So, as long as he continued to behave he could accompany Draco to meals.

She was pulled from her musings by Hermione’s arrival. The girl’s parents were working for two more days before they took off for the holidays, so she was going to spend those days at the Manor. She virtually bounced into the room, clearly in a good mood. She patted Shadow on the head and he nuzzled her hand in return. Then she made her way around the table giving herself, Lucius, and then Draco each a kiss on the cheek in turn, and settled herself at her place. Narcissa continued quietly sipping her tea and perusing the society section of the Prophet until she saw the glances that Draco and Hermione were exchanging.

Hermione looked nervous, but it was Draco who truly gave her pause. His expression was the same one he used to wear as a little boy when he believed he’d gotten away with some mischief. And then, suddenly, his face blossomed into an all out grin which was even more worrisome, and he turned to look at herself and Lucius.

“Now that our little master thievess is here we have something to tell you.”

“Thievess?” scoffed Hermione.

Draco tilted his head in consideration. “Do you prefer mistress of thieves?”

“I prefer you to be serious,” she bantered back immediately.

“Aww, don’t ruin my fun, you said this was my Christmas gift, I want to enjoy it!” He whined.

“You're a child,” she countered with a roll of her eyes.
“If that's true then you've been snogging a child.”

“Keep this up and you won't be snogging anyone,” she snapped.

For a split second his face fell, but then it lit right back up again. “You wouldn't last two days before you were all over me again.”

Hermione's eyes went wide and her face turned beet red. Narcissa could practically feel it heat up from across the table. Hermione looked up, flicked her eyes between herself and Lucius in a nervous manner and then quickly looked away. Then, without looking at him, she reached over and punched Draco on the arm.

Narcissa decided it was best to just pretend she hadn't noticed anything. As close as she was to Hermione, she realized that she was still a little young to openly discuss such things in front of adults, especially the parents of the boy she was seeing. Frankly, she was a little surprised by Draco’s brazenness and thought he deserved anything Hermione decided to do in retaliation.

Lucius set his paper down and cleared his throat. “As fascinating as this little exchange is, perhaps one of you would like to actually explain?”

Draco- who hadn’t seemed to have lost any of his good humor- just reached into the breast pocket of his robes and removed a tattered piece of parchment, setting it carefully on the table. “Hermione asked me for my assistance in removing this from Potter’s possession before we left school. She thought it was too dangerous for him to keep, but I'm hoping you'll let us keep it. It would really come in handy and we promise not to act like her moronic friend and go sneaking off to Hogsmeade,” he finished with a scoff.

“You've lost me,” Lucius drawled, and from his tone she could tell that he was quickly losing patience with their son.

“What is it, Draco?” she interjected.

He glanced at Hermione, shot her one more silly grin and then pointed his wand at the parchment. “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

What happened next happened too fast for Narcissa to process accurately.

There was a flurry of fur and paws and then she was suddenly looking into the crazed eyes of Sirius Black who was perched on her breakfast room table clutching the parchment Draco had just been showing them. Draco and Hermione had both been knocked to the floor and she was frozen in shock. Luckily, her husband kept his head and a second later her cousin had collapsed, a result of Lucius’ stunner. And then, just when it seemed as if things couldn't get anymore bizarre, Nox jumped up onto the table and settled herself on top of the man’s chest.

Lucius kept his wand aloft and he didn't take his eyes off of their uninvited guest when he spoke to the children. “The two of you take Hermione’s portkey back to her house. Stay there until we send an elf for you. Do not attempt to contact us or anybody else until you hear from us.”

“But Father-”

“That was not a suggestion. Go. Now.”

Hermione's eyes were wide with fear. She was probably almost as upset by Lucius’ harsh tone as she was by the appearance of a madman at breakfast; she had never heard Lucius speak to anybody so harshly, much less his son. To add to that, her husband absolutely radiated power at the moment,
if Hermione hadn’t understood that he was a dangerous man before, she certainly did now.

And so, she obeyed him immediately. She reached over and grabbed Draco’s hand. With her other hand she grasped the locket that she always wore and they were whisked away.

“Should I call the aurors?” she asked, struggling to keep her voice steady as the reality of what had just happened began to sink in. This man had been alone with her children many times over the past months. He could have done anything to them.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Think Narcissa,” he pinched the bridge of his nose and breathed out heavily, “What is he doing here? We have to interrogate him and then, if we deem it unnecessary to kill him, we have to alter his memory before turning him over to the Ministry as he knows of our connection to Hermione. Who knows what else he might have overheard?”

She just nodded absently as she stared at Sirius’ slumped form. She was surprised that she hadn’t realized he wasn’t a normal dog. Then again Draco had told her that he believed he was a magical creature, and other than Professor McGonagall she’d never met another animagus. Perhaps there was nothing in their auras to indicate that trait. As a human there was definitely something wrong about the energy surrounding him, but given what he’d been through it would perhaps be more disturbing if he didn’t seem a little fractured to her. If she was being honest, she didn’t know what any of it meant, and that was the most disturbing thing of all. She wasn’t used to being blindsided.

“Do you need to leave? I can do this alone,” he interrupted her thoughts.

It was more than enough to snap her back to reality. She squared her shoulders and raised her chin; they were in this together.

“I’m fine. I’ll back you up.” She carefully reached out and removed Nox from the wizard’s chest. Placing her on the floor she then removed her own wand and gave him a nod.


Sirius immediately obeyed, seeming to pay no mind to the various foods dripping from his person. She also noticed straightaway that his eyes were glassed over. She’d never seen the effects of the imperius manifest so visibly and could only assume that twelve years in Azkaban had weakened his mind to the point that it had no defenses left to fight the curse.

“You will answer any question Narcissa or I pose to you fully and truthfully. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Why are you in my home?”

“Your son invited me, practically insisted on it, actually. I thought a couple of weeks of regular meals and a warm place to sleep was better than staying around Hogwarts. I haven’t even been able to get anywhere near the castle since I tried to break in on Halloween.” The monotone in which he explained this was actually reminiscent of a person who had taken veritaserum.

“For what purpose are you trying to get into the castle?”

“Harry’s in danger. I have to kill the rat,” he continued in that eerie monotone.
“You have to kill a rat?”

“The rat,” he corrected. “Peter Pettigrew.”

Lucius glanced at Narcissa and she could see the pieces were falling together for him as well.

“Are you telling me Peter Pettigrew is alive?”

“Yes.”

“How is that possible?”

“He's an animagus too. His form is a rat. When I finally caught up with him he cut off his own finger, transformed, and blew up the street to frame me for all those muggles’ deaths and to escape unnoticed.”

“But then why did you confess?” Narcissa couldn't help but ask.

He faintly sneered in her direction, it was the first sign of emotion she'd seen since he'd been under the curse. “I didn't confess. I was crazy with grief and I said that it was all my fault. The aurors took that literally.”

“But what did you mean then?” she insisted, she'd been thinking about this part of the story since she'd first told Hermione about Sirius, and she'd never been able to make any sense of it.

“It was my idea to switch secret keepers. I thought it a brilliant piece of misdirection. You-know-who would come after me- everybody knew that James and I were like brothers- and the secret would stay safe with Peter. It honestly never occurred to me that he could be the traitor.”

“And you think that Pettigrew is hiding at Hogwarts, of all places, right under Dumbledore’s nose?”

“I know he is and I can prove it.”

Lucius looked at Narcissa dubiously. She understood why. Sirius wouldn't be able to lie to them under the curse, but that didn't mean he wasn't simply delusional. She watched carefully as he unfolded the parchment he was still clutching and Narcissa could see that it was no longer blank. He began to skim the contents.

“Aha!” he exclaimed, slamming the parchment down on the table and pointing triumphantly.

Narcissa glanced over at her husband and then they leaned over to see what he'd supposedly discovered. It looked like some kind of blue-print with blinking dots all over it. He was pointing specifically to a dot labeled ‘Peter Pettigrew’ which was virtually on top of a dot labeled ‘Ronald Weasley.’

Narcissa gasped. “Sirius, what in Salazar's name is this parchment?”

“It's a map of Hogwarts, it shows all the occupants of the castle and where they are at any given time. My friends and I designed it when we were at school ourselves. I recognized it the moment Draco said the password. Peter has been living as the Weasley family's pet rat.”

Well that explained why Draco wanted to keep this previously unimpressive looking piece of parchment, and also why Hermione was so concerned about Harry Potter keeping it that she recruited Draco to help her steal it.
"How did you know that he was with the Weasley family and would be at Hogwarts?"

"The Minister came to Azkaban this summer for an inspection. He walked by my cell and I asked if I could have his copy of the Daily Prophet, it had been so long since I'd had anything to read. There, right on the front page was a picture of the Weasleys. They had won the Ministry prize drawing and used the money for a vacation. I recognized Peter perched on the youngest son’s shoulder right away. If you can get a copy I can show you that he's missing a toe."

Here they'd been worried about dementors and Sirius, and Pettigrew had been in Gryffindor Tower with Hermione for years. She'd almost certainly been alone with him at some point. He'd attended classes with Draco. And nobody had any idea. Narcissa felt sick.

"What do we do?" Narcissa whispered, mostly to herself.

"We go get him and kill him. I want him away from my godson!" Sirius blurted, looking almost as manic as he had before he'd been placed under the imperius.

Narcissa hadn't known that Harry Potter was Sirius’ godson, but she wasn't surprised and probably should have considered the possibility.

“How did anybody believe that you betrayed the Potters? I never did, and that was just a result of knowing how loyal you were to that family. Anyone who knew you were the baby’s godfather shouldn't have had any doubts. If you'd put him in danger like that you could have done serious harm to yourself and your magic- I assume you took oaths to protect him?"

“Of course I did.”

She heard Lucius sigh. “Stupefy.”

Sirius collapsed again and she looked at her husband in surprise.

“You can sate your curiosity later, Cissa. Right now we need to decide how to proceed.”

She nodded, feeling shamefaced at being so easily distracted. “I think he could be a powerful ally.”

Lucius just blinked at her. “Explain,” he carefully enunciated the word.

She pursed her lips as she gathered her thoughts. “Uncle Arcturus never formally disowned him, so he's the rightful Lord Black. If he's proven innocent he will automatically become powerful politically and- more importantly to us- with the Light side and Dumbledore’s order. If we help him now he will be indebted to us.”

“I'm not certain he'll agree to that. He's at least half mad, and he had no love for Death Eaters in general, or me in particular, all those years ago. I doubt that's changed.”

She shook her head. “Circumstances have changed though. Harry Potter is as good as his child. He found a way to break out of Azkaban to protect him. If we can help him get his name cleared so that he can take over the boy’s guardianship I think he’ll be more than grateful. I know I would be in his shoes.”

“Will he even accept our help in the first place though?”

“Would you, for Draco or Hermione? Because he’s not getting it from any other quarter,” she paused to let him consider that. “And think about it Lucius, the Ministry threw him in prison without a trial. Dumbledore never questioned that or tried to help him. I doubt he's entirely trusting
of the Light anymore. And we could really use the Black family library for our research, I think we’re at a dead end right now.”

“We could just kill him and Draco will inherit,” he said it rather drily, but Narcissa knew he wasn’t entirely in jest, that there was a part of him that just saw a crazy intruder in front of him and thought it safest to do away with him completely.

“Draco would inherit in three and a half years. I’m not sure we have that long. We have to figure out what that journal is as soon as possible. And if we kill him Draco and Hermione will never forgive us. Which brings me to my next point. He knows about Draco and Hermione. He’s seen Hermione in our home. If that doesn’t demonstrate that we’ve changed some of the opinions that he would consider to be...less than savory, I don’t know what will.”

Lucius began to slowly nod.

“And Lucius, according to the children he’s been on or around Hogwarts grounds for months now. That is Dumbledore’s domain, the supposed leader of the Light. But it doesn't seem that he made any attempt to reach out to him or let him know Pettigrew was in the castle. He didn’t stay at Hogwarts and try to get into the castle again, he came here. He trusts and depends on Draco and Hermione, I think if we frame the argument correctly we can get him to trust us.”

She looked at him with raised eyebrows and waited for him to process this. And then he slowly started to smirk. “I do love the way your mind works,” he said, reaching out to gently brush her hair away from her face. “And if he doesn’t?”

She shrugged. “We alter his memory and figure out a way to get Pettigrew out of Hogwarts that doesn't involve him, I’m certain we can come up with something. I just think this is a better option.”

“I will require him to take vows to keep our secrets.”

Narcissa snorted delicately. “I wouldn’t expect anything less, Darling.”

He held her gaze for a moment to be sure that they understood each other, and then turned back to their prisoner. “Incarcerous,” he said, securely binding the other wizard and then levitating him into a chair, “enervate.”

No longer under the influence of the imperius, he came back to consciousness more slowly this time. He blinked blearily at them and then sneered.

“So what am I, your prisoner now?”

Lucius shrugged nonchalantly. “For the time being, until we know that you can be trusted not to attack my family again. I would ask you what you thought would happen, but I suspect you weren’t thinking at all.”

Sirius sighed and let his head fall back. “I wasn’t, I just saw the map and pounced.” He suddenly whipped his head back up, his eyes were cold and angry. “What did you do to me? Let me guess...the imperius? I should have known a Death Eater wouldn't really change his spots. What disgusting plans do you have for that poor girl?”

Lucius seemed almost amused when he answered him. “Hermione? Well, later today I’d planned to show her this rare volume on charms theory I thought she would enjoy, but nothing beyond that. However, in the interest of full disclosure, I think Narcissa plans to ensure that she is the next Lady Malfoy, and has for some time now. She already thinks of her as a daughter, she just wants to make
it official.”

Sirius actually looked rather surprised by this.

“And climb down off of that high horse, Black. I’ve seen you use some absolutely lethal curses, even an unforgivable a time or too and sometimes when you could have chosen differently. At least I was only doing what I felt I needed to in order to protect my family, we don’t keep veritaserum on hand and I needed the truth from you.”

He just stared at him and then turned to Narcissa. “Hello Cissy, long time no see,” he said sarcastically.

“Sirius,” she nodded at him in greeting, “I would apologize, but I don't typically play hostess to convicts,” she answered, with equal sarcasm.

“Ah, well that's where you're wrong, I was never actually convicted.”

She couldn't help it, she chuckled. “I actually knew that. And if I hadn't thought you were guilty, of killing those muggles and Pettigrew at least, I wouldn't have kept quiet. We may have rarely seen eye to eye as children but you certainly didn't deserve that place.”

He was obviously taken aback but his eyes softened somewhat. “You raised a good kid,” he admitted in response, “I like him. He's been kind to me. And he has good taste in witches,” he added wryly.

“Thank you, we’re very proud of him.” Narcissa responded automatically as if they were just making small talk over tea.

He craned his neck to look around the room. “Where are he and Kitten?” He asked with what seemed like simple idle curiosity.

“We sent them out,” Narcissa said.

“Kitten?” Lucius asked incredulously at the same time.

Sirius grinned. It was rather disturbing. “Yeah, the first time I met her she was mad at Draco and she went on this hissing, spitting rant. And she's such a little thing. She reminded me of an angry kitten, I've been calling her that ever since.”

“Oh she's going to hate that,” Narcissa observed.

He just kept smiling. “So this thing between them is serious, and you two approve? Draco told me last night she has rooms here. But then why are they hiding their relationship, are you ashamed of her?” He asked, eyes narrowed.

“Of course not!” Narcissa snapped.

“Then why?”

Lucius sighed. “That actually transitions well into what we wanted to discuss with you.”

“Well, I'm not going anywhere, get on with it,” said Sirius, gesturing with his chin to the bonds that wouldn't allow him to move anything but his head.

“The reason Draco and Hermione haven't let their relationship be publicly known is that it would be too dangerous for them and for us.”
He just looked at them skeptically.

“We found out at the end of their first year that the Dark Lord isn't actually dead, just temporarily disembodied.”

Sirius closed his eyes and let out a long sigh. “I knew it was too good to be true.”

“So you can see, until he is really gone…” Lucius trailed off.

“Right,” he responded scathingly, “because you don't get to quit being a Death Eater. He comes back, he'll expect you back too. Bowing and scraping and kissing the hem of his robes and those aren't the kind of meetings where muggleborns are welcome, except as victims.”

“Watch it Black!” He leaned over getting in the man’s face. “You'll do well to remember that had you not had a more compliant brother to take the pressure off of you, and a family ready and willing to take you in and protect you when you left home, you might very well have a Mark on your arm too,” he finished in a low, dangerous sounding hiss.

“I’d have died first!” he snarled.

Lucius sighed and abruptly straightened up, his face softened. “I don't know if that makes you brave or stupid. Perhaps both,” he admitted.

Narcissa resisted the urge to reach over and take his hand, he wouldn't want to display any weakness in front of the other wizard.

“Oh come on Malfoy, don't act like you weren't a willing and enthusiastic Death Eater,” Sirius continued to bait him.

But Lucius remained impassive. “At the beginning, yes, I was honored. I truly believed in the cause. I believed in the Dark Lord. But by the time I had my own family to protect, I had merely become a very good actor. And because of that family, because of the future I want for my son and that curly haired muggleborn I've grown to love as my own, I am doing everything I can to ensure that he never returns to full power. But if he does, I will return to his side and I will dismantle his organization from the inside out. He will rue the day he ever tried to make a Malfoy into a slave. However, in order to do so I can't do anything in the mean time to make him question my loyalties. So we keep Hermione close, but not out in the open.”

Narcissa and Sirius both stared at Lucius in shock.

He raised an eyebrow at his wife, “what? You said you thought he would be a good ally, I am doing my best to convince him.”

Sirius continued to stare at him for a few more seconds, he closed his eyes and his body relaxed. “What can I do to help?”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Weestarmeggie for pre-reading! I did the editing myself though, so mistakes are mine :)

I thought this would be a good point tell you, if you haven't figured it out already, that
this fic is going to get darker. We’re going to war and Lucius and Narcissa’s morals are not quite as...rigid as the protagonists in canon. The rating will almost certainly go up and I'm sorry I didn't warn you from the beginning. There will still be plenty of love and fluff though!

Thank you all for going on this journey with me, the support for this story has just been wonderful!
Chapter 20

He was sitting on the sofa with Hermione staring at the television. Normally her presence soothed him, but not this morning, nor was he distracted by the usually fascinating telly. It had been twenty-four hours since his parents had sent him to the Grangers. He’d spent the night in their guest room, which he normally wouldn’t have minded, he liked Hermione’s parents and they had a comfortable home, but he was worried about what was going on in his own home.

An elf had popped in around lunch time the day before to assure them that all was well but he wouldn’t tell them any more than that. His mother had stopped by after Hermione’s parents got home from work, talked to them privately for a few minutes and then left in a flurry of cheek kisses, again refusing to tell them anything specific. The Grangers had taken them to see a film in a blatant attempt to distract them. When they arrived back at their house his parents had sent an owl informing him that he should stay the night and that they would be in touch in the morning.

So, there they sat, the Grangers had already gone to work and he was growing more uneasy with each passing minute.

“It’s fine, Draco, they’ll be here soon,” Hermione tried to reassure him for the umpteenth time.

“How would you feel if it was your parents?” he snapped.

She whipped her head around and he saw the hurt flash across her face, she didn't even try to hide it. “I love your parents Draco, you don't think I’m worried too? But I also trust them, if they say they've got everything under control then they have.”

“I know, I’m sorry,” he murmured.

She reached over and grabbed his hand, intertwining their fingers. He laid his head on the back of the sofa and they sat like that until Evie popped in.

“Young Master, Young Mistress,” she greeted cheerfully. The elves- Evie in particular- had begun addressing Hermione in that manner with increasing frequency, but she either hadn’t noticed or wasn’t bothered by it and he wasn’t quite ready to discuss it with her yet. “Mistress sent me to bring you home.”

Draco leapt off the couch pulling Hermione along with him and held his other hand out for Evie’s. She took it and then looked to him for permission; he nodded and they disapparated, landing in his parents private sitting room, the one right off of their bedroom. His parents were seated, apparently awaiting their arrival, but as soon as they appeared his mother was up, greeting them with hugs and kisses.

They soon settled in and Draco glowered at his parents. “Couldn’t you have at least let us know what was going on?”

His father looked at his mother. “I told you he was too immature for this Narcissa.”

“What?” he asked, affronted.
His father looked at him pointedly. “You are not a child who has been denied a toy Draco. Your mother and I have spent the past day making plans that have life altering implications. If you do not even have the patience to wait overnight to be informed of them, then I do not see how you have the fortitude to be included in them.”

Draco knew a reprimand when he heard one and he deflated. “I apologize, Father, Mother. I was just worried. It’s my fault that Black is here.”

His mother, who had been looking as stern as he’d ever seen her visibly gentled. “It’s not your fault, dear, you were just being kind. None of us spotted what he really was. And in the end there was no harm done.”

“So, is he at the Ministry, or has he been kissed?” He asked, trying not to wince, and Hermione squeezed his hand in empathy. After their brief experiences with dementors neither of them would wish the punishment of being kissed on anybody, and they’d become fond of Shadow.

“Neither, actually,” answered his father. “He is still here. Have the two of you had breakfast? We have quite a story to tell you.”

Draco looked at Hermione who was just staring at his father with her mouth open. “We’ve already eaten,” she squeaked in obvious shock.

“Alright, then” his father began, “make yourselves comfortable, this is going to take awhile.”

An hour later Draco sat back against the sofa cushions. Only then did he realize that he’d been on the edge of his seat as they told them Black’s tale, and then of the plans they’d been formulating since the day Hermione had informed them that the Dark Lord wasn’t dead. He was shocked, and frightened, and a little overwhelmed at the trust his parents were putting in them by sharing this; Lord Black as well.

“So, would you be willing to come to the Ministry with us to speak to Minister Fudge, Draco?” His father asked.

He looked up and met his eyes and he realized that this was a very real question. If he said ‘no’ his parents wouldn’t hold it against him, they would simply alter their plans. He didn’t want to say ‘no.’

“Of course Father, I’m happy to help.”

His father just nodded at him in acknowledgement.

“One more thing we wanted to talk to you about before we leave,” said his mother, “though this mainly involves Hermione.”

“Draco can stay,” she responded immediately.

His mother smiled indulgently at her. Draco rolled his eyes, sometimes she was so transparent.

“Okay then,” his mother continued. “Once Sirius is cleared he’ll be able to take his place as Head of House Black, which will make him a very influential and powerful individual in our society.”

Draco and Hermione nodded in tandem.

“He’s fond of you Hermione, he appreciates your kindness to him when you thought he was just a stray, and he is especially grateful for all of the stories you told him about his godson. He’s also pleased that you and Mr. Potter are so close. So, he’s offered to do something for you that I only
wish we were able to do.”

“What’s that?”

“He’d like to offer you the protection of House Black. I’ve already spoken to your parents about what that would entail and they are interested in the idea, but it’s not something that they will agree to without your permission.”

Draco gasped and Hermione turned to face him.

“I know what that means, in theory, but from Draco’s reaction I think it might be a bigger deal than I had assumed,” she said without looking away from him.

Draco glanced to his mother for permission to explain and she gave him a nod. “The Black’s are one of the oldest and most formidable Houses, you know that, but I’m not sure you really understand what it means. For him to offer protection to a muggleborn...he would be making a major statement. You would be virtually untouchable. It wouldn’t actually change your blood status, but the repercussions for hurting you would be as severe as if you were actually the child of an Ancient and Noble House.”

Hermione looked at him searchingly for a moment and then he felt her magic brush against his. “I’ll do it,” she said turning back to face his parents.

“Excellent,” his mother clapped her hands together, “now, Draco, go change, our appointment at the Ministry is in thirty minutes.”

He nodded and climbed off the sofa, pulling Hermione with him again. She understood him well enough that he was certain she wouldn’t fight him. She always seemed to know when he wanted to talk to her privately and his parents had yet to object to them being alone in his rooms. He walked swiftly but then he realized that she was practically jogging to keep up so he slowed his pace. She released his hand and wrapped her arms around his waist and they continued on like that, pressed against each other.

“You’re relieved by Lord Black’s offer?” It was more of a statement than a question and he knew she would have been able to feel the way his magic had relaxed as they’d discussed the possibility.

They stopped inside the door to his suite and he turned to her to give her a brief but fierce kiss. “Of course I am, especially now.”

“Why especially now?”

“Because this feels like the start of something, my parents and Lord Black making an alliance. They didn’t say it in so many words but they’re preparing for war, and when that comes it’s only going to get more and more dangerous for you. If we can’t offer you protection I’m just glad my mother’s House can. If we’d had Lord Black on side earlier this year we might have been able to avoid the dementors entirely, or at the very least you and Potter both could have complained to him after the train incident. His opinion along side my father’s would be very hard to refute.”

“But nobody can know they’re working together!”

Draco shrugged. “That doesn’t mean they can’t agree on issues for the protection of the children in their care.”

“That’s true,” she mused, “I do so hope this works out, for Harry as well as myself.”
He just nodded, even he could concede that Potter deserved better than his muggle relatives and if he could move in with his godfather, perhaps Hermione would stop worrying so much about him. She had enough on her plate. He gathered a set of dress robes and went into his bathroom to change. Hermione waited for him and when he was finished they made their way down to the floo room.

“You’ll tell me everything when you get back, won’t you,” she whispered anxiously.

He chuckled. “Of course, but I don’t think I’ll be allowed to take notes so you’ll have to be happy with what I remember.”

She elbowed him in the ribs.

His parents were waiting for him near the Manor’s main floo along with another person. Even if Draco hadn’t known who he was, it would have been obvious that Sirius was a Black. His mother had inherited her looks from her mother, but most Blacks were tall, with strong aristocratic features, and had ebony hair and gray eyes just like the man in front of them. He had cleaned up, his hair and beard had been trimmed, and his filthy prison robes replaced by expensive, well tailored ones that probably belonged to Lucius. But the biggest difference were his eyes, they no longer held that manic gleam that had been so frightening to behold even with just the brief glimpse Draco had gotten the day before.

He bowed slightly to the man. “Lord Black, it’s an honor to make your acquaintance.”

Hermione curtsied. “Yes Lord Black, an honor.”

He regarded them seriously for a minute and then he threw his head back and exploded into raucous laughter. “Oh my mother must be rolling in her grave. Please never address me so formally again. It’s Sirius, or Padfoot if you prefer. Hell, I’m not even opposed to Shadow,” he smirked at them, and now those grey eyes were twinkling. And then he gave them a slight bow. “Especially as I owe the both of you a debt. I’ll be forever grateful to you for caring for an old mutt.”

“It was nothing,” Hermione demurred.

Draco remained silent but gave the man a courteous nod.

“Allright,” his mother interrupted, “we need to get going. Hermione are you going to stay here or go home?”

“I think I’ll stay and wait for you.”

His mother just nodded and took his father’s arm so that he could help her into the floo. Draco would have objected to Hermione staying- technically innocent or not Sirius had just spent twelve years in Azkaban- but according to his parents he was under so many vows he’d drop dead before he could even fully consider harming one of them. And it would be good for her to get to know her future benefactor.

“See you later,” he murmured, squeezing her hand before letting it go and moving to follow his parents through the floo.

“Good luck!” she called after him.

He emerged in the grand atrium of the Ministry and looked around curiously. He’d been there a handful of times on short errands with his father, but he’d never seen it decorated for Yule before. The cheery decorations were an odd contrast to the usual stark interior; it really didn’t suit. Sure
enough when he looked at his mother she was wrinkling her nose in distaste, his father chuckling at her reaction.

After they brushed themselves off they started to make their way towards their meeting, Draco trailing slightly behind his parents. He followed them to a lift and then to the Minister’s office. The outer chamber was grandiose to the point of tackiness, but now his mother had her game face on, and he saw not a hint of her earlier disapproval of the decor. He quickly schooled his own features.

They were shown in to see the Minister with little delay. He recognized the man, of course, but he was distracted by the woman who was standing next to his desk. She was the most unattractive person he’d ever seen. She actually managed to resemble Longbottom’s ever-escaping toad, but she was dressed entirely in pink. Several different shades of it, in fact, and Draco could only wonder where she’d found pink shoes, and was that a kitten broach?

“Minister, I’d like you to meet my wife, Narcissa, and our son Draco.”

Draco pulled himself out of his musings to properly greet the Minister.

“It’s good to see you as always,” the man responded, “may I present my Senior Undersecretary, Dolores Umbridge.’

Draco suppressed a grimace as he watched his father take the woman’s hand and place a kiss on her knuckles - she simpered in return. He hoped his mother made him bathe thoroughly before she let him anywhere near her again.

“I’m sure Madam Umbridge is very discreet, but as it is a delicate family matter that we wished to discuss with you today we were hoping to speak with you in private,” his father said.

The Minister preened and excused the woman so quickly that it almost gave Draco whiplash and then seated himself behind his desk. They sat in front of it, his mother between the two of them.

“Cornelius,” his father began, slipping into informality seamlessly. Draco marveled at how easily his Father had finagled this from business meeting to private tete-a-tete in a matter of moments. “Have you had the opportunity to look into the matter I spoke to you about yesterday?”

The man nodded vigorously. “Of course, I was disturbed at the very idea that the Scion of an Ancient and Noble House could have been sent to Azkaban without a trial. I was certain there must be some mistake, but I looked into it immediately to be sure. And I was absolutely appalled to find out it was true!” Then he hastened to add, “But he did confess Lucius.”

“I have reason to believe that confession to be false.”

The man actually began to wring his hands. “You do realize the scandal this would create? Digging up this history? Our world has done it’s best to put this ugly part of our past behind us.”

“What if I told you that I had a way to not only prove Lord Black innocent of all of the crimes of which he’s been accused, but to catch the real perpetrator? You’re right, this was an ugly period in our history, but it was not your Ministry that wrongfully imprisoned Lord Black, but it could be the one that rights this wrong.”

Fudge huffed. “But how do you know this? Where are you getting your information?”

“Why from Lord Black himself,” his father said casually.

The man went completely bug-eyed and all the color drained from his face. “Are you telling me
you’ve been in contact with a wanted criminal?!"

His mother cleared her throat delicately and sat forward in her chair. “Minister, I’m not sure if you’re aware but Sirius Black is my cousin.”

She immediately had Fudge’s attention. “Of course, Lady Malfoy, I’m well acquainted with your esteemed genealogy.”

She dipped her head graciously. “Unfortunately, House Black, once proud and respected has fallen on hard times. It’s line is close to extinction, save of course, for Draco here. And then there was that nasty business with my eldest sister, which I still find impossible to talk about,” she dabbed at her eyes delicately with a handkerchief. “And all this time I have been helpless to do anything about it. When my cousin wrote to me I couldn’t help but be curious. You see, he and I have never really been friends. As children we often quarreled and we only grew further apart as we became adults. So, I knew that if he was reaching out to me for assistance he must be in dire straits. The story he told was extraordinary and I just knew, Minister, for the sake of the reputation of my family, that I had to investigate. Surely you understand, don’t you?”

His mother’s voice was soft and breathy and he barely recognized it. But what really bothered him was the way the Minister was looking at her with such blatant appreciation in his eyes. Draco almost wanted to jump across the desk and hit him, he didn’t know how his father was resisting.

“Of course, Lady Malfoy. Your husband is correct, this should be handled as a delicate family matter, I hadn’t considered that,” he said, practically tripping all over himself to assure her. “And please, call me Cornelius,” he smiled rather sickeningly at her.

“Narcissa then, Cornelius.” She smiled at him and though there was no warmth in it he beamed in return.

“Would it be too much to ask for me to see this letter?”

“Oh, of course! I would certainly not just expect you to simply take my word for it!” She cried, and actually put a hand over her heart as she spoke.

He sputtered. “Well of course I trust your word Narcissa, I suppose I would just like to see what Lord Black has to say for himself, in his own words.”

She dipped her head in acknowledgement and removed the fabricated letter from her small bag. When his parents had shown it to them earlier he’d been impressed by the depth of planning that had gone into this charade, and had understood why they’d been so busy that they’d left him at the Granger’s over night. But now he was beginning to see that his parents were actually enacting a dance they’d been perfecting for years. He felt both superfluous and utterly impressed. She handed it to the Minister and sat back quietly to let him read it.

It took several minutes, his eyes growing larger and larger as he read. He finally put it down on his desk and sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose as if he was in pain. “Does he have any proof? This story is not completely implausible, but it is, as you say, extraordinary.”

“Of course, Cornelius, we would never have come to you and put you in this position, asking so much, unless we had significant proof,” interjected his father and it was as if his mother had passed him back the baton.

The Minister swiveled his head back around to look at Lucius and swallowed thickly. Draco would have bet his inheritance that the man had nearly forgotten Lucius was there in favor of leering at
his wife.

“Given Lord Black’s claim that he is Harry Potter’s oath bound Godfather I put an enquiry in with the goblins,” he continued, “If he had committed the crimes of which he is accused against the Potters he would have broken oath with them, which would have rendered his magic incapable of claiming his title and our Draco would be in line to inherit when he came of age. The goblins informed me that Black is still the rightful heir.”

“Well that does clear him of the crimes against the Potters,” the Minister mused, “but what of the others? This claim that Peter Pettigrew has been hiding out in Hogwarts is rather outlandish, isn’t it?”

“Draco?” His mother prompted quietly.

“Weasley,” he began suddenly, “that is, the youngest Weasley son, Ronald, has a pet rat. He’s well known for it as he carries it everywhere and because rodents aren’t generally allowed as pets. And I’ve heard that the rat belonged to his older brother, Percy, before him. That would be quite a long lifespan if he was just a common rat,” he explained, holding the Minister’s gaze and trying to make it sound like he was simply relaying the weather.

“Is our son’s word sufficient corroboration, or do you require further convincing?” Asked his father smoothly, but his tone was an obvious dare for the Minister to disagree.

“No, no, of course that is sufficient, I’m just not sure how to proceed from here,” he wiped his suddenly sweaty brow.

“Is something stopping you from exploring a reliable tip that there is a dangerous criminal hiding inside of Hogwarts, Cornelius? It is the Ministry’s duty to protect our children, after all. And even if the tip is false nobody could blame you for your caution. Simply travel to the school with a team of aurors and have Dumbledore summon this boy and his pet. I would be happy to accompany you, in my role as Head of Governors.”

Fudge blinked at him for several long moments before remembering himself. “Why, of course, that is simple. But Dumbledore won’t like it.”

His father shrugged slightly. “He has no reason to deny you.”

Fudge sat up straighter in his chair and puffed up his chest. “You’re right Lucius. He doesn’t have any reason to deny me. Are you free to accompany me now? I think it would be unwise to delay.”

“I have cleared my day,” his father confirmed, “whenever you are ready.”

The Minister suddenly stood up from his desk. Draco got the distinct impression he was acting before his courage could fail him. He gathered his cloak and that ridiculous hat he always wore and the four of them exited his office together.

“Narcissa,” the Minister said, stopping in his outer office, “may I offer you an escort downstairs to a floo?”

“Oh I do appreciate the thought, Cornelius, but I have Draco, we’ll be fine on our own.”

He then made a big show of bowing and kissing her knuckles. Draco looked at his father who was watching the display with an amused quirk of his lips, he met Draco’s eyes and so quickly Draco almost thought he imagined it, rolled his eyes.
“Young Draco,” the Minister finally turned to him, “thank you for your assistance.”

“It was my honor, sir,” he responded.

The Minister just nodded. His father clapped him on the shoulder after gently kissing his mother’s cheek- a level of affection he rarely saw them display in public- and then he strode, the much shorter Minister scurrying beside him, in the direction of the DMLE to find a team of aurors.

His mother looped her arm through his. “Are you ready to go?”

“Yes Mother.” They began to walk and he turned his head so that he could see her face, “I did not like the way he looked at you.”

She sighed. “It was rather unsavoury, but we used it to our advantage. He only saw a woman whose beauty he admired, it never occurred to him that I might be more powerful than I appear, that I was capable of manipulating him.”

“You knew he was going to react like that?” Draco confirmed.

“Your father is a very thorough man, so yes, he understood the effect that my presence would most likely have on him.”

Draco bristled.

“We use the tools we have at our disposal, my love,” she patted his arm.

“I can’t believe Father let you do that,” he said, feeling suddenly indignant.

She immediately brought them to a halt. “Your father and I are a team, it was not his decision to make. We discussed many strategies, this was the easiest and it contained the least amount of risk for us all. It is not always pretty, but we’ll do what needs to be done. I wish that was a lesson you did not have to learn, but things are only going to get more serious from here, and I think you know that.”

He swallowed nervously as he looked into his mother’s piercing blue eyes, because he saw something there; he had been correct when he spoke to Hermione earlier. Things had changed today, but not just in regards to preparing for war. His relationship with his parents had altered at a fundamental level; they’d included him like a peer instead of treating him like a child.

“I understand, Mother.” He was determined not to let them down.

“You did well Draco,” she said and then she tugged on his arm to encourage him to start walking again and they continued on to the floo.

When they arrived back at the Manor they found Hermione and Sirius in the solarium. The moment they walked through the door she relaxed and then jumped up to greet them.

“What happened!” she exclaimed.

“Well, we can tell you the whole story while we have some tea. But for now, suffice it to say that Lucius has accompanied the Minister to Hogwarts.”

Hermione and Sirius both breathed a sigh of relief. They then settled in and had tea, discussed the days activities and plans for the rest of the holidays. Sirius remained mainly silent and Draco couldn’t help but notice how anxious he seemed. About two hours after they returned home an owl
arrived with a note for his mother written in his father’s distinctive scrawl. It was a short thing, only three words: He’s in custody.

Knowing what he had been through and what was on the line, Draco was only slightly uncomfortable when, for the first time in his life, he witnessed a grown man weep.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for continuing to support this story, I’m continually amazed. So many of you left me your thoughts on the last chapter and I so appreciated them all, I love being able to see what you’re thinking when you read. So, I'll just say it again, thank you! And a special thanks to Weestarmeggie for beta reading!
Chapter 21

It had been a long time since she’d felt nervous around Draco. But nerves were exactly what she felt when he clasped her hand and began to lead her away from their gathered families on the afternoon of Boxing Day. Claire’s knowing look was alternatively reassuring and disconcerting. Hermione didn’t know what was going on except that something was off with him and considering how well she could usually read him, it was quite worrisome.

Her family had spent Christmas just the three of them but had come to the Manor for Boxing Day. It was the first time her parents had spent any real time with Lucius’ mother or Claire’s parents. Hermione had been happy to see that they all got along. She had been worried that the elder Mrs. Malfoy especially might disapprove of having muggles in the Manor, but they were all perfectly welcoming, if a bit formal. Then again, she’d never seen them act any other way. Draco, on the other hand, had been decidedly weird; quiet and withdrawn, he’d practically played with his food over dinner. So by the time he indicated that he wanted to spend some time alone with her she was a veritable ball of nerves.

He led her to what she now considered to be their window seat and she arranged herself comfortably, at home in the space if not with the situation. He settled down next to her and then smiled rather nervously as he handed her a small, wrapped package. She frowned at it. He’d already give her a Christmas present.

She had actually been surprised on Christmas morning when the gift she’d found from him under the tree had been a book. She tried to console herself by remembering that it was a rare book, one she’d been itching to read, and only Draco had known that, and so it was a thoughtful gift even if it hadn’t been particularly personal. But she’d been secretly, quietly disappointed in his choice, while simultaneously being absolutely ashamed of those feelings: he was a wonderful best friend who had become a caring boyfriend, how could she possibly ask for anything more?

“What’s this? You already gave me a present.”

“That wasn’t your main gift, Hermione. I just wanted you to have something to open on Christmas morning.” He rolled his eyes. “As if I don’t know better than to just get you a book,” he muttered under his breath, “Mother would never forgive me.”

She just stared at him for a moment before tearing the wrapping open and pulling the top off of the box. She froze at the sight of what was inside. It was a delicate ring, a band of diamonds and sapphires arranged in an intricate pattern that resembled a circlet of tiny flowers. Her heart felt like it stopped for a moment.

“Draco,” she gasped.

“You said that muggles made promises to each other with rings.” he explained, his eyes wide and uncertain.

“They do, and it’s beautiful. But it’s too much.”

“Too much?” He frowned.
“Yes, your parents have already done so much for me. This is too generous.”

His frown deepened and he pulled away from her slightly. “What does this have anything to do with my parents?”

“They don’t need to spend this kind of money on me.”

“They didn’t, what are you talking about Hermione?”

Hermione searched his expression, he looked utterly confused and something suddenly occurred to her. “Are you telling me that you bought this?” she asked incredulously.

“Of course,” he said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “I would never ask my parents to supply a gift for you,” he finished, actually sounding affronted.

She just stared at him, mouth agape. “Well I assumed you got me the book, but how can you possibly afford this?” She ducked her head in embarrassment at her blunt question. “You don’t have to answer that. It’s just that most people our age could never afford something like this.”

He put a finger under her chin and forced her to look at him. “I don’t mind talking to you about this, I mean, I tell you everything anyway. I have my own money, I thought you knew that.”

“I knew that you had pocket money, and I assumed that your allowance was more than mine but,” she gestured to the ring still nestled in the box and shook her head in disbelief. She was only estimating, but she was fairly sure that it would take all of her allowance for at least a couple of years to purchase a piece of jewelry of equal quality to this ring.

“I have an inheritance from both of my grandfathers in addition to my trust vault, and I promise you, your ring didn’t put a dent in any of that. Now, it’s not like Mother and Father would allow me to go around spending it on whatever I wanted, but an acceptable gift for you? They had no problem with that. Father even helped me have it designed.”

Designed. He’d had it designed for her. She took a deep breath.

The Malfoys were- obviously- incredibly wealthy, she had always known that. But somehow, before this moment she’d managed to separate that fact from the people she knew, and especially from her relationship with Draco. She looked around and unconsciously reached for his hand as it began to set in what she was meant for one day.

Because while she adored Draco- his whole family really- the idea of being the next Lady Malfoy was the most intimidating thing she’d ever considered. And this was something she was certain of: if Draco was presenting her with jewelry he was making a statement; save any major complications he meant to one day make her his wife. There were still several points at which propriety would allow each of them to back out before then, but she knew Draco better than that. He was as loyal as any Hufflepuff.

She took a deep breath to calm her nerves and to find a way to accept his gift graciously. She refused to hurt his feelings by letting on how scared she was. This was simply what came from being with Draco, and he was incredibly proud of his family name and heritage, she would never want him to think it was something that she didn’t want. She would accept anything to be with him and what he was offering her was actually a great honor, even if it did terrify her.

“Thank you,” was all she could bring herself to say.

“You’re welcome, will you wear it?”
“Of course!” She cupped his cheek with one hand. “I’m sorry I’m being silly.”

“How so?”

“You were born to this Draco,” she gestured to their surroundings, and then out the window to the grounds. “To me it seems a bit foreign.”

The insecurity was back on his face. “Is that a bad thing?”

“No!” She hastened to assure him, she considered trying to explain to him that everything she’d ever expected for her life had changed over the past three years. Not only was she a witch who now lived in a completely separate world from the one in which she’d grown up, but she was very close to joining what could best be described as a royal family in her new world. But she’d already done enough to ruin this moment, they could work through her insecurities later. She should probably have a talk with Narcissa.

She considered slipping the ring onto her left hand, but then decided that seemed like one step too far. Even though an engagement ring was a muggle tradition, and wearing a ring on her left hand wouldn’t mean anything in the magical world, she still wasn’t ready to put any ring from her boyfriend on that special finger. She carefully slid the delicate piece onto her right ring finger and held out her hand to admire it.

“Did I get it right?” he asked, “your parents seemed to appreciate the thought, but I wasn’t sure.”

She whipped her head around to look at him, “you talked to my parents about this?”

He shrugged. “I wanted to make sure I wasn’t doing something wildly inappropriate.”

“It’s not, it’s actually perfect,” she said quickly, “I mean, you mean this like a promise ring, right? It’s not a formal betrothal, we haven’t signed anything. But people will recognize that I’ve entered into serious consideration for one. And let me guess,” she said, twirling the ring around and around her finger, “sapphires both for my birthstone and for House Malfoy?” She gazed at him out of the corner of her eye, smirking. Their relationship would continue to be a secret but it was obvious that he was doing everything in his power to mark her as his.

“That’s right,” he laughed, refusing to be baited, “so are you going to tell everybody you have a boyfriend now?”

“Do you want me to?”

He shrugged but his apparent nonchalance was less than believable.

“Well I don’t think I can expect to go back to school and be able to pretend that I don't. I mean, girls are like nifflers, my roommates will have this sniffed out in minutes.” She lay her head down on his shoulder as she spoke, smiling to herself. The petty side of her couldn't wait to see her roommates faces when they saw her ring.

“What will you tell them about me?” He asked, taking her hand in his.

She bit her lip. “That you’re smart, and fun, and hot,” she snickered as she considered what she would say next. “But that my favorite thing about you is that you're really thoughtful and considerate of me,” she paused dramatically, “that way there's no way they could ever think I'm talking about you.”

“Hey!” He objected immediately, digging his elbow into her side in retaliation.
She laughed and turned her head to kiss his cheek. “You do spoiled prat very well and you know it,” she retorted even as she yawned.

“Tired?”

“Full,” she clarified immediately, “comfortable,” she continued, then she let out a long, contented sigh, “happy,” she finished.

He hugged her to him. “Want to take a nap?”

“Won't we be missed?”

He shrugged. “It's not like we can't be found if we're needed, and anyway, it's just our family.”

He started to kick off his shoes and she followed suit and then they situated themselves so that they were laying with her head on his chest, one leg thrown over his. She sighed again and snuggled as close as she could get. They rarely had time to just be together like this at school and she loved it here with him. And then, clear as day, she knew there was something that she had to tell him. She propped herself up on one elbow so that she could see his face.

“Draco,” she called, waiting until he opened his eyes, and then she smiled softly at him, “I love you.”

He froze and she wasn't particularly surprised, that wasn't something she'd ever heard any of the Malfoys express. Even Lucius and Narcissa whom- she was fully convinced- were absolutely mad for each other never said it, at least not in her presence, and she hoped she hadn't crossed a line. It just seemed silly to her, she knew that they loved each other and they casually discussed the fact that they very well might marry one day, but she'd never said how she felt out loud and that seemed like a terrible oversight.

She knew he might not return the sentiment. She told herself that she was okay with that, but his silence was nerve wracking nonetheless. But then he pulled her to him, almost desperately, his hands practically clawing at her waist as if he couldn't bring her close enough.

“I love you too,” he rasped.

She settled back against him then, and if the sound of his evenly beating heart and his regular breathing hadn't been quite so hypnotic, the light, giddy feeling in her chest would have kept her from falling asleep.

They walked hand in hand back into the main family sitting room about an hour later. But even whilst floating in her bubble of happiness, Lucius’ absence from the room was immediately apparent to Hermione. She squeezed Draco’s hand and when he returned it she knew that he had noticed the same thing.

“Where’s Father?” Draco’s voice broke through the chatter in the room.

Narcissa looked up from her conversation with her mum and Adele, and beamed at them. She practically jumped out of her chair, beaming, and made her way towards them. “Don’t worry about that at the moment, dears. Do you have something to show us?”

Hermione glanced at Draco nervously; for some reason she hadn’t expected anybody to comment on her new accessory, though she really should have known better. He let out a breath and closed his eyes in frustration. But before he could say anything Narcissa had reached them and engulfed Hermione in her arms. Narcissa had the most unique way of making her feel like the most powerful
woman in the world, and like a delicate flower at the same time.

“I hope you know that I already consider you to be my daughter. This is only one more step in that direction. And if the fates should see fit, somehow, that you and Draco are not to be, please know that you will always have a place here with us,” she whispered hurriedly, cupping the back of her head carefully.

“Thank you,” she whispered back.

“I do love you, my sweet girl,” she left a kiss on Hermione’s temple but had pulled away and was fussing over Draco before a stunned Hermione could respond.

Hermione’s parents came to embrace them and it was all more ceremony than she was comfortable with. But she was happy that they approved, even if she suspected that her father’s endorsement was largely a reaction to Draco’s recently expressed willingness to learn to play golf.

She got a big hug from Claire and more formally expressed congratulations from Draco’s other relatives, though his grandmother did clasp her hand in a way that was almost affectionate and it was almost more touching to Hermione than anything else. Amidst all of this Lucius came back into the room. Hermione noticed him pull Narcissa aside and speak quietly to her while Claire was examining her ring and teasing Draco about his ‘surprisingly good taste.’ After a few minutes he approached them, giving her a hug and a kiss on the forehead.

“Is something the matter?” Draco asked, apparently having noticed his parent’s hushed conversation as well.

Lucius sighed. “Perhaps we should speak more privately.” He then excused himself, Narcissa, her and Draco, and her parents and led them to his study.

She clung to Draco’s hand the whole way and when they entered the room he pulled her over to sit on a sofa while the adults settled themselves as well.

“While the two of you were gone,” Lucius addressed Draco and Hermione, “I received a floo call from the Ministry, I took it in here.”

Hermione fought the urge to squirm, this couldn’t be good news.

“It seems that Peter Pettigrew has escaped from his holding cell.”

Hermione gasped and automatically covered her mouth with her hand. She should have known something would go wrong eventually; it had all been too easy thus far. According to Lucius when he, Minister Fudge, and a pair of aurors had arrived at Hogwarts three days before to arrest the rat, Professor Dumbledore had been dubious of their story but saw no harm in checking out the claim. He’d summoned Ron to his office. Her fellow Gryffindor had arrived with Scabbers asleep in his pocket. From there it had only been a matter of asking Ron to remove him, the aurors had then forced him out of his animagus form, and stunned him. The man had never even woken up. Everybody had been predictably horrified, especially Ron, but they’d brought him back to the Ministry and locked him up without any trouble. It had seemed a rather anticlimactic ending, but in this case that had been a good thing.

After that Lucius and Minister Fudge had discussed Lucius contacting Lord Black and arranging for him to turn himself in after the New Year. Sirius had been resting, spending the majority of his time in a potions induced healing sleep in a guest room in Malfoy Manor ever since- not that the Ministry knew anything about that. His freedom was considered a foregone conclusion, it was just a matter of waiting until the Wizengamot could gather, which they wouldn't do until after the
holidays. Hermione had been shocked by their lackadaisical attitude and now it seemed Pettigrew had escaped as a result. If they had been willing to call an emergency session he would have been securely ensconced in Azkaban by now.

“What does that mean for Sirius!” She cried. She’d become fond of the man. The hours he had been awake over the past few days he had prefered to spend in her and Draco’s company- it was clear he didn’t particularly trust the elder Malfoys- and they’d all had a chance to get to know each other. It was bizarre to converse with somebody whose knowledge of current events ended when she had been a baby, and who was more than a little mentally unstable, but under it all she could tell that he was a good man- if unfortunately rather impetuous- and he was a lot of fun to be around. Though she would like him better if she could break him of the unfortunate habit of calling her ‘Kitten.’ Still, she couldn’t wait for Harry to meet him.

“I’m doing my best to see that this doesn’t have any effect on Black’s bid for freedom. I think I’ve convinced Fudge that he’s better off with one fugitive rather than two. And Black is better as an ally than an enemy for Fudge. A career politician like him lives for opportunities to have somebody as powerful as the Head of House Black in his debt. Then, of course, there is the fact that no less than ten Ministry employees as well as myself and the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot have seen Pettigrew alive. And while they were not finished questioning him, it is my understanding that they have learned more than enough to support Black’s story.”

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief.

“But how did he escape? You people don’t seem to be particularly good at keeping your prisoners locked up,” Hermione’s father interjected.

“You people!” Hissed Hermione.

Both her father and Lucius ignored her scandalized reaction.

“I do not know for certain, but I would wager that he has information about somebody within the Ministry that they do not want exposed, and that they aided him in escaping.”

“You don’t seem particularly worried.”

Lucius shrugged. “It is unfortunate, and Black will be incensed, but I don't believe he presents a danger to us so I cannot be overly fuzzed about it. The whole of our world will be looking for him when this is made public, his animagus form will no longer be a secret. He'll need to flee or go deep underground so I doubt he'll remain in the country.”

“He's a serial killer though,” said her mother.

“I'm sorry I'm not familiar with that term.”

“He's killed a lot of people,” her father supplied, his face hard.

“I am aware, and of course I would prefer to see him in prison, but there's nothing I can do about it. I am simply relieved that he is not a danger to my family, if he wanted to hurt our children he's had ample opportunity already, attempting to do so now would be suicide. I knew him a little at Hogwarts, and after. He's not a powerful wizard, nor particularly clever. But he is also not stupid. He is a follower who does what he must to save his own skin. Like I said, I doubt he'll even remain in the country.”

Her mother just sighed. Hermione knew how they worried about her when she was at Hogwarts, and about her life in the magical world in general. This wouldn’t help, but at least they could all
still continue to look forward to her gaining the protection of House Black.

“When will you tell Sirius?” Hermione asked after a long silence.

“At the last possible moment. He should be as recovered as possible before he turns himself in for his trial, this knowledge would only interrupt that. I’ll probably have to stun him to keep him from storming down there and hexing everybody in sight. Incarcerated was a barely tolerable option to him, he wants Pettigrew dead.”

Narcissa covered his hand with hers. “Can you blame him?”

Nobody had any response to that.

They arrived back at Hogwarts just in time for dinner. The few students who had stayed were already in the Great Hall waiting for the meal. But when Harry spotted her he actually stood up and grinned and then signaled her over. She hurried over to him.

“Did you have a good Christmas?” she asked stupidly when he just continued to smile at her without giving any indication as to why.

He laughed. “That’s right, you probably don’t know! My Godfather’s innocent! I should be able to go and live with him from now on and he’s already signed my permission slip for Hogsmeade. I haven’t met him yet, he’s in St. Mungo’s for mind healing after everything he’s been through but we’ve been owling.”

She blinked back tears, she was ecstatic for him but also heartbroken by how willing he was to allow somebody he once thought to be a traitor and a criminal and with whom he’d only exchanged a few letters to take over his guardianship. “I did read about it in the Daily Prophet, I got a subscription sent to my house,” she said shyly, she hated lying to him. “I’m so happy for you Harry!” She hugged him tight but searched for Draco over his shoulder. When she met his eyes he gave her a nod, she discreetly pulled her right hand to her lips and kissed her ring. He smiled broadly, tapped the side of his nose, and looked away. She bit her lip to keep from laughing at his appropriation of that muggle gesture.

They sat down to eat the predictably wonderful feast and Harry and Ron began to tell her about their holidays. It all sounded lovely enough, though she did not envy them having stayed at Hogwarts. When they mentioned that Harry had received a broom- and not just any broom, but the best racing broom on the market- from an anonymous source for Christmas Hermione dropped her fork and she actually felt her mouth fall open as they relayed the tale. She pushed her plate away from her, feeling sick.

“Let me get this straight? You received an anonymous gift, of something as expensive as a broomstick- nonetheless- after you had just discovered that there had been a Death Eater living undiscovered in your dorm for two and a half years, and you thought it would be a good idea to just try it out?”

Harry looked hurt.

“Oh get over it Hermione, you’re just jealous, it worked perfectly fine,” Ron said through a mouth full of food.

Normally she would have looked away in disgust and ignored him, but she was too angry. “Jealous! I don’t even like flying, in case you’ve forgotten. I’d say what’s really going on here is that you cared so little about your best friend’s safety that you were willing to risk it for a ride on a top of
It was the Marauders Map all over again. Within minutes of being given it by Fred and George, Harry had used the potentially dangerous magical object to sneak into Hogsmeade when he'd fully believed there was a mass murderer on the loose and after him. And Ron had thought it nothing but a lark, he hadn't given a second thought to Harry's safety. Which was why she'd recruited Draco to help her steal it from him, obviously neither of them could be trusted to use it carefully, especially over the holidays while she would not be there to supervise them. She only now knew it was safe and not some sort of trap because Sirius had confessed his part in making it. She ran her thumb over her ring in an effort to calm herself so that she could appeal to Harry’s more reasonable side.

And then, perfectly timed to interrupt what could have easily turned in to a terrible row, two owls swooped in. One landed on her shoulder and very formally presented a letter to her. The other landed on the table in front of Ron, it carried a letter as well as a long package. She knew what her’s contained, of course, but they were putting on a bit of a show for Harry’s sake. She knew Sirius hated that he couldn't tell Harry the full truth of how he'd gained his freedom and how he knew Hermione, but even he had to admit that they were big secrets for a 13 year old boy to keep. It was hard enough for Draco and Hermione, there was no need to similarly burden Harry, and the oaths the Malfoys had put him under forbade him from telling his godson anything that they didn't approve beforehand anyway.

Hermione set her letter aside and eagerly watched Ron. The redhead could drive her crazy but- for the most part- he was a good friend to Harry and she was interested to see what Sirius had sent him as way of thanks. He ripped open the letter and read it quickly. Unlike the owl that had delivered her missive the one that had carried his had remained behind.

He eyed the creature with a smile on his face. “Lord Black, um, he told me to call him Sirius, he’s sent me this owl to replace Scabbers,” he laughed a little uncomfortably.

“Well, it is kind of his fault you lost your pet,” Harry said good naturedly.

Ron grinned at him and then tore into the package and his eyes lit up as soon at he saw the label on the box. “A Cleansweep 4000?! Harry, mate, he said this was a thank you for being your friend, he didn’t need to do this. I mean I don’t need presents for that.”

For once Hermione was utterly impressed with him.

Harry dipped his head and shrugged it off. “Your mum has sent me gifts every year. And anyway this is almost as much for me as it is for you. It’ll be a lot more fun to practice with you riding this, those school brooms are terrible.”

Ron was red and Harry was carefully studying his plate, it was obvious to Hermione that both boys were a little emotional and didn’t know how to handle it. “Hey, that’s like one of the best keepers brooms available, isn’t it?” she interjected to break the tension.

Ron looked up at her in surprise. She just shrugged. She knew that they didn’t think she listened to them when they discussed Quidditch or flying, and that was mostly true, but she loved the way that Draco’s eyes lit up when he talked about either of those subjects, and as a result, she knew a lot more about it than her friends ever would have guessed.

“Hey,” Ron perked up, “if Sirius bought me a broom he probably sent you the Firebolt,” he said, sending Hermione a triumphant look.

It was entirely possible, Sirius had still been in hiding at Malfoy Manor on Christmas day, so if he
had sent Harry a present it made sense that he had done so anonymously. But that begged the question about why he hadn’t claimed credit once he had started writing to Harry. Then again, he still wasn’t in the most logical frame of mind, and it may just not have occurred to him. He would need every day of the mind healing St. Mungo’s was providing him before Hogwarts let out for the summer. She took a deep breath, and looked at Harry pleadingly.

“Maybe he did Harry. But maybe he didn’t. People have tried to hurt you by jinxing a broom in the past, remember Quirrel? And just because it worked the first time doesn’t mean it’s safe, it could have something like a time released curse on it. At least write Sirius and make sure it’s from him before you ride it again. Please, I just want you to be safe.”
She held his gaze and willed him to understand. She didn’t want to ruin his fun, but she’d never forgive herself if he got hurt because she wanted to avoid a fight. Finally he began to slowly nod.
She heard Ron huff in annoyance but she refused to look at him.

“What does your letter say?” Harry asked, after a moment his eyes were back to looking happy and he was obviously holding back a smile.

She peeled open the seal and read the contents carefully, even though she already knew what it said, they would never believe she wouldn’t be very deliberate about reading it.
“Lord Black is offering me the patronage of House Black,” she said quietly, she looked up to see that Harry was grinning at her and practically bouncing in his seat.

“Do you know what that means?”

She nodded. “Yes I’ve read about it.” He gave her a knowing look and she shrugged at him. “He would act in loco parentis for me in the magical world. I would be like a child of House Black, just like you are as his godson. It’s a big deal, and a great honor.”

Harry nodded eagerly and Hermione was pleased that Sirius seemed to have explained it thoroughly to him; she knew that he had asked Harry’s permission before formally making her the offer, but she had still been somewhat concerned that he would feel some jealousy over sharing his newly discovered parental figure. She should have known better, that really wasn’t in Harry’s nature.

“Padfoot told me that you made friends with a stray dog last fall,” he said quietly, Sirius’ animagus form was not public knowledge, but he’d ‘informed’ her of it in his letter and he’d obviously told Harry too. “Thank you for taking care of him.”

“Oh Harry,” she cried, throwing his arms around is neck, “I was just being nice to a sweet dog, I didn’t know who he was. If I had and had known he was innocent I would have taken care of him for your sake, of course, but I really can’t take credit for what I did do.”

“Still,” he insisted, “he said that you helped him get his mind back on the right track so that he could find a way to get his name cleared. I have my godfather back because of you.”
She swallowed thickly. She hated taking credit for things that were largely Draco, Lucius, and Narcissa’s doing, but she had a cover story to maintain. And she was so happy to see him so happy.

“Well, you’re giving me more credit than I deserve, but if it’s okay with you and my parents I will happily accept his offer.”

For the first time in their friendship he leaned over and gave her a hug. “You’ll be kind of like my sister, then,” he murmured to her.

Tears sprung to her eyes and she just nodded against his neck. When they pulled apart she
accidentally met Ron’s eyes across the table and it took all of her considerable training from Narcissa, in hiding her emotions, to keep from recoiling away from the ugly, jealous look on his face. That was a complication she hadn’t anticipated.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you Weestarmeggie for beta reading, and talking me through my issues with this chapter, you are wonderful! And thanks to the rest of you for being patient in the longer than usual time between updates, and for the continued fabulous response to this fic. I hope y’all aren’t disappointed Pettigrew is once again on the loose :)
Chapter 22

Narcissa paced nervously in front of the floo. She'd been sitting in the floo room waiting for over an hour and had taken to pacing ten minutes ago. Finally, her husband stepped out of the fire and she immediately stopped lest she be spotted looking so openly nervous by their expected guest. Lucius just gave her a reassuring nod and a quick, hard kiss before he stepped out of the way so that their guest could come through. She was grateful for Lucius' assurance because Sirius' face resembled a storm cloud, and if she'd gone by his expression alone, she would have been convinced things hadn't gone their way.

She carefully studied her cousin and felt a little tug at her heartstrings as she did so. It had been so many years since she had been able to look at any member of her family with affection. And she hadn't set eyes on Sirius in months. It would have aroused too much suspicion for her to visit him in St. Mungo's. He had been released only hours before and had immediately gone to the Ministry for the hearing which would decide if he was allowed to take custody of Harry Potter. He'd applied for the hearing the moment he'd been told his release from St. Mungo's was imminent a few weeks previously. He hadn't wanted to wait a moment, she hadn't blamed him.

He looked good; handsome, and his frame had filled out even if there was still a certain haunted quality about him. He looked like a Black. Polished, aristocratic, and a little bit dangerous. He actually reminded her of her father in those days when she'd still been very young, and idolized him because of the way he doted on her. Before she realized his attentions were due to her fair looks. Her sisters looked like Blacks, she looked like her mother. She was the one he showed off.

It had been a bitter disappointment, the day she'd figured it out. And she couldn't even blame Bellatrix for her vicious and terrifying resentment. But Andromeda had been there for her. And now it was too dangerous for her to even speak to her sister, but she would do what she could to protect her.

She sighed. "Hello Sirius," she said carefully.

He sighed in return. "I'd love to do something like sweep you up in my arms and give you a smacking kiss on the cheek, which I know you wouldn't approve of, but I'm not in the mood," he huffed.

She frowned. "I thought things went well."

"They did, your cousin is in his predictable Black temper," Lucius drawled, rocking back on his heels in a sure sign of annoyance.

She arched an eyebrow in his direction.

"Your's is always perfectly managed of course, my love," Lucius answered smoothly, "you are, and have always been the best of your House."

"Merlin, but you are ruled by your wife, Malfoy," Sirius snorted.

"You couldn't possibly appreciate what it is to have a wife," Lucius snapped back.
"I've ordered dinner. I was anticipating a celebration, shall we talk over that?" Narcissa suggested attempting to distract them. And much to her amusement it worked immediately. Both men nodded- she supposed they had been confined to the Wizengamot chamber for the whole of the afternoon. She took Lucius' offered arm and they retired to the dining room.

"I would have appreciated it if the two of you had told me what a ruthless old bastard Dumbledore has become," Sirius said, almost as soon as they were seated.

Ah- so Dumbledore had attempted to block Sirius' custody claim. They had assumed he might but had also considered the possibility that he wouldn't object and might even argue on Sirius' behalf in order to make him feel beholden.

Lucius sniffed. "Are you maintaining that he hasn't always been like that? Because I've thought you many things, Black. Stupid and overly trusting, among them, but surely you've noticed that Dumbledore's actions have always been consistent. He seeks control, above all else. He avoids being overtly political but that doesn't mean that he doesn't have a clear objective, or that he is not willing to do whatever he must to achieve it."

"Merlin but I hate to admit it," he almost closed his eyes at the admission, "something about Dumbledore always made me shifty. But I didn't expect him to fight Harry's guardianship. What could he possibly have had to benefit from that?" He took a moment to look between the couple. "You don't seem surprised."

Narcissa glanced at Lucius. "After you were taken to Azkaban he shut down every wizarding families' bid to take possession of the boy. We didn't even try, but I was shocked that he wasn't sent to the Bones', amongst others."

"Lily would have wanted him to know about the muggle world. But they would both have been appalled that he'd been kept from his magical heritage all this time. The Potters were very proud."

"I remember," said Narcissa, "they were a respectable family, despite what I know you heard my parents say, they were a good example of a proper wizarding House."

"You know, speaking of Dumbledore, he's bound to be suspicious that we have some kind of alliance after today."

"Let him suspect," said Lucius carelessly, "I'm certain he's been suspicious ever since I entered his office with Fudge and he realized I was there in a bid to clear your name. Though I personally suspect that at the time, he thought I simply wanted you out of Azkaban so that I could have you quietly killed in order to allow Draco to inherit the Black title. I don't know what he'll think after today. My hope is that he will interpret my support of your attempt to gain custody of Mr. Potter as outrage over the idea that the wishes of an Ancient and Noble House could ever be overruled by a claim from muggles, and nothing more."

"Good thing I'm no good to you dead," answered Sirius dryly. "But that's what I don't understand? He must've known how that would go over with all the old Houses, trying to deny a godfather custody like that. He lost a lot of political capital today. Why is he so insistent that Harry return to those muggles who don't seem to want him anymore than he wants to go back to them? At least according to him."

Narcissa glanced at her husband again and he gave her a slight nod of approval. They'd put together what could only be described as a working hypothesis over the past months using Narcissa's research into parental and sacrificial blood magic. They knew Sirius was not going to like what they'd concluded, but they thought it was important that he had the full picture, lest he fold to
Dumbledore's pretty words and manipulations. They knew they would need the old wizard onside eventually, but they wanted to remain free of his machinations for as long as possible.

"Do you remember the story we told you in December about the night Harry, Hermione and the Weasley boy went after the philosopher's stone in a misguided attempt to protect it from Severus Snape?"

Sirius dropped his utensils and took a deep breath. "You mean the night Harry came face to face with you-know-who in the back of his defense against the dark arts professor's head? After conquering a set of obstacles set up by adult wizards alongside a boy who most likely had his parents betrayer in his pocket at the time?" He asked incredulously, eyes boring into hers. "Yeah, Narcissa, I remember that. The nightmares I had in Azkaban are nothing compared to the ones that story gave me."

Narcissa winced but continued. "Harry was saved that night because of the blood protection his mother's sacrifice left with him. We've come to believe that protection could be extended by a certain amount - a little, or a lot, depending on the circumstances. For instance, if Harry was living with blood relatives on his mother's side, it could broaden to encompass the entire dwelling."

Sirius seemed to consider that. "That makes sense, theoretically. But the problem is that Lily's sister and her son are both muggles, they have no magic of their own to power the wards, that would be entirely on Harry, which could be very dangerous for him. You said having you-know-who touching him drained him. What would a sustained assault on that muggle house do? And then, once breached, Harry would be the only one with a wand to defend them. And that scenario only accounts for you-know-who himself. He could send a Death Eater in there at any point and they'd all be sitting ducks." He raked his hands through his hair which he'd pulled free from it's leather tie, and just stared off into space.

"We concluded something similarly," she replied quietly.

"But you don't think Dumbledore has figured that out? You think he really believes Harry is safer in the muggle world?"

"It's possible," she hedged slightly.

"Oh for fucks sake, Narcissa, spit it out!" he yelled, slapping the table.

She jumped, but quickly composed herself. "Before Harry came to Hogwarts he was completely ignorant of the magical world. Hermione says that he knew even less than she did. Hogwarts has made up almost the entirety of his experience in our world. Hogwarts, Dumbledore's school."

Sirius narrowed his eyes.

"Do you know why- exactly- the Potters decided to go into hiding? Because the Dark Lord had been after them for years and they had never backed down before. Even after their child was born."

"No, I thought that was odd as well, but I knew there were things James didn't tell me, it was safest to share as little information as possible in those times and I didn't press him. I know they feared for Harry."

"There was rumor of a prophecy," Lucius interjected.

Sirius visibly started, then scoffed. "You think my godson is the subject of a prophecy? That's insane."
"The Dark Lord wouldn't have thought so. Probably because he was almost fully insane himself by the end. Insane and desperate to take out anybody he saw as a threat. And let me tell you, he was obsessed with tracking down the Potters. And then he did and it got him disembodied." Lucius paused rather dramatically. "Now tell me do you really think it was a coincidence that he was in Hogwarts the first year your godson came to school?"

Sirius downed a glass of wine and then watched as an elf refilled it before responding. "So you think Dumbledore wants to keep Harry close, because of this prophecy?"

"Whether it is due to a prophecy or not, the Dark Lord is after Mr. Potter. Where he is the Dark Lord will seek him. We believe that Dumbledore wants to keep him under his control. Whether it is to wield him like a weapon, use him as bait, or something else, I'm not even sure Dumbledore knows at this juncture. But he knows he'll be important in the coming war. And the Scion of an Ancient and Noble House, educated in his heritage with access to the resources of another Ancient and Noble House is not so easily controlled."

Narcissa watched Sirius absorb this and- in the blink of an eye- his eyes went hard and he leapt out of his seat.

"Incarcerous," said Lucius, almost lazily, and then he levitated the other wizard back into his chair. He met Narcissa's eyes, and cocked an eyebrow, she gave him a hollow smile. Sirius was still too much of a loose cannon for either of them to feel completely comfortable with, but he was also too much of a gift to just throw away.

"Let me go! I'm going to kill him," he ranted, "he knew you-know-who was after my pup and he left him in a muggle house with weak wards. Wanted to keep him there still!" He squirmed desperately within his bonds.

Narcissa wondered if he'd even considered using magic.

"Oh yes, that's exactly what you should do," drawled Lucius sarcastically, "attempt to break into Hogwarts and murder one of the most powerful wizards who has ever lived. A wizard who just stood in front of the whole of the Wizengamot and tried to convince them that you weren't mentally fit to raise your godson. You'd be playing right into his hands. Absolutely brilliant."

"You don't understand," Sirius snapped, face red and eyes full of rage.

Narcissa stood up so that she could lean into his space. "Stop acting like a child. You are a parent now, Harry must be your first thought and your primary responsibility, not some temper tantrum you want to throw. Otherwise they will take him from you. Is that way you want?" She paused and regarded him coolly. "Perhaps it is, you let it happen once," she taunted.

"Low blow," he spat.

"You needed to hear it," she countered, "now if Lucius lets you go will you cease this nonsense and finish talking about this calmly. There are plans that need to be made."

"Yes, fine," he agreed.

Lucius canceled the spell. Sirius visibly gathered himself and they went back to their meal.

"The boy should have extra training. We've been providing it for Hermione and Draco since their first year. But I can only assume it will be even more important for him," Lucius said, by way of restarting the conversation.
Sirius nodded. "I'd actually already thought of that. That curse on the defense post is a real problem. Harry's grandfather hired a tutor for me and James before OWLs. Apparently they had a good teacher at the beginning of this year, at least until somebody got him fired," he said pointedly.

"He is a werewolf," Lucius bit back in return, completely unrepentant.

"Yes, and you're a Death Eater. At least Remus didn't ask to be bitten and turned into a monster."

Narcissa saw the way her husband's nostrils flared and his face colored and quickly intervened before things could escalate. "But the fact is that once a month he does turn into a blood-thirsty wolf who has no control over himself, and no business in the midst of a school full of children," she said quickly, and more gently than she thought he deserved.

"If he takes wolfsbane he keeps his mind."

"If he takes a notoriously tricky-to-brew potion exactly as prescribed. And Dumbledore didn't have any other precautions in place, he just let him lock himself up in the Shrieking Shack. A barrier you know very well was gotten past by a student in the past, considering you were the one who set that up."

"That was a prank," Sirius responded defiantly.

She shook her head. "Well it wasn't funny. And now that you have a child of your own I would hope that you can see that clearly. What would you do if somebody put Harry in that situation? If you want to risk your own life I suppose that's one thing, but you have a responsibility to protect his. We weren't comfortable with the situation with Professor Lupin and we stand by that decision, I'll not be arguing about it any further," she said firmly.

"Well, I've hired him,," Sirius retorted. "I need help getting the affairs of House Black and House Potter in order. They've both been sadly neglected for years and that's much more Moony's department than mine."

Narcissa fought not to roll her eyes at the nickname.

"He'll be good at helping me teach Harry some defense as well. I won't be talked out of it," he continued, sounding like a defiant teenager.

She did roll her eyes this time. "Just keep him far away from my children on the full moon. Otherwise I don't care what you do."

There was a long silence, only interrupted by the sounds of cutlery scraping against china and the elves moving around, making sure all of their needs were fulfilled.

"There are some areas that could use your expertise, Narcissa. If you wouldn't mind," Sirius stumbled over the last words.

He was so blatantly uncomfortable asking for a favor she almost laughed. "What's that?"

"Just some things that are usually relegated to the Lady of the House. Obviously I don't have one of those and there were a lot of domestic issues that weren't covered in my lessons as a child."

She smiled softly, there was no reason to make him suffer, he was actually trying to be responsible about this. "I'm surprised you listened in those lessons," she teased instead.

He shot her a wolfish grin. "Enough to get by, at least."
She chuckled. "Well, I'd be happy to help, but I was also hoping you would reach out to Andromeda."

His eyes went wide. "Andromeda! Yes, I should have thought of that. And she deserves to be reinstated into the family." He eyed her when she remained silent. "You're not going to fight me on that?"

"No. I never wanted to lose Andromeda in the first place. I didn't agree with what she did but I certainly didn't want to see her disowned, I just wasn't in any position to support her. But I'd like to at least know that she's okay."

"She ran off to marry a muggleborn, not to live on the streets," he answered, looking at her like she was daft.

"I'm aware of that Sirius. I know she's not destitute, but there is little I do know about her life. I know she became a healer. I know she has a daughter who was a Hufflepuff- of all things. But I don't actually know if she's okay, if she's happy," she finished with emphasis.

"You could contact her yourself."

Narcissa resisted the urge to do something very unbecoming, like huff in frustration. "That would drag her into this mess, into all these secrets. I don't want to do that to her."

"You had no trouble doing it to me."

"Oh please, Sirius, you were already in this up to your neck long before you ever jumped onto our breakfast room table. I just saw an opening."

He laughed.

When they retired to a sitting room after dinner Lucius and Narcissa exchanged yet another significant glance.

"Okay, Sirius," she began cautiously, "we need to tell you about a diary that has passed into our possession from the Dark Lord, via Lucius' father. It's important. But before we do I need your assurance that we won't have to tie you up again. We're never going to get anything done if we have to keep doing that…"

When Hermione entered her dorm room Ginny was sitting on her bed cuddling Duke. It was all she could do not to rush forward and rip him out of the younger girl's arms. She knew that Ginny didn't know any better, but the only people who were allowed to touch Duke were her and Draco. She absolutely did not want him smelling like Ginny Weasley and she was already annoyed that the other witch was in her room and on her bed. It was pretty presumptuous behavior for somebody she considered to be little more than an acquaintance. And who rarely had time for her unless she needed something.

"Hey Ginny, what's up?" she said, doing her best to look cheerful.

"Hey Hermione. Does your dragon toy belong to your boyfriend?"

"Uh, yeah, he's had Duke since he was a baby. But how did you know that?"

"You've had him for as long as I've known you, but he's obviously older than that. He's a magical toy so you must've gotten him from somebody who grew up here." She shrugged.
"Oh well, yes," she said, waiting for Ginny to get to her point.

"So, you're going to spend some time at Harry's house over the summer?" she ventured in a way that Hermione could only assume she thought was nonchalant.

Of course- when Ginny sought her out it was almost always about Harry.

"Yes, now that I'm under the protection of House Black, Lord Black is responsible for making sure I'm educated in the ways of wizarding society since I'm a representative of his House. It wouldn't do for me to embarrass him. And since Harry lives with him, then yes, of course I'll be seeing him too."

"How long will you be there?"

Hermione wondered if Ginny had any idea how rude she was being.

"I don't know. Harry and Lord Black have yet to even meet each other. It's important that they settle in first. I would never want to intrude. We're going to discuss it in a few weeks."

"Why do you keep calling him that?"

"Why do I keep calling who, what?"

"Lord Black. He told Ron to call him 'Sirius' and you're his ward now, surely he told you that you could do the same."

"He did," she said impatiently.

"So then why do you still call him Lord Black?" Ginny insisted.

She sighed, it wasn't her responsibility to explain these things to the girl. "He has given me leave to call him by his given name. He has not given me leave to do so when speaking of him to others, and I wouldn't want anybody to think that I don't respect him."

Ginny laughed, "that's so old fashioned. I know you probably read that in a book but nobody does that anymore."

She bit her lip to stop herself from telling her that just because her family didn't do it, didn't mean that it wasn't still considered to be normal amongst the rest of society. She was pretty sure the younger witch wouldn't believe her and would just take it as a slight.

Ron had said something similar to her a few days after she'd returned to Hogwarts from the Christmas holidays. He'd been pouting for days- whenever he wasn't on his new broom, actually- and hinting heavily that he should have been offered the protection of House Black just as Hermione had been. She'd tried to ignore it. But then one night in the common room- tired of seeing Harry looked confused, concerned, and unable to decide between wanting to please his friend and risking upsetting his godfather- she'd snapped.

She'd explained to Ron that it would have been highly inappropriate for Lord Black to offer such a thing to him, as he already came from an old wizarding family. It would be like implying the Weasleys weren't capable of educating and caring for their own children. She'd given him several books to reference. He'd openly scoffed at her and told her that she couldn't learn about the magical world in a book and that she was just making herself sound stupid and typically swotty.

But then Neville, of all people, had interrupted and said that Hermione was absolutely right. He'd
quietly, but confidently explained to Ron that he needed to be quiet because people were beginning
to notice what he was saying, and it was going to become embarrassing to his family. That had,
 begrudgingly, shut him up.

She just shrugged at Ginny and again resolved to wait her out, hoping the inquisition was over.

"How did you get Leo's attention?" she finally asked.

Hermione almost laughed. Ginny was so predictable.

'Leo.' That was what Hermione had blurted out when she'd been caught off guard by somebody
asking the name of her boyfriend. But it turned out to be rather perfect.

Draco hated it.

'You've named me after a lion, Hermione! I'm no Gryffindor,' he had whined, repeatedly. She'd just
laughed at him and told him the same thing over and over. 'I've named you after a constellation,
just like your mother did. I could have chosen something less fearsome.' He still grumbled
whenever it was brought up, but Hermione had pointed out that she couldn't just change it. She
couldn't reasonably explain that she'd gotten her own boyfriend's name wrong.

"I wasn't trying to get his attention. Not like that," she told Ginny with a sigh. She missed Draco, it
had been a busy term and they hadn't had nearly as much time together as they'd become
accustomed to. But they were returning home for the summer soon and she was practically
counting the hours, "we were friends first," she finished with a small smile.

"You're friends with Harry."

"Yes, Ginny but we're just friends," she said emphatically.

"I know. I mean things must be pretty serious with Leo for him to have given you that ring."

Hermione laughed as she remembered the response to her ring had garnered. The moment they'd
gotten inside her dorm room that first night back at Hogwarts the squealing had begun and it had
been ear splitting. Her roommates had kept her up into the early hours asking her everything they
could think of. It was the first time she'd felt like part of the group and she hadn't been sure she
liked it. It had seemed shallow.

The next morning news of her new accessory quickly made the rounds and girls came from the
other House tables all throughout breakfast to see it and to congratulate her. She was the first girl in
her year to receive such a token. A ring wasn't traditional, it was usually a necklace or bracelet, but
she'd explained over and over about the concept of promise rings and how he'd thoughtfully
acknowledged her muggle heritage. And while she could tell that some people didn't approve of
that, she got mostly dreamy sighs in response. She hadn't been sure she'd liked any of that either.

"They are, I love him," she said, returning to the present and the uninvited visitor to her dorm.

"Will you help me become friends with Harry?" she blurted.

Hermione closed her eyes in frustration. "No, Ginny I won't."

She would have, six months before, if she'd thought Ginny was looking for genuine friendship. But
since Sirius had been granted his freedom Harry's celebrity had risen to a new heights. Sometimes
he seemed to be drowning in it. He needed people who wanted to be around him for the right
reasons, now more than ever, and she just didn't trust Ginny's motives.
"Seriously, that's it?" The younger witch scoffed, and Hermione realized that she'd never really thought she would be turned away.

"Yes, Ginny, you haven't given me any reason to agree to help you. I know you have a crush on Harry and that's just not the kind of thing he needs more of right now."

"So what, are you his bodyguard now?" She snapped.

Hermione rubbed her forehead with the heel of her palm, she could actually feel a headache coming on. "Ginny you asked me to help you, I said no," she explained slowly. "If you really want to be Harry's friend then talk to him, get to know him. I'm not going to poison him against you or anything like that, but you're also not getting an 'in' from me."

"You don't have to be such a bitch about it." She tossed Duke down and stomped out the door.

"Oh yeah, that's really going to convince me to help you," she murmured to herself, picking up the stuffed toy and hugging him tight, murmuring apologies for the rough treatment. She flopped onto her bed, silenced her curtains, and pulled out her mirror.

"Draco Malfoy," she said quietly. This was what had really annoyed her about Ginny's intrusion. She'd come upstairs particularly to talk to Draco before he went to quidditch practice (despite the fact that the season was over) because after dinner he was going to be doing something along with some of his fellow Slytherins that she'd decided she wouldn't ask details about, but that she hoped wouldn't get him in trouble during their last days at school. They'd had precious little time to talk lately and now the time they had set aside would be cut short.

"Hey!" he answered breathlessly.

She felt her eyes go wide. "Draco, are you naked?!

He looked momentarily confused and then he started to laugh. "You didn't call and I assumed you'd gotten held up so I went ahead and started to change," he shifted the mirror so that she could see that while he was topless, he was wearing quidditch bottoms. She still blushed furiously and he laughed even harder. "It's not like you've never seen me without a shirt on."

"I was caught off guard!" she defended, flicking at his face on the screen of her mirror.

"So what's up?" he wondered.

"Ugh," she griped, "I came up here for some privacy and Ginny was waiting for me on my bed."

Draco made a face. "Do you Gryffindors have no boundaries, or is that a girl thing? None of my roommates would dare, much less anybody else."

"I suspect it's a combination of the two," she sighed, "I was barely civil," she admitted.

"What did the smallest ginger menace want?"

Hermione rolled her eyes but she felt her lips twitch with amusement. Draco didn't like the Weasleys, but she knew his derision was mostly a result of the fact that he was just always on her side, and she loved that. "My help befriending Harry."

He whistled lowly. "Wow, I've gotta hand it to her, she has some nerve."

"She first asked me how long I would be spending at Harry's house this summer. Then she asked
me how I first got Leo's," she drew the name out teasingly, "attention. And when I told her that I
didn't. That we were friends first and it just grew from there, that's when she asked me if I would
help her make friends with Harry."

"Like I said, nerve," he laughed.

"She didn't even try to be subtle about it!" She exclaimed, her voice almost a whine.

"It probably didn't occur to her," he shrugged, "she seems to be used to getting what she wants.
She's the queen bee of her year, your Potter is the only one who seems not to have noticed."

"Does that mean you've noticed?"

"I've observed her behavior," he replied, refusing to rise to the bait.

"I just, does she really think I'm that stupid or that desperate? I tried to be nice to her, and she
rebuked me. Now she sees that I have an 'in' with Harry but am no longer a threat to her because I
have a serious boyfriend, and she suddenly wants my help."

"Well, she's a Gryffindor."

"I'm a Gryffindor!" She objected.

"You've been taken in by a den of snakes, we've honed your instincts."

She thought about his words, and then of the warmth and love she felt at Malfoy Manor and started
to giggle.

"What?" He questioned.

"It's just very difficult to think of your family as a den of snakes."

"Ah- that's because you persist in considering that to be a bad thing." There was a banging sound in
the background. "Sorry, I have to go, that's Flint making sure I'm on my way."

"Okay, be careful at practice. And with whatever you're up to tonight."

"I always am."

She gave him a stern look but he just reached out and touched his mirror with one finger, a sweet-
if unfelt- caress of farewell.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you Weestarmeggie for beta reading and for listening to me drone on for hours
about fictional magical theory for this story. Thanks to all of you for your patience.
My other WIP is currently winding down and is getting a lot more of my attention than
usual. Speaking of that story, I mentioned I'd created a Pinterest board for it in the A/N
of my last update and people actually went and checked it out. So, if you're interested,
there is a board for this story too. RiverWriter over there as well. But mostly, I
continue to be blown away by the response to this story and I can't thank you enough
for that. It's so wonderful to see so much love for something I already love to do. So,
as always, thanks for reading!
Chapter 23

Hermione was pretty sure she would never forget the look on Harry's face when she arrived at Potter House for the first time. Such pure unadulterated joy was a rare thing to behold. She was thrilled for her friend.

It had been a lovely summer thus far. Her days had been mostly spent at the Manor. Lucius and Narcissa had accelerated their lessons, or maybe it just felt that way. She had certainly worked harder this summer than she ever had before. She was happy that she and Draco both flourished in such an environment; even if he did have a slight tendency to whinge, he picked up on things as quickly as she did, which is why- at least she suspected- that his parents largely ignored his childishness. She only had to roll her eyes in his direction and he almost always shut up.

She had a hard time imagining that she would ever love anything as much as she loved performing magic with Draco. She knew that what they were capable of together was extraordinary, she knew Lucius and Narcissa were pushing them to see what they could achieve, and she also knew that there were things they weren't telling them about what they could do. It could be frustrating but it was worth it. They were helping her turn her mind into a steel trap, making sure she would never embarrass herself in polite society, and let her have her run of their spectacular estate along with their son. And she and Draco had their own secrets, they never openly discussed with his parents the nature of their connection; it was sacred, intimate, theirs.

She had also gone on a two week holiday with her parents to France. Draco had accompanied them for one of those weeks and it was by far the most time he'd ever spent with her family without returning to the magical world. Her heart had felt so full as she'd watched him with her parents, and he was enveloped into their family fold like it was the most natural thing in the world. They spent most of the holiday at the beach and Hermione basked in both the sun and the heat in Draco's gaze as he perused her bikini clad body. She spent one day in magical Paris with both her mother and Narcissa as they shopped for a suitable set of dress robes that Narcissa had assured her she would need around Yule. It had been wonderful.

It had been decided that she would spend the last two weeks of the summer with Sirius and Harry at Potter House, Harry's family home. Sirius had declined to re-open any of the Black family properties and had instead decided to move them into the home where James Potter had grown up and where Sirius had spent his teenage years.

If Harry's letters were any indication he was getting along smashingly with Sirius and had also been enjoying a wonderful summer. Her usually rather reticent friend, practically gushed to her and she found herself touched that he was taking the time out of his bonding with his godfather to write her such effusive missives. So, as reluctant as she had been to leave Draco, she was excited to see Harry and how he was getting along.

He didn't disappoint. His face lit up the moment he laid eyes on her when she and Sirius apparated onto the property in a way she'd never seen before. He'd eagerly strode in her direction and enveloped her in a hug. It was all she could do not to cry; she knew it would embarrass them.

Potter House was wonderful. A beautiful Georgian mansion, smaller than the Manor- though by no means actually small. It had vast-if somewhat wild- grounds that were perfect for a boy who loved to fly and his godfather who regularly turned into a dog. Harry just seemed to belong there, as did Sirius, and they made sure that she quickly felt at home herself. She had a lovely room across the
hall from Harry but she would have gladly slept on the sofa just to witness Harry and Sirius' joy in being together.

She knew that Harry had been receiving defense lessons from Professor Lupin and that Sirius himself had begun to teach his godson about the finer details of his place in their society which were long overdue, but even she couldn't object when she learned that Harry had been given several days off of lessons at the beginning of her visit so that they could spend some time together.

Not quite a week into her stay Sirius declared that they were to host a family dinner. Harry was enthusiastic. Apparently, he quite liked Sirius' cousin- known primarily to Hermione as Narcissa's sister- and her family, and was anxious for Hermione to meet them. Professor Lupin would be attending as well. He'd actually come around for dinner a couple of times and had tried to insist that Hermione call him 'Remus' but she was having a hard time getting used to that. True, he was Sirius' age but meeting somebody as a sweet stray dog was very different than meeting them as your teacher- and she could hardly remember a time when she hadn't called Lucius and Narcissa by their first names, so there was no comparison.

Hermione had to keep herself from grinning inappropriately when she was introduced to 'Tonks.' She couldn't wait to see the look on Narcissa's face when she reported that not only did her niece insist on being addressed by her surname, but that despite the fact that she was a metamorphmagus and had literally every option available to her, she chose to wear her hair cropped short and colored hot pink. She was not surprised that she liked the older witch very much, and if not for the horror stories she knew of the Black family she would wonder if there was just something in their genes that drew people in. Actually, that might be exactly what it was.

Andromeda was tall, beautiful, and graceful, and while she didn't actually look anything like Narcissa- she had darker looks that were more traditionally associated with the Black family- it wasn't hard to imagine them as sisters. She was certainly every bit as intimidating as Narcissa had originally been to Hermione. The only difference was that she now knew how to handle it. But she also now had a myriad of secrets to keep. It was incredibly confusing given that she instinctively wanted to trust the woman.

Her husband, Ted, was a large man with an even larger personality. His gregarious demeanor was a sharp contrast to his wife's stoic elegance. But somehow, as a couple, they just seemed to make sense.

After dinner was served Sirius made a big show of clearing his throat to make an announcement. "As it turns out. Fudge wants to give us awesome World Cup tickets to help make up for that whole false imprisonment thing. Bad news: he seems to be under the impression that we'd like a family reunion, so we have to put up with the Malfoys for the night."

Hermione almost choked on a bite of roast beef. She could practically feel the humor radiating off of Sirius and she had to ignore the urge to glare at him. Lucius and Narcissa had bound him up quite tight with their vows, so she assumed that he was enjoying himself where he could and was planning to go to the World Cup and poke at them a bit in front of an audience. If she hadn't liked him so much she would have bitterly resented him making a joke out of something so serious. She knew he was angry that they wouldn't allow him to tell Harry or Remus what was really going on, but he really shouldn't play with fire like this no matter how perturbed he was, because he may have been sure of himself but she wasn't at all certain her acting skills were up to this kind of test.

Remus actually dropped his utensils in frustration at Sirius' words. "I know what you're doing Padfoot, you announced this in front of all these people so I wouldn't have the opportunity to talk
you out of it and you're planning to go and spend all night antagonizing Lucius Malfoy. But don't do it, he's not an enemy we want. You already basically threatened to take his wife and son. Isn't that enough?"

They'd floated the story to their friends and allies that the Malfoys had aided Sirius in his bid for freedom under duress. They couldn't very well leave the Minister's sudden desire to grant Sirius a trial unanswered, and they had to explain Lucius' presence at Hogwarts with Fudge over the Christmas holidays in some way.

Most people believed the story that Lucius and Narcissa had told the Minister, which is that they'd aided Sirius out of a sense of family honor. Those closer to the situation would never have believed that, they knew that the Malfoys would have needed greater incentive; and that Sirius never would have approached them in the first place with so little leverage on his side. And so as far as Remus, the Tonks, Harry, and a few others were concerned, he'd blackmailed them into helping him.

"I was perfectly in my rights threatening to void his marriage contract. That mark on his arm clearly violates the morality clause. I don't care what curse he claims to have been under when he received it, and I don't care that neither of their fathers nor my own grandfather considered it a problem. To me it is unforgivable."

"But you came to an agreement, Padfoot. I know you swore oaths. You can't use it against him, as much as you apparently might want to. Don't do anything foolish." Remus' irritation was warranted. If the charade they were enacting had been true Lucius and Narcissa would have been ready to kill Sirius, and they were not without the means to make it happen if he made himself enough of a nuisance. "And you owe him for supporting you at Harry's custody hearing." Remus reminded him.

Sirius made a derisive sound in the back of his throat. "He only did that because it offended his sensibilities to think a claim from a muggle family could overrule the wishes of the Head of an Ancient and Noble House, it would set a terrible precedent from his perspective. He was probably horrified at the very thought of his son being sent to live with muggles."

Harry snorted and elbowed Hermione playfully. "Can you imagine that? Precious pureblood Draco Malfoy in a muggle house!"

For the second time in less than five minutes Hermione nearly choked on her food. Harry, of course, interpreted that reaction as amusement and grinned at her.

"That would be something to see," she said wryly, as she remembered how admirably her boyfriend had actually adapted to the muggle world- enough to stroll around Cannes hand in hand with her without her parents feeling like they needed to supervise. He'd been avidly curious during their holiday, but never inappropriate.

"Anyway, if he didn't want to risk his wife being taken from him he probably shouldn't have become a Death Eater, if he hadn't made it clear that he's an enemy to me and my House I could have just asked for his help rather than resorting to blackmail. Evil git."

"Like father, like son," said Harry, stabbing at a piece of meat with his fork.

"Harry!" Hermione cried.

"Well it's true." He defended, eyes wide and innocent, as if he truly didn't understand what he'd just said.
"It is not. He's 14! He's...just like us! He's not his father. He's not a Death Eater and he's not evil!"

Harry frowned at her. "Why are you standing up for him?"

"I know he can be a prat and a bully, but that's a terrible thing to say, and dangerous!" She fought back tears that she wouldn't be able to explain - it was one thing to take exception to his words and another to cry over them. "Are we going to be judging everybody for things they can't control now?"

Harry seemed to remember who else was at the table because he turned bright red and looked around - at Sirius and Remus in particular - in apology.

"She's right, son," Sirius said gravely, "that's a slippery slope you're on."

Hermione bit her lip, hard, as she continued to fight back tears, not just for Draco's sake but for Lucius too. She knew that there were only a handful of people in the world who got to see the real him and she hated that.

"I'm sorry, I just meant that he makes it impossible to be around him. He's always causing trouble."

"That's because you let yourself be baited," she snapped.

"What?"

"I'm not saying it's entirely your fault, but he only behaves as he does to get attention. And you let him."

"How can you say that, after how nasty he's been to you?"

"Actually, he hasn't said anything to me in a long time. We had two classes together that you and Ron weren't in this year and he almost completely ignored me. He only acts like he does because he knows he can get a rise out of you."

She felt slightly guilty about berating him in this manner, given his ignorance of her real relationship with Draco. But, then again, she'd had more conversations with Draco about his treatment of Harry than she could count, and he'd backed off over the past year, but Harry had proved reluctant to let the rivalry go and Hermione thought it about time that he had to bear some of her frustration over it too. Harry was looking her with wide, puppy-dog eyes as if begging to know what he'd done to earn her temper. She sighed.

"Just - he's spoiled and arrogant and he's used to being the center of attention. With your fame, getting into it with you gets him the attention he craves. Ignore him and he'll leave you alone. You'll see."

"That's sage advice, Harry," Andromeda interjected, "if Draco is anything like his father."

"I'll give it a try," Harry responded glumly, looking less than excited by the prospect.

"Remus also has a point, Sirius, you shouldn't poke that bear," Andromeda continued.

"I'm not afraid of Lucius Malfoy," Sirius said petulantly, looking so much like Harry given the way they were both pouting that Hermione had to bite back a giggle.

"Well that's just foolish. You may not like him but he's ruthless, clever, politically powerful and he has even more resources at his disposal than you do. For all his faults he loves Narcissa and I am
sure that extends to Draco. He never would have thrown them out, but I'm sure the very idea of the humiliation that would have been wrought upon them by society if you had annulled his marriage has infuriated him. I know you've made oaths, but he'll find a way to get revenge if you continue to anger him. And may I remind you that you have obligations now," she looked around pointedly, "you don't have an heir, if something happens to you then Draco inherits and we are all at the mercy of the Malfoys."

Sirius looked suitably shamefaced.

"That said, it would not do to look weak, you should attend the World Cup, just behave yourself."

Sirius perked right back up. "You don't want to come and face your baby sister?" He taunted.

"I've volunteered to work so that the young people at the hospital can go, but Ted and Dora are available, I believe," she said coolly.

"What about the two of you?" He asked Ted and Tonks.

"I'm game!" She responded cheerily.

Ted nodded. "Sounds like fun to me. I was a prefect with Lucius for three years, he doesn't get under my skin no matter how loudly he disapproves of me."

"Excellent!" Sirius rubbed his hands together. "So, Moony?"

Remus sighed. "My life was much simpler without you in it."

Sirius beamed. "I know, you must have been terribly bored! Now, is that a yes?"

"Yes," he answered with a roll of his eyes.

"Oh and I almost forgot," he addressed Harry, "your friend Ron is invited too!"

Hermione stomach dropped and she had to make a concerted effort not to look dismayed. Because no matter their previous discussion, she just didn't believe that there was any way Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Sirius Black, and the entire Malfoy family could be confined to the same small space for hours at a time without something going terribly awry.

Ron arrived at Potter House two days before they were to depart for the World Cup without fanfare. He simply stepped through the floo carrying a knapsack- his parents would bring his trunk to the station on September 1st.

Harry was obviously thrilled to see him and Hermione tried to appear to be well. She wanted Harry to be happy, but she couldn't ignore the fact that when Ron was around, she always felt on edge. They simply didn't see eye to eye and she really didn't want to bicker with him while they were enjoying somebody else's hospitality.

But she found herself begin to feel genuinely distressed as she trailed behind them while Harry gave Ron an enthusiastic tour of the house and property. At first she thought she was the only one who noticed the red-head's disingenuous smiles as he surveyed Potter House, or his jealous glares when he noticed Harry's new and (finally!) well fitting clothing, but then she noticed the light in her best friend's eyes begin to dim.

"Kitten!" Sirius hissed, seemingly from out of nowhere.
She’d done her best to dissuade him from the nickname, but the moment Harry had heard it he’d burst out laughing and declared it accurate, and she’d known there would be no convincing Sirius to drop it. She glanced towards Harry and Ron who were headed off to the kitchens for a mid-morning snack she neither needed, nor particularly wanted, and scurried after him, following him all the way to the warded dueling room in the basement. She found him leaning broodily up against the wall, just inside of the door.

"Is there something wrong?"

"Why didn't you tell me that the Weasley kid is out for Harry's money?"

Hermione was brought up short. "What?" she stumbled over her words as she tried to gather her thoughts, "I know he can be a jealous git, but I thought he genuinely liked Harry."

Sirius closed his eyes and drew in several deep breaths, and then he slowly made his way over to her and placed gentle hands on her shoulders. "I apologize, I didn't mean to accuse you of anything. It's just that I saw in him... something that I saw in many of my own peers when I arrived at Hogwarts as Scion Black. I had the social awareness to avoid such people but Harry..."

Hermione bit her lip and tried to decide how much to share with him. "I don't think he made friends with Harry just because of his fame or even his money. But he can be unreasonably petty...it makes me uncomfortable. But I thought maybe I was just jealous myself. I'm not as fun as Ron, if Harry felt like he had to choose I'm not sure it would be me."

Sirius' face softened. "Harry adores you. He likes the Weasleys, but his affection for you seems almost...familial. If I'd come to know you under different circumstances, Kitten, I would still have encouraged the friendship, you're good for him. But something rubs me the wrong way about Ron, maybe he's just petty as you say, but maybe it's more. Sometimes it starts out as petty and grows into something much more sinister."

"Did you-" she clapped her hand over her mouth before she could formulate the question.

"Did I ever suspect Peter?" He asked, cocking one eyebrow in a knowing fashion, and she looked away, suitably chagrined, "not consciously, but looking back on it there were many things I should have picked up on. It makes me feel that I need to be twice as vigilant."

"I'm sorry," she breathed, horrified with herself.

"It's alright, it was a valid question. You and I have a lot of secrets, we should at least be able to be open with each other."

"Are you mad at Ron about, you know, Scabbers? She asked in a rush before she could lose her nerve.

He took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I know that wasn't his fault, that he had no way of knowing who the rat really was and I'm sure he would have been horrified if he had known. But I can't help but associate them, and I'll admit that might be coloring my impression of him."

She nodded. "I understand," she said quietly.

He chuckled bitterly. "Well now that's out there, I have a favor to ask of you."

"Okay?" She tilted her head at him curiously.
"If you feel he's being taken advantage of- by anybody, mind you- I'd like you to alert me. I'll feel better if I know you're looking out for him, you're the only witch in Britain that I know for certain has no designs on him."

She nodded. "Of course, he's more likely to listen to you about something like that than me anyway."

"Thanks Kitten." He winked, and motioned for her to precede him out of the room. She rolled her eyes and followed his lead.

The next morning the elves provided a particularly thorough spread. They knew of Hermione, Harry, and Sirius' preferences but they didn't know what Ron liked and they were obviously trying to impress him. He didn't even seem to notice, he just dug right in.

Hermione, on the other hand, was preoccupied by the way Harry was almost listless as he piled food onto his plate. He was usually enthusiastic, though polite, over meals. Hermione tried to push her worry aside and she carefully made her plate as she would any other morning, but it was hard to ignore when she could practically feel Sirius boring holes into the side of her head with his eyes. He had obviously noticed something was wrong as well and was deferring to her superior knowledge of his godson.

Still, she refused to look at him, she wasn't going to jump all over Harry about every little thing. But then Harry winced and - she was sure he did it entirely subconsciously - grabbed his scar, face screwed with pain. She and Ron gasped simultaneously. They remembered very well what it had meant the last time his scar had hurt.

"What's wrong, Harry?" Sirius asked.

"Nothing, it's just a headache. I get them sometimes."

He was a terrible liar.

"No, you don't!" Hermione snapped, she wasn't going to let him downplay this.

Harry glared at her.

"Seriously mate," Ron chimed in, "Do you think that means You Know Who is close?" He'd stopped eating and gone pale with fear.

"Why would you say that?" Asked Sirius sharply.

"When Voldemort," she resolutely ignored the way that Sirius and Ron both winced when she said the name, "was possessing Quirrell, Harry's scar would hurt when he was near him."

Harry shook his head vigorously. "No, this is nothing like that. I just had a dream about him and it's given me a headache."

Ron exhaled loudly and sat back in his chair, obviously relieved.

"You had a dream about him?" Sirius asked, his voice carefully controlled. "What happened?"

"Pettigrew was there. And he- uh- they killed this old man...I think." Harry stared at his plate as he spoke, his shoulders hunched, he looked completely defeated.

"Harry look at me," Sirius said with obvious effort to sound gentle, "this is the sort of thing I need
you to tell me about immediately. That's the only way I can keep you safe."

He shrugged, his face miserable. "I didn't want to be a bother."

"You could never be a bother. This is what I'm here for."

Harry just nodded and began to eat his breakfast again slowly. Hermione pushed her plate away, her stomach suddenly hurt and there was no way she could eat anything else. Harry could pretend that it was just a dream, but she knew that he knew better, just as she did. And, a quick glance at Sirius told her that he thought the same was the start of something terrible.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 24

"Girls claim this room!" Tonks called out and then she pulled Hermione into a bedroom just to the right of the tent entrance. She let the flap fall closed, separating them from the main living area, and then Hermione watched the older witch whip out her wand and start casting like crazy.

"What are you doing?" She asked.

"Privacy wards, security and intruder alerts," she smiled wryly at Hermione, "I'm an auror and we're in a campsite with 100,000 other witches and wizards who are bound to be drunk and unruly. I know Sirius has protections in place around the tent but I like to be cautious. And we need privacy for our girl time." She grinned and then flopped onto one of the beds.

Hermione regarded her: tattered jeans, a worn but fitted 'Rolling Stones' t-shirt that exposed her navel, combat boots, short spiky hot pink hair. She didn't look anything like what Hermione's roommates would have considered to be girly. It was great.

She really liked Tonks, though she hadn't had the opportunity to spend much time with her, just that night at the Black family dinner and then a couple of times when she'd come by the house to pal around with Harry whom she'd obviously become fond of. She was six years older than Hermione, confident in her own skin despite her nearly crippling clumsiness, and she was starting a career in an exclusive field. Hermione knew enough to realize that she must have been top of her class in all the core subjects to have gotten into auror training. But most of all, she appreciated that Tonks treated her as a friend and not a child. Hermione planned to stick close to her over the next few days, Harry and Ron were so excited and it made them quite raucous. It was a little too much for Hermione who was used to a quiet life at home with her parents or the Malfoys.

Hermione put her knapsack down and sat on the other bed. It was mid-morning. They'd gotten a portkey courtesy of the Minister that had a perfect arrival time- they had all day to explore the sights surrounding the stadium before the match started, but they hadn't had to get up terribly early. Ron had mentioned that his family portkey departed before sunrise and even they had been relatively lucky since some people had been here for more than a week.

"So, tell me about Leoooloo," Tonks said suddenly, drawing the name out playfully.

Hermione was a little taken aback but she laughed. She couldn't imagine why the older witch would be interested in hearing about her teenage boyfriend. "How old are you and what is your fascination with my love life?"

"You're fourteen and you're practically engaged. I mean that," she pointed to Hermione's right hand, "is some serious bling. And my parents got serious pretty young too, but it's still so interesting to me. I mean you don't want to play the field a little? Plus, the way you blush when anybody brings him up is just too good not to do so as often as possible." Hermione immediately felt her cheeks heat and Tonks threw her head back and laughed. "I rest my case."

"Is that what you're doing? Playing the field?" Hermione deflected.

"I'm a junior auror, I barely have any social life at all. And what I have now is an improvement
over the two years while I was in training. On top of that, there are only so many wizards who are okay dating a witch who has a career, especially one in such a male dominated field. So, I guess I'm just waiting for one to come along, but I'm not in a hurry."

"I hadn't considered that," Hermione responded. She knew that in a lot of ways the magical world was very old fashioned, but she'd grown up in a household with two working parents. She'd always assumed she'd have a career- a high powered one at that, she'd once dreamed of being both the Prime Minister and a doctor when she was a little girl. "I can't imagine Leo stopping me from doing anything I wanted to do," she said absentmindedly.

It was true, her happiness was paramount to Draco and she couldn't believe he would get in the way of anything that was important to her. But, then again, Malfoy women didn't work. Not that Narcissa sat around eating bonbons all day long, she was very busy running the Manor, doing charity work, and when she and Draco were home, overseeing their education. But neither did she have a typical career. Perhaps this was something she needed to discuss with Draco to make sure they were on the same page.

She shook herself out of her thoughts to find that Tonks was smiling softly at her. "You really love him, huh?"

Hermione just nodded, feeling a little choked up. Sometimes her feelings for Draco snuck up and overwhelmed her. She missed him.

"I'm happy for you girl," Tonks said, crossing the space between them, sitting on the bed next to Hermione and putting an arm around her shoulders. "But heads up, I think Harry's got a bit of an overprotective brother thing going on, you might want to watch out for that whenever they meet."

Hermione winced and wondered when that would ever happen.

They spent the day wandering the campsites surrounding the massive stadium. They met up with the rest of the Weasleys for a little while, perused the souvenir stands, and then eventually returned to the tent to dress for the match. Because they would be sitting in the Minister's box they had all brought nicer clothing than what Hermione would normally wear to a sporting match. She had a sophisticated suit and a new coat that she'd bought in France with her mother. She was quite excited to wear it- and the fact that she'd be seeing Draco for the first time in two weeks might have added to that.

Tonks had turned her hair emerald green in support of Ireland and when she'd seen Hermione eyeing it enviously she had offered to do the same for her. Instead, Hermione asked her to simply charm green streaks into her chestnut curls. She'd happily complied and Hermione thought that the effect was festive and cool but didn't take away from the elegance of the rest of her look or clash with her ivory suit. And she knew Draco would love it.

They arrived at the stadium early. Sirius, who had been like a kid in a candy store all day, had hurried them along. They got to the box before anybody other than the Minister and his wife. Hermione watched with a kind of shocked fascination as the man fawned all over Sirius and then Harry. Draco had described his family's meeting with him in detail, and the way he'd responded to Lucius and Narcissa, but she thought he'd been exaggerating.

Finally, after some uncomfortable introductions and attempted small talk by Fudge, they were allowed to settle into their row of seats. Tonks sat on one end, Hermione next to her, then Harry, Ron, Remus, Sirius, and Ted on the other end. The stadium began to fill and the excitement in the air swelled. At a slower pace, the rest of the seats in the box began to fill as well, mostly with other government officials and dignitaries from England, Ireland, and Bulgaria. By the time the match
was just about ready to begin all of the seats were occupied except for the three in front of Tonks, herself and Harry. Her heart skipped a beat and then began to race when she realized what that meant. She was about to spend an entire quidditch match within touching distance of her boyfriend and his parents; which would have been fine, great even, if she was allowed to act like they were her boyfriend and his parents and not a hated school rival and a couple of strangers.

She wasn't surprised that they were down to the wire in arriving. Lucius liked to make an entrance. In fact, all three of the Malfoys had something of a flair for the dramatic and would be pleased to have all eyes on them when they finally made an appearance.

She was so attuned to Draco, she swore she felt him before she saw him and she automatically whipped her head around to look for him. Sure enough three blondes were making their way down the stairs towards the front of the box. Draco was staring at her and it was apparent that he had been before she'd ever turned around. The moment he caught her eye he deliberately brought one hand up and touched a finger to the side of his nose, their secret greeting. She surreptitiously returned the gesture and then rolled her eyes as she watched the Minister rush to great them and lead them to their seats.

Draco and Lucius were both dressed completely in black. And while they both wore muggle suits, Lucius' was a much more old fashioned cut and she was sure that Draco's recent forays into the muggle world had influenced his choice of something more modern. She wholeheartedly approved. He always looked handsome to her but the suit showed off his lithe build in a way robes never could. She'd thought earlier that Harry and Ron looked like they were playing dress up in their looked like the young, confident aristocrat that he was.

Narcissa, as usual, looked beautiful in deep purple. Her hair was pulled back in a sophisticated chignon and she held her head high. The three of them cut an impressive figure, and if Hermione hadn't known them as well as she did she would have been thoroughly intimidated.

"Cousin," she heard Sirius greet Narcissa when the family walked into their row in front of him. "Lovely to see you," he finished sarcastically.

"Sirius, you're looking well," she responded, barely sparing him a glance, her words were pleasant but her voice was like ice.

Hermione suddenly had the strangest feeling that she was an actor in a play. Which, in a way, she was.

Harry bristled at her side and she put a comforting hand on his arm. Meanwhile, Fudge was looking back and forth between Sirius and Narcissa in confusion and then he began to redden as it apparently occurred to him that while the Malfoys may have been willing to do Sirius a favor in the name of family honor, things were still not exactly sanguine between the Houses of Malfoy and Black and he'd inadvertently committed a faux pas by seating them together.

But propriety must be maintained and he said nothing as Sirius began to introduce the members of his party to the Malfoys in turn. He waited to introduce her last, she was certain it was because he was enjoying this charade and wanted to build the anticipation as long as possible. When it was her turn she automatically executed a little curtsey in deference to their title. But when she looked up everybody was staring at her and she realized her mistake. In her quest to keep from looking overly familiar with them, she'd deferred to the training she'd received from Narcissa - training a muggle born wouldn't normally have had.

"He's a pureblood!" Tonks exclaimed, which was not the reaction Hermione had expected.
"Who is?" She frowned as she tried to ignore the feeling of so many sets of eyes watching her.

"Leo!"

Hermione squirmed uncomfortably and wondered where she was going with this and what it had to do with her slip-up. "Is that a problem?" She replied testily, looking anywhere but at the three Malfoys. She was going to kill Sirius for putting her in this position.

Tonks literally waved her off. "Of course not," she snorted, "like I care about blood status. I've just been trying to figure it out because I noticed that you have pure blood manners. You have the kind of manners that my mum wishes I had! And I know you didn't learn them from Sirius- especially not just over the past two weeks So, you must have learned them from Leo, or more likely, his mum."

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief, Tonks had inadvertently just provided her with the perfect excuse, and it wasn't even a lie. "Well, yes, that's true. I live in the magical world now, she wanted me to fit in," she explained a bit defensively.

"Oh I didn't mean anything by it!" Tonks put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "When Mum married Dad she had to learn muggle etiquette. I was just curious about how you learned wizarding etiquette but I didn't want to bring it up because it seemed rude..." she trailed off, "I guess I kind of failed at that, huh? I'm sorry, this is why I failed every etiquette lesson with my mum and my grams."

"You would have been fine if you'd spent half the time you did complaining just listening to what they were trying to tell you," Ted quipped.

Hermione looked around and realized that everybody was still listening to their conversation. She willed herself not to look embarrassed and forced out a chuckle when Tonks pulled a face and blew a raspberry in her father's direction.

"Wait. Your boyfriend is a pureblood?" Ron interrupted incredulously.

"Yes," she sighed. What now?

"But you're a muggleborn," he responded, squinting at her like he did when they were playing chess and he couldn't figure out her strategy.

"What's wrong with that, my mum's a pureblood and my dad's a muggleborn," said Tonks, eyes narrowed dangerously.

"And my dad was a pureblood and my mum a muggleborn." Hermione was surprised to hear Harry add.

Ron's ears reddened and he looked back and forth between them, panic in his eyes as he realized he was walking a fine line. "I just mean, what do you talk about? He wouldn't know anything about your muggle stuff."

Muggle stuff. Hermione felt her ire rise at his dismissive tone. But mainly she just felt disappointed. This kind of casual prejudice was all too common.

"Yes, we grew up in different worlds but we are capable of learning from each other. And there's more to our relationship than just our backgrounds," she explained, with all the patience she could muster. "He actually enjoys spending time in the muggle world. He learns from me, I learn from him. We're a good match." She couldn't help but flick her eyes in Draco's direction and was
relieved to see that his family had turned around and taken their seats.

Ron looked at her with a sort of condescending sympathy. "You shouldn't get your hopes up though, Hermione. I know what you think that ring means, but if I'd known he was a pureblood I would have warned you. Most purebloods, you know the traditional kind, don't think they have to hold to promises they've made to muggleborns. Your parents don't have any magic to enforce it."

Hermione's mouth dropped open in outrage. "You're saying that my boyfriend, who you've never met, is what? Stringing me along?" She almost couldn't believe the nerve of him in suggesting such a thing.

He shrugged. "I'm your friend Hermione and I don't want to see you hurt so I'm telling you, he's probably using you."

Hermione felt something inside of her snap. And she wasn't even angry for herself. It was for Draco, for Lucius and Narcissa, for the risks they took for her, for the time they spent with her helping and training her. But mostly for the way that they loved her. How dare this petty boy come along and, under the guise of friendship, try and tear that down, try to make her doubt them?

"Why? Because I'm a muggleborn he couldn't possibly really want me?! Well you're wrong. He loves me. He-" she took a deep breath and centered herself before she blurted out something that she couldn't take back, like the wrong name. "Leo loves me and do you know what? So do his parents. They've welcomed me into their family and I'm so grateful for it. Leo is wonderful and I trust him more than anybody in the world. How dare you accuse him of such a thing?! He treats me like a princess."

"Not everybody can afford to buy witches things like that," he said snidely, eyes flicking to the hand which bore the ring she never took off.

"That's not what I was referring to. He's good to me, he's kind, and supportive. And he certainly wasn't trying to buy his way into my heart, he's just generous. But you don't know that because you don't know him, and that's just the point. Don't talk about things you know nothing about Ronald Weasley!"

He opened his mouth to retort but Sirius interrupted. "You'll do well to remember that Hermione is under my protection and I'd never allow her to be misused in the way you are suggesting. Question that protection again and you'll no longer be welcome in my home," Sirius said in a deadly calm voice, and there was something about the look on his face that showed just how dangerous he could be, if he so chose. "And if I ever hear you implying that Hermione is somehow less because of her blood status, you not being welcome in my home will be the least of your problems. Have I made myself clear?"

Ron's complexion went from bright red to white so quickly that even his freckles appeared faded. He just nodded vigorously. And then, as if on cue, the team mascots began to stream into the stadium.

Using her.

Using her.

It was time for the Weasel to have some kind of major accident. Perhaps he could get confused, take a wrong turn, and fall off of a cliff. A really tall one into a deep body of water where they'd never find his body. His father would help him arrange it. Maybe his mother too. And that's when
he felt her slip her hand into his and give it a squeeze. "This is not the time, my dragon," she said so quietly that he almost thought he'd imagined it. Sometimes it was annoying how well she understood him.

But then his witch started yelling at the Weasel, laying out a thorough and very Gryffindor defense of himself and his family. By the time she was finished he couldn't help it, he was smirking. Trusted him more than anybody. Treated her like a princess. He'd have to get her a bracelet to match her ring. Weasley's head might actually explode. And then the cherry on top was Sirius. Don't mess with a Black.

He was diverted by the mascots leading their respective teams into the arena. First, the Irish had brought leprechauns. They were amusing enough, though not nearly as amusing as watching the people around him fall all over themselves trying to catch the gold they tossed into the stands which would only disappear in a few hours. Weasley, in particular, seemed ignorant of the nature of leprechauns' gold, he hoped the tosser would be thoroughly disappointed by his empty pockets later.

But more interesting was what came next, accompanying the Bulgarian team: veela. They were beautiful, to be sure, and doing some kind of dance that was clearly magical and could become rather hypnotic, he supposed, if you watched long enough. But Draco couldn't really see what the big deal was. These were the creatures that were said to drive men into attempting insane feats in order to impress them? In fact, he could see several of the men around him flexing their muscles, posing like morons, even trying to jump out of the stands to get to them. He heard a commotion behind him and turned to see his cousin and Hermione restraining Potter.

The pieces fell into place. Hermione. Of course. He loved Hermione. He'd never even really wanted to look at another girl and these veela with their allure meant to falsely entice couldn't compare to the way he felt for her. He caught her eye and winked. Her eyes went wide as she took in his calm demeanour and she smiled at him beautifically. He turned back around and sneaked a glance at his father who was also just sitting calmly. When he saw Draco looking at him he just rolled his eyes. Draco grinned to himself and waited for the teams to get on with it.

A couple of hours into the game when he'd ceased to be fascinated by the skill of the Irish chasers and the snitch didn't seem to be anywhere in sight he decided to see if he could finagle a few moments alone with his best friend. "I'm going to get something to eat," he told his parents loudly so that she was sure to overhear. His mother raised one eyebrow at him and he strongly suspected that she knew what he was up to, but she said nothing, and he took that as permission.

He stood up and turned all the way around before shuffling to the aisle. He moved slowly, hoping to catch her attention, and she finally looked up and met his eyes. He gave her a significant look and patted his chest with one hand: as always his mirror was stored there and he hoped she would understand that he wanted to talk. There was an almost preternatural understanding between the two of them most of the time, so he wasn't too concerned.

He made his way down the stairs to a concessions area and positioned himself so that he could see if anybody else emerged from the Minister's box. Sure enough, about five minutes later she appeared, her eyes darting around the space. She spotted him in moments and began to make her way over. He ducked behind a large pillar and waited for her to join him. The moment her slim figure appeared he pulled her into his arms.

"Draco!" She exclaimed, but she kept her voice quiet. "Should we be doing this? What if somebody sees?"

He buried his face in the crook of her neck. "Don't care," he murmured against her skin. "Anyway,
we're well hidden and hardly anybody here knows us."

She sighed but leaned into him. "I've missed you."

"Remind me why we can't even talk on our mirrors again," he whined.

"Because you know it would be rude of me to erect privacy wards in Harry's house like I do at Hogwarts, and how would I explain that I needed to do it anyway? And given Harry's penchant for snooping with that cloak of his, it's just not worth the risk. His face is an open book, Draco, he can't keep our secret. Merlin, I nearly gave us away at least once tonight."

"I'm really beginning to resent the fact that it's a secret," he said, rubbing her back.

"Me too, and there's no end in sight."

There were a few beats of silence as they absorbed that stark truth.

"I wanted to beat Weasley to a bloody pulp earlier and I had to sit there and say nothing," he growled, tightening his grip on her waist.

"I swear I'm not trying to avoid the subject but I haven't seen you in more than two weeks, do we have to talk about Ron right now?"

"Excellent point." He turned his face so that he could kiss her neck, up to her mouth. One, two, three soft kisses to her lips. "I missed you too, by the way."

"Less than a week and we go back to Hogwarts," she sighed running her hands up and down his chest. "I like this suit."

"I'm glad. You look really hot." He picked up one of her hands and kissed her palm.

She was wearing an ivory suit with a fitted skirt that ended at her knees and a jacket that accentuated her curves. The whole outfit had silver thread running through the fabric that almost made it look like she shimmered. And then the green streaks she added through her hair which he never would have thought of, but loved. She looked like a Slytherin. It was all perfectly buttoned up and appropriate but he wasn't sure he'd ever been more attracted to her. She blushed.

He laughed. "Since when are you shy?"

"Tonks says I blush whenever you come up."

"Tonks?"

"Your cousin prefers to only be referred to by her surname"

"Why?"

"She hates her first name."

"Mother's going to hate that."

She grinned up at him. "That was my first thought too."

"You were blushing pretty good earlier." To his delight her cheeks reddened further. "So I'm wonderful?"
"You know I think you're wonderful. But don't let it go to your head."

He watched her fiddle with his tie. "And I do love you, you know."

"I do know." She looked up, "and I love you."

He held her in silence for a few minutes. "How are things going at Potter's? He treating you okay?"

"It's good. We've had fun, I'll tell you all about it when we get back to school."

He nodded, accepting that they didn't have time to get into it now. "I found out what's happening at Hogwarts this year that Mother and Father were being so squirrely about." Her eyes went wide and burned with curiosity, they'd been trying to figure this out for weeks. "I'll tell you all about it when we get back to school," he parroted.

She huffed but nodded, "we should get back."

He sighed but he knew she was right. "It feels wrong not to escort you back. You go first at least, I'd feel better if you weren't out here by yourself." She rolled her eyes and he could practically see her bite back a retort. But she didn't argue, just went up on her toes and gave him one last kiss. "Bye Draco."

She quickly pulled away and scurried off without looking back.

Three hours later after Viktor Krum, knowing his team could never catch up given the rate the Irish chasers were scoring, had caught the snitch and brought the match to an end, he was back in the tent with his parents settling in for the night. When, all of a sudden over the sounds of raucous celebration on one side, and people drowning their sorrows on the other, there were suddenly several deafening booms, and then screaming all around.

Draco dashed outside to see what was happening, closely followed by his parents. He felt his eyes go wide at the scene that greeted them and it took several long moments for him to truly understand what he was seeing. People in black robes and gleaming silver masks were making their way through the campsite leaving a path of destruction in their wake. They were preceded by the floating figures of the muggle family who owned the campsite. The black robed figures laughed as they toyed with the helpless family, tossing them around, obviously delighting in their terror. Draco's stomach lurched.

Death Eaters.

"Idiots!" He heard his father hiss. "I told them this was a foolhardy plan. What do they think they are accomplishing?"

Draco turned and met his eyes. The memory of that day in his father's study when Lucius had showed them his Dark Mark came rushing back and it was like a switch flipped in his brain. He was one of them. Draco turned and ran.

He didn't make it far, perhaps twenty feet before he felt arms wrapping around him like steel bands, familiar arms. And a familiar voice telling him to calm down, telling him they couldn't be out here, telling him he couldn't go anywhere. He didn't care, he fought with everything he had. He needed to get to Hermione, he couldn't trust anybody else to protect her. Not Sirius, not any of her stupid, clumsy friends, not his cousin who he'd never met, not even his own parents. That much was clear now.

His mother called his name. He ignored her and clawed at his father's arms. How dare he try and
stop him after what he'd done? That mark on his arm was the reason she was in danger.

He felt his magic begin to pulse with a kind of grim satisfaction. It wouldn't let Hermione come to harm either. And they wouldn't be able to stop him.

"Narcissa," he heard his father yell desperately, it sounded like it was coming from very far away even though he knew he was right there with his arms around him, "Narcissa, he's losing control of his magic! He'll hurt himself. He can't go running off like this! Narcissa you need to do it now!"

He didn't know what that meant until he heard his mother quietly sob: "Stupefy." Everything went black.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I know it's a cliffhanger. I also know that's frustrating, but please don't vent that frustration on me, I assure you that there are important storytelling reasons for stopping things here. I'd like to thank Weestarmeggie for beta reading, I've made some changes since she had this so all mistakes are mine. I'd also like to thank all of you for supporting this story: your enthusiasm, your thoughts, even your criticisms are so appreciated. Things are picking up in intensity and I hope to start getting updates out at a slightly faster pace now that they are.

I've posted a new story called 'A Second Look.' I'd love for you to check it out, though I've already seen many of you over there. Since a lot of people have asked there will be an update for that one on Saturday. And as always, thanks for reading!
Lucius felt his son slump in his arms at his wife's quiet spell and then Cissa too nearly collapsed with a sob. Turning her wand on Draco had clearly broken her heart. Even knowing it was for the best, because Draco would have hurt himself - at worst, gotten himself and Hermione killed, and blown their cover at best - if he'd been allowed to run off in the state he had been in. Either way Lucius knew it would have been a disaster. So logically, he knew that their actions had been for the best, but he also knew his son, and knew that he would see them as a betrayal. Because it was how he himself would have felt in the same situation.

He'd seen too, the way Draco looked at him, the moment he stopped being his father and just became a living embodiment of the mark on his arm. When Hermione became his sole focus and that he would go for her no matter what his parents thought. Because she was the only thing that mattered and he didn't know if he could trust them. Yes, he knew that feeling all to well. And then they'd gone and stopped him.

As he struggled to support Draco's dead weight with one arm, he pulled out his wand with his other hand and then cast a levitation charm on his son. "Cissa," he called quietly, "we need to get out of here and take him home where he's safe. Even then I think we need to keep him under until we can get in touch with Black and have Hermione come to him. I don't think he could control his magic if he woke up and she wasn't there."

"Lucius," she said miserably, eyes locked on the slack figure of their boy.

"I know my love, I know." He wrapped an arm around her and encouraged her back into the tent. He told himself Sirius would protect Hermione. The other man was fond of her, and he was a capable wizard when he kept his head. And then there was Narcissa's niece; she and Hermione seemed to have been getting along and she was an auror. Even the werewolf was supposedly a defense expert. They would guard her. Or so he had to believe. Their duty had to be to Draco. If they revealed themselves now, made a scene running through the campsite looking for her in front of a whole group of his former comrades, well then everything they had done for the past three years would be for naught.

He ran some diagnostics and then turned back to Narcissa. "We can apparate out, they haven't put anything up to prevent it. Would you like me to take you both?"

She shook her head. "I'm fine."

"Cissa," he began gently.

"I said I'm fine," she snapped.

He took a deep breath but just nodded. "I'll send an elf later for our things."

"I don't care about our things, Lucius, I care about my son." And without another word she popped away

He didn't miss the way that she said 'my' instead of 'our.' He also hadn't forgotten the strain that being a Death Eater had put on his marriage during the first war. He hoped they could survive a
He sighed, grasped Draco's arm, and followed his wife home. As Master of the House the wards allowed him privileges which nobody else enjoyed and he apparated directly into the master suite. He was just getting Draco situated on a sofa, spelling the sleeping draught he'd had an elf bring him into his son's stomach - Draco was young and healthy, but it was still too much of a risk to continue stunning him - when Narcissa entered the room. She walked over to them, smoothed Draco's hair out of his face and arranged the pillows beneath his head, and then she turned to him.

She took a deep breath and raised her chin proudly, looking him squarely in the eye. "I apologize. It was unfair of me to snap at you, you were just doing what needed to be done." Her words were almost formal but as she spoke them tears began to stream down her cheeks.

He stepped forward and took her into his arms. "It's only natural that you were frightened."

"Terrified!" She sobbed. "Lucius, the gods be damned, I was terrified! This won't be like the first war. I can't hide away with him here, bring him into our bed so that I can watch over him even when he's asleep. He wouldn't let me, he doesn't want me to, that became clear tonight. He was ready, desperate even to run right into danger."

"He's quickly becoming a man and he has a witch whom he loves more than anything else," he reminded her patiently.

"He's only fourteen!" She returned immediately, and he could see the protective glint in her eyes.

Lucius let out a surprised breath and started to run his fingers through her loose hair. "Oh my love, I'm afraid you've been hoisted by your own petard here."

She made a small questioning noise as she leaned into his touch.

"You've been so busy pushing them together, from the moment you first set eyes on Hermione, that you didn't prepare for what it might feel like when this day arrived."

"What day?" She sighed.

"The day he made it clear that he would choose her over anything or anybody else, even if it meant defying us." He sighed. "I did try to warn you," he reminded her as gently as possible.

"I- just. He's my baby! And he wouldn't even listen to me and, did you see them Lucius? If he had tried to interfere they wouldn't have cared that he's our son, they would have taken him out!"

Lucius nodded gravely. She'd never been present at a Death Eater raid and while she'd known, hypothetically, what they'd involved it was very different from seeing it up close. And what she'd witnessed last night had been a tame example. But he couldn't take that image from her, or rather he wouldn't mess with her mind like that, so he chose to address her first point. "I suppose he will always be your baby, but he is not a baby, and he hasn't been for awhile now. Frankly, I was rather proud of him. His devotion to her is something to behold. I am aware that it will take some time to gain his trust back, but we're raising a good man. If something happens to me I'm confident I'll be leaving this House in good hands."

"Don't say that!" She whipped her head up to glare at him.

But despite that fierce expression he realized she was literally trembling in his arms. He knew that feeling well, it had happened to him many times after returning from the Dark Lord's side. "It's not something that we can ignore, Narcissa. I am trapped here but the rest of you are not. Perhaps you
should consider taking Draco and Hermione and leaving the country, utilize one of our boltholes and wait until this is all over. Richard Granger would agree to it in an instant."

"I won't just leave you, I can't."

"I'd rather protect you now, even if it means sacrificing myself, than watch you grow to hate me."

"I couldn't-"

"No, no, listen to me." He put a finger under her chin and stared into her eyes. "What happened tonight is only the beginning as well as being only a small taste of what is coming. And make no mistake, it is coming: HE is coming back. My Mark darkens more and more every day, the twinges that I feel coming from Him grow more intense. We are no closer to finding a solution to removing my Mark than we were when we started. And if you remain here, you are right, it won't be like last time. I am Head of House now, more will be asked of me, and by extension you. It was one thing for you to stay safely at home when we were actively trying to produce an heir, and especially when you were pregnant and were caring for a newborn, but Draco is nearly grown now. You will be expected to socialize. Your presence will be expected, as will Draco's. And I can only protect him from receiving the Mark for so long."

"We agreed to do this together," she argued.

"But did you really know what that agreement entailed?" Her reaction to tonight's events told him that she didn't. She was a strong woman and Lucius knew she could adapt, but this wasn't the kind of thing he wanted her to have to adapt to.

"You need me! I see things that you don't. And I can't just turn my back on you. And what about Draco and Hermione? The life you are describing is not one I want for them."

"They would be alive." He had such dreams for his son but he thought he might have to settle for just keeping him alive, it was a humbling admission.  

"No, Lucius. I will not leave you. If things continue to deteriorate we can discuss sending the children away with the Grangers."

He just nodded. That was enough of a concession for now. And he knew tonight had been a wakeup call, he'd allow it all to sink in before he broached the subject again.  

"Oh Lucius, we need to send for Hermione!" She said suddenly, raising her face to his, frantically wiping at her wet cheeks.

"I had Jema send an owl to Black as soon as we arrived home but I don't know how quickly he'll receive it. I must admit it would be very convenient if we had one of those telephone devices right about now." He chuckled, trying to lighten the mood.

"That's it!" She exclaimed, and then she turned back to Draco, bending over him and reaching into the pocket of his robe. She stood up, a triumphant expression on her face and brandished Draco's communication mirror at him. "He's been carrying it with him everywhere even though he and Hermione agreed not to use them while she's at Potter House. We should call her, she won't answer if she's not alone but hopefully she has her's with her and will at least know that we are trying to reach her."

"Very clever," he said pulling her against his side and leading them to the other sofa.

They tried Hermione regularly for the next couple of hours. Narcissa grew visibly agitated over the
lack of response from the girl or any communication from Black. "If anything's happened to her 
Draco will never forgive us. I'll never forgive myself," she kept murmuring over and over. Lucius 
didn't have any words of comfort for her because he felt the same way.

Finally, the mirror resting on his thigh heated up and buzzed gently, signaling that Hermione was 
trying to reach them. Quick as a flash Narcissa scooped it up and flipped it open.

"Draco!" He heard Hermione wail.

"No, sweetheart, it's Lucius and Narcissa."

"Oh." That one syllable was enough to betray her deep disappointment, "Yes, I see you now, 
where's Draco?"

Lucius tried not to distress over the fact that their girl had been so upset that she hadn't even noticed 
whose face was in here mirror.

"Draco is fine," Narcissa responded, much more calmly than he knew she actually was. "He's 
sleeping."

"Sleeping?!"

"Dearest," she said firmly, "are you safe?"

"Yes, we're back at Potter House now, I'm in my room. We're all okay."

"Would it be possible for you to make your excuses and come home? Draco needs you."

"I thought you said he was fine!"

"He is fine, but he's had a difficult night and we think it's best if you were here when he wakes up."

"Okay, yes. I'll be there in just a few minutes. Bye." And then she was gone.

Lucius stood up and offered Narcissa his hand and then they made their way downstairs to the floo 
room where Hermione's portkey was set to arrive. Not five minutes later she popped in looking 
frantic and disheveled, her face was red and blotchy and she carried only her wand and her cat. 
Lucius braced himself. Whatever she'd witnessed tonight he was certain it wouldn't endear him to 
her.

But then she quickly set her familiar down and rushed into his arms, hugging him around the waist 
and burying her face in his chest. He released Narcissa so that he could put his arms around her and 
rub her back. She slumped against him.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry to cry all over you! I just- I was so scared! I like Sirius and I knew he would 
do what he could to keep us safe, but the whole time all I could think was that I wished I was with 
you guys. With my family!"

Lucius' heart lurched and he he felt Narcissa bring herself closer to them and he didn't think he'd 
ever felt like so much of a failure.

"Oh Hermione," whispered Narcissa, gently stroking the girl's messy curls - if he knew Hermione 
at all, she'd spent the past few hours running her hands through her hair in an effort to relieve her 
nerves.

They just stood there for several long minutes until her sobs subsided and she slowly pulled away
to look up at him. "I'm sorry about that."

"Don't be," he said, quickly conjuring a handkerchief and handing it to her. She took it with a watery smile and then reached out to give Narcissa a hug.

"Where's Draco? How can he be asleep at a time like this?"

"When Draco realized what was happening in the campsite he panicked. He realized you were in danger and he tried to go after you. His magic was wild and erratic. He was clearly about to lose control of it, possibly injuring himself in the process, but definitely drawing the kind of attention to himself that would have been dangerous. We had to stun him to get him home and then we gave him a sleeping draught. It will be several hours before he wakes." Lucius took it upon himself to explain.

She just stared at him with wide eyes. "Where is he?" She eventually asked, her voice unnaturally calm.

"In the sitting room in our suite."

She blinked and then turned on her heel and ran out of the room. Lucius just sighed, offered his wife his arm once again, and apparated them both back upstairs. They were waiting on Hermione when she burst through the door to the room where Draco slept, but she didn't so much as glance in their direction, she just ran directly to him and practically threw herself on top of him. She squirmed until she was situated between him and the back of the sofa and Lucius was stunned to see his son - even in his potions induced slumber- put his arms around her as naturally as if they shared a bed every night.

He saw Narcissa open her mouth to speak and shook his head. "It's been a long night, whatever it is can wait for the morning," he murmured in her ear. "Let's leave them be and retire to bed."

"It's inappropriate to allow them to remain here like this, Lucius."

He frowned and wondered about her sudden concern. She'd always trusted Draco and Hermione to remain within the bounds of propriety without feeling the need to hover. "He's had a sleeping draught, darling. They couldn't get up to anything even if they wanted, and we'll just be in the next room."

He could tell that she wanted to protest further but he just urged her towards the door of their bedroom, and she sighed but allowed it.

It was a struggle for him to wake up, he was just so drowsy. His entire body felt heavy and his eyelids fought to remain closed. But as soon as he recognized the scent surrounding him he was wide awake.

"Hermione!" He nearly shouted and tried to jump up.

A small, but surprisingly strong hand on his chest pushed him back down. He automatically looked down to see his best friend smiling up at him. Her eyes were tired but she looked genuinely happy to see him.

"Hey sleepy head," she greeted, her own voice sleep-roughened.

He looked around. They were on a sofa in his parents' sitting room.
"What happened? How did we get here?"

"Do you remember what happened last night?"

He sat up like a shot dumping her off of his chest, he tried to climb off the couch but his legs were tangled with hers. She reached out and grabbed a fistfull of his shirt and pulled him forward to keep him from tumbling to the floor. He looked her up and down. "Are you okay? You weren't hurt?"

"I'm completely and totally fine. I was scared, but safe," she answered immediately.

He breathed a sigh of relief. "How did I get here? I don't remember anything after…" He felt his eyes go wide with surprise. "Did my mother stun me?"

"I don't know who did it, but they told me that yes, they did have to stun you. And then when you got home they gave you a sleeping draught. I assume to make sure you stayed calm. They said your magic went a little wild. They were afraid you would hurt yourself, or run into the fray and," she swallowed, "one of them could have hurt you."

"My father was one of them." Hermione's expression turn to one of horror. "No! Not last night but he was a Death Eater, Hermione. Technically he still is. Somewhere around here," he gestured vaguely around him, "he has a mask and a set of robes that he used to out and hurt people wearing."

She let out a long breath. "I know that, but he wouldn't hurt me," she said quietly. "It's, well it's not okay, but it is what it is."

He pulled her closer. He wasn't sure that he was quite that accepting. Everything that happened the night before felt wrong. Like his parents weren't on the right side, not even on his side. And if his father hadn't joined that monster in the first place, well Hermione would have been with them. He could be with her in the open, could have been her best friend from the very beginning. His parents were the ones who had taught him blood prejudice, but then they'd suddenly changed their mind- at least about Hermione- but as soon as the going got tough it felt like they'd abandoned her. And worse, they'd stopped him from going to her.

"I wanted to come for you. And they stunned me Hermione."

"They were trying to protect you."

"What about you?"

She just shrugged helplessly in response and he buried his face in her hair. It had a slightly muskier smell to it than normal.

"How did you get out?"

"Tonks went to help the ministry officials trying to get them under control. Sirius, Remus, and Ted herded us to the woods. I don't think we were ever in any real danger but," she choked on the word, "I wanted to come to you too! I don't know how I stopped myself. My magic- I don't know if it's possible but, I think I felt you panic Draco and I knew, somehow, that I would make things worse if I tried to come after you."

"You think you felt me?"

"It was like when you're right in front of me and we're sharing our magic. But you weren't..."
anywhere near me."

"Hermione, look at me." She raised her face to his. "Let's keep that to ourselves, okay?"

"Yeah," she agreed on a whisper, "I was thinking the same thing."

At that moment his parents entered the room and Hermione tried to jump away from him but he just held her tight and narrowed his eyes suspiciously at them. Had they been listening in?

"The two of you go clean up," his mother said, voice crisp, "and then return. We'll be having breakfast in here this morning."

Draco just stared at her dumbly for a minute before he got moving. She was angry? He was the one who had been stunned and then drugged. If anybody had the right to be angry it was him. What could they possibly have done wrong in their sleep? His mother remained stony faced but his father smiled tightly and just motioned towards the door. He stood up, pulling Hermione with him and led her out into the hallway where they parted ways to go to their respective rooms.

Once he had changed and washed up he loitered outside of Hermione's door for her. Whatever was going on he didn't want either of them facing his parents alone. She soon emerged wearing one of those simple summer dresses he liked so much. She smiled at him sadly and gave him a hug. "She's mad."

"I know."

"Why?"

"I haven't the faintest," he answered. "But I guess we might as well get it over with." He took her hand and together they returned to his parents suite.

They sat down at the small table the elves had brought in and waited to be served. The room was silent and the tension in the air was so thick it could be cut with a butter knife. The elves finally finished laying out the food and popped away.

"The two of you are not to continue sleeping together," his mother said suddenly, her voice like ice.

"Narcissa!" His father hissed.

Draco glanced at Hermione. She sat frozen, holding a forkful of food in between her plate and her mouth.

"It's inappropriate and frankly I'm disappointed in the both of you." His mother continued like she hadn't been interrupted, and if it was possible her voice was even colder.

Draco scrambled to come up with an explanation for this sudden confrontation. They had never attempted to hide what they were doing from his parents. At least twice over the summer they'd fallen asleep on a blanket out by the lake, completely out in the open. He didn't see anything inappropriate about it at all, at least amongst family. But it's not like he ever napped in public anyway.

His mother was still talking.

"This is a major abuse of trust and will not go unpunished. Though I believe we need to speak with the Grangers about what that punishment should entail."
"Narcissa, I thought we were at least going to give them the opportunity to explain themselves."
His father said quietly.

"I don't see what there is to explain." She answered without bothering to look at her husband.

Draco felt his blood begin to boil. Stunned, potioned, and now they were trying to tell him how to
behave around his girlfriend? He glared at the stranger who was impersonating his mother. "It's not
our fault that we're not allowed to be together in public. So, I don't see how it's any of your business
what we do with the time we are lucky enough to get to spend together. What next, are you going
to tell me I'm not allowed to hug her?"

"That's not an excuse Draco," she snapped. "You're too young and immature to handle such a
serious responsibility. What if she got pregnant? I know you think that you'll always remember the
charm, but sometimes you get caught up in the moment. After what happened last night I'd think
you'd understand that this is not a safe situation to bring a half-blood baby into, even if you were
older."

Draco was only vaguely processing what his mother was saying, but at the words 'half-blood baby'
he saw red. From the general direction of where Hermione was seated, he heard the sound of
cutlery clattering against china and he stood up so forcefully the backs of his knees hit his chair and
sent it tumbling backwards.

He looked at Hermione; her face was bright red, her eyes were watery, and she was gripping the
table like she needed it to keep her upright. "Let's go," he said to her.

"What? Where?"

"I don't know, to your house, maybe? Anywhere but here."

"I- Draco why does your mother think that we're having sex?!" She practically shrieked.

He didn't blame her. Because while he'd understood, of course, what his mother had been saying,
that implication hadn't really sunk in until Hermione said it out loud, and sounding like she'd never
been quite so mortified in her life. Which he imagined she hadn't. He understood, he would have
been embarrassed if he hadn't felt quite so offended. "I don't know, and I don't care. I won't have
you spoken to like this, not even by my own mother. Especially by my own mother."

"I think we need to sit back down and discuss this," Lucius interrupted, he was beginning to sound
a little desperate. If Draco had been a little less angry he would have been unnerved by that.

But he was far more furious that he'd ever been before and there wasn't room for him to feel
anything else. He simply sent his father a molten glare. "Is your wife going to continue to throw
around baseless accusations?" He sniped.

Lucius' expression hardened. "I understand that you're upset, but you're walking a fine line, son."

"Draco," Hermione's small voice drew his attention. "Sit down. Your father is right, we should
talk."

Draco took a deep breath and with great deliberation he turned around and picked up his chair,
placing it right side up, and then he moved it so that it was pushed up against Hermione's and sat
down, taking her hand. He finally looked at his mother. She appeared to be...rather shell shocked.

"Am I to understand that you and Hermione have not consummated your relationship?" Lucius
asked in clipped tones, obviously deeply uncomfortable with the conversation.
Draco glanced at Hermione, feeling highly resentful that they were expected to answer these personal questions. They hadn't done anything to justify being interrogated in this manner, or to deserve the accusations his mother had just leveled against them. And the way his mother was speaking to them, especially after the night they'd had- he wouldn't soon forget this.

"We've just kissed." Hermione began to speak suddenly, before he could decide what he was willing to tell them. "When Narcissa started talking about us sleeping together, I thought she meant like we did last night- which we do sometimes." She stopped and took a deep breath, never looking up from where she was staring at their joined hands "Well," she hesitated, "we've never spent all night together until last night. But it's not...it's not about anything to do with sex. Draco is my best friend. I feel safest and most relaxed with him. I - sometimes we just fall asleep." She shrugged and then sat back in her chair, shoulders slumped, looking like the very picture of defeat.

He sent another scathing glare in his mother's direction for reducing his usually fearless best friend to this state. He then turned to his father. "I took that talk that you gave me before I left for Hogwarts to heart."

Lucius had sat him down a few weeks before he'd left for Hogwarts for the first time and given him a long talk about witches. About respecting them and treating them properly and not rushing them. Even though Draco had barely been eleven at the time and the witches that his father had spoken of had been nameless and faceless and completely hypothetical, he had taken that talk very seriously.

The witch had a name and a face now. She was sitting beside him, holding his hand and he intended to do whatever he had to in order to keep her there for the rest of their lives. He patterned the way he treated Hermione on the way his father treated his mother, and now it felt like that was being thrown back in his face. He was appalled and insulted that his mother thought he would treat her with such disrespect as to take her virginity in a broom cupboard at Hogwarts - or some other equally awful scenario. And when they were just fourteen. What had she been thinking?

He finally turned to face his mother fully. "What have we done to make you think we were sexually active? I can't think of anything we've ever done to make you think we would abuse the trust you've placed in us like that. Do you think so little of me?"

Hermione squeezed his hand in a way that seemed reflexive and his mother let out a sad little gasp. "Narcissa, I think it's time to tell them everything, this has grown unfair," his father said rather ominously.

"Everything?" Draco asked. He had a feeling he was only about to grow angrier with his parents.

"Draco," Hermione said softly, wiggling her fingers, and he realized he was squeezing them rather fiercely.

"I'm sorry." He loosened his grip, though it was difficult.

"Don't be, I know how you feel," she answered, and she scooted closer to him, though any further and she would have been on his lap, and it certainly wasn't the time for that.

He shared a private little smile with her and turned back to his parents. "What did you want to tell us?" He asked, more bravely than he felt. But Hermione was upset. And they were his parents, it was up to him to stand up to them.

"Would you like me to explain?" His father asked his mother gently.
She delicately patted her cheeks with a handkerchief and Draco realized for the first time that she had been crying. She shook her head. "No, there's obviously been a terrible misunderstanding. They should hear this from me, it's my fault, you tried to talk me down and I didn't listen." She then turned to him and Hermione. "This story actually starts when I was just a little girl. Since I can remember I had the ability to notice things about people and their magic and how it interacted with others. For a long time I thought this was how everybody saw the world, when I learned that it wasn't, I also learned to keep quiet about it."

Draco squinted at the woman he was seeing in a whole new light. He'd always known that she was intuitive, but he hadn't realized that she possessed an actual magical gift. "Mother, are you telling us that you can read auras?"

"Not exactly, but it's something like that. It's more like I see magic itself within a magical being, it's intent, how it interacts with the world and with others. I see potential. And what I saw between the two of you that first day in the bookstore, oh children, it was something to behold!"

"Are you saying that we're connected, magically?"

"Yes. Though at first it was only potential for such a connection. But it was so promising, I know that if you forged that bond, it would be extraordinary." She looked directly at him. "Can you blame me for wanting that for you?" She pleaded

He just stared at her. "So, that's why you were so insistent that we be friends? I thought you just liked Hermione."

"I do like Hermione!" Her hand flew to her heart and she looked at Hermione in alarm. "I love you like my own daughter! But I will admit I wouldn't not have been quite so...enthusiastic under different circumstances."

"Because I'm a muggle born," Hermione said quietly.

His mother's eyes dimmed and she ducked her head. There was a tense silence and he once again considered just taking Hermione and leaving. Any answers they might get weren't worth the pain this conversation was causing. But then Hermione spoke up again.

"So, you can actually see a bond between us?" She asked, sounding equal parts horrified and fascinated.

His mother nodded. "And this where the misunderstanding comes in. Your bond, lately it has grown much more intimate. When I saw the way that Draco reacted to you being in danger last night, the way that he had little to no control over himself as your bond called to him; and then the way you so naturally settled with him after you arrived last night and he seemed to sense your presence, despite the fact that he was under the influence of a sleeping draught. Well, I thought that meant you had consummated your relationship. It was the only explanation I could think of that accounted for you being so suddenly and inextricably linked."

Draco just stared at her, breathing hard. That wasn't nearly good enough. "And you didn't think that we should be allowed to try and provide you with another explanation? You just thought the worst of us? There's more than one kind of intimacy, the two of you taught me that. And what of this bond, when were you going to tell us about it?"

She studied her hands. And then opened and closed her mouth several times before she started to speak. "I do not have an excuse, you're right, of course. And I will admit, I had no plans to tell you about it, it didn't seem relevant."
"Except that you used it to judge our actions," he snapped. "I think you just didn't want to admit that you were keeping something like this from us. I think this is the very definition of relevant!"

"Draco-" his father began.

"He's right, Lucius," she said quietly, ducking her head.

"I need to get out of here and think about this." He turned to Hermione. "Can we please go stay at your house until we go back to school?"

Looking shocked and uncomfortable, she just shrugged. And though he almost didn't, he turned to his parents for permission.

His father nodded curtly. "We'll send an elf with your things."

"We love you both," his mother called out just before they popped away.

He believed her but he didn't think he'd ever trust that the same way again.

Chapter End Notes

Don't kill me. They'll get through this. And no, Narcissa hasn't lost her mind, the events of the Quidditch World Cup just had a major impact on her. Seeing the danger they're in first hand along with realizing that Draco and Hermione really are growing up and she didn't exercise her usual good judgement responding to these things. This chapter was hard for me to write, just ask Weestarmeggie. A huge, huge thanks to her not only for beta-reading but for listening to me complain about this for weeks.

One more thing, because this has been brought up so often lately by readers. The idea that Snape is Draco's godfather is actually fanon and not canon. I know it's a popular theory and I've seen it incorporated into stories really well many times. But it's only a theory, and not one that I subscribe to. In my opinion if he was Draco's godfather that's the very first thing Narcissa would have reminded him of when she went for help at the beginning of HBP, but she just calls him Lucius' friend and Draco's favorite teacher. You are free to disagree, of course, this is just all to say that AUM Snape will not be fulfilling that role. Wow, that got really long winded. Thanks for humoring me and thank you all for reading!
Chapter 26

They landed and Hermione looked around her parents living room. She clung to Draco’s arm, not knowing where to go or what to think despite the familiarity of the surroundings, and when she looked at him, she saw that his jaw was set, his eyes wild. He was clearly furious. A feeling of dread settled in her gut.

"You're angry," she stated the obvious, with the hope that it would get him talking.

He whipped his head around to look at her. "Of course I am," he snapped, "aren't you?"

"Well, I- maybe?" She said tentatively. Truth be told she was finding it difficult to get a handle on how she felt other than blindsided. "Why are you angry?" She asked even as she was terrified of his answer.

"I wouldn't do that to you!" He blurted, releasing her to pace in front of the sofa.

She missed him immediately, but she didn't go after him, just watched as he worked himself up even further while she tried to make sense of his words. "Do what to me?" She finally asked.

"Have sex with you in a broom cupboard, or someplace else where we had to sneak about like we were doing something deserve better than that, you deserve something special. And I just wouldn't do that to you, I don't know how my mother could think that I would!"

She almost choked on her inappropriate laughter at the relief she felt and that this was what he chose to be concerned about after everything that had just happened. Even as her heart broke that his parents had apparently sewn such doubt in him.

"It never occurred to me that you would enter a broom cupboard for any reason, Draco," she said absentmindedly as she tried to sort everything she wanted to say to him in her mind.

Because the fact was that sometimes it scared her how much she loved him. Sometimes it felt like it was more than her body could contain. He certainly hadn't been part of her plan. And she'd had a plan, ever since she was a little girl. It had changed once she'd found out she was a witch, of course, but only slightly. She would still go to school, be top of her class, and get the scores to either further her education or start a great career. And from there she would change the world, now that world would just include magic. She wanted a boyfriend, and then later a family, but she'd thought that would all come later, and it had only been a vague wish anyway. One she had intended to tackle once the rest of it was taken care of.

Draco had blown that all out of the water. School and career were still important, but they were both journeys she would take alongside him now. She sometimes thought she was too young to have already decided that, but she didn't feel too young - most girls her age were still consumed by silly crushes, or at most, had been part of an innocent relationship. Meanwhile, she fully intended to be with Draco forever.

And then, just a few minutes ago, Narcissa had all but confirmed what she'd known in her heart for a long time. There was something special about her relationship with Draco. Narcissa could
actually see it. It was extraordinary, and as much as she hated the way the information had come out, and was not pleased that it had been kept from them all this time, she was mostly thrilled. But Draco hadn't seemed to be, and that scared her. But if he was just upset about the accusations that had been leveled against them, well, she could handle that as long as it meant he wasn't angry about the knowledge of their connection.

She did, of course, resent the way that her physical relationship with Draco had been dragged into the spotlight and that Narcissa had turned it into an issue. It should have been something they discussed privately and in their own time. And she especially resented that the Malfoys had so easily believed that she and Draco would abuse the trust that had been placed in them. But she knew that she and Draco could get through that.

She noticed that Draco had stopped pacing and looked up at him. He was just staring at her. "Are you calling me a snob?"

She frowned as she tried to remember what she'd just said and then froze when she realized she may have just made things much worse. She scrambled for a way to backtrack. Because Draco could be sensitive, and he didn't always take it well when she pointed out instances where she felt he was casually taking his family's wealth for granted. That wasn't a fight she wanted to have right now.

She opened her mouth. Nothing came out. And then he began to smirk.

She marched over to him and whacked him on the arm. "You prat, I really thought you were mad!"

He grabbed her and hugged her tight, pinning her arms to her sides and preventing her from punishing him any further with her quick hands.

"You are a snob," she pouted into his chest, but she let her lips caress the area just over his heart.

"I'm not sure that wanting a little privacy and an actual bed when we have sex for the first time qualifies me as a snob," he grumbled, suddenly serious again.

She raised her face to his. "With everything that's happened in the past couple of days, is that really what's bothering you? That they accused us of sneaking around?"

"Yes," he shut his mouth with an almost theatrical snap. "No," he admitted after a few moments, "at least, it's not the only thing. But the general lack of respect she thought I'd shown you. And that we had shown them. And that she didn't even give us a chance to explain. Yes, those things really bother me."

"Well, I'm sorry, I can't speak for you parents, or take back what your mother said." Her heart was so heavy for him, he regarded his parents with something close to reverence, especially his mother and this had to be killing him. "But I know that you wouldn't do that. So don't worry. You wouldn't hurt me, or push me into something I'm not ready for. Hurting me would hurt you. I know, because I feel the same way," she finished softly, feeling shy at expressing the thought out loud.

"Good," he breathed a sigh of relief and kissed her forehead. "I'm still mad at them, but I guess in the end it only matters that you know that." He held her for a few moments before beginning to speak again. "But aren't you angry with them? You said 'maybe' before and, if anything, they- or Mother, at least- were crueler to you."

"I'm-" she huffed in exasperation when she was unable to find a suitable word. "I'm confused," she eventually settled on. And then she asked him the only question she really cared to know the
answer to. "What do you think about what your mother said, you know, about our connection?"
She felt herself color and couldn't quite meet his eyes, and she hated herself for her cowardice. She
told Draco everything, she should be able to have this discussion with him without blushing.

"I think she should mind her own business," he snarled.

"Oh," she said, dipping her head to hide her hurt. That wasn't exactly the resounding agreement
she'd been hoping for.

"Oh?"

"But you didn't react to the veela," she argued quietly. "At the World Cup," she clarified, when he
didn't say anything.

"I knew what you meant, Hermione. I just don't know what that has to do with what we were
talking about."

"Well it's because of me, right? That they didn't affect you?"

"Of course it is."

She snapped her head up at the bite in his voice and saw that he looked wholly affronted; she
sighed. "I know, I didn't mean that to be a question exactly. I just thought the fact that your feelings
for me prevented you from being affected by veela might have lent credence to what your mother
said."

"You've lost me again."

"We're fourteen, Draco," she huffed in frustration. "This is like the height of puberty, our hormones
are basically on a rampage. But we're committed enough to each other that beings that are designed
to appeal to your most base sexual instincts had no effect on you. You don't think that demonstrates
that there might be a special connection between us? Above and beyond even what most people
who love each other have?"

His jaw dropped and he blinked at her, the very picture of astonishment. She quickly looked away
and tried to blink back her tears. He grabbed her chin and forced her face back up to his. "What are
you talking about, of course we have a special connection."

"Then why did you seem so upset about it? Why should your mother mind her own business?"

"Because she had no right to try and hide it from us! To invade our privacy by using her little talent
to basically spy on us."

"It doesn't sound like she can help it."

"Then she sure as hell should have told us!"

Hermione didn't have a response to that, she felt the same way. "So, you feel it too?"

Again, he froze. "Yeah. I didn't know what 'it' was until she explained, but I don't doubt it for a
second. My magic literally reaches for you. I felt it last night, more than ever. And the things we're
capable of... Hermione, were you really worried about that?"

She shrugged helplessly.

"Mother didn't tell me anything this morning that I didn't already know." The expression on her
face must have been something to behold, because he actually threw his head back and laughed. "Okay, so she actually said a lot that I didn't already know," he admitted when he calmed down. "But I've felt that this thing between us was extraordinary, pretty much since always. I just didn't consciously know it, and I certainly didn't know that it's apparently on my mother's visual spectrum," he finished wryly.

She fisted his shirt- an automatic reflex- and grinned to herself. "It's the same for me," she admitted, "I didn't know, but I knew." She lifted her eyes to his and then they were grinning at each other.

"I love you," they said simultaneously, and their grins got bigger and stupider.

Hermione tore her eyes away from his after many long moments in an attempt to bring her thoughts back to the matter at hand. But, in the meantime, she absently noted that Draco was dressed almost muggle. Not completely- out of respect for his parents, she was sure given that they'd begun the day at the Manor- but enough that they could take a stroll through her neighborhood without sticking out. He'd adapted so well, had even begun appreciating many things from her parents world; it warmed her heart. "So, we're not ready now but...one day? And in a bed, not a broom cupboard?" She smiled at him mischievously, but with a great deal of hope.

This time he caught on immediately, taking her face between his hands. "Yeah, definitely, did you not think so?"

"Yes." She swallowed thickly. "I just wanted to be sure. Like I said, last night and this morning have been confusing."

"Let's sit," he finally said, taking her hand and pulling her onto the sofa beside him. "Have you noticed that the elves have started calling you 'mistress'?"

Her breath caught. She had noticed, and she'd known it was significant. How had she forgotten? "Yes," she answered simply.

"They know things, you know."

She just nodded.

"I don't know if they see things similar to what my mother apparently sees," he said, bitterness coloring his tone, "but they definitely understand my intentions when it comes to you. I think they knew even before I did." He let go of her hand and put his arm around her. "I'll owl Father and have him draw up a betrothal contract right now, if that will make you feel better. He really can't argue, we're the same age he and Mother were when theirs was put in place. And I can't blame you if you're feeling insecure after what Mother said about...halfblood babies," he finished, his tone strained.

Hermione was surprised, out of everything said over breakfast the argument Narcissa had made about this not being a good time to bring a halfblood Malfoy into the world had bothered her the least. She didn't particularly like the reminder that she'd been born an outsider, and that until fairly recently the family she'd come to adore and view as her own had been blood purists, but she also hadn't taken it personally. Narcissa was not on her list of favorite people at the moment, but she believed that the older witch did love her. "I don't think she meant anything bad by that, just that it would be dangerous for all of us, for us to have children with the way things are right now. She has a point."

"I didn't like that she brought it up at all," he bit out. "When she said that I felt...almost violent."
Hermione considered that. "Do you want kids?" She wondered. For some reason she hadn't believed that was something he would have really thought about, it seemed beyond his years. Something that young girls commonly dreamt about, but not boys. Then again, hadn't they just established that they pushed the bounds of commonality?

"Yes," he answered immediately. She must have looked surprised because he chuckled. "I need an heir, you know that." She nodded. "But I want more than one, I was lucky to have Claire but I would have liked a sibling." He shrugged. "But I don't want kids for a long time," he quickly amended, "a long, long time. At least ten years. I intend to enjoy you fully before I have to share you."

He practically growled the last statement and she felt her face heat.

"Merlin Hermione, when did you become so shy? Where's my girlfriend, the Gryffindor?"

"I don't know!" She moaned, covering her face with one hand. "But we haven't talked about sex, not really, and to have it brought up by your parents like that. I feel like I've done something wrong, even though I know I haven't."

He jostled her playfully. "Talk to me then. I don't like when there are things between us."

"You're not going to like it," she warned.

"Can't be any worse than what my mother had to say." Every time he mentioned Narcissa he sounded more bitter. Hermione was coming to realize that it was going to be a long time before Draco truly forgave his mother for her comments. Lucius had warned her about the Black temper, but she thought that had been mostly in jest, she knew differently now, and she thought that it might go hand in hand with their ability to hold a grudge.

"I think we should wait, to go all the way, I mean," she said while resisting the urge to look away.

"Wait?" He asked, drawing the word out carefully.

She cringed. She very much doubted there was a teenage boy on the planet who would want to hear from his girlfriend what she was about to say to Draco. She had no doubt that he would respect her wishes, but that didn't mean he'd like it. "Until we get married," she admitted.

He sighed. "That's what I thought you were going to say. May I ask why? I didn't think that was important to you. Is this a muggle tradition I'm unaware of?"

She chuckled. "No, I mean there are certain sections of society and religions that advocate for waiting until marriage, but that's not something I or my family subscribe to. That is to say I didn't have this plan to save myself for marriage, and, well, it's going to be you and only you now anyway."

"That's a relief, at least," he said dryly.

She looked up sharply and met his eyes to see that they were filled with mirth. She rolled hers in his direction. "It's just that after this morning, I realized that it would feel terrible to sneak around with you. Because, you know that's what we'd have to do; steal time here, or at the Manor, or at Hogwarts, right? I don't think your parents or mine are just going to allow us to spend the night in each other's room." She took a deep breath. "And I suppose I assumed we'd marry right out of Hogwarts, like your parents did, and then we'd be free to be together however we like. I just don't want to sully anything between us with lies. Even just being accused of such a thing felt terrible."
"So this is my mother's fault?" He sounded angry but she was certain it wasn't directed at her. As annoyed and even betrayed as she felt, Hermione was also beginning to feel very sorry for Narcissa.

Hermione shook her head vigorously. "I didn't appreciate the way she went about it, but I'm grateful in a way that she brought it up. I would hate for us to do something that we regretted afterwards. Like you said, it should be special. And Draco, it's not hard for me to imagine us getting caught up in the moment and getting carried away one day. I trust you implicitly and I would never regret you, but that's not something I want to do on a whim. It's too important."

"Damn it," he said softly, but he was nuzzling her hair. "I can't argue with that. I'd be a right prat if I did. But do you think we could put a pin in this discussion? Agree to talk about anything before we do it, but leave it open to changing our minds?"

"Yeah," she nodded, "that sounds fair."

She put her head on his shoulder and they relaxed against the cushions.

"I do have some good news," he eventually said, breaking the peaceful silence.

"What's that?"

"Have you ever heard of the Tri-Wizard Tournament?"

She adjusted her head on his shoulder so that she could see his face. "No, should I have?"

"I hadn't, I just thought you might have come across it in your reading."

"You read almost as much as I do, Draco."

"You're more interested in history," he countered. "Anyway, it's a tournament between Hogwarts, Beauxbatons and Durmstrang. A few hundred years ago it occurred on a regular basis and the schools took turns hosting it. It hasn't been held in a couple of centuries, but it's coming to Hogwarts this year."

"Why hasn't it been held in so long, and why haven't either of us even heard of it?"

"It fell out of fashion," he snickered, "too many deaths among the participants."

"I'm sorry. You said this was good news?" She asked incredulously, pinching his side lightly to demonstrate that she did not appreciate his humor.

He just grabbed the offending hand. "Well I don't plan to be stupid enough to volunteer to participate. Anyway, they've changed the rules, you have to be of age, they think that'll make it safer."

"I'm still not excited about our school hosting a deadly tournament," she grumbled. Sometimes the magical world just seemed so odd to her.

"Nothing we can do about that," he shrugged. "But the good news is that Claire turns seventeen in October, she's coming along with the Beauxbatons contingent. Which means she'll be at Hogwarts most of the year!" He finished cheerily.

She just stared at him. "And you're not worried about Claire participating in a deadly tournament?" He loved Claire like a sister, would hex somebody for so much as looking at her askance.
Hermione couldn't believe that he was so nonchalant about her putting herself in that kind of danger.

"Oh," he shrugged. "Well, only one champion is chosen from each school, and Claire doesn't seem to think there's any possibility that she'll be the one. She'll barely be of age. She's certain it'll be one of a few seventh years that she says are all very talented. She just wanted to use the opportunity to spend some time at Hogwarts."

"Huh," she considered that, thinking that it seemed awfully optimistic- very un-Malfoy like. She shook it off because she also knew Claire, there would be no talking her out of it, and she was about to be an of-age witch. "How are they chosen, anyway?" She asked instead of voicing her concerns.

"There's a magical goblet, you submit your name and it chooses the most worthy from each school."

Well, that certainly sounded like a fascinating magical artefact. "Is this what your parents were keeping from us?" She asked when she suddenly realized that this was probably the secret they'd been trying to discover all summer.

"Among other things," he snorted. "But yes, Claire wrote to tell me, and once she'd done so Mother and Father were willing to confirm it."

"Well," she said after a moment, "it will be nice to have her around."

He just nodded and they lapsed back into silence. And then after a few minutes their late night and long morning caught up with them and they fell asleep, still upright, leaning on each other.

They were still lounging on the sofa- though Dobby had made sure they were well fed and taken care of- when the Grangers returned home from work that evening.

"Hermione, Draco?" Helen came to a startled halt as she entered the living room and eyed them sitting side by side- Hermione's head on Draco's shoulder, where it had remained most of the day- both staring vacantly at the television.

"Hi Mum," Hermione responded, but she shifted only her eyes to look at her mother, the rest of her remained comfortably propped against Draco.

"What are you doing here?" Her mother visibly shook herself. "Not that we aren't happy to see you, of course! Richard, come in here!" She called out.

He rushed into the room, his shirt halfway unbuttoned, he'd obviously already started to change out of his work clothes. "What's going on here?"

Hermione tugged on Draco's hand until they were both sitting up straighter. "Pull up a chair, we have a lot to tell you," she said soberly. It had sunk in over the course of the afternoon that they were going to have to tell her parents what had happened at the World Cup, and also this morning, which had led them to be here rather than still camping outside the stadium as planned, and neither was looking forward to it.

She slowly began to explain the last few days to her parents, with Draco chiming in here and there. When she reached the part about the Death Eater activities she saw her mother and father exchange a significant glance. She looked at Draco and knew that he'd seen it too. He gave her a subtle nod. They'd have to talk about that later.
When Hermione finished her tale her mother actually chuckled.

"Really Mum?" She objected.

"I'm sorry darling, I know that you must have had an uncomfortable morning, I was simply wishing that Narcissa had consulted me before she made such an accusation. I could have assured her that your relationship hadn't progressed that far."

"Are you going to tell us that you have a secret magical talent as well?" Hermione asked sarcastically.

"Not a magical talent, just my eyes and a mother's intuition. I think perhaps her talent has made Narcissa a bit blind in this instance. She's usually so perceptive, but perhaps she's come to rely on it too much."

"You don't seem surprised to hear about my mother's ability. Or about our connection." Draco interjected. Hermione could tell that he was attempting to keep the accusation out of his voice, but he wasn't particularly successful, and he couldn't hide the tension in his body from her.

Helen cast a nervous glance at her husband, obviously taken aback by the animosity practically radiating off of their daughter's best friend.

"Your parents told us about it when the two of you first became friends. They used it to explain why we could trust them with Hermione," her father explained in his wife's stead, eyes narrowed in Draco's direction.

Hermione's heart sank and she felt Draco's hand curl into a fist where it was resting against her thigh.

Her parents had known and they hadn't said anything either.

"Why didn't anybody tell us?" She implored, trying not to sound whiny.

"Well I can't speak for Narcissa," her mother began slowly in response to the tension in the room, "but I know that I didn't say anything at first because I didn't want you to feel pressured to become a couple, or to even remain friends. I wanted to make sure that it was your choice and not the result of some kind of supposed magical predestination. And I haven't thought about it at all in a long time."

"I felt the same way," her father added solemnly. "I would also say that I didn't know Narcissa at the time, and I didn't know how much I believed what she was telling us. So, I certainly wasn't going to fill your head with her theories."

Those were actually reasonable explanations. At least it felt a lot less like her parents had actively been trying to keep them in the dark. She glanced at Draco and he just gave a small shrug.

"Okay," she said, "Draco and I were hoping to order Chinese for dinner, would that be okay?"

It was a blatant attempt to change the subject and she didn't care if they knew it, as long as they went along, because there was only so much she could deal with at a time, and she felt bone deep weary. She needed to talk to Draco, in private, but that would have to wait. Luckily for her, her parents had apparently also had their fill of serious conversation for the evening and they allowed their daughter her little subterfuge. They didn't say anything but rose- almost simultaneously- to go retrieve the takeaway menus from the kitchen.
The foursome ordered food, ate, and then settled for the evening in the living room and—quite uncharacteristically for a family that usually thrived on discussion and debate—tuned into the telly for the hours before bed. They all seemed to need the mindless distraction. And despite being quite exhausted from everything that had happened in the past forty-eight hours, by silent agreement Draco and Hermione both stayed awake and in the living room until her parents had gone to bed.

The moment she heard their bedroom door close she turned to Draco, the panic that had been simmering inside of her since the conversation earlier that evening—and maybe even since the night before—boiled over. "What if they try and separate us?" She whispered, unable to disguise the hysteria in her voice.

"Calm down," he said grabbing her hand and bringing it to his lips. "Come here." He pulled and she scooted over until they were pressed against each other. She turned to face him, curling the leg nearest to him so that it was partially underneath her and partially cradled in his lap. He put an arm on the back of the sofa and they both rested their heads on it, foreheads touching. "I've been thinking about this."

She let out a breath, enormously relieved that they were on the same wavelength. "You have?"

He just nodded and his nose brushed hers. Out of the corner of her eye she saw his lips quirk and he tilted his head to give her a sweet kiss that she hadn't realized she desperately needed.

"What's your plan?" She asked when he had pulled away, though he didn't so much pull away as he just separated their lips, there was barely a hair's breadth between them.

"We need options. We need to have the freedom to make our own decisions if our parents start making ones for us that we can't live with. But it's tricky, because legally and magically we are still considered children for awhile yet."

It was her turn to nod.

"My parents kept me from you last night and while I understand why they did it, I will never agree with it. And then the moment they thought we'd done something that they didn't agree with, they turned on us. And then, of course, now we know for certain they're keeping secrets, who knows how many there are?"

Hermione opened her mouth to argue, to tell him that it was all very complicated, but found that she couldn't. Because in the end that was the point, it was complicated. Lucius and Narcissa would do what they considered to be best, so would her parents. But that wouldn't necessarily align with her desires, or Draco's. He was the only one she trusted completely.

"I saw the way your parents looked at each other when we were talking about last night, Hermione, I know you did too," he continued. "I don't blame them, my father is a Death Eater and Death Eaters did that. Death Eaters are a threat to you. I'm not even sure how I feel about my own father right now. I can't blame them for wanting to get you away from all that, but I also can't lose you."

"So what do we do?"

"If I've learned anything, as a Malfoy, it's that money gives you options. So, I was thinking it would be a good idea to move some into the muggle world. If the war escalates it will be easier to access that way. And if I do it slowly enough it won't raise any red flags. Would you help me with that? I don't know anything about muggle banks."

"Don't you need your parents permission to withdraw money?"
"No, I won't have access to the greater Malfoy fortune and certain portions of my inheritance until I come of age. But what's in my name already is mine alone. I've just always asked for permission before." He pursed his lips. "Out of respect," he clarified, his expression was hard but his eyes were troubled.

"Oh," she said quietly as the weight of what Draco was willing to do sunk in. "Yes, I can help. Maybe we can even invest some of it, let it grow on its own so you don't have to take out so much."

"Whatever you think." She thought there might have been some relief in his tone.

"And it would probably be good to establish your presence in the muggle world. If we need to-" she hesitated, "avoid or get away from the magical world it will be easier to do that way. We should look into getting you some muggle identification. We might have to fake it with magic, but I'm sure we can figure it out." She paused again. "Draco, are we planning to run away from home?" She asked it in a harsh and disbelieving whisper, surprised at her own willingness to go along with such a plan.

"We're giving ourselves options," he reiterated firmly. "I guess that's a possibility, but I'd only want to do it under the most dire of circumstances. I just want us to be free to make our own choices. And most important is this." He sat up and extended his pinky in her direction and she eyed it curiously and then looked up at him. His lips curled into that little grin that he reserved just for her.

"I thought we could make another one of your pinky promises."

Her expression shifted to one of disbelief. He'd been so dubious the first time she'd suggested that, almost exactly a year ago. Then again, many things had changed since then, hadn't they?

"The first one worked out pretty well didn't it?" He wiggled his pinky a bit in invitation, his confident expression never faltered. She met his eyes again, they were dark and intense and they held just a tiny bit of insecurity, and it was all she could do to stop herself from surging forward into his arms.

"Yeah," she said, and she didn't even care that it came out all breathless and dreamy and that Draco- who could read her like a book- would know exactly what that meant. As much as he had meant to her on the day they made that first pinky promise, as thrilled as she'd been that he wanted to try and be more than friends, it somehow paled in comparison to what she felt for him now. She could no longer imagine living without him by her side. And after the events of the past twenty four hours especially, he deserved to understand how much she adored him. She reached out and curled her pinky around his.

"We promise, no matter what else, that we put each other first. From now on. Always."

She held as gaze as she repeated, without hesitation: "Each other first, always."

They each leaned forward and kissed their respective hands to seal the promise, and then she tugged their jointed appendages down and out of the way. But she didn't kiss him, just pressed her forehead against his and raised her free hand to cup his face. Silently, he copied her actions.

She felt only a tiny twinge of conscience at the promise they'd just made, that she'd agreed to put him above even her own parents. But she knew that they were really just giving voice to something that had been true for awhile now. And wasn't that the way of the world anyway? She just expected to be older before she committed herself to another so completely. But Draco deserved to be her first priority. She would protect him from anything, whether they were wearing a Death Eater mask, or a set of Narcissa Malfoy's fine robes.
Y'all, THIS CHAPTER. It just did not want to be written. I knew exactly what I wanted to include so I wouldn't even call it writer's block, the words just wouldn't come out in a cogent manner. Between that and the fact that fourth year is a logistical nightmare and I've been getting all my ducks in a row, I know that it's been awhile since I updated. I'm not going to apologize for it both because this is a hobby and because I'm not willing to post anything that I'm unhappy with just for the sake of updating. But I did want to let you know what was going on. I am not losing interest in this story and have no plans to stop writing it, I work on it in some form daily.

So much love to Weestarmeggie (as always) she doesn't just beta read, she brainstorms with me for hours and is unendingly patient with my whining. If you haven't already I highly recommend you go check out her stuff! As always thanks for reading and leaving me your thoughts! You guys are great!
Chapter 27

Hermione walked into lunch on her birthday feeling decidedly melancholy. She knew she didn’t really have anything to complain about, but she couldn’t help it. It was a Monday, and while she loved school and enjoyed class, now that the exciting newness had worn off two weeks into term, she could only lament the fact that her birthday fell on a weekday and not the weekend. She would have prefered to have had the day to do with as she pleased.

Harry, Ron, Neville, even her roommates, had all remembered the day, which had felt wonderful. Harry, especially, was being very attentive, determined to find a way to make her day special. Even just one summer in a loving home with a caring parental figure had done wonders for him. He was more confident, thoughtful, and far more affectionate.

Hermione had heard enough stories from Sirius about James Potter to know that- had Harry grown up with his own parents- he would have probably been very like his father. A quip always on the tip of his tongue, an arm casually draped around his friends shoulders, a generally carefree attitude towards life. The opportunity stolen from him broke Hermione’s heart. He was great and she was fortunate to have him in her life.

But, he wasn’t Draco.

She missed Draco.

Nineteen days into term and it was harder than ever to just pretend that she didn’t care about him. And especially hard to find time to spend with him. Things had been challenging the year before with the addition of their elective classes. But they were even more so this year. The lack of quidditch due to the tournament meant that the evenings Harry usually spent on the pitch- very often with Ron tagging along- were now spent with her. And then, of course, there was Draco’s friendship with Theo Nott.

They’d become friends as arithmancy partners the year before, a bond they’d been unable to forge during their first two years of school, even though both of them were Slytherins. Hermione was happy for Draco. Or she at least tried to be. She knew that- aside from her- he didn’t have any real friends inside Hogwarts, and that Narcissa and Theo’s mum had been close, but she couldn’t help but lament the time she missed with him now that he had Theo. And she hated herself for it because she knew how hypocritical it was. But sometimes she just needed to sulk like the teenage girl that she was. She longed for somebody to vent to about it, Narcissa would have been her usual choice- for some reason it seemed to silly to share it with her own mum- but she didn’t dare. She no longer knew where she stood with the woman.

“What is he doing here?” Harry practically yelled, seemingly out of nowhere, startling Hermione from her thoughts.

She stopped short, almost running into Harry’s back and looked up to see Lucius sitting at the head table. She wanted to laugh, but instead grabbed Harry’s hand, hissed a warning at Ron, and led them over to the Gryffindor table.
Warmth blossomed in her chest. She gazed at the Malfoy patriarch out of the corner of her eye and bit back a grin. She knew Lucius too well, there was no way he’d appeared in Hogwarts on her birthday by simple coincidence.

When Dumbledore announced that the Board of Governors were present and had requested the presence of the top two students in every year, along with all of the prefects, for a meeting that afternoon, she was certain Lucius had a hand in the arrangements. She hid a smile behind her hand and resisted the urge to look across the Hall at the Slytherin table. Because Draco was the second best student in their year.

Harry sent her a reassuring smile. “At least you get out of afternoon classes,” he commiserated.

She smiled in return. “Keep notes for me, yeah?” She asked, trying to make herself sound regretful—she wouldn’t normally relish missing an entire afternoon of classes.

“Yes,” he said seriously.

Inside the Board of Governors meeting room the students were seated around a large table by year group which left her between Draco and a third year Ravenclaw called Mariel. Apparently they had been gathered to discuss any issues they might have with how things were run in Hogwarts, academic or otherwise. The Board of Governors wanted to make very sure they put their best foot forward for the tournament. It was a good idea. One she wanted to take seriously.

But, of course, her stupid boyfriend decided distracting her would be the order of the afternoon instead. He started by just looking at her, just little fleeting glances, but she could feel his eyes on her. Then, because that was apparently not enough, he reached over and cupped her knee under the table, which not only captured her attention completely, but felt downright scandalous. She tried to send him a warning look but suddenly he wasn’t interested in so much as glancing her way.

She squirmed, and he clamped down harder on her leg before he began rubbing soothing circles on her kneecap. And just like that, she wasn’t so invested in making him remove his hand. She surreptitiously looked around the room and realized that nobody was paying them any attention anyway - not even Lucius- and that his actions were completely disguised by their voluminous robes. If somebody were to peek under the table they’d most likely be faced with just a curtain of black. She grabbed his hand and tucked them both into the sleeve of her robe just to be certain. He rubbed her knuckles with his thumb soothingly and she could practically feel him radiating satisfaction.

And so they remained for the majority of the afternoon. It was actually a worthwhile activity, for the Board of Governors to get the opinions of the students, especially with a couple of foreign schools about to be on their doorstep. It got a little tedious after a couple of hours, but she was grateful to be able to spend the time with Draco.

They finally wrapped up just before dinner.

“Mr. Malfoy, Miss Granger will you stay back, I’d like to speak with you,” Lucius said in his usual imperious manner as the other students were readying themselves to leave.

A few people looked like they were going to object, but most were quelled with a look from the intimidating blond wizard. However, Harold Abbott- who was Hannah, a Hufflepuff who was in their year’s father- wasn’t put off.

“Now see here Lucius, I won’t object to you speaking privately with your son, but what business do you have with this girl?”
“It’s not a problem sir,” Hermione jumped in, she supposed she should have appreciated his concern but was insulted on Lucius’ behalf, even though, in theory, she understood, “I know Lord Malfoy.” She smiled sweetly.

The man reared back in obvious surprise.

“Miss Granger is my wife’s cousin’s ward. You do remember that my wife is a daughter of House Black, don’t you Abbott?” It was almost a threat, if he protested further Lord Abbott would have been interfering with family business. People may not have understood the detente between Houses Black and Malfoy, but they knew that it existed and none of the old families would question that - it just wasn’t done. And if a ward of House Black wanted to speak to Lord Malfoy, it would be utterly improper for anybody to try and stop it.

The man narrowed his eyes in Lucius’ direction but said nothing and turned to Hermione once more. “It was a pleasure to meet you young lady, you have a bright mind and Hannah speaks highly of you, I look forward to seeing it develop in the future.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly, looking at her feet and knowing she was bright red. She heard the man leave the room and then Draco started to laugh.

“What evil things do you think he believes we might be up to with Hermione, Father?” He asked as he hooked an arm around her waist, voice full of mirth.

Lucius sighed and she looked up to see that he was pinching the bridge of his nose and looking very pained indeed.

“I do not know, Son, but despite everything we should probably be grateful that he wasn’t more insistent.”

She felt Draco’s arm tighten around her reflexively.

“But now is not the time to discuss such things.” He raised his head and met her eyes, smiling. “Happy birthday, Mignonette.”

She pulled away from Draco and walked into his arms. “Thank you so much, I’m so glad you’re here. How long have you been planning this?”

He smirked at her, but shrugged casually. “It was suggested by somebody other than myself that we hold a meeting with the school’s top students, I simply took the opportunity to suggest and take advantage of the date. Narcissa sends her regrets, she had no excuse to come today.”

There was a heavy pause. They all knew that Narcissa could have manufactured an excuse, had she really wanted to, she was a master of such things, and the fact that she hadn’t said a lot. Hermione didn’t know whether to feel guilty or relieved. She hated that Narcissa felt unwelcome, but she also didn’t think that Draco, or herself, for that matter, were ready to spend any real time with the older witch.

“I’m just happy you’re here,” she muttered into his shoulder.

“I’m happy to have had the occasion to see you on your birthday,” he laid a kiss on her forehead and finally pulled away. “I have some things for you. Rumi! Evie!”

Hermione watched with wide eyes as the two elves popped in. “I thought personal elves weren’t allowed on the grounds?”
Lucius chuckled, his eyes twinkling. “There are many benefits to being a member of the Board of Governors.”

Hermione watched as the elves set several wrapped packages and a large picnic basket on the table and then fell to her knees to embrace them. “I’m so happy to see the pair of you!” She gushed, Evie embraced her in return and while Rumi was still obviously a little uncomfortable with her display of affection, he didn’t pull away.

When she finally rose to her feet she saw Draco looking amused, and Lucius resigned. He shook it off and handed her the largest box. “This is from Narcissa and myself. I promised her I’d stay to see your reaction, after that I’ll be out of your hair.”

She tore the package open and felt her jaw drop. Inside were the most beautifully crafted, almost decadent, pair of dragonhide boots she’d ever seen. Buttery soft, utterly feminine but still practical with their low heel. She’d spent enough time with Narcissa over the past few years to be certain these had been custom made for her. She didn’t spend hours pouring over fashion magazines like some of her housemates, but she appreciated beauty and quality, and these were exquisite.

“Narcissa thought that it was time that you had something a little more grown up,” Lucius commented lightly. But she knew better than to take his tone at face value, these had been purchased as a statement. She looked down at her rather childish Mary-Jane style shoes and got the point immediately. Narcissa may have forgotten for a moment, but Hermione was becoming a woman and deserved to be treated as such. She appreciated the gesture and felt her heart heal a little further from the rift with her surrogate mother.

“These are amazing,” she said, running her hands over them before passing them to Draco, who knew how to appreciate quality and whom she hoped would understand the message they had been meant to send as well. “Thank you very much.”

“Of course, now I shall be going. This room is yours for the evening, you won’t be disturbed.” He visibly paused. “I don’t think I need to tell you to behave yourselves, and to be back in your houses by curfew.”

“He gave Draco a clap on the shoulder and then left a kiss on her forehead. She reared forward and enveloped him in a crushing embrace, he stiffened for a moment- she really thought she’d broken him of that- but then returned it. “Thank you so much for all of this.”

“You’re welcome little love.” He placed another kiss on the top of her head. “Draco, perhaps you should consider writing to your mother.” Hermione cringed in Lucius’ arms and backed out of them carefully to stand in solidarity at Draco’s side.

“I have written to Mother, more than once,” he said stiffly.

Lucius sighed. “You know what I mean, those letters were little more than formalities. Don’t you think that this has gone on long enough?”

It was a reflex, the way Draco grabbed her hand and squeezed, she could tell by the way he tried to drop it immediately, but she wouldn’t have it and entwined their fingers together in a manner he couldn’t easily free himself from. She knew what he was doing, he was ashamed by the way his parents had treated them, and by how much it continued to bother him. He’d spoken to her about it openly at first, but had begun to try and hide it. She understood why- even with her, he still tried to resist being so transparent with his emotions- but she couldn’t imagine that he didn’t also realize
how pointless it was, it was nearly impossible for them to keep things from each other.

“It was really nice to see you, and I thank you for arranging all of this, but I think maybe you should just go,” she said quietly to Lucius, looking up at him from beneath her lashes, unable to fully meet his eyes.

Lucius’ eyes flashed with anger and she had to resist the urge to flinch; she was very glad, at the end of the day, that he was on their side. She’d hate to be on the other end of that anger when it was truly unleashed.

But he took a deep and obviously fortifying breath, nodded to them both, and simply strode out of the room without another word.

Draco took a deep breath, so obviously reflective of his father that it nearly broke her heart. She hated to see them at odds, but she didn’t say anything, just took him fully into her arms.

“I have wanted to do this all day. All month” she confessed with a huff. “I would say don’t be mad at him, but I’m mad at him too, for bringing that up. Can we just take advantage of this time though?”

“Yeah,” he murmured.

She snuggled against him, but then she suddenly remembered his earlier antics and reared back to thump him on the chest. “Did you have to be such a prat earlier? We could have gotten caught!”

His body went entirely rigid at first and she thought she’d offended him until he started to shake with laughter and turned his head to press his mouth against hers. “I missed you and I love you. Was I supposed to just sit next to my girlfriend for an entire afternoon- on her birthday- and not touch her? Also, don’t pretend like you didn’t enjoy it.” He snarked, utterly unapologetic. He pulled out his wand and transfigured a chair into a loveseat and then pulled her down and onto his lap, which she allowed without protest.

She sometimes felt that she and Draco were unusually mature for their ages. She’d dismissed the idea before this summer. Now she suspected it might actually be true and that the connection Narcissa saw between them may have been a contributing factor. It was almost certainly the reason Draco’s mum had mistakenly believed that their relationship had become intimate. She didn’t know any other girls who would truly feel this at ease with their boyfriends, she’d endured hours of stories from her roommates and girls in the years around her about the fumbling treatment they were regularly subjected to from other boys their age.

“Happy birthday,” he murmured.

“As much as you insisted on acting like an idiot, I’m so glad we got called into this meeting,” she confessed, resting her forehead against his and keeping him held tight.

“Again, sit here and try to convince me you didn’t like it,” he smirked. “I have gifts for you,” he singsonged when she didn’t say anything.

She smiled. “I saw that,” she murmured, her face buried in his neck.

“Mia,come on,” he cajoled, his voice gentle but somewhat impatient- the only thing he liked more than giving gifts was receiving them, he was a sucker for praise.

She took a moment to process his words. “What did you just call me?”
That seemed to bring him up short for once, and she pulled back to see him looking both shy and defiant. “Everybody has a nickname for you: Father calls you Mignonette, your father calls you Pumpkin, Sirius calls you Kitten. Even Potter and Weasley call you Mione, as horrendous as it is. Don’t I get to give you a name, if I like?”

She recognized Draco’s signature arrogance, but she knew him well enough to also detect the insecurity he was attempting to keep hidden—this issue meant something to him. Knowing him, he’d been marinating this idea for quite some time just waiting for the opportunity to address it in a seemingly casual manner. And she honestly didn’t mind if he wanted to give her a nickname, she was just curious.

“I just wondered,” she said quietly, “why Mia?”

He opened his mouth and ducked his head. “It’s pretty, and it makes sense.”

She tilted her head and just regarded him. “Maia would make more sense than Mia, as far as how my name is pronounced,” she argued.

She saw his cheeks pinken and he pulled her closer in an obvious attempt to hide it. “Mia vita, la mia anima gemella,” he murmured into her ear.

Her heart melted, she was particularly susceptible to him speaking Italian. “My life, my soulmate,” she translated. But she also sort of wanted to kick his arse. “You’re claiming me!”

“I thought it was more like we already belonged to each other,” he retorted, never releasing his grip on her.

“You’ve given me a nickname that essentially means ‘mine’” she shot back.

“And you’ve named me after your house mascot,” he retorted, “Leo,” he reminded her mockingly.

“You’ve marked me, essentially.”

“Then so have you,” he pulled back to look at her and rolled his eyes. “Don’t be so dramatic. Are you that offended to be associated with me- to be ‘mine’- even privately?” That brought her up short. “Hermione. You know I would never take anything from you that you weren’t willing to give, right?”

She let out a long breath. “Merlin Draco, of course you wouldn’t!” The feminist in her had risen up in protest at the idea of being some kind of possession. But she knew better than that, she didn’t believe that he’d ever try and impose his will on her, or be a hindrance to her in pursuing her dreams. However, that thought begged a question that had been in the back of her mind since her conversation with Tonks at the World Cup.

“Would you object to me getting a job?”

“Getting a job?” He asked, blinking at her like she’d just spoken in a foreign language.

She chuckled, realizing that was probably how it had sounded to him—the question must have seemed to have come out of nowhere. “When we’re married,” she tripped a little over that last word, still finding it difficult to regard that as a foregone conclusion.

He continued to just stare at her for a few moments. “To be honest I’d never considered it.”

“I know it’s not traditional. Your mother doesn’t work.”
Again he just regarded her steadily. “True, but I’m aware that you and my mother are very different witches. And, well, let’s just say I’ve started to rethink the importance of traditions since we’ve become friends.”

“What do you mean, other than the obvious fact that I’m a muggle-born?”

“Well, for one, some thoughts on what we might do after Hogwarts.”

“After Hogwarts? What were you thinking?”

“Well, actually it’s part of your first gift. Though I don’t know that it truly counts as a gift.” He summoned one of the packages his father had left behind and handed her the large stack of what was fairly obviously books.

And when she unwrapped the package she found that they were, in fact, books. More specifically, muggle textbooks. Her breath caught and she looked to Draco for an explanation.

“I’ve been speaking with your parents.”

She knew that he regularly corresponded with her parents, though it was usually a note he included with her own letters, but this seemed to indicate an altogether deeper degree of communication.

“I was thinking on what you said last year about keeping up with your muggle studies. I—” He hesitated, and looked away. “I shouldn’t have just dismissed you when you brought it up. I realized that over the summer and I started talking to your parents about the idea, and they helped me gather these materials. I know I’ll probably be behind, I won’t expect you to hold yourself back for me, but I thought that we could do our best to study together because I don’t want to—”

He was cut off as she threw her arms around him again. If she hadn’t loved him so much it would have broken her heart—how dismissive he’d been nearly a year before when she’d expressed a desire to keep up with her schooling in the muggle world. She was more than a little ashamed that she’d allowed circumstances, and his disapproval, to dissuade her. That he’d pursued the idea without her was amazing.

“I’d like to learn too,” he began again quietly, “I know I may not be able to catch up but…”

“Draco,” she gasped.

“Your parents have been really great,” he shrugged, “they say they understand if I can’t ever go to muggle university, but they aren’t holding it against me.”

She closed her eyes, both so overwhelmingly grateful and so sad, because she knew what he was thinking— at the moment, to him, her parents appeared wonderful and understanding, while his appeared stodgy and distrustful. “It isn’t a matter of your parents loving you, you’re just going through a rough patch. They made a mistake, a big embarrassing one, and you have every right to be angry and to take your time getting over it, but it was a mistake.”

He seemed to ignore that. “Also, I think it’s important for me to be able to function in the muggle world. I think the preparations we’ve already started putting into place could make it so that money would never be a problem— but Hermione, I don’t want to hide forever. What if we’re still in the middle of this war when we’re done with school? I’m not willing to…” he trailed off, taking a deep breath and pulling her even closer. “Like I said, I won’t hide forever.” He swallowed thickly, his adam’s apple bobbing.

“I don’t want this to just be because you’re mad at your parents, Draco.”
He shook his head vigorously. “It’s not. I mean, maybe their behaviour made me realize that I
would give up anything that stood between me and a life with you, even my own parents. But I’m
not doing this because I’m angry.”

She took a deep breath. She couldn’t really argue, because she felt the same way. He was the most
important thing to her and she would do whatever she had to do to secure a life with him.

“I’ve gotten you something else, it’s your real gift,” he said eventually, nudging her hip
encouragingly.

“We’re not done discussing this.”

“Of course we’re not,” he snorted.

“Fine, gimme my gift,” she said, making grabby hands which made him laugh.

He summoned the smallest package and handed it to her. She tore the wrapping off
enthusiastically, specifically for the purpose of amusing him, and then pulled the top off of the box
revealed within. Nestled inside was another- gorgeous- wood veneered box. It was decorated with
a design of white roses- an ancient symbol of true and pure love, which resembled some of
Narcissa’s most prized flowers. Hermione had also come to adore those roses, particularly because
she knew they had been planted in honor of Draco’s birth. Her breath caught in her throat and she
looked at him.

“Take it out and open it,” he encouraged.

She picked it up reverently, hastily pushing the wrapping aside, and then lifted the lid. The
soothing melody of her favorite fairy tale song filled the air.

Have faith in your dreams and someday
Your rainbow will come smiling through
No matter how your heart is grieving
If you keep on believing
The dream that you wish will come true

She realized now that as a little girl she’d taken great comfort in the idea that if she just had faith
and persevered that she would- like Cinderella- find happiness. The day she’d discovered she was a
witch, she had thought that was the day that her dreams had come true. But now she knew it had
actually been the day that she’d run into the Malfoys in Flourish and Blott’s, not that Draco was
some fairy tale prince. But he was perfect for her. She’d found her place in the world as a result of
that chance encounter in a bookshop.

She hadn’t thought he’d been listening when she’d showed him the movie over the summer, that
he had barely been tolerating the experience. She certainly hadn’t thought he’d understood what
she had been trying to articulate to him. But he seemed to have gotten it all too well.

“Draco,” she gasped, raising a trembling hand to her mouth. There was really nothing else to say,
and the delight in his eyes was its own kind of present.

“Did I mention that I loved you?”

She could only laugh joyously.
Hello you wonderful and patient people! I have missed you and I have missed this story! I hope I haven’t lost too many of you, I promise I won’t give up on this story, I love it too much. Real life has just been trying lately. I’m okay, but when I got stuck in a bit of a rut plot-wise it was even more difficult than usual pulling myself out. In good news, I accidentally wrote a good portion of the next chapter while writing this one, so hopefully I can have it to you fairly soon.

I've put a picture of what I imagine Hermione's music box to look like up on the Pinterest board for this story. Same name over there for those that don't know. Thank you Weestarmeggie for beta reading (and reading and reading and reading), just being awesome, and talking me through a lot of self doubt! Thanks to you all for reading this story and especially to those of you who leave me your thoughts!
Chapter 28

Narcissa sat back in her chair and attempted to disguise the fact that she was shaking.

Her cousin, however, felt no need to try and hide his feelings. "His soul, a piece of his fucking soul! Well that gives a whole new meaning to the term soulless monster." Sirius raged. "I mean who does that? Merlin, how can things possibly be worse than we thought they were?" He continued plaintively as he flopped back into a chair and tossed an arm over his eyes.

Narcissa wanted to roll her eyes and scold him for his dramatics, but she couldn't. Because he made an excellent point and she felt the same way, she just had more dignity than to whine and flail about. But she too was terrified for everybody she loved: he was right, this was even worse than they'd suspected.

"There really were no lengths to which The Dark Lord wasn't willing to go," Lucius answered dryly. "I just didn't know this was possible- there is a reason that there is such a veil of mystery drawn over soul magic, this is a crime against not just magic, but nature. But I suppose there is a reason he was so feared that nobody dared even speak his name, even though it wasn't even his true name and only held so much power."

Sirius snorted. "It's called a nomme de guerre for a reason, Malfoy, the entire point is to inspire fear in those you mean to rule."

Lucius just gave him a curt nod in response.

Under any other circumstances Narcissa would have teased them. The two of them had the oddest relationship, they despised each other but also held a grudging respect for one another too. It was usually equal parts amusing and exasperating. But tonight she felt nothing but fear and horror.

It had taken surprisingly little effort once they had the Black library at their fingertips to figure out what the journal the Dark Lord had left in Abraxas' care actually was. They'd once again put off their research until the children were out of their respective homes- it hadn't been difficult to convince Sirius of this precaution once the possible danger to his godson had been explained. But they hadn't wasted any time beyond that, and all gathered on the morning of September 1st to restart the research she and Lucius had begun. It was surprisingly nice to have another hand on board, Sirius was a interesting addition to say the least- intelligent, intuitive, and completely irreverent.

Narcissa had wished she could involve the Grangers directly as well, they'd be at least as determined as her cousin who could be somewhat easily distracted. But without any magic to protect them from some of the dark texts they were examining, they would be sitting ducks. However, to everybody's surprise their involvement was unnecessary anyway because, within only days of Draco, Hermione, and Harry's return to Hogwarts; she, Lucius, and Sirius had been able to put a name to the darkness.

Horcrux.

It scared her how easily they had been able to figure it out by simply combining the knowledge in
just a handful of books from their dual collections. She could only wonder how many others had been able to do the same? The Dark Lord had clearly acquired the knowledge, after all, and he didn't have his own family library. Had he done it by combing through theirs? The very idea made her feel dirty.

She took some deep breaths as she tried to forget the horror of what they had learned, even as she knew that she never could. The thought of the word 'horcrux' made her shudder, she absolutely refused to say it out loud. It felt blasphemous that they even had knowledge of such a disgusting thing and she wished that when this was all over she could ask Lucius to remove the memory of it from her mind, but then, she couldn't leave him alone with such a burden.

Unfortunately, they still didn't know how to destroy it. As it turned out, people who were willing to write down the method for violently wrenching a piece of one's soul out of one's body by way of a murder, and then storing it in a foreign object to make it so that you couldn't be killed, were also unwilling to also provide the information on how to destroy such an object.

But they hadn't dwelled on that the first night they'd discovered what they were dealing with. By mutual silent agreement they stored the books in the hidden compartment under Lucius' study where Abraxas had originally kept the journal so that nobody- Merlin forbid, their children- could just stumble upon them. And then Lucius had called for their best aged firewhiskey and they'd proceeded to get rip roaring drunk.

Well, Lucius and Sirius had gotten drunk. Narcissa just sipped from her tumbler quietly and thought over whether they could have made different, better choices and spared themselves and-mostly, Draco and Hermione- the trials that were surely coming. But she just didn't know the answer to that, would never know, and decided it was finally time to let it go. They had enough work to do without dwelling on the past.

She watched with grim amusement as Lucius and Sirius stumbled to breakfast the next morning. She'd decided that given the circumstances she wouldn't attempt to deprive them of a hangover potion and there was one at each of their place settings. It was bad enough that they'd passed out on the floor and the sofa of Lucius' study respectively.

"So," said Sirius after he'd guzzled his potion in a manner that made Narcissa cringe. "We keep looking for a way to destroy this abomination and once we do he's finished, right? I mean I know the news hit me pretty hard, but really, things are looking up." He made a face that was surely meant to be cheerful, but just looked pained.

Narcissa didn't know the answer to that question, but she had an ominous feeling. She glanced at her husband whose face was grim, and then back to her cousin who was obviously reading the tone of the room correctly and visibly began to wilt.

"I do not know, to be honest," Lucius said eventually, "this is why one does not dabble with soul magic. I cannot be certain that destroying the journal would also destroy the wraith, and you are assuming he has only made one… of these objects."

Narcissa had to grip the arms of her chair to keep herself upright and she heard Sirius' breath hitch.

"What do you mean? You think he made more than one? You think he ripped his soul into multiple pieces!"

"Now that we have proof of how far he was truly willing to go to achieve immortality I cannot discount it," Lucius said, his voice completely even, "nor do I feel it prudent to rule out the possibility that he performed other rituals to keep him anchored to this plane."
Sirius leapt from the table sending his chair skidding across the floor behind him. "What the fuck Malfoy!"

Lucius pinched the bridge of his nose. "It is just a theory, but as I said, I do not believe it is one that we can afford to discount."

"Explain," ordered Sirius through clenched teeth as he marched up and down the length of the room.

It was a testament to how shaken he was that Lucius did not take offense and simply began talking. "My father was one of the Dark Lord's first followers, and part of his inner circle, to be sure. But he was by no means his favorite or his most trusted follower. It is unimaginable to me that if there was only one, that he would have chosen my father to entrust with it."

"So, what, you think he made a whole host of these things and just passed them out to all of his Death Eaters?"

"Not a whole host, and certainly not to all his Death Eaters," Lucius remained outwardly calm. "First of all, I will have to do the arithmancy, but I can only imagine there are limits to how many times one can perform this ritual before it becomes unsustainable. Secondly, you are forgetting that there are many other ways he could have chosen to hide them, they are not necessarily with other Death Eaters. We will have to look into other possibilities on that front as well."

"Maybe your father just happened to be with him when he created his one and only and that's why he gave it to him," Sirius posited, a little desperately.

Lucius just shook his head. "I have other reasons for believing there are either more than one-" he visibly hesitated- "horcrux, or other issues we will have to deal with before he can be fully destroyed. When I met the Dark Lord he looked like a handsome older man, charming, powerful, but just a man. And perhaps he was a little...eccentric, but he was sane. As time passed he grew more power hungry, more frightening, and he lost his sanity gradually- for the most part. But there were at least two different occasions on which in a matter of hours he grew considerably more insane, and visibly less human. I submit that he performed the horcrux ritual, or maybe some other ritual, on those occasions. That's at least twice, and just in the time that I was in his service, Father had the diary before I was marked."

Sirius stopped pacing, he was breathing very heavily and he looked every bit as crazed as he had the morning he'd leapt onto this very table as a dog. All of a sudden he strode forward, picked up the teapot and flung it at the wall. Narcissa jumped as it shattered, and became aware that she was still gripping the arms of her chair even as she thought, a little hysterically, that she was going to have to stop allowing him in this room if he was going to keep being so destructive.

It was completely silent for a few beats before Sirius spoke. "I apologize Cissy, I will of course pay for that," his voice was odd and stilted and Narcissa could see a battle raging in his eyes. "I have to go, I cannot sit here and discuss this with the pair of you right now." And with that he turned on his heel and marched out of the room.

It was silent again for a very long time before she could bring herself to look at her husband. "You're quite sure about this aren't you?" She asked him.

"I wish I could tell you otherwise," he answered, before abruptly standing and also hastily leaving the room.

Malfoy Manor was quiet after that, not the usual quiet that descended when the children were
away, but a disturbing quiet. At first she just thought Lucius was brooding over the- admittedly-terrible news. But then it became apparent that he was avoiding her. And when he did speak to her their interactions were so stilted that she was certain even the elves were tiptoeing around their Master and Mistress to avoid the she tried to ask him about it he pretended there was nothing wrong and went so far as to accuse her of being dramatic. Which was just about the final straw for her.

After a week of this behavior Narcissa became truly concerned. It wasn't like him to shut her out for so long. It was much too reminiscent of the first war.

And so she resorted to using tactics that she wasn't entirely proud of: the only place he hadn't been avoiding her was in the bedroom and so when he reached for her at night she turned away from him. She loved him, and after just a few days she missed him terribly, but they were supposed to be in this together, and she wasn't going to allow him to hide in their physical relationship. He was going to have to talk to her.

She'd been a good wife last time. She'd been quiet, and hadn't asked too many questions. She'd done what she could to help and to be there for her husband, but she'd mostly modeled herself after Anneliese's behavior. But she wasn't Anneliese, Lucius hadn't married her because she was like his mother. He liked her fire and her intelligence and liked when she showed it to him. And Lucius was Head of House now. They no longer had to worry about upsetting Abraxas if she behaved in a way that he considered unseemly. She was free to stand at Lucius' side.

But the biggest difference was that while Draco wasn't grown quite yet, he was getting there. He had Hermione now. What he needed from his mother now was different than what he had needed when he'd been growing in her womb or when he'd been a baby. He didn't need her to hide away, he needed her to be strong. And yes, she'd had one morning of total insanity and ruined a lot of their trust in her. But she wouldn't let that undo everything.

Things were still frosty between herself and Lucius the morning of the nineteenth when he departed for Hogwarts for his meeting and to celebrate Hermione's birthday.

"I know you're upset," he told her before he departed. "I'll talk to Draco and Hermione, especially Draco. It's time to put all of this behind us."

She was slightly taken aback. "No, Lucius, let them recover from this in their own time. Pushing them might just push them further away. I'm not going to say it isn't difficult to know that they are upset with me, to read letters that are not as warm as they usually are, but they are not being disrespectful or cruel, so I've made my bed and I'll lie in it. I'll do the work to regain their trust."

He'd looked dubious and had just given her a perfunctory kiss on the cheek before he flooed away.

When he returned that evening he immediately strode into the sitting room where she was waiting and over to the liquor cart. He poured a generous amount of Brandy into a glass and tossed it back in one gulp.

Narcissa watched in alarm. "Are they unwell?"

"They are fine."

"What's the matter then?"

"I made a misstep with Draco. I apologize, I should have listened to you. I just wanted to make you feel better, I thought if things improved with Draco and Hermione then things would go back to
normal with us as well."

Narcissa was momentarily stunned, and then she scoffed. "You think this," she gestured between the two of them, "is about Draco and Hermione's attitude?"

"Isn't it?"

"Of course not! As I said, I accept that it will take some time to rebuild our trust."

"Then why have you...withdrawn?"

She just stared at him incredulously. "You're the one who withdrew," she said slowly, enunciating her words carefully.

"You won't let me anywhere near you!" He snapped

"Because you won't talk to me!"

That brought him up short. "What?"

"We haven't had a real conversation since the day we discovered that the diary is a horcrux. You got up from the breakfast table the next morning and you have been avoiding me ever since."

He opened his mouth and shut it again.

"This can't be like the first war, Lucius," she continued, "I'll lose my mind. You can't turn in on yourself and then just use me to forget your problems."

His mouth remained open and his complexion was rapidly reddening. "I would never!" He hissed.

She held up a hand. "I'm sorry, I did not mean that the way it sounded. But the last time you shut me out and the only kind of intimacy we shared for months at a time was physical. I always knew that you loved me, you weren't using me in that sense, but it wasn't enough, you and I both know it almost tore us apart. And I just saw it happening again. I asked you, and asked you, and asked you, and you acted like I was crazy for even believing there was something wrong. The only way I could think to get your attention since you weren't listening to what I was saying, was deny you that physical intimacy. But I see you misinterpreted that completely," she let out a breath and collapsed in defeat.

"Cissa, I-"

But she wasn't done. "I'm frightened Lucius, all of this frightens me, but I think it would be unbearable without you. Please don't do that to me," she looked up at him with pleading eyes.

"I only wanted to spare you."

"And don't you think I would spare you, if I could?" She countered, but continued before he could reply. "But that's not how this is going to work. Not this time."

He set his drink down, sank onto the sofa next to her and began to rub his temples.

"I know the idea of there being more than one horcrux is...disconcerting," it took all of her restraint not to wince as she said the word.

"It is," he agreed, "but I have some ideas about that."
"You do?" She questioned, and tried not to feel resentful that he hadn't shared this with her before as it was a problem that she'd been worrying herself sick over, but he was finally confiding in her and she didn't want him to stop.

"That journal was once one part of a whole, Narcissa. Technically, we should be able to use it to locate...any other pieces, if they do exist," he explained, his disgust at the very concept was clear in his demeanour.

"That's brilliant," she responded, feeling a little flabbergasted. Her husband was a powerful wizard, but he'd filled his days since they'd graduated from Hogwarts with House business. She knew that he was an astute politician and a clever businessman, but sometimes she forgot how smart he actually was.

"But that is not what has me so out of sorts," he confessed. "It's not what I despaired telling you."

"Then what?"

He glanced at her and took her hand. "Surely you must have suspected that there is something unnatural about the Potter boy's connection to the Dark Lord?"

Narcissa's breath caught in her chest as she recalled the letter from Hermione describing a dream the boy had had over the summer that had seemed more vision than anything else. And then, of course, there was the fact that his scar reacted to the Dark Lord's presence.

"What are you saying Lucius?" She asked in a hushed whisper, afraid of what he might be about to tell her and the possibility that even the elves might overhear.

"I think you know," he said, but he could only look at her out of the corner of his eyes.

"He's just a boy!" She couldn't help but exclaim.

Lucius set his jaw and she knew that he was decided. "And one day he won't be. And then, if he's what stands between our children and a free and happy life, I'll do what I must."

Narcissa gripped the edges of the sofa cushions with her free hand as she absorbed his words, her heart thudding in her chest, her breathing erratic. She was a mother, before anything else, and her entire being rebelled against her own husband's assertion. "I'll find a different way," she vowed.

Lucius gave her a curt nod. "I hope that you can, but if it's between him and them, I won't hesitate."

Her stomach roiled, but as much as she wanted to, she couldn't argue with him.

Inexplicably the Goblet of Fire flamed for a fourth time and yet another piece of parchment flew into Dumbledore's hand.

"Harry Potter," their headmaster's voice reverberated through the silent hall.

Hermione's heart lodged itself in her throat and she glanced at her best friend. Her best Gryffindor friend. She couldn't chance a look at Draco even though that was her first instinct in such an emotionally charged moment, but they were in the middle of the Great Hall, and everybody was looking in her direction because she was seated beside Harry.

She should have known. Her friend attracted trouble the likes of which she'd never seen before. He'd faced the darkest wizard their world had encountered in a millenium on more than one
occasion. Then there had been the Dementors. There had been a Death Eater living in animagus form in his dorm room for the first two full years of his time at Hogwarts. And, of more than a hundred-thousand people at the World Cup, his wand had been the one stolen and used to cast the Dark Mark. The Tri-Wizard Cup had probably acted as some sort of terrible magnet for the boy-who-just-wanted-to-be-normal.

She glanced at Harry and he looked gobsmacked. She grabbed his hand. He was absolutely frozen, and she was furious.

"Go!" She encouraged even as she hated to say it.

His eyes were wide and he was swallowing convulsively. He was obviously terrified.

"I'll wait for you after, but we need to know what's going on. Now, go, everybody's waiting." She gestured to the hall, which had gone absolutely silent around them and shoved at him. "We'll figure this out." She leaned into him and whispered: "Don't let them see you as weak." She felt his spine go straight and he rose from the table and mechanically made his way towards the head table.

She hated that she hadn't had more opportunity to reassure him, but they needed backup, and the opportunity to call for it. Making a fuss now would only make them look like unruly children and would undermine anything they did later.

When the student body was finally excused she tried to get Ron's attention, but one look at his face told her that she would be garnering no assistance from that quarter. He'd obviously let his irrational resentment and jealousy take over, it was simultaneously shocking and unsurprising that he so badly misunderstood Harry to think that he would have ever entered himself into this silly tournament.

She pushed through the crowd and made her way to the Entrance Hall when she heard a familiar voice.

"Granger, Granger!"

She stopped in her tracks, took a moment to gather herself and put her game face on before turning to face her boyfriend.

What she saw when she did almost made her flinch. He was in many ways unrecognizable to her. His eyes were hard and there was a sneer on his face; it had been a long time since she'd seen that expression directed at her. But if he was approaching her in this manner it was important and she needed to play her part, not turn into an emotional mess, no matter how on edge she was feeling.

"What do you want Malfoy?"

"I just wanted to make sure you were scurrying off to inform Lord Black about the travesty that just occurred in there with his godson," he gestured vaguely to the Great Hall.

"What do you care about Harry?" She scoffed.

He laughed, it was cold and derisive and nothing like her Draco. "You misunderstand me, I just don't want to see Hogwarts humiliated by having such a mediocre wizard participate in the tournament, and I trust that Lord Black can help remedy the situation. I'll certainly be speaking with my father," his voice was haughty but his eyes had turned pleading- he was actually frightened, for Harry or for them all, she couldn't be sure and didn't have time to decipher his motives at the moment.
Hermione felt her heart rate increase. "Well thanks for the advice, Malfoy, but all you've done is hold me up." And with that she spun on her heel and made her way towards Gryffindor Tower.

She waited down the corridor from the Fat Lady's portrait for Harry in an out of the way corner where she was certain not to miss him but where she also wouldn’t be easily found and shooed back to her dorm. She wanted be sure to catch him before he walked into the raucous party she could hear going on in the Gryffindor common room celebrating him being chosen as Champion. He'd be mortified, and she'd never get a moment alone with him.

When he appeared in the corridor approaching the entrance to Gryffindor Tower she emerged from the shadows. He seemed only momentarily surprised to see her before that turned to obvious relief. She held her arms out so that he knew what she was about to do and engulfed him in an embrace. He melted into her gratefully.

"Where's Ron?" He questioned.

She winced but didn't attempt to sugar coat it, by the look in his eyes he'd already guessed the answer. "He's not happy about this," she explained simply. "You know him and his temper though, he'll get over it." She rubbed his arm supportively and tried to give him an encouraging smile, though she wasn't certain that she believed her own words.

"Right," he said, once again straightening his spine like he was preparing to ward off further attack, her heart sank.

She wondered at the strength it must be taking for him to hold himself together.

"So, what happened?" She asked hesitantly.

He gave her a tight smile but immediately began to explain what had occurred in the meeting with the Champions, their headmasters, and the Ministry officials, and she felt herself growing steadily more angry the longer he spoke.

They were planning to force him to compete?

They weren't even going to give him any support?

She took a deep breath and reminded herself that she had a plan. "Where's your cloak and your mirror?" She inquired. "We need to tell Sirius about this immediately, your mirror is much quicker than an owl," she clarified with a smirk, "it's all well and good to treat a fourth year like this, but I'd like to see them tell Lord Black that his underaged godson has to participate in a dangerous tournament which he didn't even enter!"

He lifted his head and she saw something like hope ignite in his eyes, but it was immediately shrouded by doubt.

"You don't think Sirius is going to take this lying down, do you?" She said with her hands on her hips. She sighed when he continued to look dubious. "Harry, I know that you're not really used to having adults who will stick up for you, but I'm absolutely positive he's going to be furious."

He shrugged self consciously. "The mirror and cloak are in my trunk," he said, instead of really responding to her assertion.

She allowed him the obfuscation. "That's fine, I'll just pop up and get them, hardly anybody will pay attention to me."
He gazed at her steadily and then suddenly engulfed her in a hug. "Thank you Hermione."
She huffed against his shoulder. "Of course, you don't need to thank me for being your friend."

He just shrugged again.

She left him with an easy smile and snuck down the corridor towards Gryffindor Tower.

Sirius was, as Hermione predicted, livid. He swore that he believed Harry right away without needing any explanation or proof, and it had been a balm to Hermione's soul to feel her friend relax against her side in relief as his godfather said as much. He also promised to do everything he could to get Harry out of the tournament. Hermione didn't miss the fact that he'd made no guarantees, and she couldn't blame him for not making promises he couldn't necessarily keep. He'd just gained Harry's trust, he wouldn't want to lose it now. But the fact that Sirius wasn't certain he would actually be able to change the situation ratcheted Hermione's worry up several more notches. Lord Black was a powerful figure in their society, his wishes could go a long way, but would it be enough?

She practically stumbled into her room and onto her bed later that night, stripping herself of everything but a camisole and knickers; she couldn't be bothered with nightclothes.

"Draco," she said tiredly to her mirror when she was finally settled underneath the covers, it was late but he answered immediately.

"Are you okay?" He asked in a rush, as opposed to a more standard greeting.

"Of course I'm not," she admitted, falling back against her pillows.

"I've already written Mother and Father, they'll do what they can," he assured her.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

"Hermione, look at me," his voice was suddenly stern.

Immediately she lifted her eyes to meet his, unaware that she'd been avoiding his gaze. "Hi," she sighed, feeling foolish for avoiding him.

"Are you mad at me about earlier?" He wondered.

"What?! No, not at all, I'm just sad and scared, though I am curious why you thought that little confrontation was necessary?" She peered at him inquisitively.

He smiled fondly. "I know you Mia. You might have spent the whole night rubbing Potter's back and telling him everything would be okay, but I wanted to make sure you got in touch with Sirius. He's Potter's best chance."

She ignored his commentary about her sentimentality. "So you don't think Harry entered himself in the tournament? Everybody else seems to."

He snorted. "I know he's your friend, but Potter is neither clever nor powerful enough to fool Dumbledore's age line and a powerful magical artefact. Plus, you've made a pretty good case over the years that he actually hates attention, so this is the last thing he would try. And even if he had, he has no business in this tournament, he's our age, he'll get himself killed."

"You don't think it's a coincidence either, do you?" She asked, halfway hoping he would contradict
"You mean after what happened at the World Cup?" He clarified and she could only nod. "I'm not stupid, of course I don't think it is," he responded, "and neither do you."

There was no use denying it. "I'm scared," she confessed.

"Me too," he nodded.

Her eyes fell shut, she knew what it must have taken him to admit that, even to her. There were several minutes of silence and she just listened to the reassuring sound of his breathing. "Get to breakfast early tomorrow, though," she smirked, attempting to lighten the mood, "I think Lord Black intends to make an entrance."

He chuckled. "Well that sounds like fun, I will definitely be there."

Hermione yawned.

"Go to sleep," Draco urged gently.

"Okay," she nodded, "I love you."

"Me too, always. Goodnight Hermione."

She barely managed to snap her compact closed before she drifted off, comforted by the love she could feel coming from him even from all the way down in the dungeons.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you guys, it's such a joy to post this story because I always get such a lovely response. To the people I recently "met" on the Strictly Dramione Facebook group, hello again! Thanks for your enthusiasm, y'all made my night/morning and I hope you enjoyed this chapter. Beta love to Weestarmeggie who is my lifeline and puts up with so much, you guys don't even know! And finally, as always, thanks for reading!
Chapter 29: Interlude- Sirius

Sirius ended his call with Harry and Hermione and then, with careful deliberation set his mirror down, sat back and took several deep breaths. He couldn't afford to go storming into Hogwarts and blast that fucking Goblet into smithereens, as much as that sounded like a satisfying solution to the problem at the moment. They'd take Harry away from him for displaying such insane behavior, he might even find himself in Azkaban again.

It had already been a hellish day. The previous Halloween was the first time he'd even been aware of the date, they don't exactly keep calendars in Azkaban, but last year he'd been too determined on his mission to get the rat to dwell in his own misery. Today, alone in Potter House, had been a special kind of torture. It had taken all of his self control not to go on a bender or to start destroying things, he'd done enough damage to House Potter without literally damaging their ancestral home. It probably would have been healthier for him to go somewhere that wasn't so full of memories of happier times with people who were long dead, but he didn't think he deserved to escape.

And then Harry had called, all pale and terrified, his equally terrified looking best friend at his side. Sirius didn't know where their third, red-headed counterpart was and he'd been afraid to ask. He really couldn't decide what to think about that boy.

He felt like he'd failed Harry all over again, and ironically once again on Halloween. That first Halloween Harry had also been terrified. He'd never forget the sound of his godson's mournful wails, but what would haunt him for the rest of his life was that as frightened as Harry had clearly been, when he'd set eyes on his godfather his expression had immediately turned to one of complete trust. Trust that Sirius had betrayed.

And because of that, Harry didn't look at anybody like he trusted them completely anymore. He held something back from everybody, even his best friend whom he obviously loved a great deal. And he'd looked downright dubious that Sirius would be able to do anything to help him when they'd spoken to isn't. He had done his best to reassure his godson, who had looked so much younger than even his fourteen years as he sat there huddled with Hermione, but he hadn't been able to promise him anything other than that he would do his best.

But he wasn't at all certain that would be enough. He planned to throw the full weight of his political power and his Gringotts vaults around. He'd beg and bribe without any shame if that's what it took. But given that there was an ancient magical artifact in play here, he was afraid that this was beyond the realm of lining the pockets of some unscrupulous politicians, or even using his family's dark reputation to scare the pants off of them.

He needed some help, at the very least some more information. He shook his head at his own stupidity and picked up his mirror again.

"Draco Malfoy," he intoned. Draco may have only been a fourth year just like Harry and Hermione, but as a Slytherin and a pureblood he would see and take note of different things than they would, and frankly, if there was something sinister going on at Hogwarts he was more likely to know something about it than they were. It took only a few moments for the blond's face to appear. "Hey kid," he said.
"You look terrible," Draco responded with a smirk.

"Yeah well, it's been a hell of a day." He wiped a hand down his face.

The younger wizard immediately sobered. "I'm sorry, I forgot for a minute. Hermione's beside herself, I just got done talking to her."

"Kitten's a good friend. I think she would have prefered if her name had come out of that goblet."

He snorted. "Probably, the bleeding heart," he said affectionately. "And while I definitely don't wish it was Hermione, I'm sorry this is happening to Potter."

Sirius just tilted his head in response.

"Your godson really does have the worst luck."

"I don't think having a bunch of homicidal maniacs with matching evil tattoos and their dark lord of a leader after you counts as just bad luck," Sirius answered with a sneer.

Draco blanched and Sirius immediately felt guilty. Whatever his opinion of Lucius Malfoy, it was unfair to vent his spleen on the man's son, especially because Draco was a good kid whom he owed a lot.

"I apologize."

Draco shrugged. "You're not wrong. So, you think it's Death Eaters?"

"I think it has something to do with You-Know-Who, it all goes back to him. And it feels like far too much of a coincidence that this happened on Halloween."

"Hermione and I thought it was too much of a coincidence considering what happened at the World Cup. I didn't even consider the Halloween angle." He paused, obviously thinking. "You should talk to my father, I mean if it's Death Eaters... and that was the plan wasn't it? For him to spy when the time came, and I know he's kept up his connections."

Sirius huffed bitterly. "Some plan, it seems to have failed at the first stage. Though, to give Lucius credit the Death Eaters aren't very organized at the moment, not enough to plan anything more complicated than that nonsense at the World Cup, anyway. This is probably somebody working on their own, I'm certain whomever it is wishes Harry harm, but this is such a convoluted way to go about it."

"Well, I've written to Mother and Father and I'm sure they'll let you know if they hear anything."

Sirius rubbed his eyes wearily. "That's actually why I called. I wanted to ask if you'd noticed anything odd, or suspicious at Hogwarts. Maybe something you dismissed as inconsequential at the time?"

Draco sat back against his pillows and seemed to give that some serious consideration. "Not that I can think of. But to be honest, Sirius, so many things are different this year because of the tournament. Ministry officials are coming and going a lot, and now we have all these extra students here, it would be hard to say what's odd and what's just different."

His words hit Sirius like a bludger and he could have jumped through his mirror and kissed his cousin. "Draco, you have no idea how helpful you've been. I have to go visit your parents now. I'll see you at Hogwarts tomorrow, I'm sure!" And then he disconnected his mirror before the very
confused looking blond could respond.

Lucius popped into the room just moments after Sirius stepped out of the floo at Malfoy Manor. Looking as disheveled as Sirius had ever seen him, he also seemed furious. "Gods, man, haven't you heard of calling, it's late!"

Sirius didn't even flinch at the wand pointed at him. "I need the map."

"The what?"

"The map! The map of Hogwarts that Hermione and Draco stole from Harry that proved that Peter was hiding in the castle!"

"You came over here in the middle of the night to ask for a toy?"

"That toy is a powerful tool in the right hands and you know it, which is why you kept it for yourself! It's proven there was an imposter in the castle once and I need it to do it again."

That got his attention. "You think there is somebody at Hogwarts who shouldn't be? Somebody dangerous?" He asked sharply, lowering his wand.

Sirius could say many things about Lucius, but the man loved his son and wouldn't willingly allow him to be put in danger, Hermione either, for that matter. "Draco wrote you, but I know his owl wouldn't have had time to get here yet. So suffice it to say for now, Harry's name came out of the Goblet of Fire tonight as a fourth competitor for a fictitious school. So, yes I think there is somebody who has access to Hogwarts, who means my godson harm, and the map might help identify this person."

Lucius took only a moment to process this before giving a sharp nod and motioning Sirius forward. "Come, it's in my study, with any luck we can solve this tonight."

It would end up being a very long night.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, it's a cliffhanger but I want y'all to discover what they find- if anything- at the same time Hermione and Draco do. I didn't intend to write this but occasionally Sirius stands up and demands my attention and it felt wrong to write Halloween without delving into his POV at all. Next up will be a normal length chapter and he will head to Hogwarts.

A year ago today I posted my first ever fanfiction. It was the prologue to this story and you guys have made it such a joy, your response has been amazing and I'm so, so grateful. Thank you so much for taking this journey with me!
Chapter 30

Lord Black did indeed make an entrance into Hogwarts on the morning of November 1, 1994. Hermione watched, rather fascinated when—about thirty minutes into breakfast, and in a move that was almost certainly timed to ensure that he had the biggest audience—the doors to the Great Hall flew open and the man that Hermione had originally met as a dirty, matted dog strode into the room.

His bespoke robes were cinched at the waist and revealed legs clad in what appeared to be actual dragon hide trousers. His shoulder length ebony hair was tied at the base of his neck. His overall appearance was that of a powerful wizard at the height of his life—not to mention his power, as well as a reminder that House Black had once been, and was again becoming, a force to be reckoned with. Because as much as his clothing begged attention, it had nothing on his demeanour. Narcissa would have been proud of the way he commanded the attention of the entire hall, Hermione wondered enviously if she’d ever be able to develop that kind of presence, or if you had to be born to it.

"Albus Dumbledore, I have a bone to pick with you!" He roared pointing an accusing finger towards the front of the hall. "I left my godson, Scion Potter, in your care and you have allowed him to be entered into a dangerous tournament meant only for of-age wizards! He has also been falsely accused of breaking the rules and entering himself, a belief which you have not corrected, besmirching the Houses of both Potter and Black in the process! I know what it is to be falsely accused and I will not stand for it!"

Hermione cut her eyes in Harry's direction, momentarily worried that he would be embarrassed, but he was barely suppressing a grin. She smiled to herself. Of course, he was just happy to have somebody standing up for him. And to anybody who knew Sirius, this was rather hilarious, after all. He despised his title but he was certainly playing it up.

As soon at he was within six feet of the head table a silencing charm descended and she could no longer hear what Sirius or any of the teachers were saying. But it was obvious that Professor Dumbledore was trying to placate him. Professor McGonagall, on the other hand, looked ready to strangle somebody.

After a few minutes the spell was canceled and most of the students tried to pretend that they hadn't been avidly watching the action between the Head of an Ancient and Noble House who also happened to be the notorious Sirius Black, and the senior staff. Sirius spun on his heel and took a detour to walk past the Gryffindor table instead of turning and making his way directly out of the hall.

"Kitten," he greeted Hermione with a perfunctory kiss to the top of her head.

"Godson," he continued, clapping Harry on the shoulder, "everything okay here?" He asked, a slight edge to his voice.

Harry just nodded.
Sirius gave his shoulder a squeeze. "Go be young and have fun, I'll find the both of you later!" He called after him as he walked away.

Hermione tried to remain composed as she imagined a thousand and one ways she could make him suffer for using that ridiculous nickname in the middle of the Great Hall. She heard Harry snicker and then he spoke quietly to her, "you know that you're muttering threats against Padfoot under your breath?" She immediately shut her mouth, berating herself for her slip. Harry just laughed louder.

But he was immediately diverted by the sound of Sirius' voice resounding throughout the hall yet again. "Well hello, Cousin."

Hermione looked up quickly to see Sirius and Draco loitering in the doorway, glaring at each other. She had to hide her face again to disguise the fact that she was rolling her eyes at their theatrics, she was well acquainted by now with how dramatic the Black family could be.

"Cousin," Draco returned the greeting with a slight bow, "a pleasure to see you as always," he said with a sneer, making it clear it was anything but.

"What a git," she heard Harry mutter.

She wondered what he would think if he knew that they were just having a bit of fun, playing off of their family's supposed rivalry?

"I suppose you liked that, all the attention is on you again," came a snide voice from down the table and Hermione whipped her head around to see Ron glaring at Harry.

Harry opened his mouth to respond and she grabbed his arm to stop him, throwing Ron a glare of her own in the process. If he had a fight with his 'best' friend in the middle of the Great Hall it would ruin any goodwill Sirius may have dredged up for his cause. There was no reasoning with Ron when he got like this anyway.

"Let's do as Sirius suggested, how about a walk?" She asked him in an overly bright tone.

He let out a frustrated breath but nodded. She took his arm and they made their way out to the Black Lake. "What's Ron's problem?" He suddenly blurted as they approached the shoreline. "He confronted me last night too, he wouldn't believe that I didn't enter myself and then he made some smart remark about how I should get some sleep because I probably had to be up for a photo call or something."

Hermione bit her lip and considered how to handle this. "Well, he's jealous."

"I know that, but why?"

She took a deep breath. "Ron has always been rather desperate for attention and you've always had it. You're famous, wealthy and titled, and now you live with your famous and wealthy and titled godfather. And you know how sensitive he is about his family's financial situation. And now with the tournament…"

"But doesn't he see what it's cost me to have all these things! I'm famous because my parents were murdered! I had to go live with the Dursleys even though I should have been with Sirius all that time. I didn't even know about magic until I was eleven! I would trade places with him in a second! Not to mention, we've been best friends for three years and he won't even believe me when I tell him I didn't enter the tournament?!"
She bit her lip, she wasn't exactly thrilled with Ron at the moment and didn't enjoy making excuses for him on the best of days, but she knew that Harry valued his friendship and she didn't want to be the thing that drove a wedge between them. "Well, he is a fourteen year old boy. He's not as wise as you," she jiggled his arm playfully, "and he didn't realise that this eternal glory stuff was a bunch of baloney and thought you'd really risk your neck for a measly 1000 galleons."

Harry momentarily blanched and Hermione dropped his arm and covered her face with her hands. "Oh Merlin, Harry, you did consider it!"

"Just for a minute!" He defended. "When Fred and George were talking about it, I just thought for a second that it would be nice to be famous for something I actually accomplished. But then I realised how stupid that was."

Hermione immediately relented, dropping her hands and took his arm again. "Actually Harry, it's not a stupid idea, to want to be known for your own accomplishments. But I am glad you came to your senses."

"It doesn't matter in the end, I'm still in the stupid thing," he responded bitterly.

"I'm sure Sirius is trying his best, and either way, now you can at least honestly say that you didn't cheat. Your integrity is important," she insisted.

"Yeah," he sighed. "Hey," he suddenly perked up. "Wanna come for a fly with me?"

She stopped in her tracks and glared at him.

"Oh come on," he stuck out his bottom lip, "I'm having a bad couple of days, I need a distraction and you on a broom sounds like the perfect thing to cheer me up."

"Harry," she warned.

"Please Hermione," he whined. "You're my very best friend and I need your help right now."

"You are laying it on so thick."

He stuck out his lip further and she sagged. "Fine, but you'll go slow Harry Potter," she poked his arm for emphasis, "and you won't make fun of me if I scream."

"You're the best," he grinned.

Sirius found them on the quidditch pitch three hours later. Hermione had long had enough of flying and was sprawled out on a conjured blanket desperately trying to distract herself from the death defying stunts Harry was performing above her with a book.

As soon as Sirius was close enough for her to see his face though, she knew it wasn't good news. She looked up at Harry who was shouting joyfully as he performed a series of loop-de-loops, he hadn't seen Sirius yet, and her heart sank. She watched Sirius plaster a smile on his face and then call for his godson. She blinked back tears, it wasn't the time, Harry needed her to be strong.

Sirius told them that he had arranged for them to have a private lunch, and so they made their way up to the castle, she in silence, he and Harry chatting about quidditch, but the light banter was obviously forced.

They ate a tense meal in a room that Hermione could only assume had been set aside for instances like this where a parent needed to come meet with a child, and when they were finished Sirius sat
back in his seat. "I have good news, and I have bad news."

"Bad news first," Harry said immediately.

Sirius sat up and looked at his godson, there was no artifice in his manner. "I'm sorry, son, but you have to compete."

Harry sagged in his chair but just nodded, completely resigned. Hermione glanced at Sirius and saw how that devastated him, and while she had never protested being included in this discussion, she now knew for sure why she had been. Because when it came down to it, Sirius didn't know Harry that well. She was the emotional support. She reached for Harry but only touched him lightly on the arm, not wanting to overwhelm him, just assuring him that she was there.

"But I didn't enter," Harry choked out.

"I know you didn't, and Dumbledore is going to make an announcement over dinner confirming that. I was serious, I won't have your reputation tarnished. But it's more complicated than that."

Harry just looked at him, eyes full of tears as Hermione continued to choke hers back. She wanted to rage at Sirius, scream about the unfairness of it all, insist that he could have done more. But she was still clear headed enough to realise that wouldn't help, she had some idea about the complicated magic at work here with the Goblet. Harry was well and truly stuck, she couldn't rattle his support system before they'd even really begun.

"Why?" He said it so quietly, so hopelessly.

She leaned over and hugged him. The room was silent as he took a few deep breaths and when she sensed that he had himself back under control, she pulled away again.

"The Goblet of Fire is an ancient magical artifact," Sirius explained, "and it has been, for lack of a better word, bamboozled. We know that you didn't voluntarily enter, but the magic of the Goblet believes that you did, and that places you into a binding magical contract. And to try to break it before the terms of the contract are met, well that would risk not just your magic, Harry, but that of all the champions, possibly even all of your lives."

Harry nodded. "Okay, that would be bad. It's not fair to the other champions to risk it."

"Well, this isn't fair to you," Hermione interjected quietly.

"Hermione, the tournament officials won't take any steps to release Harry from the contract and I can't force them to," said Sirius.

"I understand that, but I think we should all acknowledge that this sucks and it's okay for Harry to be angry. No reason for him to bury that."

Sirius nodded at her in recognition.

"Oh, I'm angry alright," said Harry darkly. "Could I have the good news now?"

"We caught the perpetrator and he's being taken to the Ministry now for interrogation."

"Who was it?" Harry asked.

"A man by the name of Barty Crouch Jr."

"Crouch?" Asked Hermione, "as in the Ministry official? The one who's helping run the
"His son," Sirius nodded gravely, "and believe me, they'll be hauling Senior in to answer some questions too."

"But why, and how?"

"He's actually a convicted Death Eater, he was believed to have died in Azkaban."

"Believed to?" Harry asked with a frown.

Sirius sighed. "Yeah, I don't know how they bollocksed that up. Though I'm proof that Azkaban isn't exactly the airtight fortress it was once thought to be."

"How did a convicted Death Eater sneak into Hogwarts, tamper with the Goblet of Fire and then enter Harry's name?"

"He was disguised as Alastor Moody."

"Professor Moody!" Hermione exclaimed, her mind racing. "Oh, polyjuice!" She turned to Harry, "remember how he's always drinking out of that flask? Polyjuice potion will turn you into another person but it only lasts for an hour, he'd have to have been constantly re-dosing himself."

Sirius chuckled. "Merlin, Kitten, that's a N.E.W.T. level potion."

"I came across it in my reading," she shrugged demurely. "He would have needed access to the real Moody's hair though."

"He would, which is why he's been keeping him prisoner in an expanded trunk in his office."

"So we've had a convicted Death Eater teaching us Defense while he was holding a prisoner in the next room," Hermione breathed, "that position really is cursed."

"I don't understand how you knew it was Moody though," said Harry, drawing Hermione out of her theorising.

"I suggested a search of the school," Sirius grinned proudly. "The fake Moody was in the meeting and he started to act strangely. The real Moody is a good friend of Dumbledore's and he spotted the odd behavior and stunned him, it was only a matter of minutes before he turned back into himself."

"You'd think Dumbledore would have noticed something before now," grumbled Hermione, "he's been here for months, using unforgivables in his classes."

Sirius' eyebrows rose sharply. "Okay, we will be talking about that last part later."

"So, he wants me dead and he was using the tournament to do it?" Harry asked glumly.

"I don't think so," Hermione responded immediately.

"What?"

"Think about it Harry, he had plenty of opportunity to hurt you if he was just a Death Eater with a vendetta. There must be a bigger plan at work here."

She immediately felt guilty when she saw his face fall. Sirius just nodded.
"That was our thought too, but we'll have to wait for him to be interrogated before we know for sure."

"So what happens next?" Harry asked.

Hermione had a million more questions but she shut her mouth, it was clear her friend didn't want to dwell on the subject of a man who had snuck into their school, apparently with the express purpose of doing him harm. She could always ask Sirius later.

"Well, the way I see it we have a couple of options."

"I'm listening."

"You're entered into the tournament under a nameless, fictitious fourth school, which means you are under no obligation under tournament rules to remain a Hogwarts student. So, I could take you home and we could hire tutors for your schooling and, more specifically, to prepare you for the tasks. When the tournament is over you could return to Hogwarts, transfer to another school, or continue with homeschooling."

"Or?"

"Or you remain here, take most of your regular classes, but we bring in extra tutors to prepare you for the tasks." Harry looked torn and Sirius must have seen it too because he continued. "It's completely up to you, we can make either option work, and please don't think that I'll feel slighted if you want to stay here with your friends. That certainly would have been my choice in your place."

Harry nodded. "I think that's what I want. I don't think I want to be homeschooled for four years, and if I transfer I'd have to start all over. If I leave for just this year I don't think things will ever be normal at Hogwarts again."

Hermione didn't think things had ever been normal at Hogwarts, or that they would return to what Harry considered normal after this was over, but she kept her own counsel. She wasn't surprised that Harry was reluctant to leave Hogwarts, and in many ways she couldn't blame him. She also believed that if Sirius thought it was absolutely necessary for him to do so, that he wouldn't have given him a choice in the first place.

"I understand, that's what we'll do then. There's not a better tutor I could find for you than most of the people who teach the core subjects in this school anyway, McGonagall and Flitwick specifically," Sirius reassured him.

Harry fidgeted.

"What is it, Pup?"

"It's just, having teachers brought in especially for me is only going to draw more attention to me."

"I know," Sirius sighed. "But there's really nothing to be done for it, this tournament is dangerous, you need extra training. We will keep it as quiet as possible." He shifted his gaze to Hermione and looked at her significantly and the knut dropped. She couldn't fix this for Harry, but she could make him feel less alone in it.

"Maybe I could join you in these lessons, Harry?"

He perked up immediately. "Really?" He looked at Sirius questioningly.
"I don't see why not, Hermione's already my ward so it wouldn't be inappropriate and the Headmaster can't object. Considering that you're going to need to learn how to fight it should be helpful to have another student at your level in the lessons with you."

"I couldn't ask you to do that and take you away from your school work though, Hermione," Harry objected, but he looked so hopeful that even if she hadn't wanted to do it, she wouldn't have taken her offer back.

"You didn't ask, Harry, I volunteered," she reminded him, "and when have I ever said no to extra tuition? This is a good opportunity for me too." She smiled brightly at him.

He reached over and briefly laid one hand on top of hers. "Thanks," he rasped, standing up. "I need the loo, I'll be back in a minute."

"Should I?" Sirius questioned, motioning to the door where his godson had just exited.

She shook her head. "He needs to be alone for a bit to process."

Sirius pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. "Don't get me wrong, I'm happy he has a friend like you, Kitten. But I really hate that I have to ask you about things like that."

Hermione could only nod sympathetically. By all rights he should be the person who knew Harry best and not she.

"Thank you for being here, and for volunteering to be tutored with him. He needs all the support he can get."

"I love him too, Sirius," she said solemnly.

He gave a sharp nod. "Would you make sure he keeps up with his occlumency exercises? He's going to need the ability to compartmentalize his thoughts and emotions now more than ever."

She thought that was quite an ironic statement coming from Sirius, but given that he was right, she didn't comment. "He's actually pretty good about doing them, especially if Ron isn't around to grouse about it." Sirius had begun teaching Harry about the basics of occlumency over the summer and once he understood that there were people out there who could actually read his mind if he didn't learn to shield it, he had been very anxious to learn how to do so and even once he'd returned to Hogwarts he worked on it consistently.

"Speaking of, I noticed your redheaded friend wasn't sitting with you at breakfast, nor was he on the mirror last night."

"He doesn't believe Harry," she explained simply.

"Well that's just what he needs right now, a fairweather friend," he sighed.

Hermione didn't comment, she didn't have the energy to expend on Ronald Weasley at the moment.

It was quiet for a few minutes.

"You know," she began, changing the subject, "Harry didn't notice because he's trying not to think about it too hard, but there's a glaring hole in your story."

He just arched an eyebrow in response.
"The polyjuiced Moody had been impersonating one of the Headmaster's friends without raising any suspicion for months. He suddenly starts acting oddly. And the Headmaster stunned him, just like that?"

Sirius grinned and pulled a piece of worn parchment from his breast pocket.

"The map!" She exclaimed, "I'd forgotten about that."

"So had I, but your boyfriend inadvertently reminded me of it when I spoke to him last night. So I went to see Lucius and Narcissa and we sat up all night in his study watching for anything suspicious, or anybody who didn't belong inside Hogwarts."

She nodded.

"We noticed that Bartemius Crouch spent the night in the Defense professor's bedroom, and Alastor Moody spent it in his office, which didn't track for a whole list of reasons I won't go into. And before I entered the Great Hall this morning I checked again, and sure enough the person labeled Bartemius Crouch actually appeared to be Alastor Moody. I had a private audience with the Headmaster before the larger meeting to address Harry's situation and I showed him my proof, though I'll admit I was expecting the father, not the son, but the map doesn't differentiate between people with the same name. I also had to admit I had a hand in making the map, but I just made it sound like I'd had it stashed away all these years, he doesn't know of the Malfoys' involvement."

"That's brilliant, so simple," she breathed. "You're not going to tell Harry about the map?"

"It would be difficult for me to explain to him how I obtained it without admitting that you and Draco stole it from him and then everything that happened after that, including my true association with the Malfoys."

"Which you can't do without violating at least one of the oaths you've made with Lucius and Narcissa," she realised.

He nodded. "I could make something up but," he sighed, "it seems easier to keep it from him than to tell him a bald-faced lie. And then, of course, there's the fact that I'm trying to be a responsible adult and as much as my Marauder's heart rebels at the idea, this map might not be the safest thing for a fourteen year old boy with a propensity for mischief and access to an invisibility cloak to have. The four of us certainly put ourselves at a lot of risk with it, and we didn't have a dark lord after us," he winced as he spoke.

Hermione laughed. "That was actually painful for you to admit, wasn't it?"

He gave an exaggerated grimace. "Anyway, Lucius has deigned to let me hold onto it in order to keep an eye on Harry with," he explained with heavy sarcasm. Then he waggled his eyebrows. "But don't worry, I won't tell him and Cissy how much time you and their son spend in broom cupboards, that would go against the Marauder's Code."

She rolled her eyes but kept mum about the room which she knew for sure didn't appear on the map- apparently the infamous Marauders had never found it- where she and Draco spent almost all of their time together. Instead she changed the subject. "When Harry comes back I'm going to go and let you two spend some time alone together."

"Thanks Kitten."

"No thanks necessary." And they weren't, she needed to get away and find Draco. She needed to feel his arms around her and maybe finally give into the temptation to cry. It was going to be a long
Claire followed Draco discreetly through the library and slipped through the door to the turret room just as it was closing behind him. She walked up to him smiling brightly and reached up to give him a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"I'm happy to see you, but when did you get so tall? I'm still getting used to you being taller than me, much less having to stretch to give you a hug. How does Hermione manage?"

He rolled his eyes. "We make do."

She snorted. "I'll bet you do." She looked around pointedly. "With a place like this I'll bet you make do very well." She taunted as she strolled further into the room. "Seriously, this is great. And Hogwarts is lovely, if a little chilly."

"It has its good points," he said with a shrug. "I'm just glad your name didn't come out of that blasted Goblet."

His parents had been less than impressed that Claire had volunteered for the tournament. In fact, given the changing political climate they would have preferred that she stay out of Britain completely, as they assumed that being associated with the name Malfoy would soon see a target painted on her back. They couldn't force her to withdraw her name so they had convinced her not to publicly associate with Draco, hence the rather cloak and dagger act through the library. If she had actually been chosen for the tournament they would have gone crazy, so would he, for that matter.

She literally waved him off. "I was never worried about that. Hermione must be worried sick though, have you talked to her?"

"Last night on our mirrors," he nodded, "and yeah, she is. I'm just hoping Sirius can take care of it."

"Well he certainly made sure everybody knew his opinion on the matter," she smirked. "What was that thing between you and him earlier?"

"Just a bit of fun, I talked to him last night too and he said that he would see me today, so I made it a point to make sure that he did."

"You're such a peacock, Draco, just like Uncle Lucius. I don't think either of you can even help yourselves."

"I'm just playing my part," he said innocently, "can't be letting people think I'm too friendly with the family blood traitor."

She snorted. "I can't wait for the day the world finds out you're completely head over heels for a muggleborn witch. I'm going to be there to see it, mark my words." She looked around. "So where is it safe to sit?"

"Safe?"

"Well I don't exactly relish the idea of lounging around in the remains of your dried bodily fluids," she said wryly.

"What?!"

"Oh come on! You have a secret girlfriend and a secret room. Don't tell me all the pair of you get
up to in here is a chat."

He knew a whole host of emotions crossed his face before he could school his expression.

Her eyes went wide. "Wow, okay, I was just teasing, what's wrong?" She approached him, took his
arm and pulled them down onto the sofa.

"Why does everybody think that!"

"Think what?"

"That I've been skulking around defiling Hermione?"

She just blinked at him for the longest time. "Defile? Merlin, Draco, you're practically engaged
and, like I said, you're besotted with her, you would never do anything that could be characterised
as defiling her. Anyway, I was kidding. So, do you want to tell me what's going on? Because you
looked horrified just now, and I know you can't actually be horrified by the idea of being intimate
with Hermione."

He took a deep breath. "It's kind of weird to talk about this with you," he murmured.

"Yeah, it is, but we'll get over it. Tell me what's going on," she demanded.

He opened his mouth and the whole story of what happened the night of the World Cup—most of
which she already knew, and of what happened on the morning after—most of which she didn't,
came spilling out. When he finally finished talking she just stared at him, her mouth slightly open,
and then she began to giggle, which turned into full out guffaws.

"Claire! This is not funny!" He hissed.

She took a few heaving breaths in an effort to calm herself, waving her hands in front of her face to
dry the tears streaming down her cheeks, but when she turned to look at him she cracked up again.
He sat back, crossed his arms over his chest, and glared at her.

"Oh stop pouting," she shoved him, "I'm sorry, but you have to admit, it's a little bit funny."

"I don't see anything funny about it," he snapped.

She cocked an eyebrow at him. "Really? You don't see the humor in Narcissa 'serious discussions
are not to be had at the table' Malfoy accusing you of sneaking around to have sex with your
girlfriend over breakfast?" She took a breath. "Draco, you mustn't continue to have intercourse with
Hermione. Lucius, would you pass the marmalade?" She said in a disturbingly spot-on imitation of
his mother.

"Yeah, well it didn't seem so amusing at the time," he grumbled.

She finally stopped laughing and looked at him sympathetically. "I'm sure it wasn't, and after all
that happened at the World Cup I bet it was a pretty terrible morning. Why didn't you tell me about
this before?"

"It's not really something I wanted to write in a letter."

"Okay, that makes sense," she nodded. "I knew something was off between you, Aunt, and Uncle
but I never would have guessed anything like this." She sighed and reached over to touch his arm.
"So, when are you going to forgive them?"
He blanched at the abrupt question. "I have forgiven them, I'm just-"

"Punishing them for not trusting and embarrassing you?" She interjected.

"When you put it like that, it sounds petty. But I think I have a right to be angry," he scoffed.

She nodded in agreement. "You have plenty of reasons to be angry. But that's not what I'm saying. It's been two months, don't you think it's time to cut them some slack?"

"They should have trusted me, that's on them!" He snapped.

She sighed and squeezed his arm. "They do trust you, you have more freedom and they share more things with you than any kid I know. They made a mistake. But I know you Draco, you're holding on to this righteous indignation to hide what's really going on."

"And what's that?" He asked snidely, resisting the urge to pull away from her grasp.

"Your feelings are hurt that Aunt Cissy could believe you would disappoint her like that."

He just looked at her disbelievingly.

"Do you remember when you were six or seven, Uncle Lucius got that new racing broom and you snuck it out for a fly and crashed in the woods? I've never seen either of them so angry or so scared. They didn't even remember to ask me to leave the room before disciplining you."

Draco did remember that, he remembered it perfectly, and he still felt a lick of shame everytime he thought about it. But he just nodded.

"Uncle Lucius yelled at you for what felt like forever, and even though you were just a little kid you stood there and took it. I think you knew that you deserved it. But then, right after he dismissed you, your mother just looked and you and said very quietly, 'Draco, I'm so disappointed in you,' and only then did you start to cry. You were still all red and blotchy at dinner that night."

"I cried all afternoon," he conceded.

"I know you love Uncle Lucius and you want him to be proud of you, but it's the thought of disappointing Aunt Cissy that kills you. You learned how to respect witches from her. And then she went and accused you of being disrespectful to the witch that you love, she believed, if only for a moment, that you were capable of doing that, and you can't get over it. But it's not a reflection on you, Draco, she was scared and she had a bad moment. I know it's hard for you to believe, but she's not perfect."

"I know she's not perfect," he responded automatically.

She just looked at him pityingly. "Okay, not perfect, but it's an awfully high pedestal you have her on. You learned it from Uncle Lucius, I think."

Draco just huffed, but he couldn't dispute her statement, at least not as it pertained to his father. Before he could think of another response she continued.

"You said that she apologised?"

"More than once," he admitted with a sigh. "For making assumptions and not giving us a chance to explain. And also for not explaining to us the nature of the connection she sees between us."

"I don't think she'll be so thoughtless again, I mean, it's really not like her. I don't think she does
anything without thinking of every possible consequence, and that includes encouraging you to befri
friend Hermione."

It was another annoyingly good point, because he could admit, if only to himself, that if his mother
had shared with him when he was eleven that she saw a magical connection between him and a
muggleborn witch, he very well might have dug his heels in and refused to associate with her. The
thought filled him with terror.

"I don't know," she shrugged, "just think about it. I just don't think you're doing yourself any favors
by remaining upset. How does Hermione feel about all this?"

"She was upset, mainly embarrassed I think. She wants to wait for marriage."

Claire looked taken aback. "To have sex?"

He nodded uncomfortably.

"Is that a muggle thing I don't know about?"

He chuckled. "That's what I asked. She said it is in some religions, but that's not why, she's not
religious. She just doesn't want to have to sneak around. You know how she is, it's the principle of
the thing."

"I mean, you should discuss this with her, but why would you have to sneak around?"

"You think Mother and Father are just going to give us permission? After the story I just told you?"

"I think what they didn't like is that they thought you were sneaking around in the first place, and
that you're still a little young to be going that far. But I also think it would be hypocritical of them
to forbid it."

"What do you mean?"

She looked at him incredulously. "Draco, have you met your parents? There is no way they waited
until they were married."

He felt his eyes go wide as his brain automatically traveled to a place to which he never wanted it
to return. "This discussion is so over and I'd really appreciate a memory charm right about now."

He shuddered.

She just laughed.

After lunch he returned to the room on his own hoping that Hermione would seek him out after
she'd spoken with Sirius. And, sure enough, about an hour later she came barreling through the
door and basically threw herself at him, curling up on his lap.

"They couldn't get him out of it, huh?" He surmised when she'd finally quit breathing like she'd just
run a marathon.

She just shook her head.

"What happened?"

"A Death Eater, and not the reformed kind disguised as Professor Moody," she sniffed. "Can I wait
to tell you the whole story later, I can't think about it anymore right now."
"Of course," he responded immediately. He wasn't certain he even wanted to know all the gory details, he already had plenty of fodder for his nightmares.

"I'm afraid for him," she admitted.

Frankly, Draco was afraid for Potter too. But he was mostly afraid for Hermione, because she had, on more than one occasion, compared her relationship with her friend to his relationship with Claire, and she knew very well how much he cared for his cousin. If anything happened to Potter she would be devastated. "I'll do whatever I can to help," he vowed.

She pulled back to look at him and then gave him a sweet kiss on the lips. "Thank you, I love you."

They sat there for awhile just drinking in each other's presence before he decided to change the subject.

"Claire thinks I should forgive my parents...for this summer."

She remained silent and just began playing with the hair at the base of his neck.

"I take it you agree?" He prompted.

She shrugged. "I think you've already forgiven them, but your feelings were badly hurt and that's harder to forget."

He let out a startled laugh. "Merlin, am I that transparent? She basically said the same thing."

"We just know you," she said as she somehow found a way to curl her body even more tightly against him.

"I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have you if it wasn't for Mother," he admitted.

"Yeah," she nuzzled his neck, "we definitely owe her one there."

"I get why she didn't tell us when we were younger- about our connection- but she should have told us before she went jumping to crazy conclusions!" He realised he sounded petulant even as the words left his mouth.

She let out a little laugh in response and tugged playfully at his hair. "Well, I could have done without the jumping to conclusions thing," he felt her smile against his neck as she spoke, "but did we really need her to tell us?" She kissed his jaw. "We already knew, Draco."

"We didn't know that she knew," he groused.

"You're adorable." He could still feel her smiling against his skin.

"I'm not sure I like that term," he rolled his eyes, "but why do you say that?"

"You're so protective of me. You can't stand the thought of our privacy being invaded, not for your sake, but for mine. But I don't need protecting from your parents. I love them, and they love us. So, don't hold onto this for my sake."

He growled and moved onto the next source of his ire.

"Can I hold onto the belief that Hogwarts is a deathtrap and I'd prefer to take you and run far away?"
"Yeah, I feel the same way," she sighed, "but we can't."

"Remind me why?"

"Well," she sighed. "I've just agreed to help Harry prepare for the tournament. Sirius is hiring tutors and I've said that I'll participate in his training." He felt a flicker of jealousy but she took his silence for anger. "What would you have done in my place?" She asked, "he doesn't deserve this!"

"Neither do you," he countered.

"Neither do you," she said in return.

"What do you mean?"

"If we left now we could very well be running forever, away from our families, our society, and your birthright. Could you do that to your parents? To mine? I'm not sure that I'm prepared to. I'm not even sure that we have the resources in place at this point to make it happen. And are we really that desperate yet?"

He felt a weight pressing on his chest at the very idea and tried to concentrate, instead, on how annoyed he was with witches who were making so much sense today. It didn't work.

"Not yet," he conceded. "But don't you ever wish that we could?"

"I feel terrible about it, but yeah, I do."

He gathered her further into his arms. "Is it wrong to want to be happy?"

"No. Not at all." She craned her neck to give him a kiss. "But would we be? We agreed to put each other first, but could we live with ourselves if we just disappeared? We're not at war Draco, not yet at least, and believe me I'm tired of hiding our relationship too, but it seems a little soon to throw in the towel."

Her words settled upon him heavily- as truth. It was one thing to make extreme plans, another to enact them. And he couldn't stop imagining the devastated look on his mother's face if they suddenly disappeared. "You're right, of course."

"I'm just afraid," she said in a rush of breath.

"Me too," he admitted

"Not just about what's to come, but if it comes down to it, how do we decide to leave everything that means anything to us, except for each other?"

The weight on his chest increased, almost unbearably so, sometimes he wished she wasn't so insightful. "I don't know." He breathed her in. "I really don't know Mia. I just know that I love you."

"That's the only thing I don't question."

Chapter End Notes
Ah, the teen angst! Though to give Draco and Hermione credit they have a pretty heavy weight on their shoulders. Also, there you go, Harry has to compete but at least they've caught Crouch, how will that change things? This is the longest one yet, Weestarmeggie deserves an extra big round of applause for her beta skills. Thank you, lady! And thanks to you all for reading!
Chapter 31

When Sirius retrieved her from the Gryffindor table on the morning of the first task she made certain to keep her expression straight and unaffected. Otherwise people might have believed that she was worried about Harry, which could put him at a disadvantage. And she was most certainly not going to do that.

It probably wouldn't matter for this particular task. But it had become common knowledge that she was training with Harry, and if she didn't think that he was capable, that spoke volumes. And a large part of their strategy was to always appear strong. Which was especially important, because if the tasks ever pitted the champions against each other, Harry's age alone already made him a target.

The weeks in the lead up to the first task had been a series of revelations, and not all good ones either: so many students didn't care that Dumbledore had declared Harry innocent, they still vilanized him. On the opposite end of the spectrum were those revered him in a way that was utterly disturbing to the muggleborn witch. Boy-who-lived and now Hogwarts champion, even though he wasn't Hogwarts champion and he'd yet to do anything to earn their praise, but Hermione was learning that logic was often very lacking in the magical world. Or perhaps it was just the world in general, given the way that Colin Creevey appeared to be ready to drop to Harry's feet in supplication at any given moment.

Their training, on the other hand, was interesting and fulfilling, or it would have been, if it hadn't been provided for such a terrible reason. But at least they got to see Sirius, and to a lesser extent Remus, on a regular basis. Harry had been disappointed that his godfather hadn't hired Remus as his full-time defense tutor, but it had been explained to him that Remus was simply too close to the situation to effectively educate Harry in the brutal way that would be necessary to prepare him to face the tournament's tasks.

After having been thoroughly educated on the history of the tournament by their new dueling tutor, Master Maslay, Hermione agreed completely. Harry needed a relentless taskmaster, not a favored uncle. Though, during their first lesson when the man had immediately begun to throw (low-powered) cutting curses at them just to see what they would do, she began to wonder if it wasn't worth the risk to sprite Harry away from all of this along with herself and Draco.

She'd almost completely broken down when she'd learned the nature of the first task. Draco had found her in the library, obsessively flipping through books on magical creatures, feeling almost maniacal as she did so.

"Leave it Mia, you need to eat." He said when he found her, "whatever you're doing can wait, you're no good to Potter if you work yourself into exhaustion. Don't think I missed the fact that you weren't at lunch."

She didn't look up, or even stop paging through the book as she spoke. "It's dragons."

There was a long pause. "Pardon me?"

"The first task is dragons," she looked up and met his eyes, "so, you see, I can't stop. I can't watch
my best friend get eaten, Draco! I have to find a way to help him."

"Wow," he breathed, "this whole thing really is crazy. Dragons! What are they thinking? Does he have to kill it?" He asked, looking nauseated, which was probably the result of a combination of Draco's own reverence for the creature's and the thought of somebody their age facing such a daunting task.

"I don't think so, most dragons are endangered. I don't think they'd design a whole task with the sole purpose of killing them. And, besides that, the first task is traditionally some kind of clue retrieval."

"Clue retrieval?"

"Yes, they have to find a way to get a clue for the next task which is hidden or guarded in some way." Hermione shuddered, that seemed a little too reminiscent of the obstacle course guarding the philosopher's stone. "Sirius thinks he'll just have to get past the dragon," she let out a hysterical little laugh, "just get past it," she repeated, as it sank in how ridiculous that sounded.

Hermione didn't know where Sirius was getting his information. She suspected that a lot of palms had been greased at the Ministry, and while that once may have bothered her, she hadn't since given it a second thought, she'd just asked him if he was sure about the dragons.

"Okay," Draco took a deep breath, "okay," he repeated. He reached over and pried the book from her hands, closed it with purpose, and then hauled her onto his lap.

"I think my point remains though, you're no good to Potter if you're running yourself into the ground, he needs you at top form. And you're not the only one working on this, right?"

"True, but-"

"Also, what kind of message do you think you're sending to Potter by either hiding yourself away researching or panicking? Come to dinner, be his friend, show him you believe in him."

She took several deep breaths, allowing Draco's familiar scent and the comfort of his arms around her to calm her down.

"That's my girl," he murmured, "and remember, you have a secret weapon."

"A secret weapon?"

"Yeah, me!"

"Draco, I know you said you would help but-"

"Do you doubt me? Do I really have to remind you that my name means dragon, I'm the wizard for this job. We've got this, okay?" He gently took her chin in one hand and forced her to face him, his eyes were serious, but he looked confident.

And, as sometimes happened around him, she was hit by a wave of love for him that almost overwhelmed her, but she held onto him, and, as always, he kept her steady and she started to believe his words too.

And sure enough, when she called him on their mirrors for their nightly chat just a few hours later he answered with a proud smile. He then proceeded to remind her- as they'd all discovered, especially Draco himself, during Lockhart's failed dueling club Second Year- that Harry was a
parselmouth, and if ever there was a time to use that ability, it was now.

It was something she'd honestly forgotten about, it had been big talk for a few days afterward, but then when Harry hadn't immediately morphed into Voldemort reincarnate, the speculation had quickly died down and the rumor mill had moved onto the next thing. She'd had no cause to think of it since. It was also something which she was fairly certain that neither Sirius nor Remus were aware of. And so, their plan blossomed from there.

"Relax," Sirius murmured, drawing her back to the present, "you're stiff as a board. He'll be fine, we have a good plan." She wasn't sure if he was trying to convince her or himself.

They did have a good plan, because her boyfriend was a genius. She knew that she was biased on that matter, but it was beyond dispute that he'd provided them with all the key information. She wondered what Harry would do if he knew of Draco's involvement, she hoped that someday in the future she could use it to convince him that Draco was a good man whom he should give a chance. Yes, he'd helped for her sake, but he'd also done it because he didn't think that what was happening to Harry was fair and wanted to help him survive it.

Hermione and Sirius had paused in the Entrance Hall and activated the Marauder's Map when Hermione thought of something.

"Won't this look suspicious, us bent over a piece of parchment as we walk?"

He smirked at her. "The map has a notice-me-not feature."

"You boys really did think of everything, didn't you?" She chuckled. "But why not make it permanent? I can't think of a situation where that wouldn't be helpful."

"We discovered that when all four of us were trying to look at it at the same time with the notice-me-not active, one or two of us found it hard to concentrate, and when we simply dialed it down it was ineffective."

"Fascinating," she marveled, reminding herself to ask Sirius for details later.

"Alright Kitten, if you see a name you don't recognize point it out and I'll do the same."

Unfortunately, they still didn't know what Barty Crouch Jr.'s plan had been. He'd been interrogated everyday for two weeks by aurors and unspeakables without giving up a single piece of information, and he was practically immune to legilimency, which made sense given that he was able to break out of an Imperius Curse he'd been under for a decade. He would have to have incredibly strong mental shields in order to do so. And so, out of desperation they'd given him veritaserum and the very first question they'd asked him had triggered an unbreakable vow and he was dead before even one word had left his mouth- which is why veritaserum was only used as a last resort.

Meanwhile, Barty Crouch Sr. had the tables turned on him and had been under his son's Imperius Curse since late summer. And while he had almost certainly been privy to the details of Junior's plan, and acted as an unwitting accomplice to it at some point, given his access to both the Ministry and Hogwarts, he had no memory of it. So, he'd been shoved somewhere deep into the bowels of Azkaban for his crimes, but he was useless to them.

So, she and Sirius would be scanning the map looking for anything suspicious or out of place, and Remus was already inside the arena where the task was to take place using his enhanced lupine senses to do the same, as the arena itself was out of the map's range. They strolled slowly across
the grounds, allowing as many people as possible to pass by them.

They were also on the lookout for Rita Skeeter whom, Lucius had warned them, was an animagus with a beetle form, and because the tournament was big news, was sure to be hanging about looking for a scoop. Sirius had simply wanted to turn her in for her illegal activity, but Lucius had convinced him that she could be useful, which told Hermione that the woman had been useful to him in that past. So, they were keeping an eye out for her lest she overhear something they didn't want her to. Harry had already met the woman at the Weighing of the Wands Ceremony and reported that she'd seemed awful - she'd even tried to corner Harry for an interview, but Sirius had quickly put a stop to that.

"I don't often get the chance to talk to you alone," Sirius said, out of the blue.

"Is something the matter?"

"No, at least not beyond everything," he gestured around them demonstratively.

She giggled. "Point taken, I should have asked if anything else was wrong."

He chuckled along with her. "Draco's a good kid."

She hummed in agreement.

"I already knew that," Sirius continued to explain, "but he's really impressed me these past few weeks especially. Did you know that he had his parents pack up his entire collection of books on the subject of dragons and send them to me?"

"I didn't know that," she answered, surprised. It was unlike Draco to pass up an opportunity to brag or ask for an award for a job well done. Then again, she could tell he'd been making a concerted effort since Halloween to keep her mind off of Harry's ordeal and make the very limited amount of time they were able to spend together just about them and their relationship.

"It's got me thinking, there's an offer I wanted to make to him, but I wanted to discuss it with you first."

"Why me?"

"Because it will have a big effect on you as well, I already know what his reaction will be, I don't need to ask him first. But I know something about what a burden this could be on you, and I care very much for you, so if you're dead set against it I'll keep quiet."

"What is it?"

"When Draco comes of age and this war it over, I'd like to make him Head of House Black."

Hermione inhaled sharply and immediately understood why he'd come to her first. This would mean the world to Narcissa, who longed to rebuild the honor of the House she'd been born into. Lucius would also be thrilled, this would bring his son and his family considerably more power and prestige. And while Draco would respect and appreciate his parents points of views, she knew he'd also be touched on a more personal level that Sirius would entrust him with this.

But for her, she would be tossed into the deep end of a pool that she was supposed to have decades to wade into and learn how to swim effectively in (because she didn't believe for a minute that stubborn Lucius was going to die and make her Lady Malfoy sooner than that). It also meant that she'd have to have not one, but two sons in order to pass the Black name onto the second boy, or
the Black line would go extinct. Because a wizard with a different last name couldn't hold the title for more than one generation. Given that the Malfoys hadn't produced more than one son in a generation in more centuries than she cared to count, that was a stressful burden.

She was a muggleborn. She had great hopes that that would change things for the future of House Malfoy. She knew Draco and his parents felt the same. But she didn't know how she felt about this offer, it might be asking just a little too much.

'I wouldn't even ask, Kitten," he sighed, "but the fact is that I'm tired, and once this war is over I know I'm just going to be even more exhausted. I'm trying to do my best by Harry, but Azkaban isn't an experience you can just shed, and I can't imagine a time when I'll feel ready to get married and have a family of my own. I'm bitter, and much older than my years, and I just don't think I have it in me to restore our House. You and Draco, I truly believe that you'd make me proud to be a Black again."

Hermione didn't know what to say to that, his voice had taken on a weary quality that- despite knowing what he'd been through- she never would have expected from the usually upbeat wizard and it was deeply disturbing to her. She'd grown used to his almost manic cheerfulness, something she now realized that she should have seen through months ago. Of course he was damaged, how could he not be?

"I don't expect you to answer me right now, in fact, you should think it through fully," he continued. "It's not urgent, but it was something that I wanted to address. I know that Lucius has most likely been educating Draco for his future duties since he learned to talk, but if you agree, I'd like to start informing him about some issues that are unique to House Black so that when the time comes, he's prepared."

"I'll think about it," she said quietly, squeezing his arm. "And on Draco's behalf, thank you for thinking so well of him."

"That's all I ask. And you don't have to thank me for that."

Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, they reached the arena without spotting anything out of place. When they entered the arena Hermione took a moment to take it all in. It reminded her of the Roman colosseum, which seemed an accurate comparison given what was about to happen here. At its center, where the action would take place, there was what looked like a desolate rocky landscape, with very few places to run or hide, and Hermione felt her anxiety ratchet up another notch. Sirius inhaled sharply beside her and she looked up at him to see that his eyes were also locked on the place where his godson would soon see himself in mortal danger.

In an effort to calm herself she looked around to see if she could spot some familiar faces. There was an entire section where it looked like almost all of Gryffindor had gathered, a few notable exceptions who weren't supporting Harry were seated elsewhere, their red and gold scarves sticking out amongst the colors of the other houses. She spotted Ron's red head with the large crowd and thought that he had a lot of nerve.

After Dumbledore's announcement Ron had quickly changed his tune about believing Harry, and he just seemed to think that they could go back to the way things had been without actually offering any kind of apology. He'd then proceeded to grow more offended by the day when Harry was only coldly polite to him and he'd been visibly angry when he'd learned that Harry and Hermione were getting extra training that hadn't been offered to him, but apparently had enough sense not to irritate Harry any further by saying anything about it. Harry was so busy he was hardly ever in the Common Room regardless and Hermione couldn't remember the last time she'd seen them exchange more than two words - Harry himself admitted that the tension in his dorm room
was palpable and he'd begun avoiding spending any time there except to sleep.

She took a deep breath and continued to search the crowd. Draco was with the Slytherins, but he'd obviously been waiting for her to look for him because he was already staring at her when she caught his eye. He immediately lifted one hand to touch his finger to the side of his nose, their secret sign and she hastened to return the gesture, finding more comfort in it than she would have thought possible.

She looked over to the Beauxbatons contingent next and spotted Claire straight away as the older witch was waving at them. Hermione waved back, albeit less enthusiastically, and Claire shot her a commiserating smile and blew her a kiss.

Nobody would find anything odd about their interactions. Since Lucius and Narcissa had effectively forbidden her from associating with Draco, Claire had started hanging out with Hermione instead. When she wasn't with her Beauxbatons friends they studied together and she usually ate at least one meal a day at the Gryffindor table. It had made Hermione very popular with her roommates who viewed Claire as an older, more experienced, fabulously fashionable witch - they weren't wrong. Harry just thought of her as the French girl Hermione had been writing to for years, he had no idea she was Draco's cousin. He had immediately accepted her as a friend, in fact, Hermione was quite certain that he was developing a crush on her.

They had just about reached the seats Remus had been saving for them when she spotted Lucius and Narcissa, who were sitting with the other school governors and their spouses. Thus far this tournament had been nothing but an embarrassment for Hogwarts and she knew both the governors and the Ministry were doubling down to make sure the rest of it ran smoothly. Neither of the elder Malfoys acknowledged her in any way, but she was sure that they'd seen her and she felt better just knowing they were here.

They got seated just before Ludo Bagman began to explain the nature of the task the champions would face. Hermione already knew, of course, as they'd had an advance scout, and so she tuned him out. She didn't want to hear it again. When they announced the order of the champions and which dragon each would face, Hermione clamped her hand around Sirius' forearm to keep from reacting in any other way. Because, just Harry's luck, he was to go last, and he'd drawn the most dangerous dragon: the Hungarian Horntail.

Diggory, Krum, and the Delacour all performed adequately and successfully retrieved their golden eggs, receiving only minor injuries in the process. Though Hermione's heart broke a little when Krum's conjunctivitis curse irritated the Chinese Fireball so badly that she stomped all over her own eggs. But she had very little room in her heart to care about anything other than Harry today.

Time passed at a snail's pace, but also very quickly, and then it was Harry's turn.

She was proud to see him walk out with his head held high. The specialty competition robes they'd had made for him were a deep red, almost a burgundy. A traditional color for House Potter, the robes were trimmed in mahogany brown with matching fitted brown trousers, and were much more sophisticated than the traditional Hogwarts uniform which most of the audience was used to seeing him wearing, and made him look older than he was.

He stopped just inside the arena and didn't hesitate to draw his wand.

"Expecto Patronum!" A brilliant shimmering stag, which Sirius and Remus swore up and down was the exact likeness of James Potter's animagus form, burst forth from his wand and immediately made a lap around the arena.
Hermione swelled with pride for him, and Sirius bumped his shoulder against hers in understanding. The crowd quieted. She could only imagine that it was a result of some combination of awe at Harry’s impressive display of magic, and the calming nature of the presence of a patronus.

Hermione reflexively took a deep breath and allowed the comforting familiarity of Harry's magic to soothe her nerves. Relieved that Harry was slightly paranoid about dementors and had practically demanded that Remus teach him this charm over the summer. None of them had imagined he’d have the power or strength of mind to cast it, much less that it would ever actually be useful.

The dragon relaxed as the magic of the stag reached her as well. It was as they'd hoped, that even a nesting mother, chained up and surrounded by hundreds of humans wouldn't be able to resist slipping under the spell of such light magic. At the very least they'd hoped it would demonstrate that Harry bore her no ill will.

Prongs returned to Harry and though Hermione couldn't hear what he was saying, she knew that he was sending the patronus off with a message. After a few moments it flew off and Harry settled down behind a rock to wait.

Hermione knew that Hedwig was perched nearby and so it was only a matter of a minute or two before Hermione spotted the owl's familiar silhouette winging her way towards them, carrying the key to their whole plan in a small cylindrical basket clutched in her talons. She gave the dragon a wide berth as she approached Harry, gently deposited the basket in his lap, and then with an affectionate bark for her wizard, flew away again.

If Hermione hadn't known what was happening, she probably wouldn't have understood what she was seeing, but since she did, she watched avidly as Harry opened the basket and Holly poked her head out and immediately started to crawl up his arm. Holly was Harry's new familiar, a six month old boomslang, and she represented Draco's real stroke of genius.

It was one thing to have remembered that Harry was a parselmouth, and another to figure out how to use that fact. Dragons were reptiles, but they weren't snakes. And no matter how much research they did, they could not confirm or deny whether parseltongues could speak to dragons, it was just such a rare gift, there was no documentation either way. And even if they had been able to confirm it, they would still just have been sending Harry into the arena speaking parseltongue, hoping that the dragon would be willing to listen; a dubious prospect.

Dragons were distrustful creatures, especially of humans. And a dragon who lived in captivity would, in all likelihood, feel even more resentful of people. She would have been as likely to roast Harry alive as she was to listen to him.

But Dragons and snakes were natural allies. In exchange for protection in the dragon's territory, snakes often served as scouts and lookouts, because dragons were reluctant to stray from their territory, but given their protective nature, were also very keen to know if there was danger encroaching. Also, there was no doubt that dragons and snakes could communicate, and Harry could definitely talk to snakes. They considered having Harry just conjure a snake, but that was nearly as unlikely to work as simply allowing Harry to walk into the arena speaking parseltongue.

They had needed a snake who would be loyal to Harry and would be willing to intercede on his behalf. A snake who could help them lay the groundwork with the dragon long before Harry ever came face to face with it. And so, it had also been Draco who had suggested that Harry find a serpentine familiar, which provided a solution to all of these issues.

After a weekend scouring exotic pet stores with Sirius and Remus, Harry returned to Hogwarts with
Holly, explaining to Hermione that he'd felt a pull towards her as soon as he'd entered the store. She could tell immediately that the pair already had a bond, and even surprised herself by how quickly she'd come to love the snake as well.

As soon as they received word that the dragons had arrived and were penned up inside the Forbidden Forest, Harry had sent Holly off to see if they were willing to negotiate with her. She'd ventured out five nights in a row and they had begun to worry that they would run out of time before she made any progress. But then the day before yesterday she'd reported to Harry that it was done.

But this was the real moment of truth.

Harry stood up, and Hermione noticed the moment people began to realize that he was holding a snake as not-so-quiet murmurings broke out all over the arena. But that meant little to her. She was concentrating on the dragon, and she could have sworn she saw the moment recognition dawned in the great beast's eyes. Harry cast a spell on Holly and then on himself- which she knew was to amplify both of their voices- and then he began to speak, and when he did so there was a collective gasp.

Harry had been incredibly reluctant to expose his parslemouth abilities in front of so many people, but they'd all agreed that he needed to prove to the dragon that he was the speaker that Holly had told her about. It was foolish to leave anything to chance just to appease other people's prejudices. They'd all just have to get over it again. It hadn't been that hard to convince Harry, he was a little too used to witnessing the Hogwarts population turn on him, and while he didn't relish it, it was infinitely preferable to risking his life.

Hermione was already used to listening to Harry speak to Holly, but he'd kept her hidden from the rest of the student population, so nobody else was prepared for what they were witnessing. Harry spoke to Holly, and then Holly spoke to the dragon. This went on for a couple of minutes, and while the dragon didn't appear to actually be saying anything, Harry didn't seem concerned either.

And, apropos of nothing, it appeared as if the dragon nodded. Harry pulled out his wand, cast a point-me charm to get his bearings, and then said, "accio Hungarian Horntail care package!" It spun him in the direction of the 'gifts' Sirius had arranged for whichever dragon Harry ended up with, in accordance with their requests to Holly.

Another minute passed and a wooden crate sailed into the arena. She watched Harry, his eyes narrowed in concentration, waiting for just the right moment, "arresto momentum!" He bellowed and the crate fell to the ground right in front of the dragon.

Harry quickly began to disassemble it to reveal at least a dozen whole roasted animals- if Hermione recalled correctly, for the Horntail they'd provided deer. She had just been relieved that they weren't alive, apparently the rather lazy creatures actually preferred for somebody else to do the work for them. Hermione made a mental note to ask Sirius if he'd told the Potter elves that they had been preparing four dragon feasts. If not, she'd have to remind him to inform them, they'd be delighted to have been so helpful to their master during his arduous task.

The dragon inhaled deeply and then exhaled, letting out a little burst of fire with what Hermione could only describe as satisfaction. She lowered her head in Harry's direction in a semblance of a bow, and then with apparent deliberateness, stood up and moved away from her nest. Harry bowed deeply in return and then quickly made his way past her.

Hermione held her breath when he paused for the briefest of moments next to the nest to bend over and retrieve his egg. As he walked past the dragon again he held the egg up for her to inspect so
that she could see that he hadn't absconded with any of hers and after a moment began to move again. Right before he exited the arena he turned back around and said something to Holly who related it to the dragon. And it was only when he turned again and walked out of view that Hermione finally exhaled.

And then, without really knowing what she was doing, she was on her feet screaming and applauding alongside Sirius and Remus. She didn't even notice the deafening silence from the rest of the crowd.

He was waiting outside of the champions tent for them twenty minutes later, the egg tucked under one arm and Holly wrapped around the opposite wrist. Madam Pomfrey was fussing over him, trying to convince him to let her check him out, but he was having none of it. Hermione started running as soon as she had him in her sights, pushing her way through the crowd, uncaring of anybody else. When she reached him she actually lept on him, hugging him around the neck and squeezing him to her, murmuring about how well he'd done, and how proud and happy she was that he was safe.

"Oof! Hermione!" He protested.

She jumped off of him immediately. "Oh, I'm sorry! Did I hurt you, or Holly?"

"It's fine, just knocked the wind out of me." He laughed and- still so hesitantly- wrapped the arm holding Holly around her.

Hermione let him hold her for a moment, thankful for the progress they'd made, then smiled up at him and took a step back, holding her hands out towards the snake who uncoiled herself from her wizard's wrist and slithered into them without hesitation.

"And just like that they've both forgotten me," she heard Harry gripe, but she ignored him, her eyes fixed on the beautiful creature in front of her. Harry had named her for her green and red scales which truly did bear a resemblance to a series of bursts of holly leaves and berries; and due to the fact that Sirius had informed him that it was a tradition in his mother's family to name girls after plants. Normal boomslangs didn't have red scales, but they believed they were indicative of her innate but unawakened magical nature- at least until she'd come into contact with Harry.

"You brilliant girl!" She praised, holding her up so they could make eye contact. "You did so well!"

Holly hissed something in a way that Hermione had come to recognize meant that she was actually 'speaking.'

"What did she say, Harry?" She asked without looking away from Holly.

"She agrees that she's brilliant," he explained, she could tell that he was trying to sound disgruntled but was actually amused.

They'd come to realize that while she didn't understand English, per se, and Harry had to switch to parseltongue to explain specifics, she had no trouble understanding the general meaning of what others were trying to communicate to her.

"And beautiful too!" She beamed and placed a gentle kiss on the top of her head and Holly preened.

"Kissing snakes now, Granger?" Came a familiar voice from behind her, she had to fight her immediate instinct to turn around and run into his arms. And then she processed his words.
Oh, he thought he was hilarious, didn't he?

She turned to face him. "Only brilliant and gorgeous ones like Holly here. Why, are you wanting a kiss Malfoy?" But he just smirked and she recognized that he'd understood the buried compliment. She should probably tone it down or he was going to be insufferable, but she was very happy with him right now and thought he deserved a little praise.

"You just wish," he retorted, suddenly turning to look at Harry with an expression on his face that even Hermione- who knew him so well- couldn't have described, "that was quite the interesting strategy, Potter."

Harry automatically opened his mouth to respond, but she could see when he realized that he hadn't actually been insulted and shut it again. Draco let out a derisive little laugh, spun on his heel, and walked away.

Hermione watched him for as long as she thought she could get away with.

By this time Sirius and Remus had reached them and offered their congratulations to Harry, and then heaped their own praise on Holly. Harry didn't even seem to care when they informed him that he'd tied for first place in the task (which was entirely unfair in and of itself, he'd been by far the most successful champion, the biased judging was atrocious) and was just happy that he'd gotten through it. But Hermione could tell that Remus and Sirius were as thrilled by this reaction as she was, because it meant that Harry most likely wouldn't be taking any reckless risks to win this tournament.

A raucous group of Gryffindors arrived to congratulate Harry and inform him that they were throwing a party in his honor.

"Go ahead if you like," he told the Weasley twins, who were clearly the instigators, all the while ignoring Ron, who was obviously trying to get his attention, "but I just want to spend some time with my family." And with that he took Hermione's arm and steered them back towards the castle.

Chapter End Notes

I've been so excited to begin writing the tournament. But at the same time this kind of action is totally out of my comfort zone, so I hope you enjoyed it, and I would really appreciate some feedback. :) Thank you a million times over to Weestarmeggie for so many things, the least of which is beta-reading this chapter (which was no small task.) You are a rockstar! And thanks to you all for reading, seriously, I'm continually amazed by the response to this story, you guys are wonderful!
Draco paced back and forth across Malfoy Manor's floo room as he waited for Hermione to arrive via her locket portkey. It was the first full day of the Christmas holidays and they'd returned home, where they could visit each other at their leisure, rather than remain at Hogwarts and attend a ball where they'd only be able to sneak glances at each other from across the room. Draco had never been so relieved to board the Hogwarts Express. When Hermione finally appeared in front of him, he didn't hesitate to haul her into his arms and kiss her soundly.

"I missed you," he breathed between kisses.

"I missed you too," she responded and the way she held him so tightly was a reassurance he hadn't known he'd needed.

He hadn't spent more than a handful of minutes with her in at least a week. The sensation of dainty fingers tunneling their way through his hair had him kissing her again - he loved that feeling.

"Your parents," she reminded him.

"Are very well aware of your arrival and are giving us privacy. As it turns out, they actually do trust us. I think they're making a point of it, actually."

"Draco," she continued to rake her fingers through the hair at the base of his neck. He leaned into her hand, it had been too long since he'd felt her touch.

In the wake of the first task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament Hermione's moments of free time had been few and far between. He knew that Potter had no idea that he'd been keeping them apart, and he tried not to resent him for it, but he did.

Draco put that out of his mind as he held his girlfriend. "Two weeks!" He said gleefully, "I get you all to myself for two weeks!" As a guest of the school Claire had been obliged to stay at Hogwarts, so for the first time since the summer it would be just the two of them.

"I'll have to spend a little time at Potter House near the end of the holidays," she corrected.

He groaned and pulled away to pout at her.

"I know," she said, tracing his face with one hand, he leaned into her. "But Harry keeps asking me when he can meet Leo and I keep putting him off and lying to him and I just feel so badly about it. And he wanted to spend the holidays with his family which he considers me to be a part of, I can't begrudge him a couple of days."

"I thought you told him you were going to America to visit Leo," he practically growled the name- he hadn't warmed to it at all.

"Well that's the other thing, it's not very believable that I would be gone for literally every single day of the holidays, and I think he's getting suspicious that I'm keeping something from him already."
"Okay, okay," he relented. "But I still can't believe he left Hogwarts in the first place."

"He's never had a home to go home to for the holidays, can you honestly blame him? I know that you look forward to Yule every year, and you've always had a wonderful home and family. A quiet couple of weeks with Sirius sounds a lot better to me than spending that time in a castle full of people who have nothing better to do than stare and giggle and whisper about him."

The first task had only raised the myth that was 'Harry Potter' to new heights. Draco could admit it had been an impressive performance, particularly his ability to conjure a patronus that not only took clear form but was also strong enough to send a message, whilst standing in front of hundreds of spectators and a five ton beast that had the ability to roast him alive at only fourteen years old. It had put to rest any doubt that he was an extremely powerful wizard, and more precisely, that he had the ability to harness that power.

"And it didn't help that the only witch he was truly interested in taking to the ball still thinks of him as a little kid."

She nudged him playfully and Draco stifled a groan. Potter's crush on Claire was understandable. She was smart, funny, beautiful; what wasn't to like? And Potter had earned Draco's respect over the past few months, but the fact was that nobody was ever going to be good enough for Claire and he was relieved that she'd asked Hermione to make it clear to Potter that she didn't see him like that.

"How did you break that to him, by the way?"

"I told him the truth: she has a cousin his age who she considers to be like a little brother and it just makes her feel like she's too old for him. I made sure he knew it wasn't personal, because it's not. It was awkward for a few days but they're friends again."

"Yeah I noticed," he said wryly. Still mostly on the outs with Weasley, Potter stuck to Hermione like white on rice - which was why he hadn't seen her in so long - and Claire could often be seen hanging out with them. "And speaking of somebody being too old for somebody else, Krum is too old for you."

She sighed. "First of all, even if he was interested you know very well that I'm not. I'm very happy with the wizard I have," she hugged him around the waist. "Second, he's harmless, stop worrying about him."

"I don't like the way he looks at you."

She barked out a laugh. "Wow, you sound exactly like Harry. Who, by the way, has appointed himself my bodyguard and I think even Viktor Krum is intimidated by Harry at this point, so you have nothing to worry about."

"Fine, I'll try not to," he sighed dramatically.

She went up on her toes to kiss his cheek. "I should go say hello to your parents, it's been months since I've seen them."

"Alright, you're right, I know they're anxious to see you too." He threw an arm around her shoulders and led her from the room. "So, Mother told me something last night."

"Why does that sound so ominous?"

"My grandmother is coming to town."
"Okay, what's unusual about that? Your grandmother usually comes to spend the holidays in England."

"No, Hermione, I didn't misspeak, not my grandmère, my grandmother," he clarified.

She reared back, eyes wide and just stared at him.

Draco wasn't surprised that Hermione was surprised, even he had been shocked when his mother mentioned the previous evening over dinner that Grandmother Black was coming to spend Yule with them. The woman hadn't set foot in Britain in years. Hermione had probably heard mention of her less than a handful of times. His mother went to visit her occasionally, but Draco was under the impression it was only a sense of duty that drove her to do so; they certainly weren't close and he couldn't imagine why she would leave her comfortable villa in Italy to come visit them. But then his mother had explained that she'd finally told her about Hermione, that a betrothal was imminent, and then Draco had understood. She was coming to inspect his girlfriend. Which wasn't something he knew how to explain to said girlfriend.

"Hello Dear!" His mother's voice came from behind them.

He turned around to see his parents approaching them and bit back a laugh. They'd been giving them privacy to greet each other, but they'd definitely also been hovering, anxious to see Hermione.

"Narcissa!" Hermione exclaimed, ducking out from under his arm to go embrace the woman. They exchanged cheek kisses and then she turned to his father and threw her arms around his waist, his eyes widened slightly and Draco bit back another laugh as he wondered if the man would ever stop looking surprised when she did that.

"Draco was just telling me that his grandmother is coming for a visit." His parents exchanged a look and Hermione noticed it as well. She glanced between them, her smile falling. "Why is everybody being so shifty about this?"

His mother took her arm and began to lead them away, he and his father trailed after them.

"My mother is very traditional," she said gently.

"Which is your way of saying that she won't approve of me," Hermione surmised after a moment.

"Don't worry, you're part of this family, no matter what. My mother's opinion is outdated and immaterial. But she remains my mother, and I don't feel right denying her the right to at least meet you."

Draco disagreed. As he remembered her, his grandmother was a nightmare and he didn't want her anywhere near Hermione. Not that he didn't think she could handle her, but why should she have to? It irked him, there should be some way in which he was able to protect his witch, right? And yet he had to sit in the back and keep quiet.

"It's alright," Hermione said softly, "I'm used to it."

His mother brought her to a halt and he and his father stopped walking behind them, but nobody spoke. The silence was thick and he could see that both of his parents were trying to come up with an appropriate response.

"I didn't mean it like that," she pleaded, obviously realizing what she'd said, and to whom.

"And yet you have every reason to feel as such, Mignonette," his father answered, his voice as
gentle as Draco had ever heard it.

"It's okay," Hermione reiterated.

"It's really not," Draco cut in, no longer willing to hold his tongue. It was bad enough that his family had ever thought badly of Hermione, but he couldn't allow her to just downplay the situation, which he knew was actually deeply hurtful to her.

"Draco," she said, looking back at him pleadingly.

He just shook his head, "it's not okay that anybody thinks like that and it's certainly not okay that my own grandmother does." He was rapidly growing tired of the world he'd been raised in. Sure, he continued to value many of their traditions, and he wanted to do right by his family, but the thought of his Grandmother Black anywhere near Hermione made him feel more than a little sick. She looked back and forth between him and his parents and he had a terrible premonition that she was about to do something without really thinking it through.

"Sirius wants to make Draco, Lord Black when he comes of age."

His mother let out a gasping sound that was as close to a squeal of delight as he'd ever heard from her. His father went still at his side.

His mother rushed towards him and enveloped him in a hug. "Oh my sweet boy, I'm so proud of you!"

"Mother," he huffed, "I haven't done anything. I'm the only one left, there is literally nobody else he could pass it on to."

"But he doesn't have to turn it over at all. And he wouldn't if he didn't trust and respect you."

"It's because of Hermione," he argued.

"No," Hermione argued in return. "I told you Draco, he made a point to tell me that he thought you were turning into a good man and that you would bring honor to House Black."

"Hermione," he sighed. "I thought we were going to talk about this some more before we mentioned anything to anyone."

She'd come to him, shortly after the first task and relayed Sirius' question about turning over House Black to him when he was of age and the war was over. And while he actually was flattered, his immediate concern was for Hermione. They'd talked it in circles since then but hadn't come to any firm decision.

She crossed her arms over her chest. "You and Sirius both said that it was up to me."

"I didn't think that you had decided, though. And you don't have to do this in some sort of attempt to impress my grandmother."

She was unable to completely suppress her wince and he knew that he had her. She hadn't actually come to a decision on her own, she just knew that the news would appease a pureblood traditionalist like Grandmother Black and was prepared to sacrifice her own comfort to smooth things over. She could be such a bloody Gryffindor.

He looked at his parents. "So we're still talking it over, not a word to anybody else." His mother appeared slightly disappointed but his father eyed him and then gave him a nod of respect, and
carefully cupped Hermione's face.

"He's right," he told her softly. "That's a major burden you would be taking on, I didn't truly understand that myself until very recently," he explained, eyes soft and full of meaning as he approached his mother and gently led her away.

Draco put an arm around Hermione's waist and she didn't resist when he steered her to follow them to the Breakfast Room.

His Grandmother Black arrived at Malfoy Manor in a grand manner two days later. She'd taken a ship from Italy, claiming that international portkey travel was too trying. So, by the time she arrived his grandmère was already in residence for the remainder of the holidays. His mother took a carriage to retrieve her from the port and as soon as she stepped into the Entrance Hall she looked around, took in her surroundings with a sniff and then regarded Grandmère.

"Oh, you're still here."

"Well, this is Malfoy Manor and I am a Malfoy."

"Your husband is dead," Grandmother responded flatly

"Yes, thank you, I remember, I was there."

"Druella, I have the deepest respect for you," his father drawled, sounding like he had anything but the deepest respect for her, "but my mother will always have a place here as long as I am Head of House Malfoy and I resent you implying otherwise."

"Me as well, Grandmother," Draco chimed in, squaring his chin against the woman who looked so much like his mother that it almost hurt.

She acted like she hadn't heard him. "Draco! Hello darling!"

He cringed at the reminder of how much he hated to be called 'darling,' and why it especially bothered him when his mother did it. There was no real affection in his grandmother's voice or manner, because she didn't really love him. He was a prized stallion she felt like she could metaphorically trot out and show off when it suited her- her sole male grandchild and heir of House Black, if only Sirius would conveniently die. It made him ill.

He could feel Hermione's magic crackle in irritation at the entire exchange - he knew that she was actually quite fond of Grandmère and was feeling insulted on her behalf.

He took a deep breath and prepared to play his part. He gently brought Hermione forward with a hand to her elbow. "Grandmother, may I present my…" he trailed off as he realized that he had no idea what to call Hermione, and they stupidly hadn't discussed it. 'Girlfriend' would be a meaningless term to his grandmother.

"I'm Hermione Granger, Draco's betrothed, Mrs. Black," she rescued him, with a slight curtsey in deference to her as an elder as well as her relationship to him.

Draco's heart softened. Betrothed. He cut his eyes in her direction and she smiled at him.

His grandmother looked Hermione up and down. "Well her hips are acceptable and the hair can be managed." She turned back towards his mother, "but what kind of name is 'Granger'?"

Draco's eyes went wide and he grabbed Hermione's hand and squeezed it, hoping to relay his
horror as well as a thorough apology for her words, along with his support for what he was certain was about to come.

And, sure enough, she was decidedly unhappy to find that Hermione was a muggleborn, he clenched his free hand into a fist at his side to keep from responding as she ranted about the integrity of their bloodline. He wouldn't do his mother the disrespect of insulting a guest invited into their home- much less her own mother.

Hermione just stood stoically at his side and when his grandmother was through, in what he was beginning to recognize to be a surreal display of pureblood stiff-upper-lipped-ness they continued onto dinner as if nothing had happened. And, as was happening increasingly frequently, he resented his upbringing. The Grangers would have whisked them away from this awful situation-no, they would never have put them in it in the first place.

But the conversation devolved into small talk and Draco thought that things were going to be okay when his grandmother decided to make her opinions known again. "Narcissa, do you honestly approve of this situation?" She gestured between himself and Hermione. "I suppose it's understandable if the boy wants to have some fun before he settles down, but this is not the kind of woman that you marry."

Draco let out a long breath and willed his magic to settle. "Hermione is a light in our lives," his mother responded with dignity. "I couldn't ask for anyone better for Draco."

"And you?" She turned to his father, "has your House fallen so far since the death of your father?"

The mood in the room turned glacial. "I choose to run this House differently than my father did."

His grandmother snorted. "Obviously, Abraxas would never have abided such an abomination."

Draco wasn't certain what he expected, but what happened next left him flabbergasted and pinching himself for days. "Oh, and you're an expert in what Abraxas wanted. Or perhaps you just wish that you had been?" Grandmère drawled in her slight accent.

Draco blindly grasped for Hermione's hand. He didn't know what was happening here, but it felt cataclysmic. He watched as his grandmère drained her wine glass and tightened his hold on around Hermione's fingers. "I knew Abraxas since we were children."

"And yet that didn't do you much good," she responded with a smirk. "Regardless, you are overstepping your bounds, watch how to talk to my son."

His grandmother sniffed and straightened her spine, attempting to look dignified, but her pinched expression ruined it. "Well, I will not be spoken to like this, and if this is how you are running your house, I will not be returning," she glared at Lucius and then she strode from the room.

There was a long moment of silence.
"Mother," Lucius eventually said, "what was that?"

"I did not care for the disrespect she showed you in your own home. Especially given that as you are the only son-in-law that has neither been repudiated nor sent to Azkaban, she is most certainly living off of your generosity. For as much as Cygnus might have doted on her in life he was not the kind of man who would have made provisions for her in death, she was a mere trophy to him."

Draco saw his father hesitate, but then his curiosity obviously won out and Draco remained as quiet as possible lest he be remembered and sent away.

"There was something more to it than that, if I do beg your pardon, Mother."

"Are you certain you want to know the answer to that, Son?" She asked as she watched an elf refill her wine glass and Draco tried to recall a time where he's seen his grandmère drink more than one glass in a sitting.

"Yes, I believe so."

She took another sip of wine. "Let us just say that she would have preferred to have been Abraxas' trophy and she cannot forgive me for winning that particular contest - or so she sees it. So she resents your," she dipped her head in her son's direction, "very existence. And I suppose she is probably very conflicted between pride and resentment that Narcissa succeeded where she did not."

The room was silent as they absorbed this information, Hermione's hand shook in his, or perhaps it was he who was shaking.

"Is that why they never came here when Father was alive?"

She laughed, but it was bitter. "Oh Lucius, surely you've realized by now that your father cared nothing for my feelings. Not that I would have been bothered. No, they never came here when Cygnus was alive. He was well aware that he was, at best, Druella's second choice and didn't appreciate being reminded of that." She turned to his mother, "please do not think that I mean any disrespect to you my dear, when I say these things. I'm aware that I have not been the most doting mother-in-law, but I was afraid if I appeared too fond of you it would bring scrutiny into your relationship that I didn't wish for you to endure. I will forever be grateful to you for the kind of wife and mother you have been to my son and grandson." She cracked a smile then. "And for the laugh I got the summer Lucius returned home and informed us that he intended to court you. And the irony is," she added, now she was actually chuckling, "had Druella not driven one child to madness and another to run away from home, I'm fairly certain that out of some kind of delayed spite Cygnus would never have approved the match, but she had so ruined your prospects, he didn't have a choice. All the better for House Malfoy," she raised her glass in a salute, did a double take when she realized it was empty, and held it out for yet another refill.

There was another heavy silence until his mother managed a quiet: "Thank you Anneliese."

"Lucius, please do stop looking at me like you've never seen me before. I simply find being a widow very freeing and thought it time some truths were spoken."

"I just did not know that you felt that way."

She arched an eyebrow at him, and Draco had never seen such a resemblance between the two of them before. "What, you didn't think that I appreciated Narcissa? I said that your intention to court her amused me, and it did. But that was only at first, as soon as you brought her to meet us properly, I knew that she would be the best thing to ever happen to you. Mother's know these
things," she looked pointedly between his mother and Hermione, "and I did everything I could to ensure that you could have her."

His father just stared at her for the longest time, before he took his mother's hand and brought it to his lips. Grandmère smiled. "You don't have to hide that from me, you know, it's a sign of strength not weakness. I'm sorry I couldn't do more for you myself, especially, well when it came to," she paused, looked down, clearly ashamed, and briefly closed her eyes, "That Man." And Draco was suddenly certain she was no longer talking about his grandfather. "I know you'll do better for your own son." She then got up and made her way around the table to kiss each of their cheeks and, in contrast to his grandmother earlier, made her way out of the room with actual dignity.

The four of them just stared at each other in silent disbelief.

Later, after Draco had apologized so profusely for the way she had been treated that Hermione actually begged him to stop, they were laying in their window seat discussing their betrothal contract. Draco hadn't realized how much it had been bothering him that they hadn't formalized things until earlier when Hermione had told his grandmother that they were betrothed. He knew contracts weren't a tradition Hermione had grown up with and her comfort was paramount, so he'd been trying not to dwell on it. But the fact was that he'd always expected to enter into one and it didn't feel quite real to him without one. Hermione was excitedly explaining to him some of the rituals she'd read about to seal the contract when his grandmère entered the corridor and made her way over to them.

"Grandmère," he greeted, pulling Hermione into a sitting position as he did so, but then he frowned and checked the slim watch on her wrist. It was late, already almost Hermione's curfew, his grandmère normally would have been in bed long before now. "Is something wrong?"

She cringed as she settled herself next to them. "Your mother and father sent me to sit with the two of you while they deal with Druella."

"Deal with her?" Hermione squeaked.

She reached over and patted the younger witch's knee. "I apologize if my earlier words played any part in goading her into this. Jema came and reported to Lucius that she attempted to order the kitchen elves to poison Hermione."

There was a beat of silence followed by a rushing in Draco's ears, and then all of a sudden his arms were full of Hermione, but when she said his name it sounded like it was coming from very far away. And then he felt her magic. Usually a comforting presence, this was more commanding, an attempt to force his own magic into submission. It obeyed immediately.

He opened his eyes to meet hers. "Better?" She asked rubbing soothing hands over his cheeks.

He nodded absently as he noticed a cool breeze at his back. He looked around and discovered why Hermione had reacted as she had. He'd blown out the window around them and every other one in that corridor. His eyes went wide and he began to run his hands up Hermione's legs and sides checking for injuries. "Are you hurt, Mia?"

She placed her hands over his, stilling them and pressed a kiss to his lips. "Do you think your magic would ever allow any harm to come to me? I just thought you'd probably regret it if you brought the Manor down around us. I know I'd miss the library in particular."

He gave her a squeeze of thanks for her attempt at levity.
"I do appreciate that as well, Mignonette," his father said and they both looked up in shock, having been completely wrapped up in each other they hadn't realized his parents had arrived on the scene. How long had he been in the magical stupor? Hermione tried to scoot off of his lap, but he was having none of it.

"Who's watching Grandmother and when will the aurors be here?" He asked, almost surprised by the commanding tone of his own voice, he had a million questions but those were the only two that seemed relevant at the moment.

His father was standing about six feet away, his mother on one arm, his grandmere on the other. His parents appeared concerned, but not angry, his mother in particular was very pale, but her eyes were red and swollen. Grandmere just looked shocked.

"The elves are guarding her, they're taking this all quite personally. Not just because they're so fond of Hermione but because she presumed they would even consider harming the next Lady Malfoy," his father responded. "As for the aurors, they aren't coming."

He bristled and opened his mouth to respond.

"Draco," Hermione interrupted, her voice barely above a whisper, "we can't call the aurors, you know that."

"Why the hell not?!" He hissed.

"How would we explain this?" She gestured to the miniscule space between them. "And then there's the fact that I don't think she's actually committed a crime, not yet at least, and I'd prefer if we not let her go through with the poisoning."

He glared at her for her blase attitude, but also because he realized that she was right. He frowned and tried to think of a solution he could live with.

He looked towards his parents. "I want her out of this house and Hermione will never be forced into her company again." His tone brokered no argument and part of him braced himself to be reprimanded, but the rest of him didn't care.

"It will be taken care of Draco," his father answered simply. "Come, ladies, let's give them some space."

His mother rushed forward and embraced them both quickly, murmuring her apologies and her love for them both, and then the three adults beat a hasty retreat.

Draco cradled Hermione against his chest as a balm to soothe his oncoming despair. He couldn't keep her safe even in his own home, from his own relatives. How were they ever going to survive the approaching storm?

"It's okay," she whispered to him, over and over, "it's okay."

He really wished she'd stop saying that.

"Cissa."

"Just a minute Lucius."

"Cissa."

"I said just a minute," she swatted a hand towards the sound of his voice like he was a fly.
A large hand appeared from over her shoulder and flipped the book she was reading shut. She spun around to face him.

"I was in the middle of something!" She snapped.

He just shot her an unimpressed look. "You're making the elves nervous."

"Come again?"

"You're making the elves nervous. Jema was actually waiting for me when I arrived home and asked me to come fetch you. She said you hadn't eaten. Have you left this room at all today?"

Narcissa opened her mouth to respond when she realized that since Lucius had been out on business, she'd simply had the elves bring her breakfast, lunch, and tea so that she could continue working.

"As I suspected," he chuckled, pulling up a chair and seating himself beside her and reaching over to take one of her hands in both of his, kissing her knuckles.

She smiled at him. "How did things go today?"

"As expected," but he was not to be diverted. "Narcissa, you cannot continue on like this, it's been non-stop since Draco and Hermione went back to Hogwarts."

"What choice do I have?"

"You are not responsible for your mother's actions and nobody blames you."

"I know that."

"Do you?"

"Yes!"

He just arched an eyebrow incredulously and she sighed.

"I can't help but feel guilty, but I do know that it's not my fault. However, I feel like I owe Hermione and I think that I've had a breakthrough."

"In your research for the Potter boy?"

"Yes, it was something Helen said to me yesterday. It struck me when she said it, but I didn't know why until this morning."

Narcissa had never even properly met Harry Potter but Hermione loved him deeply. She'd witnessed the girl's guilt and sadness at having to lie to her friend, knew that it only got worse with each passing day. If they could just find a solution to the boy's connection with the Dark Lord they could allow Hermione to tell him her secrets. But more importantly, Narcissa couldn't imagine her devastation if he didn't survive, if they couldn't find a solution and Lucius had to- she couldn't even contemplate it.

And Sirius, her cousin was still a little unstable, and Merlin knew that he drove her up the wall of every room he walked into. But he was a good man and he'd been particularly good to Hermione. Narcissa didn't think he'd survive the loss of his godson.

And then there was Narcissa's own conscience. No, she couldn't slow down. Not now that she
finally had an idea.

The past few months had been some of the longest of Narcissa's life. She needed some good news. The rest of the holidays had been surprisingly peaceful. At least as peaceful as things can be after uncovering an attempted murder plot in your own home, by your own mother.

Draco had kept Hermione even closer than usual whereas Hermione herself seemed to go out of her way to let them know that she wasn't angry and that she still felt at home at the Manor. They'd had a quiet Christmas, for the first time they shared Christmas day with the Grangers. There had been a lot of family time spent reading or in quiet discussion and Narcissa was aware that they were lucky that two teenagers were so willing to spend so much time with their parents. By all outward appearances it had been an idyllic couple of weeks. But Narcissa had remained unsettled. So many things so far out of their control- and things they'd never even considered too, her mother's actions had underlined that. How would she ever feel truly comfortable again.

And then Helen had come to tea. Hermione's parents were adapting remarkably well to her life in the magical world and Helen in particular was trying to understand the world her daughter now resided in, and was anxious to do anything she could to help. So Narcissa had told her everything.

It had been an innocent comment. Helen had just been trying to understand the nature of the horcruxes when she'd noted that she couldn't understand how Harry could possibly be one given the protection his mother's sacrifice had gifted him.

Narcissa had demurred, not knowing the answer, but in her semi-conscious state as she'd come awake the next morning a thought had occurred to her: he couldn't possibly be a standard horcrux. Almost 100% of the time, according to those who knew him best, Harry retained his own thoughts, feelings and faculties. And if he had been a standard horcrux, the Dark Lord would have fully possessed him long ago. The soul fragment seemed to be literally confined to his scar, only seeping into Harry's consciousness when he was at his weakest- injured, asleep, or under some kind of mind altering spell or potion. The occlumency would hopefully help with that but it wasn't enough.

Still, it gave Narcissa hope. The horcrux and Harry weren't one and the same. It was trapped in a very small part of his body, with minimal attachment to him. She needed to do more research, but a fairly simple cleansing ritual might be all the push they needed to banish it. Especially if Sirius was the one to lead the rite. Given the oaths he would have taken as his godfather, upon James Potter's death, magically Sirius had become Harry's father. That, combined with the protection left by his mother which continued to run through his veins, the balance of masculine and feminine energy, mother and father, should be enough to overcome any hold that insidious piece of the Dark Lord had over the boy.

Or so she hoped. Oh how she hoped that it would work.

She turned back to Lucius. "I'll come down for dinner and I'll tell you my thoughts as we eat, but then I'm coming back to work."

He gave her a long measuring look. "Then I'll help."

Chapter End Notes

First of all, I was absolutely blown away by the response to the last chapter, I can't thank y'all enough. Just when I think you can't get more wonderful you somehow
manage it. Second, I'm sorry if this Harry is only sort of a horcrux thing is unsatisfactory, but in my opinion this is one of the biggest plot holes in the books and I'm dealing with it the best way I can. I know this is probably not the chapter you guys were expecting in any way, shape, or form but I hope you liked it and aren't too upset by the lack of Yule Ball. Thank you to my fantastic beta, Weestarmeggie. Guys she doesn't just edit, she's my sounding board, and for this chapter she listened for HOURS about Druella's backstory, so she's basically a saint. :)
Harry was waiting for her in the Common Room to escort her to breakfast as he had been every morning for almost a month now. It would have been sweet- it was sweet- but it was also driving her crazy. That first morning at the end of January she had been surprised to see him, Harry was not a morning person and it was rare that he was awake before she was, but then her surprise turned to fear when she saw the look on his face. He was paler than Draco and his eyes were wide and frightened. He'd looked less afraid when he'd learned he was going to have to face a dragon for the first task.

She'd asked him what was wrong, but he refused to tell her, just said that he'd asked Sirius to come to Hogwarts that night, even though it was supposed to be an off day from training, and that he would explain it to them both then. And then he'd proceeded to stick to her side as if he was afraid that somebody was going to snatch her away from him.

And as she found out later, that's exactly what he was afraid of.

While Harry was home at Potter House for the holidays, it had been Remus who finally identified what Harry was hearing when he opened the golden egg he'd retrieved from the dragon. Mermish. After that, a short swim in the magically heated pool later and Harry had a real clue for them to interpret, a clue which ended up being pretty self-explanatory. And then they poured themselves into making yet another plan.

But, weeks later, and Harry was worried they'd overlooked something.

"What if it's a person?" He'd asked that night in late January, his voice breaking as he spoke.

"What if what is a person, Pup?" Sirius had wondered.

"What if the thing I have to get out of the lake isn't a thing at all, but a person?"

There was a beat of silence as they digested this. "Why do you ask that?" Sirius asked cautiously.

Harry looked at Hermione. "I was just thinking about what you said the other day, about how cruel these tasks are, how they're meant to push the champions to their limits."

She nodded to indicate that she remembered, they'd been up to their elbows in research and she'd gone on a bit of a frustrated tirade. She had regretted it afterward, afraid she'd frightened him when he was already doing the best that he could without her adding to his worry.

"I mean," he continued, "having to hold my breath underwater for an hour is a pretty scary thought. But that's not what the riddle concentrates on, it's the fact that they've taken what I'll 'sorely miss' if I don't retrieve it in time, and I can't think of a single thing I'd really miss that much if I lost it. There's definitely not anything I'd be willing to risk my life over, but a person..." he trailed off and looked between them almost hopefully, like he wanted them to convince him he was wrong.

Hermione opened her mouth to reassure him, to tell him that they would never do that, and then promptly shut it again. Glancing at Sirius she could tell that he was thinking the same thing.
Amongst the 'they' in question, were people who had made a fourteen year old boy face a dragon; been responsible for the presence of dementors at a school; and had hidden an infamous magical artifact inside that same school behind a series of dangerous obstacles. Of course 'they' would do that.

And it was unfortunately unsurprising that Harry had been the one to consider this worst case scenario. The rest of them were primarily focused on him and his safety, but Harry, who'd been denied love for too much of his life, would be much more frightened for his loved ones than he was for himself.

Which is why Hermione had hardly been alone in a month, and it was why, on the day before the second task, Sirius was due to arrive after breakfast to take them to Potter House for the night. The idea that the three of them would be together until Harry went into the lake was the only thing that was keeping his mind at ease.

"All packed?" he asked her, taking her arm when she reached the bottom of the staircase.

She chuckled. "It's only one night Harry, not a lot to pack."

"Right, only the one night, so you'll only need ten or twelve books." His tone was airy and teasing, and it was wonderful to see him appear so carefree, but she wasn't going to let him off so easily.

"Ha. Ha. Ha." She deadpanned. "You're not as cute as you seem to think, and anyway, I only brought my transfiguration and potions text because I have homework to finish. Otherwise, I plan to avail myself of your lovely library."

He smiled at her fondly. "Of course, you're welcome to it."

When they got to breakfast Ron shot her a dirty look when Harry wasn't looking. He blamed her for the fact that Harry hadn't immediately forgiven him after the first task, and that, on top of Harry's decision to go home for the holidays- which he resented bitterly, and also blamed Hermione for- had dissolved any real remaining ties of friendship between herself and the redhead. She was a little ashamed to admit that it was mostly a relief.

Sirius arrived early and, sending a bunch of giggling girls scrambling to allow him a place at the table, he seated himself across from them and began fixing himself a plate. "Ready to skive off?"

He grinned at them.

Hermione dropped her fork. "Please tell me you at least informed the headmaster you were taking us for the day. I know you're allowed, but we shouldn't push our luck."

"I didn't," Sirius responded, twirling his fork in the air and not even deigning to look away from the platters of food he was considering with great concentration.

She just gaped at him.

"I told Minnie though, she is your head of house," he continued to explain with another careless wave of his fork.

She let out a frustrated breath. "You're not funny, Sirius."

"We'll have to agree to disagree, Kitten."

Harry snickered next to her.
"Have the Potter elves gotten so fed up with you that they've stopped feeding you?" She asked, eyeing Sirius' towering plate pointedly.

"Oh please, they love me, this is just for old time's sake."

"Careful or you'll get fat," Harry sing-songed.

Sirius' head snapped up, he glared at his godson and then threw a piece of toast at him, hitting him squarely on the chin. Harry just grinned, picked it up, and took a large bite.

They didn't linger, though she was pretty sure that Sirius wanted to, just to make the point that he could do as he pleased. Before they left he sent a pointed look in Harry's direction and then made himself a couple of bacon sandwiches for the road. Then they made their way outside and across the ground to the gates, stopping to speak to Hagrid on the way, and after clearing the wards took a portkey to Potter House.

Remus was waiting for them there with a smile. Hermione was a little surprised that Sirius hadn't dragged him along to Hogwarts but she understood— with a good deal of guilt— that though he made regular trips to the school to help with tournament training, he only usually saw Harry and herself, and he was uncomfortable appearing in front of the full student population who all knew his secret.

He informed Harry that he had some parchment work— House business for him to look over. Sirius encouraged Harry to go ahead and he and Remus went off in the direction of the study. When an elf appeared to take their things to their rooms she took her transfiguration book from her bag and let the eager creature take the rest. Then she trailed after Sirius to the main living room where she found him pouring himself a drink from the bar cart.

She eyed him worriedly— it wasn't even nine am, but she didn't say anything. She knew he was hiding it fairly well for Harry's sake, but he sometimes dropped his guard when he wasn't around and so she knew that he was actually scared to death for his godson. Today, and every minute until the task was over, was going to be difficult for him.

"I feel like a fucking hypocrite," Sirius said suddenly, throwing himself into an armchair, "encouraging him to go take care of his House business, telling him to have pride in it when I'm doing everything I can to get rid of that same responsibility for myself as soon as possible."

Hermione was taken by surprise, as she was initially every time that Sirius confided in her not as a ward but as a peer. And in this moment she felt unequal to the task. But who else did he have? He couldn't talk to Remus, Harry, or any other friends he might have, and neither Lucius nor Narcissa would understand, even if he trusted them enough to share his feelings with them. She knew that feeling well— there were so few people she could be completely honest with. So, she just considered his question rather than asking him if she was really the right person to be asking.

It was times like these that she felt torn— within herself and also between two different worlds. The witch who was about to become Draco's betrothed, the woman who was set to one day become the Lady of an Ancient and Noble House felt the honor of the title. But the middle class muggle she'd been raised as thought that Sirius had suffered enough, that his family had treated him abominably, and if it was painful for him to be Head of House then he had every right to relinquish it, and shouldn't be ashamed of doing so if it was better for him. But again, she felt like she would almost be betraying the family she'd already claimed as her own to say so.

"Aren't you going to scold me for my language, Kitten?" Sirius' voice interrupted her thoughts.

She ignored him. "If you were in Harry's place, if you were Scion Potter, would you be proud of
"That's exactly my point Sirius, now answer the question."

"Yes, I would be very proud to be a Potter," he answered over the clink of glass on glass as he decanted another drink.

"But you're not Scion Potter, you're Lord Black and the Blacks didn't earn your respect. So, I guess technically, yes it's a little hypocritical, but it's not really the same situation at all. And Harry will be able to understand the difference too, once you're able to explain it to him."

"I hate keeping things from him," Sirius confessed.

"You don't think I do too?" She snapped. She was immediately remorseful; her irritation, her guilt, her exhaustion were not Sirius' fault. "Sorry," she said horsley.

"It's okay, I don't have to deal with it quite so much day to day like you do," he admitted.

"It all sucks," she breathed.

"There might be a way..." he trailed off, "maybe soon," he added, sounding a little desperate.

"There are a lot of things I don't know aren't there? Things you're cooking up with Lucius and Narcissa?"

"Do you want the burden of knowing?" He asked darkly. "Not that I could tell you if I wanted to," he added bitterly, she could imagine the the oaths he was under chafed, though he was usually good enough not to mention it and make her feel like she had to either commiserate or defend the elder Malfoys.

She bit her lip. She was ashamed of her own cowardice, but sometime ignorance was bliss. "You're right, I already have too many secrets from Harry and just- too many secrets..."

Sirius came over and put a comforting arm around her. "You're still a kid, that's good, that's how it should be, it's okay to want us to handle things for awhile longer."

"You and Draco still haven't decided have you?" He asked eventually.

She smirked at him, given the contradiction in the last two things he'd said. He just shrugged helplessly.

"No, I'm sorry we haven't. And Draco's grandmother's behavior over Christmas didn't help. She'd be thrilled if he became Head of House so I think he's considering turning it down just to spite her."

Sirius let out a barking laugh. "I'd say that's petty, but I know exactly how that feels and I can't blame him. Merlin, that just makes me like the kid more!"

Hermione huffed out a laugh as Harry entered the room with a bright smile on his face and Sirius discreetly hid his drink behind a vase. Hermione wondered if the business Remus had for Harry was really that interesting, or if he was just happy to be home, but it would be improper to ask so she said nothing.

"Fancy a swim? We have the whole day to do whatever we want!" He said gleefully, days like that
were a rarity lately.

"Getting in some last minute practice?" She joked.

He made a face, "don't compare those two things, you'll ruin the pool for me."

"Okay, sorry," she chuckled. "I'll just go get changed."

That evening they got some surprise visitors, or at least they were a surprise to Hermione. Sirius disappeared for a few minutes and then reappeared with her parents, each of them carrying a large cardboard box under their free arm.

"Mum, Dad!" She ran up to them and hugged them both tightly.

"Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Granger." Harry greeted, approaching them at a more sedate pace.

"Harry, how many times do we have to tell you, it's Richard and Helen," her mother said as her father rolled his eyes, winking in Hermione's direction.

"Richard, Helen," he corrected, and shot Hermione a wide, but still somehow shy smile. And she realized that it had been his idea to invite them over.

She released her parents and threw her arms around his neck. He cleared his throat uncomfortably, but hugged her back and she smiled with satisfaction. She'd broken Draco and even Lucius, she'd get Harry too.

"What's with the boxes?" She wondered after they parted.

"We come bearing gifts!" Explained her father, sounding excited by the prospect.

"Was it too much trouble?" Sirius asked.

Harry and Hermione looked at him in curious tandem. He waved them off.

"Not at all, we had fun," Richard said, a genuine smile on his face.

And then they began to pull things out of the boxes: hats and scarves, and much to her surprise, several muggle-style hoodies. The hats and scarves were in the colors of House Potter—burgundy and brown striped—and the scarves had 'POTTER' printed on one side, and 'Mischief Managed' on the other. And the sweatshirts, much to her amusement had: 'Marauder's Academy,' printed on the front, and then in smaller letters: 'est. 1994,' below that. Hermione smiled broadly. It was a running joke between them that she and Harry were attending Marauder's Academy, the fictional fourth school of the Tri-wizard Tournament.

"Do you intend for us to attend the task in muggle clothing?" She wondered, looking at Sirius.

"I don't know about you, but I'm through making allowances for this tournament, and here at Marauder's Academy we don't put on airs anyway. If I'm going to sit by the Black Lake for an hour in the middle of a Scottish winter, I plan to be comfortable."

She looked at Remus who had pulled one of the hats on, low, almost over his eyes, the jaunty tassel bobbed on top of his head, and giggled. And then her father removed one final thing from his box and held it out in front of him. She recognized it immediately and looked to Harry who clearly did as well, and when their eyes met they burst out laughing—ths was the cherry on top.

It was a basic black wetsuit with 'Marauder's Academy' printed on the front, 'POTTER' on the
back: and as a little extra: '4,' printed below that, just to remind people that he was actually the fourth contestant in a three person tournament.

"That's great," said Harry, "thank you so much. I really wish I could have gone with your full suggestion and competed in scuba gear."

When the nature of the task had become apparent Sirius - who regularly dined with the Grangers in order to keep them officially updated on their daughter's life - mentioned it to them over dinner and her father had sarcastically suggested that they just get Harry some scuba gear. But Sirius had apparently given the suggestion real consideration (it was an ingenious plan, in theory) until he realized that the breathing apparatus would leave Harry unable to cast spells. He'd had some luck casting silently, but not with enough confidence for Sirius to send him into a lake full of creatures that might try and hurt him, without being able to cast out loud.

But following that observation and Sirius' response, Hermione's mother had wondered if there wasn't a magical equivalent to scuba gear. After all, she'd reasoned, there was a potion that could turn you into an entirely different person, wasn't there one that could allow you to breathe underwater? Which was what got their research started in the direction which let them, not to a potion, exactly, but to a plant which, when stewed a certain way, would allow the consumer to do just that.

"As we understand it," her father continued, bringing Hermione back to the present, "that weed you'll be eating will help keep you warm down there, but this will help even more and it will also streamline you."

"That's great, thanks," Harry said as he took it from him and examined it more closely.

"And you'll have a proper cheering section this time Harry, with your colors and everything!" Hermione added, beaming at him and thinking that there should be some silver lining to his ridiculous predicament. She looked at Sirius and Remus. "We should write some chants, maybe a song," she smirked.

They both snickered, Harry blushed and ducked his head, but she could tell that he was pleased.

"Alright, Pup," Sirius said after they sat down to dinner, "tell me your plan for tomorrow."

Harry looked around the table pointedly.

Sirius pinched the bridge of his nose, obviously pained. "If you can't even remember in front of people you're comfortable with, how are you going to remember it in the heat of the moment?"

Theoretically, the plan for the dragon had been more dangerous than this one, Harry had needed to be in a state of mind to perform some complex magic. But it was still just a series of steps he had to follow. The second task would probably involve a lot more thinking on his feet and was therefore frightening in a different way.

"I don't want to bore them," Harry defended, glancing to the Grangers.

"We're interested to hear," her mother assured him. "This is as close we'll get to the action." She cringed as soon as her words registered. "I didn't mean it like that," she quickly corrected, "just that we can't attend and it'll make us feel better to know that you have a solid plan."

Harry just looked at her mother and the sheer gratefulness in his eyes simply because she'd just admitted to caring about him nearly broke Hermione's heart.
Harry shook himself and cleared his throat. "Okay well, first of all, remind me to leave my glasses with you guys, I don't want to leave them on the dock." He smirked, "Hermione should probably be the one to hold onto them, she's by far the most responsible of you three."

Sirius rolled his eyes while Remus just chuckled at the joke. "Fine, Hermione is in charge of glasses," Sirius allowed.

"I eat the gillyweed on the dock but dive in before it takes effect, because even though the lake is going to be as cold as hell frozen over, I want to be underwater when I undergo the transformation." He knew this from experience as he'd gone through a couple of test runs. Unfortunately it had only been a couple, because given the relatively short notice, even with the Malfoys connections, they'd only been able to obtain a limited amount of gillyweed.

"Where do you head first?" Sirius prompted.

"Unless there is some indication that I should go in a different direction, I should swim towards the mervillage which is in the northeastern corner of the lake."

Remus cleared his throat, "given the clue, I think they'll be calling the champions towards either the village, or where they are holding- whatever it is they are holding hostage. It should be safe to follow their voices."

Harry just nodded. "Avoid the Giant Squid who prefers the shallows by the north shore, but who probably knows something is going on and might venture into the lake and try and play, especially because he gets bored in the winter. I should be able to see his ink in the water if he's within a hundred feet of me."

He took a bite of roast and chewed it thoughtfully. "The grindylows are the creatures most likely to try and interfere, they attack in packs, blasting hexes should be most efficient against them. Also, I shouldn't forget my knife, they like to entrap you in the reeds and if my wand is too close to my body the magical backlash could be dangerous."

"Right on," Sirius said quietly but he seemed to notice something in Harry's demeanor. "What else are you worried about, Son?"

"When I get to the hostages, how do I know I'll choose the right one?"

The whole table seemed to take in a collective breath at the possible brutality of this task.

After a moment Sirius answered. "Go with your gut, kid. It only matters that you try your best under the rules of the tournament so that you don't incur any magical penalties. Tell me what comes next."

Harry fidgeted, Hermione wasn't surprised by his discomfort, she knew how deeply it troubled him that anybody might be put in danger because of him. He'd protected as many people as he could- namely her, because none of them truly believed anybody would be foolish enough to try and use Sirius or Remus as a hostage- but that wasn't nearly good enough in his mind. There were plenty of innocent victims in Gryffindor tower he had no authority to protect- she was the only student Sirius was allowed to take out of school.

"And then I come back as quickly as possible, but carefully, it's not a race, I'm not trying to win, the most important thing is that I get back safely," Harry finally said.

"If you get back early?" Sirius prompted once again.
"Swim around the docks until the gillyweed wears off, the crowds should dissuade any creatures from coming after me."

"Well, I think you're as ready as you can be," Sirius sighed.

The rest of the evening was a falsely cheerful occasion which Hermione was certain that everybody in question wished they'd not had to endure. Not that the company wasn't good, but the circumstances were grave. However, she did her best to enjoy the opportunity to see her parents in the middle of term.

Breakfast the next morning was eaten mostly in silence and they made their way to Hogwarts early, before the stands on the Black Lake began to fill with spectators. When the students began to make their way out of the castle, Hermione scurried around passing out hats and scarves to those of Harry's friends that she knew would want them. She initially sought out Neville, Ginny, and the Weasley twins, but all of the Gryffindors in their year group were enthusiastic, as well as all the members of the Gryffindor quidditch team, plus many others, and she quickly ran out. Ron was suspect in his absence, and Hermione's stomach knotted.

When it was time for the champions to line up on the dock Harry handed his glasses over to Hermione with a smirk in his godfather's direction. And then he also carefully transferred Holly from his neck to hers, the snake preferred Hermione to both Sirius and Remus because their innate animal nature—due to their respective statuses as an animagus and werewolf—was unsettling to her. She let out a low hiss as she settled and Harry chuckled.

"What did she say?" Hermione wondered.

"She wishes I'd let her tag along with you ever since we left home. Apparently your hair and outfit are much warmer than mine."

She reached up and carefully rubbed her head. "You should have asked him before girl, you're welcome to hitch a ride anytime." Holly just made a noise which Hermione instinctively knew wasn't really speech, even to Harry, but she understood it nonetheless: Holly knew what Harry was facing today and wanted to be there for him.

"Okay, we should take our seats," Sirius said, clapping Harry on the shoulder. Remus did the same and Hermione gave him a tight hug. She had decided not to tell him that she suspected Ron might be in the lake, it would only ratchet up his nerves and she didn't want either of them to be hurt because she'd clouded his mind before things had even started.

When they settled into their seats Hermione skimmed the stands; Draco, with his bright hair amongst the placid Slytherins was easy to spot. Lucius and Narcissa were equally easy to place amongst the school governors. She took a deep breath, somewhat comforted by their very presence. She just wished Harry knew how much support he actually had.

Watching the task would have been boring if she hadn't been so worried for Harry. And even though there was nothing to see, she spent most of the next hour with her face buried in Sirius' shoulder.

Fleur emerged first, not under her own power. She'd been attacked by the grindylows, the deep scratches and bite marks all over her exposed limbs were a testament to that; and, unable to fight them off, a team had been sent to retrieve her. Hermione tried not to panic over the sound of the other witch screaming and pleading to be allowed back into the lake.

Cedric was next. He'd made use of the bubble-head charm, and he had his girlfriend, Cho Chang in
tow. Hermione watched in fascination when, as soon as her face breached the surface, it was like she woke up, she gasped for breath and her eyes went wide with surprise.

"Did you see that?" She asked her companions in a hushed whisper.

"Yes," said Sirius tersely.

"Some kind of stasis," murmured Remus.

Soon after, Viktor Krum in a- frankly terrifying- half-shark form emerged with the Slytherin sixth year he'd apparently escorted to the Yule Ball. The girl swam away from him as soon as she broke the surface and glimpsed her companion, obviously afraid. Hermione actually felt sorry for him, despite his harsh reputation and stern exterior he seemed to be a rather gentle soul to her, and she was certain he'd just been doing his best on the task.

She tried not to fret over Harry. But now that she'd seen the others, she knew that his plan should have been the most efficient. So where was he? Surely if he was really in trouble they would have sent a team in after him, right?

But then the minutes passed and Holly stirred against her neck, obviously unsettled. She held out her hand for her best friend's familiar to nuzzle, the snake decided to slither around her wrist instead. "I know," she cooed, uncertain which of them she was attempting to soothe.

It was an agonizing few minutes later when Harry finally emerged, gulping for air, Ron's red head under one arm, and the silver blonde of a little girl under the other; which explained why he'd been held up.

Typical Harry. Frustrating, wonderful Harry.

The moment he made it to shore Hermione rushed towards him, largely unfettered because they were seated upfront. Not to mention that she heard Sirius and Remus pushing aside any other well wishers as they made their way forward at a more dignified pace. When she reached Harry she threw her arms around him, uncaring that he was soaking wet, and as she did so she felt Holly rear up and bump her head against his chin as a reprimand for worrying her. Hermione choked out a laugh.

"Sorry, sorry," he murmured, "but she's just a little girl," he explained, gesturing to the girl- who was locked in an embrace with Fleur- whom he'd brought along with Ron.

"No, of course, we were just worried."

"We were," agreed Sirius, who had joined them, but Hermione could hear an undercurrent of pride in his voice.

"You saved her!" Fleur declared, turning to Harry and practically throwing herself at him, then kissing him on both cheeks, he gave her a small smile but looked mostly uncomfortable and Hermione absently wondered if the gravity of the situation had dampened her allure. "And you helped!" She turned to Ron, who was standing a few feet away, and did the same.

"Well, yes I guess a bit," Ron answered, obviously dazed by her attention.

Hermione looked at him incredulously, indignation rising up in her, and she couldn't help herself when she responded: "You were unconscious until you broke the surface," she scoffed. "You didn't do anything, that was all Harry!"
He had shown no interest in helping Harry prepare for either task, had maligned his character when his name had come out of the goblet, and then pouted for weeks when things hadn't immediately returned to the status quo after the first task, and now he was trying to take credit for Harry's bravery! She couldn't believe his nerve!

"It's fine Hermione," Harry murmured, then looked at Ron, "I'm sorry you got caught up in all of this," he said, a simple though genuine statement, but he didn't wait for a response before he led her away.

And as they were followed by Sirius and Remus and then dozens of other well-wishers she did her very best to forget Ronald Weasley; if Harry could do it, so could she. She concentrated her attention on her pride for him; this tournament was fraught with cheating and they'd agreed from the beginning that they didn't care if he won, they just wanted him to survive, no matter what they had to do to accomplish that. That had been the only goal. But then his behavior, the choices he made while actually in the lake were so courageous and full of integrity that she was rather awe-struck.

That night Gryffindor Tower was unusually quiet, its occupants having worn themselves out celebrating for the remainder of the day. Sirius and Remus had left and Harry was occupying himself playing a lazy game of chess with Seamus.

So Hermione stole away upstairs, crawled into her bed and called Draco on her mirror. Since he wasn't expecting her she knew he probably wouldn't answer right away, but she hoped he would notice, go find some privacy, and call her back. And, sure enough, five minutes later her own mirror buzzed.

"Hi," she answered breathlessly, beaming at him.

"Hi yourself," he responded, "boy are you a sight for sore eyes."

"I know what you mean," she said reaching out to touch his face on the surface of her mirror. "So listen, I was thinking we have a little while before curfew. Since the task is over Harry can relax for awhile, he's busy playing chess and nobody else is paying any attention to me, do you want to meet me in our room?"

His face fell. "I told Claire she could use it to study in private, she has a big exam tomorrow. I didn't think there was any chance you would be free tonight."

"Oh," she said. She felt her own face fall and her heart drop, and she knew her disappointment was somewhat disproportionate to the circumstances, but Merlin she missed Draco!

The were quiet for a few minutes.

"Meet me in that empty classroom on the fourth floor instead?" He asked hopefully.

There was an unused classroom they used to frequent in their younger years, before Hermione had discovered their room; it was convenient because there were no portraits in the corridor surrounding it to spy on them. She hesitated, she should say no, it was risky and they had so much more to lose now than they had in their first or second years.

"Mia," he said softly, "I'm dying down here. Nott's good company and all that, but you provide a few things that he doesn't." He waggled his eyebrows playfully.

"Using me for my body, Mr. Malfoy?" She made a face, attempting to look angry.
He chuckled. "I just want to hold you."

She knew he was manipulating her, she just didn't care. "I can be there in ten minutes," she let out on a hushed breath.

He gave her a small smile but his eyes were twinkling triumphantly. "Love you." And then he was gone, presumably before she could change her mind.

Hermione jumped out of bed and then looked down at herself. She was still dressed in her jeans and hoodie from earlier, and for a moment she had the ridiculous, girly notion to change and do something with her hair. Then she giggled and shook her head to herself. She was going to have to find a way to see Draco more often lest she turned into a silly lovesick teenager and forget that he was her best friend who loved every side of her, and who would much rather she hurry to him than spend those precious minutes she could spend primping, in his arms instead.

And come to think of it, if he hadn't noticed it earlier, he would probably think the hoodie was hilarious.

She hurried down the stairs and through the common room, calling out to whomever was listening that she was headed to the library. And such was her rush to get to her wizard that she didn't even notice that Harry had also disappeared from the common room in her absence.

Draco was already seated on a desk, eyes trained on the door when she entered the classroom. He held out his arms for her and she kicked the door closed and ran into them. He just held her for a few moments and then he pulled back and tugged the hair ties out of her plaited pigtails and began to carefully un-plait her curls. When he was done he started trying to tug the hoodie over her head.

"Like I said, using me for my body," she observed dryly.

He snorted. "Excuse me for not wanting you to be completely covered. You're wearing a shirt under this aren't you?"

"Yes, Draco, I'm definitely not going to consent to being shirtless in a random, freezing classroom."

She allowed him to remove the comfortable but- admittedly- bulky garment.

"Hi again," he murmured, gripping her waist and running his thumbs up and down her ribcage.

She leaned into him and he kissed her, making his way from her lips, her cheek, her jawline, to the column of her throat, before he reached just the right spot and sucked lightly, making her moan, exactly as he knew that she would.

And then they both jumped at the sound of the door flying open and crashing against the wall with a great thump, followed by the whoosh of fabric. Hermione startled and wrenched her attention away from Draco to come face to face with a confused, but infuriated, Harry Potter. Jaw clenched. Eyes hard. And wand trembling between his fingers.

"What the bloody hell is going on?!"
Chapter 34

Draco saw his life flash before his eyes. Not because of Potter, he wasn't afraid of the wunderkind. But his parents were definitely going to kill him.

If it was up to his father he might at least make it quick, but his mother was going to slowly torture him to death for being so reckless. Narcissa Malfoy had not raised her only son to be indiscreet.

Thankfully, his reflexes kicked in and even though Potter already had his wand in his hand, Draco had him disarmed before he could even raise it. After he bound and silenced him Hermione came back to life.

"What are you doing!" She practically shrieked.

"Mia," he said as calmly as possible but with a concerted attempt not to sound patronizing, "we can't just let him run off screaming to the whole castle about this."

"Well we can't just keep him tied up either!" Now she was shrieking.

"Of course not, but this will at least give us the opportunity to explain without him alerting anybody."

She narrowed her eyes in his direction but made no attempt to counteract his spells. "Fine, yes, you're right," she huffed.

Draco licked his lips as a plan quickly came together in his mind. He knew it was possible to alter memories, but he didn't have any idea how to go about it, and he was pretty sure Hermione would never consent to him trying that on anyone, let alone Potter. Discounting that, the situation was still salvageable, if barely. His and Hermione's secret was out, but they could still try and keep his parents' until they had permission, and knew for certain that it was safe to share it with Potter. However, he was going to have to play upon the other wizard's love for his friend to do it, and he could only hope that Hermione went along with his hastily formed plan, because they wouldn't be able to discuss it. If he stunned Potter in order to buy time to talk to her, he was sure that he'd ruin any willingness Potter might have to listen to explanations.

Hermione turned back to her friend. "I can explain," she pleaded, and Draco's heart clenched at the small, desperate quality to her voice, and then she looked back at him. "I'm not sure how to explain," she begged him.

Keeping in mind that Potter was a Gryffindor and would probably respond best to as much raw honesty as Draco could manage, he took a deep breath. "I love her."

Hermione whipped her head around and stared at him in shock.

He reached out and touched her cheek. "I told you that not twenty minutes ago, why are you looking at me like I've never said it before?"

"I didn't expect you to say it in front of Harry."
"You think I'm ashamed?"

"I think you're private." Her eyes automatically went to where Potter was struggling against his bonds, turning red with the effort.

He immediately drew her against his side. "Time to come clean, about us," he said, emphasizing the last part. He watched her process this and she gave a sharp nod even as she wiped frantically at her eyes.

"We should unsilence him." She held up a hand to stop him when he started to object. "You have his wand, we can lock and silence the room, that's enough, and it's really not fair to force him to listen to us when he can't even talk back."

"Okay," Draco sighed, though he really would have preferred to keep the other wizard silent for as long as possible, he went about doing as she suggested.

"What the fuck, Hermione? Malfoy?!" Potter spat in her direction when he was able to speak again.

She slowly began to move so that she was between him and her friend. Draco didn't like it, but he didn't argue, just pulled her against his chest, confident in his spell work and that Potter wasn't going anywhere.

"I know how this must look to you but-"

"I'm not stupid," Potter interrupted with a hiss, his expression almost malevolent, "I knew there was something going on with you. You've been sneaking off every chance you've gotten for months, so I finally decided to follow you, and I don't know what I thought I'd find but this-" he stopped speaking abruptly and the look on his face morphed from anger to something like horror and he turned his attention to Draco. "Do you have her under some kind of spell or something- a love potion to satisfy whatever sick interest you have in her?"

Draco's entire being recoiled at the very notion even as he felt a kind of stupid admiration for the other wizard who was trying to stand up for his friend even as his position was utterly helpless.

Hermione gasped. "I'm not under a spell or a potion, Harry, Draco would never do that. He would never do anything to hurt me." She reached out for her friend, but then stopped, and with obvious effort resisted the urge to go to him.

Potter's face screwed into an ugly impression of his usual visage. "Oh, so all those times he called you filthy, sneered at you, and looked at you like you were lower than dirt, that was just his way of romancing you?" He sneered.

"That was a long time ago, I apologized for all of that," Draco protested automatically, clenching one fist at his side as he held Hermione with the other arm- he would not make things worse for her by being overly confrontational.

"And you believed him!" He scoffed. "Come on Hermione, you know his family's reputation, and how they feel about people like you. His father is a Death Eater, for Merlin's sake!"

Draco heard her inhale sharply and couldn't hold his tongue.

"People like her?" Draco growled beginning to lose his temper at the very implication that he would believe Hermione wasn't good enough for him. "You mean a brilliant, beautiful witch, whom I fully intend to make the next Lady Malfoy?"
Potter let out a sardonic laugh. "Don't tell me you believe this!" He directed his question to Hermione. "He's tricked you somehow, done something to you. You have a boyfriend! And I never thought you were the kind of person to cheat, or to lie to your friends."

"Harry, this relationship is for real. This is Leo," she turned slightly in his arms to place on hand on his chest.

"What?"

"You know the Black family tradition of naming children after stars and constellations- Draco, Sirius...Leo. It was too dangerous to tell you about Draco, too big of a secret to ask you to keep, but he means so much to me, I did want to be able to talk about him, so I gave him a code name."

Potter just stared at her. "Dangerous? Why on earth would it be dangerous to tell me who you were really dating?"

"Merlin Potter," Draco couldn't imagine how he'd remained so naive. "As you so kindly pointed out, my father is a Death Eater, and my family is firmly aligned with the Dark Lord. Our relationship can't be publicly known until he is gone for good. Do you have any idea the kind of target that would make Hermione? Which is why you won't be saying anything to anybody," he said in a voice that made it clear this was an order and not a question. "But make no mistake, I'm not my father. My love and respect for Hermione is genuine, and the moment I'm able, I'll be shouting our relationship from the rooftops."

Draco felt badly about what he was implying about his father, his father who adored Hermione. But it was one thing for Potter to know about their relationship, and another for him to discover that Lucius planned to spy for the light and that his mother intended to help. That was a whole other level of secrecy, and frankly, not his to tell.

Potter opened his mouth, closed it, and finally collapsed against the chair to which he was bound and in turn Hermione relaxed against Draco's chest.

"If he's Leo, how long has this been going on?! Fuck Hermione, how long have you been lying to me and sneaking around behind my back!" Potter hissed after a few minutes spent processing the situation.

Part of Draco wanted to roll his eyes at the other wizard's dramatics, it's not as if she'd been cheating on Potter, and when it came down to it, their relationship wasn't really any of his business. But another (much smaller) part sympathized with the betrayal he was surely feeling at the moment- after all, he too considered Hermione to be his best friend and he'd be devastated to find out she'd kept such a big secret from him.

"We became friends at the end of first year, and I don't have an excuse for why I didn't tell you about that except that I knew how you and Ron, especially, felt about him and about Slytherins in general and I didn't want to lose you as friends." She paused and took a breath, lacing her fingers with his. "We became a couple at the beginning of last year."

"But all those times you said you were visiting Leo, did you just make that up?" Potter frowned.

"We can go out together in the muggle world, Potter," Draco said, once again skirting the truth so that Hermione wouldn't have to he couldn't very well tell him they actually spent most of their time together at Malfoy Manor- and they did go out in the muggle world.

"And what changed?" Potter demanded of Draco. "How did you go from thinking she was scum, to
becoming her friend, to being her boyfriend?"

"Hermione," he shrugged, "I was drawn to her from the first time I met her, who wouldn't be? She was pretty and smart and powerful. And eventually I just got tired of being mean to her. I got up the nerve to go talk to her, and it just went from there." Draco wished that was the whole truth, that he'd been strong enough to follow his instincts and befriend her right from the beginning rather than parroting his father's beliefs and trying to force himself to hate her. He wished he hadn't needed a push from his mother. But there was nothing to be done about that, he could only support her as best he could now and that included helping her friend come around to the idea of the two of them in a relationship.

He watched Potter process this and nod to himself. And then suddenly his head shot up again. "Does Sirius know about this? Did he see you two together when he was sneaking around the castle as Padfoot? Did Malfoy help you take care of him, is that why he won't hear a bad word spoken about Malfoy even though he clearly hates his father?"

Draco sighed. Potter was quicker and more clever than he'd given him credit for, and Draco knew he didn't school his features quickly enough at his question, worse yet, when he looked down at Hermione he could see the truth written all over her face. Potter's face fell and now Draco really felt sorry for him. Sirius was the closest thing he had to a parent, and considering how much he valued the open and honest relationship he had with his own parents he knew this had to hurt.

"He didn't want to keep secrets from you, Harry," Hermione immediately started to plead, 'but we asked him to and he felt like he owed us for helping him. Also, I think he feels like it wasn't his secret to tell anyway."

"Whatever Hermione, I'm sure the two of you had a good laugh behind my back over how clueless I've been."

"What, no!"

"Listen, could you untie me? I'll keep your dirty little secret," Potter said, a nasty curl to his lips as he spoke, clearly denoting his disgust, "but I'd like to go talk to my godfather now."

Draco didn't look at Hermione- he wasn't foolish enough to think that she was going to like what he was about to do, but it felt necessary. "Before I let you go I'm going to need you to take a vow on your magic that you won't speak of this to anybody."

"And if I refuse?" Potter bit back.

"I'll erase your memories of tonight," he answered as calmly as possible.

Hermione gasped but said nothing.

"Why didn't you just do that in the first place?" Potter challenged.

"Because it's been killing Hermione to keep this from you. I certainly didn't intend for you to find out, but now that you know it'll make things a lot easier for her. And from what she's told me your occlumency is sufficient enough to keep somebody from just picking this out of your head. But I don't trust you enough to let you walk out of this room without some guarantee that you won't lose your temper and blurt it out, you did just come bursting in here in a rage with no discernable plan," he never looked away as he spoke. "Hate me all you want for demanding this, but Hermione's safety is too important to leave to chance."

Draco then held his breath, hoping that last little bit of emotional manipulation would keep Potter
from calling his bluff. He might be angry right now, but Draco believed that the other wizard truly
cared about Hermione, and he was hopeful he would agree to this as another layer of protection for
her. After a few tense moments Potter gave a sharp nod.

"Wait a minute," Draco said as he recalled something, "why did you come bursting in here when
you did?"

"What do you mean?" Potter asked.

"You said that you followed Hermione, which means that you were close enough to see her the
whole way here, so you must have arrived just after her. We were in here for at least five minutes
before you came in, so why did you choose that moment?"

Potter went bright red. "I thought you were hurting her."

"What?"

"I wasn't going to come in here at all, I was just trying to figure out what was going on and had
planned to confront Hermione later. I could hear you talking, I could tell she was in here with a
wizard, but not well enough to make out what you were saying or who you were exactly. But then
she-" he looked away, "moaned. I thought you were hurting her and that she needed help."

"Oh gods!" Hermione cried, covering her face with her hands, Draco could practically feel the heat
radiating off of her cheeks.

He had to fight the urge to smirk and tell Potter that he felt quite sorry for any witch he might get
involved with in the future if he couldn't tell the difference between a moan of pain and pleasure.
He wouldn't add to Hermione's embarrassment like that. But he allowed himself to feel smug.

"Okay, let's just do the vow."

Hermione acted as their binder, and then as soon as Draco released the spell tying Potter to the
chair and tossed him his wand, he was up and running for the door, pausing only briefly to pick up
his invisibility cloak from the place it had fallen when he first entered the room.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Hermione called out.

He stopped in his tracks but didn't turn around. "Yeah well, maybe you should have thought of that
before you spent three years lying to me and then asking my godfather to do the same."

Draco almost drew his wand again. "Don't be like Weasley, Potter," he hissed instead.

That got him to turn around. "Excuse me?"

"I get that you're upset right now and that you need some time. But Hermione's been a good friend
to you, don't turn your back on her the minute things get a little bit hard."

That actually seemed to give him pause, but he didn't say anything, just spun on his heel and
continued out the door. And then Hermione was back in Draco's arms, sobbing into his neck.

"It'll be okay, it'll all be okay," he soothed.

"You don't know that!"

"Yes I do," he insisted, hoping he wasn't lying to her.
"How?"

"Because he's been your friend for years now. And I was telling the truth earlier, once somebody gets to know you, they can't help but love you. You even broke Father down. Once Potter calms down he'll remember that and he won't want to lose you."

She huffed out a laugh against his neck. "I'm not even going to argue with you, I just want you to be right."

"Merlin, that's a first."

She giggled. "Thank you Draco, I love you."

"I love you too. But what are you thanking me for?"

"I know it must have been hard for you to keep your temper, but you mostly did. That could have gone much worse."

He nodded. "Thanks for not arguing with me about the vow," he said in return.

"I almost did," she admitted, "but then I realized that you were right; Harry has a temper, it's best that he has the warning the vow will give him to keep him from just blurting something out in anger. Your safety is important too, I know you didn't say it to Harry because he doesn't care much about that, but it would be dangerous for you if our relationship went public as well- at the very least you'd have to publicly distance yourself from your parents."

"Hmmmm," he said noncommittally- because truthfully, while she was right, the thought hadn't crossed his mind- and hugged her close. "Something Potter said is bothering me though."

"Lots of things he said are bothering me," she responded wryly.

"Well, I can only assume his opinion means more to you than it does to me," he chuckled. "But he was definitely right about one thing."

"What's that?"

"I was terrible to you when we first met and the way I acted paled in comparison to the things I thought about you. I know that I told him I'd apologized for that, but I'm not sure that I ever actually did, do you know how sorry I am?"

"Oh Draco, I haven't thought about any of that in years."

"That doesn't make it okay though, and I should have said something before now," he insisted.

"Well, no, you're right, it's not okay. The way that you and Lucius and Narcissa used to feel about muggles and muggleborns is frankly abhorrent, but if I continued to hold it against you what would that say about me? You show me everyday how much you love and respect me, and that's what I care about. Plus," she shrugged, "I was a rather bratty first year too."

"You were cute," he laughed.

"And now I know how absolutely biased you are."

Lucius was having an enjoyable breakfast with his wife. He was in quite the upbeat mood; they'd gotten to visit with Draco the day before, albeit shortly, following the second task, and had been
able to at least set eyes on Hermione and reassure themselves that she was safe. And for today they'd decided to take some time to relax and just spend together- but then Narcissa's cousin came strolling into the room.

He was really going to have to limit the man's floo access- his own elves had stopped bothering to announce Lord Black, they adored the dog-man and just automatically made him welcome at anytime.

"Oh good, Black's here," he drawled with obvious sarcasm.

"Always a pleasure to see you Malfoy," the other man responded with a roll of his eyes, throwing himself into a chair, bumping the table and rattling the china in the process.

Lucius was just thankful that Narcissa had taken to using what he knew to be her least favorite set on the off chance that Black stopped by and ended up destroying something. She'd bemoaned for weeks the loss of the apparently irreplaceable teapot he'd shattered the morning they'd discovered that the Dark Lord had created horcruxes.

"Unfortunately this isn't a social call. Narcissa I hope you have that ritual ready to go because we have a problem," Black said, as an elf placed a plate of food in front of him.

Lucius exchanged a glance with his wife. "What's that?" He asked with a sigh- they'd just gotten Potter through the second task, surely they'd earned a few days until the next crisis hit.

"Harry caught Hermione and Draco together last night."

Lucius winced.

"What do you mean by 'together'?" Narcissa asked.

"Cissa!" He hissed. He thought she'd learned her lesson about interfering too much in that aspect of their relationship.

She flushed slightly and looked at him, a plea for understanding in her eyes. "I didn't mean it like that, I was just wondering if there was some way to explain what he saw, aside from the truth."

He reached over and took one of her hands.

"Well I didn't ask for details," Sirius chuckled, "but Harry definitely knows they're in a relationship." Then his face darkened. "And I'm pretty sure he hates my guts, it didn't help that he had so many questions which I couldn't answer because of the vows the pair of you have me under. He only knows about Draco and Hermione for now, but I think it's only a matter of time before he starts putting the pieces of the larger puzzle together. We need to get that thing out of his head, like, yesterday."

Lucius braced himself to shield himself and Narcissa against the other wizard's rage. Rage which had been nearly cataclysmic in the wake of the confession that they had made to him just after the new year that they believed Harry Potter was a horcrux, and which he fully expected to reemerge at the very mention of the topic. But apparently he had finally come to the realization that he was more helpful to Potter when he was under control, because he just took a few deep breaths, in through his nose, and out through his mouth.

"How did he even discover them?" Narcissa asked eventually, and Lucius knew she was trying to decide how to handle this as a disciplinary matter as- technically- Draco and Hermione seemed to have been caught doing something against school rules.
Black took one final deep breath. "It seems that Harry has noticed that Hermione has been sneaking away when she thinks he's distracted. He's started carrying his invisibility cloak around with him and was just looking for an opportunity to follow her."

"I can't believe you let him keep that thing," retorted Lucius - the last thing, in his opinion, that a fourteen year old wizard needed, was an invisibility cloak.

Black huffed and stuffed a rasher of bacon into his mouth. "It's a Potter family heirloom, one his father and at least his grandfather before him brought with them to Hogwarts. I can justify keeping the map from him given that I'm a co-creator and therefore have at least as much right to it as he does, and because I've actually been using it, but it would just be wrong to take the cloak from him."

"It just seems like a lot of power to place in the hands of a fourteen year old wizard," Lucius snorted.

"Don't you see the hypocrisy in that argument, given how much responsibility you've placed on Draco's shoulders?"

"I would give anything to remove the burdens Draco faces, for the only thing he need worry about when he got caught snogging his betrothed to be embarrassment. But I can't," Lucius answered through a clenched jaw.

"And how do you suggest I remove the burdens Harry is also sure to face? That cloak is one of the few links Harry feels like he truly has to his father, and frankly I sleep better at night knowing that he has the ability to literally disappear given the trouble he seems to attract. I actually encouraged him to start carrying it on him at all times, I just didn't realize he'd use it to spy on his friend."

This was not the first time they'd had this argument and it annoyed Lucius that he'd yet to come up with a counter - he'd gift Draco with the same advantage in an instant.

"And you're just going to leave him in Hogwarts, now that he has this knowledge?" He asked instead.

"Don't you think it would look a little suspicious if I just randomly pulled him out of school the morning after he successfully completed the second task?"

"I don't care, better than risk him running off at the mouth!"

"Oh, your kid took care of that," Black laughed, "I should probably be angry, but I actually sort of admire his ruthlessness in protecting Kitten. Anyway, he placed Harry under his own vow forbidding him from talking about anything he saw last night other than with him, myself, or Hermione. Threatened to alter his memories if he wouldn't agree to the vow."

"Draco doesn't know how to do that," Narcissa interjected.

"Yes, but Potter doesn't know that," Lucius said, "he was protecting his witch the best way he could," he explained, intuitively understanding his son's actions.

"So, Narcissa, the ritual?" Black prompted. "You still think it will work? I'd like to do it over the Easter holidays."

"I have no reason to believe that it won't," she responded.

"Not exactly instilling me with confidence here," he growled, stirring his tea forcefully, his spoon
clanking against the teacup.

She took a deep breath. "I'm confident that it won't hurt him, so there's no reason not to try."

"And if it doesn't work?"

"Draco might not yet be capable, but we could always alter his memories," Lucius provided.

"I'd really rather not do that- when I spoke to her this morning Hermione actually begged me not to- or rather begged me to beg you on her behalf not to." Black ran a hand over his face. "And in fact, if it does work, I'd like to tell him everything, at least as much as Hermione and Draco know. I hate keeping secrets from him and he could really benefit from doing some training with them both."

Lucius met his wife's eyes and he knew they'd be discussing that proposition later.

"How is Hermione?" Narcissa asked.

"Upset, but determined."

"And Mr. Potter?"

"Upset, but he won't give up on her this easily. I'm confident he'll come around in time."

"Okay then," said Narcissa.

"I need you to start prepping me on the ritual now, please Cissy. I always avoided ritual magic as a child."

"Of course, you must be comfortable in order to do it properly."

"I'll meet you in the library?"

"Yes," she agreed easily.

Lucius looked at his wife as Black left the room.

"So it begins," she said on a long exhale and nodded at him, "may the gods help us."

"Indeed."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for the fabulous response to the last chapter, I just adored reading your reactions to Harry discovering them. And I really appreciate your patience waiting for this one when I left you with such a cliffhanger!

Okay, I prefer not to explain things in my author's notes, I like the story to speak for itself. But I know that this story is long and complicated and there seems to be a lot of confusion about a certain issue, and as that issue re-emerges in this chapter I've decided to address it. Harry does not have the Marauder's Map, he only ever had it for a day or two right after the twins gave it to him. Hermione- with Draco's help, plotted to steal it as soon as she figured out what it did, she justified herself by saying she
thought it was too dangerous for Harry to have, but let's face it, it would have been a
disaster for her personally if he had kept it. They took it to Malfoy Manor. Lucius had
it until Harry's name came out of the Goblet when he gave it to Sirius so that he could
use it to search for suspicious activity in Hogwarts. Long story short: Sirius now has
the map and, amongst other reasons he didn't give it to Harry as a favor to Hermione.
He continues to use it to keep an eye on things at Hogwarts.

And as this author's note is already epically long I might as well keep going. A few
months ago I was nominated for some awards hosted by the Beyond the Book
FanFiction Nook Facebook group. Last month I found out this story won in the
Hogwarts-era category and was a runner up in the Best Overall category. In addition, I
was runner up for best new author. I know many of you out there voted, some even
reached out to congratulate me and I just wanted to take this opportunity to thank you.
And to thank you all, really, for taking time out of your busy lives to read this thing
that comes out of my imagination, to leave me your thoughts and just for generally
being wonderful and supportive. Occasionally I get on Facebook or Tumblr and see
my writing mentioned and I'm blown away everytime. And basically, I just can't say it
enough, thank you!

Thank you Weestarmeggie for your alpha/beta skills- she's so invested in this story and
I'm incredibly grateful. This is probably my last update this year, so love to you all this
holiday season, be safe, see you soon!
Chapter 35

Hermione paced up and down the length of the solarium at Potter House and couldn't help but glance in the direction of the Potter ritual circle, despite the fact that she knew she wouldn't be able to see anything. She had been a nervous wreck for weeks, hardly even able to enjoy the extra time with Draco because it had meant that Harry was shutting her out.

He hadn't been cruel, just quiet and withdrawn, and occasionally she'd caught him looking at her like he was trying to figure her out. Everybody else danced around them, apparently the rift in their usually rock solid friendship was distressing- or at least disconcerting- to their classmates and nobody seemed to want to jump into the middle of it.

They'd left Hogwarts five days before for the Easter holidays, but Sirius had wanted to wait until the optimal time of the lunar cycle to try the ritual. He was rather more closely acquainted with such things than most wizards due to all his years of friendship with Remus.

She, Draco, and Harry had all been ordered home for Easter via owl post just the day after Harry had caught her snogging Draco. She assumed that she and Draco had been summoned back to be thoroughly chastised for their carelessness. But when she learned that Harry had been called home by Sirius, she suspected that there might have been more to it.

In the end her parents, as well as Lucius and Narcissa, had been surprisingly lenient. They'd basically just been given a stern talking to about following school rules but she wasn't convinced either set of parents really had their hearts in it. And then they'd been separeated and thoroughly educated on the contraceptive charm and potion 'just in case.' Hermione and Draco had a good laugh later about the stark differences between those conversations and the first one they'd had with his parents about sex, and they wondered if the adults were truly coming to terms with the fact that they were growing up, or if they just thought it was better to be safe than sorry.

After that she'd spent most of those five days nervously stomping around Malfoy Manor while her parents worked. Even now, she wasn't convinced that she was doing any real good. She was just here as a last resort to seek help if it was needed because there really wasn't anybody else to perform the task. Harry had grudgingly allowed her into his house, to be the lookout for something which had only been peripherally explained to them both. And Hermione appreciated the fact that he at least continued to trust her that much.

Sirius and Harry had begun the ritual at midnight and it was only ten past. Hermione felt like it had been ten hours instead.

She'd just turned on her heel to start another lap when she heard an inhuman scream rent the air. She had to grab the top of an armchair to keep herself from running outside towards it, she'd promised that she wouldn't interfere unless the crystal Sirius had charmed to let her know if things went catastrophically wrong activated.

She stood there, frozen in terror, gazing at the crystal- which remained dormant- until a grim Patronus came streaming into the room
"Success Kitten, but I need you to come help me get Harry into the house." Sirius sounded exhausted but pleased.

Hermione took off at a run. She'd been to the circle only once, the day before when they'd been making preparations, and at the time it had given her even more hope that the ritual would succeed. The space had felt sacred even to her and she wasn't a Potter. But now she was just afraid, despite what Sirius said. She needed to see it with her own eyes.

As she approached the space she could feel the recently expelled magic lingering in the air and the wooded area around it looked like it had been hit by a hurricane. She picked up her pace. But when they finally came into view she nearly stopped in her tracks. Sirius was kneeling on the ground with Harry's head on his lap and Hermione couldn't hold back a scream at the sight of her friend; he was unconscious and covered in blood.

Sirius immediately raised his hands in a conciliatory gesture. "He's fine, he's fine. He's just exhausted and I don't trust my magic enough to levitate him right now, so I need you to do it."

"Sirius, he's covered in blood," she answered with a concerted effort to hold her temper.

"It's from his scar, it's superficial, head wounds bleed a lot."

Hermione took in a couple of long breaths and nodded absentmindedly. "Okay," she said, but her voice trembled and she continued to approach them cautiously.

Sirius attempted to give her a reassuring smile but it was fairly clear that he, too, was exhausted. "Let's get him inside and cleaned up. You're not too shaken up to do it are you?"

"No, no, you did all the work, I'm fine." She pulled her wand from its holster and used it to carefully pick Harry up and begin guiding him towards the house where they got him settled in his room. Sirius instructed her on cleaning him up, and then they settled in to wait for him to wake up.

Three days later they were still waiting.

They sat with him in shifts, Hermione returned home only to sleep. And she had watched in fascination as- once it was clean, over the course of the first day Harry's scar almost completely disappeared. She couldn't wait to see his reaction to that, he hated that scar.

Draco stopped by a few times, but for the most part it was just her and Sirius holding vigil over Harry's bed, and the only reason Hermione didn't begin to panic as day turned to night yet again was because Sirius was so upbeat.

She was curled up in an armchair with a book the evening of the third day, Padfoot stretched out on the bed beside Harry with Holly on his chest, when all of a sudden she heard Holly hiss, and then Harry responded. She was frozen until she heard a murmur of her name.

"Mione?"

There had been a time that she hated it when anybody shortened her name, it just seemed lazy. But over the years the diminutive had become Harry's preferred way to show affection for her, something which he was generally uncomfortable displaying in other ways, and so she'd become fond of it. And she hadn't heard it in almost two months.

"Harry!" She exclaimed, leaping from the chair and just stopping herself from actually jumping on top of him, instead wedging herself onto the mattress beside him. Padfoot yawned and stretched and in the blink of an eye, Sirius was sitting cross-legged on the bed on Harry's other side.
"How are you feeling, Pup?" He asked.

Harry blinked at them. "Really good actually, a little stiff but everything is so much clearer now."

"Oh!" Hermione squeaked, "the ritual improved your eyesight too? Is that how you knew it was me?"

He chuckled. "Oh no, you're as blurry as ever, but I'd know that hair anywhere."

She shoved him gently and plucked his glasses off of the bedside table and handed them to him.

He put them on, blinked, obviously allowing his eyes to adjust, and smiled at her. "But no, I meant my brain just feels a lot clearer...somehow."

Hermione grinned at Sirius. "It really did work, didn't it?"

"I told you," he rolled his eyes in her direction. "All the diagnostics said it did and if you'd been there you wouldn't have doubted."

Harry maneuvered himself into a sitting position. "I'd like to hear all the things you promised to tell me if the ritual worked now," Harry looked back and forth between them expectantly.

Sirius nodded. "I assumed as much, but you're going to eat while we talk," he ordered.

Harry smiled gamely. "Now that you say that, I'm famished," he rubbed his hands together with clear anticipation.

"The nutrient potions we've been spelling into you keep you sustained but they're nothing compared to a good meal," Sirius explained. "Pippen!" He called.

The elf popped into the room immediately and did a double take at the sight of Harry sitting up in bed. "Master Harry is awake! May Pippen be bringing him the soup and bread we have prepared for him?"

"You read my mind, Pippen," Sirius answered. "That's exactly what I was hoping."

"Thank you Pippen," Harry echoed, smoothing the bedclothes over his lap.

The elf smiled broadly, popped away, and within a matter of moments Harry had a tray of hearty vegetable soup and rich bread, along with a generous helping of butter on the side and a drink which Hermione recognized as an elvin restorative potion- something that she knew spoke a great deal about the Potter elves respect for Harry to have shared it with him. When Draco had lost control of his magic because of his grandmother's actions over the Yule holiday, the Malfoy elves had brought him one as well, but they'd known him his whole life.

"Start talking," Harry ordered as he dipped some of the bread into his soup. "The more I think about it, the more I realize that things are not adding up."

"Well, you had something messing with your head, lad," Sirius answered and Hermione almost felt like she needed to look away at the tender way he ruffled Harry's hair, "which is why we couldn't have this conversation before."

Sirius looked at Hermione and she nodded.

They'd agreed that the best way to tell this story was from the beginning, and she was the one best equipped to do that. So, she opened her mouth and began to tell her best friend about the day she
ran into Draco Malfoy in a bookshop and what a life changing event that had been.

Lucius and Narcissa had agreed that she could tell him everything, but out of respect for them she left out some of the more personal details. Harry didn't need to know the inner workings of the Malfoy family dynamics, or some of the sensitive issues in their pasts- though she obviously couldn't skirt the topic of Lucius having been a Death Eater. Which was also one issue that Harry couldn't seem to get past. Not something that was entirely unexpected or unreasonable, especially given his history.

"But Malfoy Senior is a Death Eater, Hermione, how can you be okay with that. Stay at his house, eat at the same table as him?" Harry asked when Hermione finally ran out of things to tell him.

She took a deep breath and tried to figure out how to explain it to him, quickly realizing this wasn't a matter of logic, she could only tell him how she felt.

"Because he's not a Death Eater to me, he's just Lucius. He's like a second father and I love him."

"And he's really okay with a muggleborn in the family?" Harry asked dubiously, looking at her like maybe she wasn't quite as smart as he'd always believed- which chafed, but she kept her temper, he was entitled to his doubts.

"I mean, he was reticent at first, but for most of the time I've known him, he's treated me like a daughter. I've had rooms at Malfoy Manor since the summer after our first year. He buys me presents when he's out of town on business and sends me treats when I'm at school. He sits with me when I have cramps, for Merlin's sake!"

Harry made a face at that and she had to resist the urge to roll her eyes.

"What do you think?" He turned to Sirius, who literally snorted.

"I think he's an arrogant arsehole whose willing to do just about anything in any situation to get what he wants, hardly cares about anybody outside of his family except to figure out how to use them for his own purposes, and I often have to resist the urge to punch him in the face," he sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "But I have to admit that he seems willing to do something incredibly brave, and if he goes through with it he will probably be essential in defeating You Know Who. So, I tolerate him. Also, I have a lot of respect for Kitten here, and Draco as well, and even Narcissa, and he's important to them all, so I try not to harp on about how much I dislike him personally. But nobody's going to try to tell you that you have to be okay with what he is or what he's done."

Harry seemed to absorb that as he nodded to himself slowly.

"What about Dumbledore? Why hasn't he been told any of this, he's the leader of the light, right?"

"Because when it comes down to it, the Malfoys don't trust him."

"And you?" Harry prodded Sirius, who ran a hand through his hair again and then plucked a leather band from the opposite bedside table to tie it back.

"Well, as you now know, the vows they placed me under keep me from revealing their secrets without their permission. So, I couldn't, even if I wanted to. But when it comes down to it, I think they're smart to play things close to the chest. Personally, I'm not sure I trust Dumbledore, I was a member of his Order during the first war and yet I was sent to Azkaban without a trial. He'll be told eventually, when he becomes necessary. A spy is useless if he doesn't have anybody to pass his information to. But I'm comfortable leaving him out until then. "
"Okay, but what about people you do trust. Moony, Andromeda and her family, she's Mrs. Malfoy's sister, couldn't they help?"

"I trust Moony with my life, and he would never betray us voluntarily, but an unfortunate side effect of his lycanthropy is that he is susceptible to manipulation from his sire. And his sire is the most notoriously brutal werewolf in Britain who also has a long history of associations with You Know Who. That's the reason we thought Remus was the spy during the last war. When he started parleying with the packs we assumed Greyback had gotten his hands on him and compromised him. So, as much as I hate keeping secrets from him, even if the Malfoys agreed, I wouldn't burden him with this knowledge, and he would agree with that decision."

"Oh," said Harry, "that sucks."

"Being a werewolf is a bitch," Sirius nodded. "As for Andromeda, Ted and Tonks. Well, Narcissa wants to keep her sister as far away from all of this as possible, and I respect that. And Tonks is an auror, knowing any of this would put her in a terrible position. What Lucius is doing, and especially what he plans to do in the future, isn't exactly legal. And then there's the simple fact that the more people who know a secret, the greater the chances that it will come out. This knowledge is a burden Harry, and as much as I've wanted everything to be out in the open, I also dreaded doing this to you."

Harry looked back and forth between them. "But I have you two to talk to."

"Of course you do," responded Sirius, clapping him on the shoulder.

"And Draco, and even Lucius and Narcissa, if you like," added Hermione. She was aware that she being stupidly optimistic about the way things would be post confession. She knew deep down that she couldn't really expect Harry to accept it all right away, or maybe ever, but she longed for him to.

Harry rolled his eyes dramatically.

Hermione sighed, though perhaps she she shouldn't have let her impatience show so easily, but she'd been waiting months- years really- for this day. "You get that Draco is my boyfriend, right?" She asked as gently as she could manage. "And that he's about to become my betrothed- we're getting married Harry. You're going to have to learn to tolerate him eventually if you still want to be my friend."

Hermione suspected, that if Harry could get past their history- as Draco, for the most part, already had- that the two could be good friends. They actually had a lot in common: both training to become Head of House in an Ancient and Noble family, both seekers and quidditch lovers, both tended to isolate themselves from their peers and keep their own counsel, and then, of course, there was her.

He blanched at that. "What! Of course I do!" He visibly paused before reaching out and wrapping an arm around her. "I'm sorry I shut you out over the past couple of months. There were a bunch of times that I wanted to reach out, but then I'd just get so mad again even though I know you, and I know you wouldn't purposefully hurt me, it's just not who you are. Like I said, things are much clearer now." He tried to smile at her but it was brittle, and she wasn't sure how to respond.

Finally, she took a deep breath. "You had a right to be upset. I did lie to you. A lot." She brightened as she thought of something that might cheer him up. "But you could train with us now Harry! We've been learning to fight every summer since first year."
She knew she was lucky that Harry hadn't kicked her out of his tournament training. He'd forgiven Sirius for keeping secrets almost immediately, and she got the impression he'd been looking for any excuse to do so, and while part of her had been jealous, she'd mostly just been relieved that she hadn't been responsible for doing lasting damage to their relationship. And he had kept her at arm's length, it had been difficult, but she hadn't blamed him, not really and had just been glad he hadn't shut her out completely.

But she was very excited to start training with him where she didn't have to hold back. She wouldn't have been able to explain some of her skills to him before. Not to mention that she and Draco had different strengths than he did and they could all learn from each other.

"That actually does sound interesting," he admitted. "But I really am sorry, Hermione."

She shook her head vigorously. "In your place I would have been upset too."

There was an uncomfortable pause.

"Is this why you don't like the Weasleys?" Harry asked eventually.

"I like the Weasleys just fine," she defended automatically, though if she was being very honest, she wasn't sure that was entirely true.

Harry cocked his head and considered her for a moment. "Okay, is this why you don't trust them?" He clarified.

She stared at him, part of her wanting to deny it, but she couldn't and he'd obviously noticed more than she'd guessed.

"No," she sighed. "I think they're ultimately good people, but I don't trust them or agree with them about many things."

"Why- because of the Malfoys?"

Hermione tugged on her hair and twisted a curl around her finger in a sure sign she was uncomfortable. "I suppose I don't like their attitudes. I don't like how they fail to appreciate Wizarding customs or how they think about muggles, and yeah I guess the Malfoys helped me see that."

Harry snorted.

"I know how that sounds," she continued, "given what I've just told you about the Malfoys previous views. But I can't just get past the idea that the Weasleys don't know the most basic things about muggle life. Draco has gotten to the point that he can function quite well in the muggle world, and his parents have become at least coherent in the vocabulary, within just a few years. Mr. Weasley is supposed to be the Ministry's expert on muggles, but he can't pronounce the word 'electricity' correctly. I just find them...frustrating."

Harry seemed to consider that. "Okay, yeah, that makes sense, I didn't think of that."

"Again," Sirius interrupted, in a clear attempt to cut to the tension. "You had that thing messing with your head." Hermione nodded in agreement.

"Yeah, about that, what was that exactly?" Harry asked.

Sirius hesitated, and Hermione wondered if he was going to tell them. Lucius and Narcissa had
rather deliberately not been specific when they’d told her they had found a ritual to remove the taint from Harry’s scar. Only that it was responsible for his connection to the Dark Lord- for the dreams and the visions- and they hoped that pushing it out of his scar using the cleansing and forcing it to make contact with his skin would activate the protection his mother had left him with and destroy it, as it has destroyed Quirrell in their first year.

"I'll tell you, if you really want to know. It's your body. But I'd prefer if you'd just trust me when I say that you're better off not knowing," Sirius said, pulling the tie from his hair and running a hand through it again in a nervous manner.

Harry cut his eyes to Hermione, obviously seeking her opinion.

She shrugged. "I don't know what it was either, and I don't think I want to. I know a little bit about what the Dark Lord is capable of, and...yeah, that's enough. But it's up to you, like Sirius said, it's your body."

"You call him the Dark Lord," he hedged.

"It's what I'm used to hearing. And I use it out of respect for Lucius and Narcissa, the name 'Voldemort' bothers them."

"Merlin this is all so weird," Harry groused, but it had turned somewhat good natured. "So you, like, hang out at Malfoy Manor? I mean, I know what you said, but that's still so weird."

He was smiling at her in an encouraging way and she could only grin at him in return. "Oh Merlin, Harry, the lake is fantastic!" She gushed. "You would love it!

He just shook his head in a disbelieving manner and looked at Sirius. "I'll trust your opinion for now, but will you tell me if I want to know someday?"

"You have my word Harry, you have every right to know, I just want to spare you as much pain as I can."

Harry smiled at him, but it had turned brittle again.

"Alright!" Sirius said in a falsely cheerful voice, "that's enough heavy stuff for tonight! Let's have pudding, I'm starving!"

When she wrapped things up at Potter House- at least for the night- she had a couple of hours before she had to be home to make curfew and so she took her portkey to Malfoy Manor. Jema greeted her when she arrived, informing her that Draco was in his rooms. She made her way upstairs, stopping to greet Lucius and Narcissa who were reading in their sitting room. She informed them that Harry had woken up and then headed towards Draco’s suite.

He wasn't in his sitting room so she removed her shoes and padded into his bedroom. He could be a neat freak and had something of an unspoken rule about no shoes near his bed. She found him lounging in the middle of his bed, perusing a quidditch magazine. His eyes lit up when she walked in and he immediately sat up and tossed the magazine aside.

"Hey," he greeted her.

"Hi," she smiled.

"Can I assume this means that Potter is awake?"
She nodded and climbed onto the bed and into his arms.

"And how did it go?" He asked, kissing her forehead.

"As well as could be expected, I think. It's just that Harry tends to see things in black and white and I think he's having a hard time wrapping his head around it all."

"Father?" He questioned.

"I think that will be the hardest thing for him to accept. He looks at him and just sees a Death Eater, and the animosity between him and Sirius won't help things. But, then again, he and your mother are responsible for Sirius' freedom which is obviously a very big deal to him, and now that he knows they weren't coerced into it, well, I don't think he'll forget that."

"Hmmm," he said noncommittally

"And he apologized for being so distant lately."

"Good."

She knew Draco had taken umbrage with the way Harry had treated her after he'd discovered their relationship. And maybe a part of her had also been resentful, but she wasn't going to add fuel to that fire.

They were quiet for a long time, Hermione played with the hem of Draco's shirt.

"I can practically hear you thinking," he said eventually.

"Can we go for a walk by the lake?"

She felt him go still before he relaxed again.

"Sure, is everything okay?" He wondered.

"Yeah, I've just been thinking a lot tonight about us and I wanted to talk to you, but if we just keep laying here I'm afraid I'll fall asleep."

"You know that's a really terrifying thing to say to a wizard."

She giggled, put her arms around his neck and kissed him. "It's nothing bad, I promise."

"Alright," he said, helping her off the bed. They each collected a pair of shoes and made their way outside.

When they reached the lake she let go of his hand, wrapped both of her arms around one of his, and placed her head on his shoulder.

"So what's up?" He asked.

"I told Harry our story tonight."

"Our story," he paused, "that's an interesting way to put it."

She shrugged. "That's what it is though. It was really hard for me to put into words exactly what you are to me. I think he thinks I'm a total sap now."
"Please tell me you portrayed me as very manly and impressive."

Hermione snorted. "Well I didn't tell him that you cried when we went to see 'The Lion King' if that's what you're asking."

"I had something in my eye! That theatre was so dusty!" He defended hotly.

"Sure," she snickered. "Anyway, do you ever think about your life before we became friends?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just- do you ever consider how much our relationship has changed your life? For me it almost feels like my life has been divided into two sections: Before Draco and After Draco. Even finding out I was a witch was less life altering than meeting you. I can imagine going back to living as a muggle, but I can no longer imagine my life without you in it." She looked down at her hands where they were gripping his arm. "Is that, I don't know, pathetic?"

Draco brought them to a halt. "If it is, then I'm pathetic too. Let's sit down." He lowered himself to the ground and after offering her a hand to help her down, settled her between his legs, her back to his chest. "You sound kind of sad. Are you worried about becoming betrothed?"

"What! Oh, no, not at all! I'm sorry, I'm just feeling sentimental."

She reached back and ran her fingers through the hair at the base of his neck, he leaned into her hand and sighed happily. "I love it when you do that."

"I know," she laughed. "You used to be so weird about me touching you, though."

"Yeah, well, my family's not exactly touchy-feely, you know that, so I wasn't used to how casual you were about it. Plus, I liked it a little too much. And at eleven that totally freaked me out."

She turned in his arms so she could see his face. "Seriously?"

"I mean, I'm not sure I would describe it as anything romantic or sexual at first, I was probably a little young for that. I just sort of never wanted you to stop and I didn't know what that meant. You were a witch and a muggleborn and it was all very confusing."

"I- yeah, I get that," Hermione admitted. "What you made me feel from the beginning was very confusing.

"I hated you more than a little at first, and yet I never really could. It was frustrating."

"I could never hate you either, even when part of me wanted to. And as soon as you were even a little nice to me I longed to be your friend, and then before I knew it, you were the most important in the world to me. I hardly even know how it happened."

"You're the most important person in the world to me too," he squeezed her. They were quiet for awhile, looking out over the water.

"So you still want the betrothal contract? I know it's not what you're used to and we're a little young still..." his hands clenched her waist as he spoke.

"Tomorrow, let's do it tomorrow."
First chapter of the new year, happy 2019! Also, if anybody noticed this and was wondering, that tiny exchange between Holly and Harry when he's first waking up does mean that he's kept his parselmouth abilities. I know that's not canon, I don't care, I like my way better ;) Thanks to weestarmeggie for betaing and listening to me whine, as usual. Thanks to you all for reading!
Chapter 36

He was awoken by small hands shaking him. He reached out blindly and caught one. And then he opened his eyes and blinked until a very familiar silhouette came into view.

"Can I climb in?"

"Of course." It was an automatic response, but then the reality if the situation caught up with him and he swallowed. "Mia, we're going to be in big trouble if you're caught here."

But she was already climbing onto the bed and crawling under the covers and then she practically threw herself at him. He caught her arms but prevented their bodies from coming into full contact.

"What's wrong?" She asked; he couldn't made out the details of her face in the dark but he could tell she was looking around frantically as if checking for some unseen danger.

"Nothing, at least nothing like you're worried about. It's just that I'm a teenage boy and my girlfriend- my betrothed," he couldn't help but add, he was feeling very smug about that- "just got into bed with me. We have a situation arising."

She was quiet for a minute and then she burst out laughing. "Did you mean to put it like that?"

He felt his face heat. The double entendre had been unintentional and now felt quite mortifying.

"Draco," she froze. "I signed a contract today agreeing to one day become your wife. As in, you'll be my husband. I know what those terms mean. I'm aware that you have a penis and that you probably have an erection right now. In fact, on several occasions I've actually felt it." She said that last part in a comical whisper. "Actually, I'm more than a little insulted you don't remember those occasions," she added.

At first he was a little dumbfounded by the joking quality in her voice. But then he smiled to himself and began to chuckle, finally seeing the humor in the situation. They'd had frank discussions about sex, determined not to be like their peers who seemed content to fumble around in the dark until they figured out what felt good, rather than face the possible embarrassment of simply talking. But there wasn't anything he couldn't talk about with Hermione and he'd risk any embarrassment against the smallest possibility she wouldn't enjoy anything they did together anyway.

Between that and some of the exploring they'd done with each other, he probably did seem a little ridiculous to her right now. But this situation felt different- her in his bed at Malfoy Manor on the night after they'd signed their betrothal contract- it felt intimate and he didn't want to treat it casually.

"I think you might be overestimating my willpower," he told her.

"Oh please," she scoffed, "your magic would strangle you before it let you do something I was uncomfortable with."

"But that's the thing, love, I think we both know you wouldn't be uncomfortable, but I also think anything that happened here tonight you would regret later because we said we weren't going to sneak around under my parents' roof."
That seemed to give her pause.

"Would it help if I told you that your mother knows I'm here?" She eventually asked.

"Would mentioning my mother help get rid of my erection, yes, yes it would," he quipped.

She giggled and then reached above her head to grab a pillow and placed it between their lower bodies. "There, is that better? Will you at least touch me now?"

He held out his arms and she scooted into them, tangling their feet together, their bodies somewhat awkwardly bent around the barrier of one of his goose down pillows which was squashed between them.

"Now, do you want to tell me why Mother's given you permission to sleep in here and why you waited until the middle of the night to come in?"

"It's not that late," she protested. "Anyway, we've been up talking." But Draco wasn't particularly reassured when she took a fortifying breath. "She said I could spend the night with you. I want to do a blood ritual at dawn and the physical proximity will help us prepare for it."

Draco just lay there, stunned. He certainly hadn't seen that coming, he'd have been less surprised if she actually had snuck in here to seduce him. He reached blindly along the top of his bedside table until he found the familiar length of Hawthorn in his hand.

"Lumos."

Hermione blinked at him as the lights came up. "Why'd you do that?"

"Because I need to be looking at you when we have this conversation." And that's when he spotted a large tome- even by Hermione standards- a ritual bowl, and an athame that he vaguely recognized as belonging to his mother, sitting on the bedside table on the side where Hermione was laying. "Now, run that past me again."

She made a small sound of annoyance. "You heard me. I want to do a blood ritual, a betrothal ritual."

"We just got betrothed not twelve hours ago."

"With a contract," she responded, wrinkling her nose. "It all just felt very legal, I was hoping for something more magical."

"It was a magical contract," he laughed but pulled her closer when he saw insecurity blossom in her eyes, took a deep breath and let her familiar scent soothe his agitation. "Hey, what's going on?"

"I don't know, I was hoping to feel different afterwards but I don't, it just felt like our parents bartered over the terms of our marriage." She was almost vibrating, her magic unsettled, but beyond that he knew she was upset.

"That bothered you," he surmised, he should have considered that- marriage contracts were a foreign and unsettling concept to her.

"It seemed very impersonal, I guess. I'm sorry, I didn't realize it would affect me in this way. And I did want it, I just also wanted something more personal. You know I've been reading up on rituals, because of Harry, but also because of us. I really don't understand why they don't teach us about them at Hogwarts, it's like a whole branch of magic left out of our education!"
He let her rant, he shared her frustration and anyway, it was cute. "Alarmists think ritual magic is too easy to be abused," he answered when she was finished.

"I know, and it can be! But it's also really beautiful. And you can't defend yourself from something you know nothing about!"

"I know," he soothed. "Blood rites are a big deal, Mia. Blood magic is dangerous."

"Because it can be used to bind a person irrevocably against their will," she finished for him. "Which isn't something I'd ever have to worry about between us."

"Of course not." He worked his way until he was sitting up against the pillows tugging her up along with him. "Okay, show me what you want to do."

She hauled the ridiculous tome onto their laps and flipped to the marked page and Draco's eyes immediately went wide, his breath caught in his chest.

"This is a marriage rite."

"Just the beginning of one," she quickly defended, "it would require a final bonding and, um, consummation to be complete."

"But Hermione, I hesitate to label anything as simply Dark, but this is."

"It's not." She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him.

"Hermione," he sighed. "I know you're smart enough to know what this rite does. It binds a woman to her future husband's family. It will allow my family magic to begin to work on you. It will make you want me. Why in the world would you think I'd agree to that?!" He was beyond agitated and had to resist the urge to pull away from her.

"It was your mother's idea."

"Well she's clearly gone around the twist then. I know she's just about desperate for a daughter but this is one step too far."

"Draco, listen to me. Intent matters. This has obviously been used to bind witches in the past against their will, but I'm not unwilling! We would both walk into this with the best of intentions and your mother believes that if we start a marriage bond like this it will actually calm our existing bond, which we both know can be erratic."

"It's fine," he groused.

"It is not fine," she hissed. "Remember the World Cup? Or after your grandmother…"

"Tried to poison you," he finished incredulously. "Salazar's sack, Hermione. I think my losing control of my magic was perfectly understandable in that instance."

"I'm not saying you didn't have perfectly good reasons to react as you did in both instances, but that doesn't stop it from being a dangerous thing to keep happening. What do you think would have happened if none of us had considered that the things held under the lake for the second task might be people? If we hadn't taken precautions, and I'd been take?."

Draco felt his magic flare at the very idea.

"See," she insisted with a knowing expression that was thoroughly irritating. "And if you reacted, if
you'd tried to come after me or simply lost your temper, how would you have explained that? Our situation is too precarious for that, Draco. Your magic will still seek to protect me, but starting this bond should keep it under control enough that you at least keep your mind."

"There must be another option."

"Not one that's as effective. And this has another benefit."

"What's that?"

"As you said the Malfoy family magic will begin to work on me, begin to consider me a Malfoy wife."

"Yes, you'll be beholden to it." He clenched his fists as he spoke, what was wrong with this witch?

She eyed him and sighed. "Which would be terrible- if I was unwilling, if I didn't trust you and your parents- but that's not the case here!" She cried. "This would be beneficial to me, I don't have any family magic on my own, my parents have no magic to protect me. This would allow your parents to act like I'm a member of the family. The elves come to me as a courtesy now but if we do this they'd be able to find me even if I couldn't call. This was always going to happen Draco, when we married. Why wait when I'm in danger now?"

"I'm just worried my mother manipulated you into this. She means well, but she'll do just about anything to get what she wants."

"I do know your mother, Draco. And I was the one who approached her about this."

"But she suggested this particular ritual," he narrowed his eyes in her direction and was a little annoyed when she merely smirked at him.

"Yes, but we discussed several, she was very honest with me. Draco, if you aren't ready for this, just say so. It's not that it can't be undone, but it's not easy."

It wasn't until his eyes flew open at that statement that he realized that, in the midst of his frustration, he'd closed them. "Shit! That's not what I meant. That's not what I meant. I just- it's your life that's changed the most throughout all of this, I wouldn't want you to have regrets."

"There's not a single thing I would change," she said without hesitation.

"Not a single thing?" He asked with the arch of one brow.

That made her smile. "Well, okay, maybe the whole dark lord thing. But things between the two of us? No. I wouldn't want to risk not getting where we are right now, laying in bed together, me trying to talk you into something I'm pretty sure we both already want."

He let out a breath and admitted to himself that he wanted this with her more than he even wanted to take his next one. "Yeah, you're right," he huffed.

"There," she patted his chest. "Now was that so hard?"

"Next time I'll just say: 'whatever you want, dear,'" he winked at her. "I learned that from Father."

She turned her face into his side and laughed. "Turn out the lights, we have to be up early."

"Whatever you want, dear."
She giggled and it was such a delighted sound that he could resist pulling her against him fully, ridding them of the pillow between them. He felt her smile against his neck.

"Oh I do love you."

He froze, she'd said it many times before, but the way she'd just breathed it out as naturally as-well- breathing- as she fell to sleep was more than he could ever possibly have imagined.

"I love you too."

Hermione danced at Draco's side as they waited in the floo room at Malfoy Manor for Harry and Sirius to come through.

He clamped down on the hand he was holding, "Merlin, Mia, calm down, you're practically manic. They'll get here when they get here," his words were chiding but he was smiling at her.

Hermione had never been so happy in her life. She felt settled, like things were exactly as they should be. Her bond with Draco had settled on her like warm blanket. She was completely comfortable in it and it left her feeling settled in her own skin as a result. It had not changed her feelings for Draco, just made her more secure in them. She suspected that she wouldn't like being separated from him any more than she ever had, but she thought that it would at least feel less like a physical ailment because her magic would be able to handle it better.

It wasn't something she planned to test if she could help it.

Draco had reported similar feelings. When he'd felt like speaking, that is. He'd invested quite a bit of time into snogging her over the past week.

And today Harry had finally agreed to come to Malfoy Manor. It was the last day of the holidays and she was pretty sure he just couldn't deny his curiosity any longer and Hermione had barely been able to contain her excitement since he'd owled to tell her the night before.

Finally, after what seemed like an interminable wait, Sirius stepped- or rather bounded- out of the fire and greeted them in his usual exaggerated manner. "Kitten! Good to see you, you are looking as lovely as ever!" He kissed her on both cheeks.

"Hi Sirius. You're in a good mood," she giggled.

"What's not to be happy about? And the future Lord Black, how are you?" He shook Draco's hand as her betrothed rolled his eyes.

"I'm well Sirius, and you can keep saying that all you like, but that doesn't make it so."

"Sure, sure," Sirius waved him off.

That when Hermione spotted Harry was hovering behind his godfather. She dropped Draco's hand and launched herself towards him for a hug, but when she heard a hissing she pulled away immediately. "Oh Holly, I'm sorry, I didn't know you were there! Did I hurt you?"

The snake immediately poked her head out from Harry's collar and started hissing again.

"She said she was just letting you know she was here," explained Harry. "She's been a little clingy since the ritual."

Holly turned and looked at Harry and hissed in a clearly displeased manner. Hermione laughed.
"Males are notoriously obtuse, it's our burden to bear, I'm certain he hasn't even considered that you had good reason to be worried about him," she told the snake and extended her wrist, "would you like to come to me? Regardless of the obtuseness of men I'd still like you to meet mine."

Holly seemed to consider that and slithered onto her wrist.

"Potter," Draco started, stepping forward with an extended hand. "Welcome to Malfoy Manor. I'm happy to see that you're well."

"Malfoy," Harry responded, clearing his throat uncomfortably but extending his own hand. "Thank you for inviting me. And thank you for the help you've given me with the tournament."

Draco shrugged. "You were dealt a shite hand, that didn't sit right with me. And you matter to Hermione, I would to anything for her."

Harry cleared his throat again. "Well thanks anyways," he said shifting around.

Hermione resisted the urge to roll her eyes but she could practically feel the amusement radiating off of Sirius at the sight of the other two wizards' awkward greetings.

"Holly," she held the snake up to eye level. "This is Draco," she looked at her betrothed. "Draco this is Holly."

He took a startled step backwards. "Hermione-"

"She just wants to meet you," Hermione said as the snake lurched forward curiously.

Draco took another step back.

"Is there a problem?" Harry asked, he'd taken a step forward in an obvious protective maneuver.

"No," Hermione answered quickly. "Draco just isn't crazy about snakes, but I want him to see how awesome Holly is.

"Really?!" Harry snickered.

Hermione shot her most vicious glare at him and he shut up immediately. "Isn't she beautiful?" She continued, meeting her betrothed's eyes, and for a moment he seemed uncertain. Then he smirked.

"Very beautiful," he responded, never looking away from her face.

Harry made a choked sound and she jerked her head up to meet his eyes. "Is something wrong?"

"I- no." He bit his lip and shuffled around uncomfortably. "It's just really weird to see Malfoy being...nice."

Hermione felt her hackles rise. "Did you think I'd consent to being in a relationship with somebody who wasn't nice to me?"

She could see that Harry immediately regretted his words. "I didn't mean it like that! It's just weird, that's all."

Draco snagged her around the waist. "How could I not be, Potter, surely you realize what a catch this witch is. I endeavor to treat her as she is owed."

Harry actually appeared startled by this declaration. "Well, of course," he eventually responded,
twisting his hands behind his back and scuffing his feet against the marble again.

Hermione glanced at Sirius but he was leaning casually against the wall next to the door and she could tell that he was determined not to interfere. So she just smiled up at Draco. "You sap," she kissed his jawline, "or maybe you're just a suck up. But seriously, look how beautiful she is." She held the snake- who was still wrapped around her wrist- out towards him again.

Holly cocked her head, obviously evaluating the wizard in front of her and that seemed to amuse Draco who huffed out a laugh and raised a tentative hand. "Can I touch her?" He asked, cutting his eyes in Harry's direction.

"Sure," he shrugged, "if she were opposed you'd already know."

Draco ran one finger gently over her head. "Oh wow, hello," he said, his attention suddenly fully focused on the boomslang. "Hermione's right, you are beautiful, and after that performance at the first task I know you're a proper bad arse too." He laughed when Holly preened. "Plus my witch adores you, so I don't mean to offend, but I was bitten as a child, here in the gardens, and I still find myself wary," he finished his explanation about his fear of snakes.

Holly flicked her tongue against his palm and hissed.

"What did she say?" Hermione asked, fascinated by the display in front of her.

"She says that he smells like you, and that it's nice," Harry answered, cheeks bright with embarrassment.

Hermione sighed. "Honestly Harry, we're in a relationship, there's a certain amount of physical contact. I'm sure that to a certain extent, Draco and I smell like each other, not just him like me."

Holly hissed a reply.

"She says that's right, she can tell that you're mates and that you're well suited," Harry's blush didn't dissipate in the least at this declaration.

Holly kept speaking, apparently choosing to ignore her wizard's discomfort.

"Also, she knows that it was Malfoy's idea for me to get a snake, so she feels that she owes him a debt. She's willing to talk to the snakes on the property and let them know that the humans aren't a threat so that he doesn't have to worry about them."

Hermione watched Draco's eyes soften. "That's very kind of you," he spoke directly to Holly. "We have a myriad of magical creatures on the estate, I hope you'll be comfortable here, they've been told to make you welcome."

Holly made a pleased sound and slithered onto his wrist.

Harry snorted and Holly hissed at him in a way that was obviously a reprimand. Hermione hid a smile behind her hand and Draco gasped. "Oh, wow," he said, "her magic is really something."

"Yeah," said Harry, clearly surprised by that reaction from Draco, "I was drawn to her from the moment I entered the shop. No other snake even came close to creating that kind of pull on my magic."

"I suppose it would take a very robust creature to be able to settle with your magic," Draco conceded.
Harry's eyes went wide and his mouth dropped open.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Seriously Potter? Hermione is your best friend; even if I hadn't seen you cast a patronus, and in the presence of a bloody dragon of all things, I would know that you're particularly powerful."

"Oh," Harry answered, his mouth hanging open.

"You should take your schoolwork more seriously though, you're wasting your potential," Draco finished, without missing a beat.

"Draco!" Hermione hissed.

"What? It's true! And have you not told him a thousand times?" He countered as he allowed Holly to climb his arm.

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"He's right," Harry said eventually, rubbing the back of his neck and sighing. "But I've been better this year, I get it now."

"Yeah," Draco snorted, "because you've been hogging Hermione. And Claire, for that matter."

There was another silence but then Harry started to grin and then chuckle. "That must have driven you crazy," he practically cackled.

"You have no idea," Draco responded, extending his hand again in front of Harry.

This time Harry took it with a smile on his face and held Draco's eyes as he shook it. Hermione just watched, her mouth agape.

"Thank you for not holding it against her, she values your friendship," Draco spoke quietly.

"Hermione is important to me too, she's my best friend."

Draco's entire posture relaxed at that declaration. "I'm happy to hear that, but I was referring to Claire."

"Oh," Harry said, brought up short, "well, she's really nice."

Nobody mentioned the way Harry's cheeks reddened again at the mention of her name.

"She wanted to tell you herself- that she was Draco's cousin- she felt terrible for lying to you, but you know the foreign students have to stay at Hogwarts for the holidays and it wouldn't have been safe to tell you before," Hermione provided in the silence that followed.

"No, I get it," said Harry. "Any other huge secrets?" He glanced between them all, his voice was joking but his meaning was serious.

"Not that I know of," Hermione answered, "and if the adults are keeping things from us, well, I'd seriously consider it before I demanded answers if I were you. I, for one, am okay knowing what I know for now, that's hard enough."

He just looked at her for the longest time but then he nodded too.

"Would you like to see the house, Potter?" Draco asked when that had settled in. "My parents are
available, it's up to you to decide if you want to see them or not but you're welcome here nonetheless."

"That sounds good," Harry nodded in agreement.

And then Draco led them out of the room, Hermione gaping after them. Once they'd departed she looked at Sirius whose eyes were full of mirth, she narrowed her own eyes in response. "I will never understand boys- it wasn't, they just- ugh! After everything we've been through, that's it?!"

"What? Did you want them to throw a few punches?"

"Of course not!"

He offered her his arm. "Then just accept it, Kitten. And if it makes you feel better I can assure you that the confusion you're feeling right now pales in comparison to what we wizards face on a daily basis from you witches."

"Stop enjoying this so much," she groused even as she took his arm.

He placed a kiss on the top of her head as he'd become so fond of doing. She bit her lip so that he wouldn't see her smile; it always filled her with warmth to be so fully accepted by somebody who had no obligation to her at all, just affection. "You're enjoying this too," he accused, "in fact, I'd wager this is already going better than you ever could have imagined. You just can't stand that you didn't see it coming."

Hermione could only describe the sound he was making as he escorted her into the main part of the Manor to be giggling. She was not amused.

She was not.

"Shut up Sirius."
Chapter 37

"Dumbledore's not going to be appeased for long." Sirius told them. "He wants to know why Harry's scar has healed. Honestly, it's a little disturbing: the Headmaster of a school who had no issue with a child under his care who basically had an open wound, is suddenly concerned when it's healed? What is the matter with him? I know he's much more than that, but still."

According to Sirius, Harry hadn't been back at Hogwarts for twelve hours before the headmaster had summoned Sirius to Scotland for a meeting. He'd put it off for 48 hours, not wanting to let Dumbledore believe he was subject to his whims. Narcissa found she couldn't even begrudge him that bit of pettiness.

He'd come to the Manor for dinner that night to report on how things had gone.

"He has an agenda," she responded. "He does not truly understand the burden we all bear, as parents," she looked around and eyed Sirius pointedly.

"You have an agenda too, Cissy," he rolled his eyes.

"Of course I do," she tipped her chin at him, responding without hesitation, "and I have never attempted to hide it from you. I intend to get myself and my family through this war, and because my daughter loves your godson so much that includes you."

Narcissa would never tell her cousin that she was actually beginning to enjoy his regular presence in their house, despite his rather unfortunate temper, and she planned to do her best for him for his own sake as well.

"How did you explain things?" Lucius asked, interrupting what had become something of a stare-off. "I assume not the truth."

"Of course not," Sirius scoffed. "I told him that Harry had been complaining of headaches. That I was hesitant to take him to a healer right away, given his unfortunate fame and so first I did some research and some basic diagnostics. I admitted that I realized now I should have done that when I first gained custody. But that I discovered a curse taint within the scar which was the reason it had never healed properly in the first place. I told him I performed a cleansing ritual to get rid of it and that he was perfectly free from it now."

"Do you think he will attempt to confirm your story?" Wondered Lucius.

"I don't know, I don't see how he could. He could run some tests on Harry but there's not much he could do without alerting Harry, and everything should come back normal anyway."

"Will you ever tell him the true nature of what it was?"

"No!" Sirius practically shouted, sitting up straight in his chair so suddenly that he nearly splashed tea all over himself. "No, I don't intend for anybody outside of the three of us to ever know. I realize Harry may figure it out one day, but I hope he doesn't. But this is the kind of thing that could follow him around for the rest of his life, and that's on top of this ridiculous Boy-Who-Lived
"I agree, Sirius," Narcissa said quietly. "We will keep it to ourselves as well. Will we not, Lucius?"

She eyed her husband who just cocked one eyebrow in her direction, then sighed and nodded. She knew he disliked making such an open ended promise and she understood; even she could see that this information could possibly be valuable for trade in the future, but after finally having met Harry Potter, she couldn't imagine either putting yet another burden on his shoulders or using him as a bargaining chip.

She was aware- courtesy of the elves - the moment Harry had arrived at the Manor on that last day of the Easter holidays. So, she knew that he'd already been around for a couple of hours when Hermione and Draco entered her parlour- she and Lucius were intentionally remaining in separate rooms, him in his study, and she in the Lady's parlour- followed by an obviously reticent Harry.

She'd seen him before, of course, at the World Cup and from a distance both at Hogwarts and on the platform at Kings Cross, but she'd never had an opportunity to really study him. Her first thought was that he was too thin- but that could have been due to typical teenage growth spurts. Her second was that his eyes were some of the most striking things she'd ever seen; and her third was that there was something about him, before he'd even spoken, that helped her understand why her daughter was so determined to protect him.

She didn't offer her cheek for a kiss, much less do what she knew Hermione would have and attempt to hug him, but the poor boy hesitated to even take her hand. And he kept looking around as if in wonder- though she could commiserate with that, she'd felt similarly when she'd first seen Malfoy Manor and she'd been raised in luxury herself.

He'd been unfailingly polite but there was something almost painful to watch about his demeanor, not quite shyness, more like a reticence. He seemed terrified that at any turn he was going to do the wrong thing and they were all going to turn on him- with the possible exception of Hermione, whom he kept looking to for reassurance. But it had been a pleasure to get to know him, to see his face light up when she asked for stories about Hermione, and it was a reminder that he was just a boy, just like her Draco. She couldn't throw him to the wolves.

"Thank you," Sirius sagged. "So as I was saying, I don't think I can hold him off much longer. If we keep Dumbledore in the dark too long we lose the chance that he'll trust us and be willing to act on our information."

"You think he's going to trust us? Perhaps you Black, but the moment Narcissa and I were sorted into Slytherin we lost any chance of being trusted by Dumbledore."

Sirius rolled his eyes. "You know what I mean Malfoy. If he suspects what was in Harry's scar, suspects the existence of horcruxes as a whole, and then finds out we knew and kept it from him, he may refuse to listen to any information we provide and then everything we've worked for is for naught."

"That's not necessarily true," Narcissa interjected, becoming uneasy, it was typical for her husband and cousin to clash, but she believed it was imperative that they remained a united front. "Even if he refuses to work with us, we've cleaned Harry's scar and we've discovered the existence of the horcruxes. I agree that he would be a boon, but we don't necessarily need Dumbledore to find and destroy them. But I do agree that we're walking a fine line and need to start thinking about when we're going to approach."

Lucius sighed. "The mark darkens, I was at least hoping to have some solid information about the
Dark Lord's state and location first. He's been inside Hogwarts before, Crouch Jr. was there earlier this year without Dumbledore's knowledge, I don't want to inadvertently blow my cover before the war even really starts."

"You can't predict everything," Sirius growled.

"No, but I can be cautious," Lucius snapped in return.

"We've forgotten Hermione," Narcissa interrupted.

"I assure you I have not," her husband responded, his voice sharper than he'd usually use when speaking with her. He took a breath.

"What I mean-" she shot him a look, "is that we've forgotten the effect Hermione's presence in our lives will have on Dumbledore's opinions. No matter what he thinks of us, Hermione is a muggleborn witch who is betrothed to our son, with our approval. That automatically puts us in danger from the Dark Lord, and more importantly, puts them in danger. I have many issues with Dumbledore, but he is no fool, he'll be able to understand why we would want to change our allegiances."

Lucius and Sirius eyed each other.

"Maybe we should get Harry through the tournament and then come back to this subject," Sirius conceded.

Lucius nodded. "For no other reason than I think I would prefer if Hermione and Draco were not living in Dumbledore's domain when we approach him."

Sirius' expression morphed into one of pure amusement. "What do you think he's going to do?" He smirked.

Lucius drummed his fingertips against the table, a sure sign of impatience. "I do not know," he intoned, "and I do not like that which I cannot predict. It would just give me peace of mind to know they were safely at home and our of his reach. After what's happened to your godson this year I'd think you'd understand."

Sirius had the good grace to look abashed. He released his hair from its tie and ran his hand through it, as was his habit when he was worked up. "Yeah, okay, agreed."

From what Hermione could tell, the way that Draco and Harry worked through their past issues and the remaining tension between them was by trying to kill each other on a regular basis. Or perhaps not kill, but definitely permanently maim.

Once Harry recovered physically and magically from the ordeal of the cleansing ritual it quickly became clear that he'd undergone a large surge in his magical power. According to him, he and Sirius had been doing some exercises to get ready to go back into training for the tournament, Sirius had wanted to start with some simple spells and Harry had accidentally thrown him across the back garden with his first one: a simple disarmer.

Which meant that they had a whole new category of things to work on before the third task: teaching Harry to control the power he poured into his spells. More power could certainly be beneficial, but if he couldn't control it, it could easily be as dangerous as it was helpful.
And so Draco had been added to Harry's training rota. He was a new, unpredictable opponent, a perfect training tool. And while he could only be present when it was just Sirius overseeing the sessions, for obvious reasons, that still happened far too often for Hermione's peace of mind.

She'd seen Harry face older, more seasoned, and more powerful opponents on multiple occasions. But she couldn't shake her fear- irrational as it might be- watching her best friend and her betrothed face-off. She knew, logically, that she had nothing to fear. But they just seemed to find too much glee in trying to hurt each other for her peace of mind.

The first time she covered her eyes. The second time she left the room; but that had only made her more anxious. She'd tried bringing Claire along to quell their tempers, but it had only seemed to seal their determination to prove themselves- if for different reasons. So, she learned to just grin and bear it. Well, no. There was no grinning, she bore it and yelled at them both afterwards.

And she didn't care how much they both assured her that they didn't actually mean the other any harm; their ferocity spoke for itself. And Sirius 'Boys-will-be-boys' Black just thought it was hilarious. When this war was over she was determined to kick his arse.

By the time they'd been back at Hogwarts a month and Harry had finally been called to a champions' meeting about the third task; Hermione swore she'd aged several years.

She, Draco, and Claire were waiting for Harry in- what had previously been her and Draco's private sanctuary in the library- when he busted in without any subtlety.

"They've turned the quidditch pitch into a maze!"

Hermione recovered from the sudden intrusion first. "Excuse me?" She thought she understood his meaning, the research they'd done had indicated that the third task was traditionally some kind of treasure hunt; a maze made complete sense.

Harry huffed and threw himself onto the floor in front of the fire.

"They've grown hedges on our quidditch pitch! They say they'll be twenty feet tall by the time of the last task, on our quidditch pitch!" He reiterated, clearly overcome by the idea- not of the task, but by the invasion of supposed sacred ground.

Hermione immediately began to feel herself developing a headache.

"What!" Draco exclaimed, before Hermione could open her mouth.

Harry eyed him, his head propped on his arm. "I know, right? What were they thinking? As if there weren't plenty of other places to erect a maze, why ruin the quidditch pitch?"

Hermione could only gape at them.

"They'll set it to rights though?" Draco asked.

"They say so," Harry griped.

"What!" Hermione shrieked when she finally found her voice. "Are the both of you mad!"

"Of course not," Harry answered loftily.

Draco wisely kept his mouth shut.

"Harry has to face yet another life threatening task and the pair of you are worried about the state
of your quidditch pitch!" She continued.

She saw the boys exchange a look and swung her legs around so that she could stamp both feet on
the carpet.

"What is the matter with you! Quidditch doesn't even demand a pitch, it's not football, it's played in
the air!"

Draco and Harry both gaped at her, completely appalled, and then began to speak at the same time.

"You wouldn't understand," Harry wailed.

"It's about the integrity of the game!" Draco cajoled.

"The pair of you need to get your priorities in line," she snapped, giving them each a good long
glare for good measure.

She then looked to Claire for back up, but the older girl just shook her head. However, when
Hermione gathered her things, clearly preparing to leave for the night rose in solidarity and linked
arms with her as they exited the room. She could feel the boys' gaze trailing after them.

She knew almost immediately that she'd overreacted. Or- more accurately- that they'd all reacted in
line with their own experiences, but thankfully, they understood her well. All she'd had to do was
lay her head on Harry's shoulder at breakfast the next morning and tell him that she was simply
worried, but that she would never begrudge him quidditch, and all was solved with him.

Well, there had been the ribbing about how he was certain she'd prefer it if he would just give up
quidditch entirely. But he, in turn, admitted that he may have lost the track of what was really
important a little by concentrating on the state of the quidditch pitch rather than the task he had to
face.

She hadn't needed to say a word to Draco, or him to her, for them to understand each other. She had
been dramatic. He had been flippant. They were both sorry.

Sirius doubled down on Harry's training once they knew something of the nature of the third task
and even when she wasn't participating, Hermione brought her her materials for revision- her
exams were fast approaching- and accompanied Harry as a sign of solidarity. But even after seeing
him work so hard, being thoroughly put through his paces, and after what he'd survived with the
first two tasks, by the time June 24th and the third task arrived, she was still terrified.

She simply couldn't shake the feeling that something terrible was on the horizon and there was
nothing she could do about it.

The feeling was only added to when the Daily Prophet was delivered that morning. A story about
Harry's unnatural attachment to his muggleborn best friend who also happened to be the ward of
his godfather, and how it might be limiting him, graced the front page. For a moment Hermione
felt her cheeks burn in shame.

She glanced at Harry and was relieved- and God help her, thankful for Rita Skeeter- to see that he
looked amused. "You and me, huh?" He muttered.

"Obviously we're in the midst of a torrid love affair," she shot right back.

Their eyes met, and they burst out laughing.
Any lingering feeling of dread and embarrassment was abated with the appearance of Sirius, Remus- and to her complete shock, her parents- a few minutes later. Part of her wanted to be annoyed by the presence of her muggle parents. They didn't have any idea what might be happening later, still had no idea with what purpose Harry had been entered into the Tri-Wizard Tournament, and it could be dangerous for her non-magical parents to be present. But she was so happy to see them that, despite it all, she could only be pleased. And the squeeze of Harry's hand in hers, and his excited glance in their direction only cemented that thought.

When McGonagall swooped down from the Head Table to tell her that she could make up her History of Magic exam at a later date in favor of visiting with her parents and Harry's other guests, she'd opened her mouth to object, not wanting special treatment, only for her own mother to bend down and whisper into her ear:

"Life is too short, love. If anybody begrudges you this, let them, that's their problem. It's not as if anybody could truly accuse you of slacking off your academics. And look how happy Harry is."

She glanced at her best friend who was absolutely beaming at this show of support and just nodded.

"That's my girl. Now, show us around this magical school of yours." Her father gave her a kiss on a her temple which felt like it woke her up: HER PARENTS WERE AT HOGWARTS! No matter what else, this was a gift. She glanced at Sirius who was smiling gently at her and bit back a sob as Harry began to lead them all away, like an over eager tour guide.

Draco managed to run into them in the Entrance Hall. Literally. He nearly bowled Harry over. Hermione shouldn't have been surprised, he seemed to enjoy this tactic.

"Got yourself a girlfriend, Potter?" Draco waved the newspaper around and if Hermione hadn't known him so well, hadn't seen the mischievous mirth in his eyes, she would have worried that he was either worried or angry; but he was clearly enjoying this.

Stupid git.

"Hermione is my best friend. It doesn't surprise me you can't understand such a relationship," Harry sniped. He was playing his part so perfectly that Hermione couldn't help but wonder if they'd planned this little encounter. Except she knew that they couldn't have predicted Rita Skeeter's inanity.

"Whatever you say." He turned his head and looked at her up and down, and if he was anybody else she would have been uncomfortable under his gaze.

Harry stepped into his space. "Back off Malfoy."

"I think you're the one who should back off, Potter," he spat, shoving his shoulder against Harry's

Draco started to walk away but turned to give her a significant look and tapped his finger against the side of his nose.

"God," she heard her mum breathe, "that was like seeing an entirely different person." Her mother placed her arm around her shoulders. "Is it like that all the time?"

"He's very good at playing his part," she murmured, squeezing her mum's hand which was dangling from her shoulder. .

"I knew, what things were like in theory, but I'm not sure I really understood how hard it must be
on you children," Helen confessed, eyes still following Draco's retreating form.

Her mum gave her a long look, then a smile and a nod.

After that she spent an enjoyable if completely unanticipated day showing her parents around Hogwarts. It was an opportunity she never thought she would be able to experience and despite her nerves on Harry's behalf she was at least grateful for that.

Despite her parents' presence it was Sirius' arm she found herself clutching as they approached the stands preceding the third task.

The atmosphere was celebratory and Hermione wondered if these students had been present at the last two life threatening tasks. Was it really possible to be this disassociated?

She spent the entirety of the task squashed between Sirius and her father, with Remus on Sirius' other side and her mother at her father's side. Her heart skipped a beat when red sparks went up above the maze- and part of her hoped it was Harry. But then they led a disoriented Viktor Krum away from the maze and to the hospital tent.

Hermione consoled herself that Harry had sworn he wouldn't take any chances, he was probably just ambling about making the required effort, he couldn't downright forfeit, they were concerned that would risk breaching the contract.

The wait seemed interminable. Though she would later learn it was less than an hour, just staring at a bunch of hedges hoping, but also dreading that something would happen was agonizing.

And then, without any warning she appeared at the entrance of the maze. Obviously having arrived by portkey, goblet in hand: the newly crowned Tri-Wizard Champion Fleur Delacour.

Hermione sagged with relief but she didn't stop holding her breath or loosening her grip on Sirius' arm until a group of aurors led first Cedric Diggory, and then Harry- looking a little worse for wear, but safe- out of the maze.

Hermione supposed she should have been disappointed that a Hogwarts champion hadn't won.

However, despite how others may have thought she should have felt, she wasn't actually disappointed, and she wasn't the least bit sorry about it.

She simply felt as if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders and- as was almost always her instinct- her eyes sought out Draco who was seated in the next set of stands. His face was impassive, but he seemed to sense her eyes on him and he raised his own to meet them, and then, for the second time that day he brought one finger up to touch the side of his nose. It was everything she needed to finally relax, or more accurately, to collapse.

She let out a great sob and buried her face into Sirius' shoulder. "It's over," she kept repeating, "it's over, it's over, it's over!"

He clutched her to him, clearly as grateful as she was. But he allowed Remus to interrupt their little celebration to take her face in his hands and kiss her cheeks like an affectionate uncle. And after that, when he was free from the general public, she also allowed her somewhat delirious looking best friend who had run over to embrace Sirius, to then pick her up and twirl her around even as she patted him down to check for injuries as he laughed uproariously.

"I'm fine, fine, fine!" Harry repeated over and over but she didn't release him and he didn't fight her until she had done her own thorough examination.
And after she'd seen her parents off she even allowed herself to indulge in the party the Weasley twins had thrown together for Harry in Gryffindor Tower. Merlin knew he deserved it - winner or not, he'd put in an impressive performance, and she needed to forget that they still didn't actually know what had let to him being entered into the tournament in the first place. Or the inevitable gossip that would result from their platonic display of affection following the task.

She would allow herself a few hours to just be happy.

"Let's have a normal summer?" Harry requested later that night, looking a little drunk as he sank onto a sofa and crowded into her personal space, the festivities still going on around them. "Damn if I know what that is," he added under his breath, confirming his drunken appearance.

"I'll do my best," Hermione promised. She studied him for a moment and then pulled him into a hug. "Merlin, I'd like nothing more."

It was half wish, half prayer.

It was not to be.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Weestarmeegie for the beta read and for just generally understanding my brain. Thanks to the rest of you for reading, for your patience, and your love. I've received some reviews from new readers over the past couple of weeks that were especially inspiring, I can't impress upon you how much it inspires me to see your enthusiasm and I cannot express my appreciation enough!
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

WARNING: This fic is about to get real. And by that I mean that it's about to earn it's rating, because the war is here. I will never move completely away from the love and sweetness of the family dynamic that has been the centerpiece of the story thus far, but from here on out there's also going to be a certain amount of darkness that you haven't seen here before.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 38

Lucius managed to land on his feet before he twisted to the side and vomited the entire contents of his stomach onto his wife's previously pristine floor. He felt her approaching and held one arm out, stopping her progress.

"Lucius?"

He tore at the mask which he still wore, throwing it across the room and then nearly ripped his Death Eater robes off of his body. How had he ever considered these to be honorable trappings? He couldn't bear for Narcissa to touch him at the moment.

He pulled out his wand to clean up the mess, but his hand was shaking.

"Stop, my love," Narcissa ordered, "you're exhausted, I'll do it."

He was ashamed- that he needed her help for something so simple, and for the reason that he needed her help in the first place. However, he knew that he was lucky not to have splinched himself just getting home and so he lowered his wand.

"Go sit down," she continued.

He carefully made his way out of the room, the tremors made it difficult for him to hold himself upright and walk at the same time. He probably shouldn't have risked apparition after that many rounds of the cruciatus- he was no longer used to the Dark Lord's preferred brand of punishment- but there hadn't been a floo available and he refused to stay anywhere near the newly re-born thing whom he had once been convinced was one of the greatest wizards to have ever lived, and that snake.

Oh that snake.

He shuddered again, but this time it didn't have anything to do with the after effects of a curse.

A few minutes later Narcissa followed him into the main sitting room- he hadn't had the energy to make it to their wing- and he wasn't sure he'd ever felt so helpless in his life as he watched her arrange a healing kit on the side table, her face carefully blank. She handed him two potions, the first was the best thing they for ameliorating cruciatus exposure- there was a reason that curse was classed as unforgivable- and the second was a strong pain potion.
They'd prepared as best they could for this night, knowing it was coming as Lucius' mark had gotten darker and darker for months. Narcissa was the superior potioneer between the two of them. Actually, she was just a superior potioneer in general. And so she had been the one to build their stock. But it had been difficult to watch her put on the stoic mask she usually only used in public, shut herself in their lab, and brew the items that might be necessary in the near future to simply keep him alive.

However, he figured his time was better spent getting House business in order. Including finishing preparations for several boltholes for his family spread all over the world, and sharpening his fighting skills with Black. And he kicked his horcrux research into overdrive, because finding and destroying them was the only way to end this.

And now that he'd seen what had become of a once brilliant wizard and charismatic leader, he knew he'd made the right decision. The Dark Lord had always been evil, but now he was also unstable, which made him far more dangerous, than he had been before. It was going to take every bit of Lucius' intelligence and guile to stay alive. Remaining unscathed might be too much to hope for.

"Do you have any other injuries or is it all cruciatus related?" She asked.

He just shook his head and she moved away from healing supplies and sat down gently beside him, but was careful not to touch him and waited until he'd downed the potions before asking: "So he's-

"He's back," Lucius answered her unfinished question. "And this time, I think he might literally not be human, Cissa."

Her mouth dropped open. "I- I suppose that's understandable, he lost his human body, anything he returned in would have to be some kind of construct."

Lucius just nodded, they'd never discussed it, it was too disturbing, but he'd assumed they'd had similar thoughts on the matter. But it was one thing to theorize and completely different to actually witness. "He doesn't have a nose. His eyes are red. He's- he appears to be part snake. I think he used his familiar in the ritual." He shuddered again at the thought of that creature.

"And from the state you're in, I take it that it wasn't a happy reunion?"

He snorted. "Pettigrew was there, has been with him for months, apparently. And lets just say that our Lord was less than pleased to find out his most faithful follower is a wizard of so little calibre. He is not ignorant of our abilities and resources, and he knows that if Pettigrew was capable of finding him, many of the rest of us could have as well- had we been so inclined. Also, the rat has kept him very well informed and was all to happy- I'm certain- to inform him of our part in securing Black's freedom."

She nodded but didn't comment, he was walking proof of the results of the Dark Lord's displeasure at the moment. "Speaking of, should I call Sirius?" She asked eventually. "Do we need to meet to discuss what to do next? And save you from having to tell the story twice."

"Hold on Cissa, there's more." He had to confess this to Narcissa first, before he faced Black, and Merlin help him, his children.

She moved slowly to give him fair notice, but wouldn't allow him to shy away when she took his hand. She must have sensed how bad it was, he gripped her gratefully.

"The Longbottom boy is dead."
She gasped. "Are you certain?" She asked after a long pause.

"Yes, he was dead when I got there, there was nothing I could do, it appeared that his blood was yet another ingredient," he winced at the term, "in the ritual used to revive the Dark Lord."

She just bowed her head and took several long breaths, then she took out a handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes.

He hoped she wouldn't ask for more information, that he wouldn't have to explain that when he'd first spotted the body he thought the boy looked vaguely familiar, but hadn't been certain until the Dark Lord began to mutilate the body. About how he had mocked a dead child over his supposed triumph, because he'd been so easily taken from his own home, and then bragging that this was his vengeance on the son of the people responsible for some of his most loyal followers being imprisoned.

And Lucius really didn't want to have to admit that he'd been given the honor of participating in place of his sister in law, Bellatrix, who was 'unavailable' at the moment. Narcissa would only blame herself for that.

But the worst part of it was that while- to his shame- Lucius had seen dead children even younger than the Longbottom boy, had seen many bodies mutilated, and he was certain this wouldn't be the last time; this boy was different. He had been the same age as his son, a friend of Hermione's, and had shared a dorm with the Potter boy. Lucius was certain, in fact, that he'd been a replacement for Potter within the ritual when Potter had proved too difficult to capture, which added a whole new layer of horror to it all.

He wasn't sure that he could expect- or even hope- that they would forgive him.

"Of course there was nothing you could do," she soothed.

They just sat there for a long time, she quietly crying and he trying not to panic. It was all well and good to plan for war, but now that it had come he wasn't sure he had the strength to survive it again.

It had been one thing when he'd actually believed in the cause, even if he often disagreed with the Dark Lord's methods, but now- he'd see Hermione's face on every victim. Every muggle house raided could be the Grangers. His son could be discovered to love a muggleborn and their entire family made an example of. Everybody he loved could come to see him as a monster.

He couldn't stop thinking of these worst case scenarios. He had too much to lose and he wasn't sure how he was going to make it through without giving himself away.

He had accidentally allowed his occlumency shields to fall for a brief time tonight when his fear had overcome him. If the Dark Lord had chosen to take even the smallest peek inside his mind during that time his life would have been forfeit. They were going to have to come up with some kind of system so that Narcissa would know if he was killed. So that she would know to run. Because while he feared for himself, he was much more afraid for those who he would leave behind, which led to another worry: what else had they not considered?

"That can't be a coincidence, can it?" Narcissa asked, startling him out of his thoughts. "That it was the Longbottom boy- Neville," she clarified, voice tripping over his first name. "He was a fourth year Gryffindor along with Harry. Both of their parents were members of the Order of the Phoenix, both families attacked within days of each other, both of their lives irrevocably changed by the Dark Lord..." she trailed off and Lucius knew she was thinking of Bellatrix.
Something niggled at the back of Lucius' mind: the prophecy. He'd been thinking of one boy as a mere stand-in for the other, but what if they were truly linked in the Dark Lord's mind? Prophecies tended to be so vague. What if it could have applied to either child and the Dark Lord was hedging his bets- doing his best to get rid of them both? He put that away to think on later.

"I don't think that it is," he told her. "I think that Crouch was sent to infiltrate Hogwarts and bring Potter to him when the time was right. I think he manipulated the tournament for that reason."

"But why?" She bit her lip and he could tell she was trying to get it all straight in her mind. "It just seems so convoluted. He was inside Hogwarts for two full months, surely he could have found a way to lure Harry outside of the wards and portkey him to the Dark Lord in that time. Why draw attention to the fact that something was amiss and putting everybody on alert by entering him into the tournament?"

"Well the Dark Lord isn't completely rational, and I seriously doubt Crouch was either after what he went through, and for the most part Pettigrew is an idiot who will go along with whatever the smarter more powerful people in the room think. It would not be unlike the Dark Lord to want to make a production of things, to have Potter taken from under Dumbledore's nose to demonstrate that he couldn't even keep his golden boy safe within his own school. And the tournament was certainly a way to be flashy about things. Also, I suspect that there is a timing element at play here, whatever ritual he used would almost certainly have to be the kind that requires months of preparation. Most likely it simply wasn't ready this autumn."

Narcissa nodded thoughtfully. "That makes sense." She took a deep breath. "So we'll wait to alert Sirius in the morning?"

"Yes, let them have one more peaceful night, there's nothing to be done immediately."

"Okay then. Are you feeling better? The tremors seem to have subsided."

"Yes," he sighed. "But I'm going to be quite sore in the morning." It was a small price, he almost hated to mention it.

"I'll get you a muscle relaxant draught to take first thing, and you should have a bath now." She stood up and extended her hand to him. "I'm tempted to send Jema to fetch the Grangers, it would bring me peace of mind to have both of the children under our roof tonight, but that would be selfish, wouldn't it? I should let them have one more night of peace as well."

He stood up and took her into his arms. "Additionally, I do not believe that I have the fortitude to explain this to them tonight."

She nodded, "I understand."

"Thank you," he murmured as she settled herself against his chest.

"Whatever for?"

"For still being here, for not looking at me like I'm a monster."

"I know you better than that."

He held her tight and breathed her in until his aching body began to protest. "Now, how about that bath? Will you join me, I'm not sure I could let you go right now?"

"Whatever you need."
He wondered if she'd ever truly understand how much he needed her.

Hermione went running from the room the next morning when Lucius informed her that her friend was dead. Draco immediately ran after her and the Grangers had a brief hushed, but intense conversation, and Lucius gathered that they were arguing over whether they too should go after her. Or perhaps they were debating if they should grab their daughter and get as far away from him as possible.

He wouldn't have blamed them either way. In fact, a large part of him wanted to beg them to take Draco and Hermione and run- if they had magical back up he would have done just that. But they ultimately stayed seated.

Narcissa sat quietly at his side clutching his hand, but he knew it was going against her every instinct not to follow them. Sirius sat silently with his head in his hands and Harry just stared off into space.

It was twenty minutes before they returned, Draco's arm around Hermione's waist; he was basically holding her up. Lucius was shocked when, instead of continuing on to the loveseat where they'd been seated together before, they stopped in front of himself and Narcissa. Hermione bent at the waist and wrapped her arms around his neck. He was so startled it took him a moment to return her embrace.

"I'm so glad that you're home safe," she whispered to him.

"Oh you sweet girl," Narcissa cried, clearly overhearing her words.

"Thank you," he murmured.

She gave him a final squeeze and stood back up. Draco gave him a simple nod over her shoulder that said more than any words could. Then he took his betrothed's hand and led her across the room.

"What now?" Sirius finally broke the silence. "We've been waiting for this, we knew it was coming, but now that it has, I feel like I have no idea where to go from here."

"You should all get away from me," Harry said suddenly.

"Excuse me?" Sirius asked, sounding the oddest amalgamation of the dangerous Black who had broken out of Azkaban and the caring parent Lucius knew he could be.

The boy didn't look up. "I'm not as smart as Hermione or Draco, but I know what's right in front of my face, and I know that he's after me. Just being around me puts you in danger. You should all get as far away from me as possible."

Lucius said nothing, he fully expected Sirius to object and he didn't intend to interfere.

So he nearly jumped in his seat when it was Hermione who yelled: "Shut up," sounding angrier than he'd ever heard her.

Harry's head swiveled to look at her.

"What?" She challenged. "You're being stupid, would you rather I say that? Okay, here goes: you're being stupid, stop it."
Potter huffed petulantly. "Neville died for me, Hermione, how can you…"

"Shut up! He did no such thing!"

"If it wasn't for me…"

"If it wasn't for you it would still have been Neville...or maybe somebody else. The Dark Lord is evil and crazy Harry, and you're not the only one he's after! None of this is your fault!"

"That's easy for you to say, you're not-"

"Not what?" She challenged.

He was silent and Lucius could see him gathering him courage. "You're not in his line of fire, not if you weren't my friend."

She laughed, but Lucius realized that it was not a sound he ever wanted to hear again. "Because he's suddenly going to embrace muggleborns? Accept the idea of Draco and I together?"

Potter set his chin defiantly. "It's not the same thing."

"Is it not? I should take comfort in the idea that he only wants be dead for what I am and who loves me rather than who I am specifically?"

Potter was silent.

"And what are you going to do to solve this unfortunate problem of your continued survival? Knowing you, you've got this noble idea that you could just go seek him out. How, Harry? Take out an ad in the Prophet? And then stand in front of him and let him kill you? Not only would that be an utter waste of the life your parents gave theirs to protect, but it would be futile. You think he would stop at your death?"

"That's not fair Hermione, to bring my parents into this. He's after me."

"Maybe. But he's not only after you."

"He tried to-"

Hermione actually snarled and rose half way from her seat before Draco pulled her back down. "Stop it Harry!" She demanded. "You're no good to any of us as a martyr. If you don't feel like sticking around to train with me and Draco just cut the dramatics and go throw yourself into a volcano or something. Neville is dead, stop pretending it's all about you."

"But it's-"

"What part of shut up, don't you understand," she shrieked, Draco started to looked truly concerned and Lucius quickly understood why as the air began to thicken with magic.

Lucius surreptitiously pulled out his wand. Hermione's magic would never allow Draco to come to harm but it might become necessary to shield the rest of them from it if she continued to lose her temper.

"Everybody in this room has worked and sacrificed to keep you safe over the past year and to break that horrible connection!" She poked rather viciously at her own forehead. "Sirius broke out of Azkaban to protect you. Are you just going to throw that back in our faces?" She spat. "Well, I wish you'd saved us the trouble and just let that dragon eat you! Of course if you had Neville would still
be dead, because I don't think the fucking Dark Lord was going to give up on coming back to life just because Harry Potter was already taken care of!" She let out a sob and Draco actually threw himself on top of her and began murmuring into her ear, and slowly the magic in the air began to dissipate.

The silence in the room was as oppressive as ever.

Eventually Draco sat up, pulling Hermione along with him. She immediately scrambled to kick off her shoes and curl herself into a ball against his side. Potter just sat looking absolutely stunned.

"Well," Narcissa began after a few minutes. "I suppose we're all feeling a little emotional."

"Actually," Black said, his tone glacial as he glared at his godson. "I think that was very well said. Don't test me Harry, I will take your wand and ward you into the house. Now, what comes next that doesn't involved Harry taking out an ad in the Prophet inviting You Know Who to kill him?"

"Lucius and I discussed this briefly last night. We think it would be best to send the children out of the country."

"What, no! I can't leave Hogwarts until I sit my O.W.L.s!" Hermione protested. "It's illegal, I won't ever be able to come back!"

"Just for the summer, for now," she soothed. "Nobody will think it odd for you to go away for the summer and you'll be safe overseas"

"That sounds like a fantastic idea," Richard immediately interjected.

"Where would we go?" Draco asked.

"There are many options, a beach, perhaps?" Lucius said, quirking an eyebrow at his son. He didn't imagine for a moment that he'd turn down the opportunity to spend the entire summer with Hermione on a beach.

But then he noticed him and Hermione exchanging a glance, just a quick thing, but it spoke to a sort of silent communication between a couple that usually took decades to establish. They were going to have to stop calling them children.

"We still want to train though, if possible," Draco answered. "A bit of a holiday would be nice, but neither of us would feel right just laying around all summer knowing what's happening here. We want to be ready."

Lucius' heart clenched in his chest and he rubbed a thumb over the back of his wife's palm at how telling his son's words were. Hermione and Draco weren't planning to stay out of this conflict, and in less than two years their parents wouldn't have a legal or magical leg to stand on to try and stop them. He'd never felt such a combination of pride and terror.

"I think that can be arranged," he conceded easily.

"What about Harry?" Hermione asked.

"Mr. Potter is, of course, welcome."

Hermione didn't even glance at her friend. "Sirius?" She puled.

"I agree with Richard, I think that seems like a fantastic idea. I'd happily volunteer a Black property
too. Nobody would think look for Draco there."

"What do you think Harry?" Hermione asked, finally looking at him again.

He let out a long breath. "Yeah, okay," he nodded. "It seems a little bit wrong, but at the same time we can train anywhere."

"Who will accompany them though?" Helen spoke up. "They're too young to spend an entire summer on their own, even with tutors coming and going. Richard and I could take a couple of weeks, but we can't afford to leave our practice for longer than that."

"What you're saying is that you object to the idea of your teenage daughter alone with two teenage boys, one of whom is her boyfriend? I'm offended Helen," Draco held a hand to his chest in faux indignation.

She chuckled and then the rest of them joined in. Lucius was grateful to his son for injecting even a small amount of levity into the situation.

"A boyfriend who literally just tackled my girl and laid on top of her in front of us and his parents," Richard grumbled; it was equal parts resignation and irritation.

Lucius suppressed a sigh. He had fully embraced Hermione. He'd accepted the Grangers. He'd even conceded that they couldn't afford to shut muggleborns out of their society. But he didn't think he would ever amend his view that there were unfortunate side-effects to mixing muggles and magicals in the same company.

By definition muggles were ignorant to magic. And he'd noticed that Richard- and to a lesser extent Helen- tended to forget that magic was not a parlor trick but part of their daughter's very being. She could not be separated from it and it was a major part of her relationship with Draco.

She was already being enveloped into the Malfoy, as well as the Black family magic. The morning Hermione and Draco had performed their betrothal ritual he'd sat straight up in bed, shocked by the alteration to his magic. It was almost as powerful as Draco's birth. And while he had loved Hermione for years, now it went much deeper, it had become an intrinsic part of him. He hadn't said as much to Narcissa, but he had longed to call for Hermione last night as well because without her there was a hole in him.

And Draco's reaction to her earlier magical upset had been as natural as breathing. Lucius knew how it had probably looked to Richard Granger, if any other boy had touched Hermione like that he would have been up in arms himself. But Draco wasn't any other boy, and there had been absolutely nothing inappropriate or even vaguely sexual about his actions, and Lucius felt himself bristling at the comment. He took a calming breath; they had enough to deal with.

"I think that boyfriend just kept our daughter from blowing up his parents sitting room," Helen said quietly.

Lucius nodded in the woman's direction and she shot him a tight smile.

"I too could do a week here or there," Narcissa brought the discussion back on track, "but I'll need to be here to support Lucius, I can't be away all summer."

"Have I just been volunteered by process of elimination?" Sirius laughed. "Well damn, that sounds terrible, go hang out with the kids on the beach for a summer. You're all evil for forcing me into this."
"Consider yourself volunteered then," Lucius drawled. "Anything that you find unpleasant is acceptable to me," he continued in the spirit of sarcasm in which the original comment was offered.

"We will have to inform Dumbledore though."

Lucius just quirked an eyebrow in question.

"Of your loyalties," Sirius clarified. "If I'm not around to report to him, you'll have to do it yourself. But frankly I think it's time that we all joined the same team. It was one thing before, but now…"

Lucius sighed, the other man had a point. Now that the Dark Lord was fully back they were on an even more truncated timeline and could use any resource that they could get. Also, it would be complicated to the point of absurdity to hide his identity from the leader of the light from here on out. He didn't like it, but he understood the necessity.

"I agree, and there's nothing like the present, we can use this news of the Dark Lord's return to help convince him that I am serious. Severus has probably already informed him, but my unsolicited voluntary confirmation is different. Will he see you if you owl him?"

Sirius nodded. "He should, I can do that now." He rose from his seat and strode in the direction of the owelry.

"The rest of us can have brunch while we wait for his answer. We can decide where the children will spend the summer," Narcissa said with forced cheerfulness.

Lucius squeezed her hand before helping her up. "I'd like a word with Draco and Hermione though, please."

As Narcissa led Potter and the Grangers towards the dining room Lucius waved his son and Hermione towards his study. They followed him, but stopped just inside the doorway, Hermione clinging to Draco's arm and both of them looking very hesitant. He leaned against the front of his desk and regarded them. "You're not in trouble. Did you think that you were?"

Draco shrugged.

"It's been a bad day," Hermione clarified.

"I truly just wanted to speak with you," he gestured them forward encouraging them to close the distance. But found himself at a loss as to exactly what he wanted to say. He felt as if he'd come to terms with his mortality over the course of the past twenty-four hours and that was a heady thing.

He knew he could be summoned again at any moment, expected it, in fact. The Dark Lord would not be satisfied simply to have succeeded in his ritual for long, he would have plans he wanted to move forward. And Lucius didn't want to leave anything unsaid if things went awry on one of those occasions. Especially as they'd just decided that two of the three most important people in the world to him were about to go abroad for months.

"I just wanted you both to know how much I love you."

Draco froze and Hermione sucked in a loud breath.

"Father, don't." His son swallowed and reached for him.

"I'm not planning on doing anything foolish, and I have no intention of giving up. But my eyes have been well and truly opened to the precarious nature of my situation." He placed one arm around
Draco’s shoulders. "You are the best thing that I have ever done, by far, and I take comfort knowing that if anything were to happen to me, that you will look after your mother. But Draco," he turned the younger man and extended his arms so that he was holding his son by both shoulders and could look him in the eyes. "I know I have raised you to be proud of our name, but I fear that I have made you feel the need to put the Malfoy legacy before anything else. When it comes down to it, your duty to your family is to love and protect your mother and Hermione, and to a lesser extent your grandmother, aunt, and cousin. Their lives are what's really important, do you understand me? Not this place," he gestured to the Manor around him.

Draco nodded.

"I'm prouder of you than I can possibly express."

Draco let out a suspiciously shaky breath and looked away, moving to stand beside him. Lucius let him have his moment. He gestured to Hermione with his free arm, he refused to let go of Draco completely.

She rushed towards him and eagerly tucked herself under his arm. He felt rather than heard Draco chuckle; she had always been so enthusiastic, it had once annoyed him, but it was now one of his favorite things about her.

"I have heard Narcissa describe you as a light in our lives more than once, and I can't agree more, Mignonette. And just like I trust Draco to take care of Narcissa, if necessary, I trust you to take care of him."

"Of course," she snuffled.

"And maybe give my wife a handful of grandchildren to indulge."

He felt her freeze and held back a laugh when she reared back, her nose wrinkled, her face a picture of indignation. "A handful?!"

He saw the moment she realized that he was playing with her and allowed himself a laugh.

She tilted her head this way and that. "Not funny, Father."

The slowly blooming smile on her face told him that she too was toying with him, pushing her boundaries, but the sincerity in her eyes told him that she truly meant the moniker.

"I wasn't joking, Daughter, though I think that you are only one of two people in the world who think that I'm even occasionally funny."

"I find your constant efforts to pretend that Narcissa isn't the boss of you to be hilarious," she deadpanned.

Draco looked momentarily horrified, until he began to laugh, and then his son joined in. He would fight like hell, but if worse came to worst his family would survive. Draco and Hermione carried the soul of it within them. And whereas he might doubt himself, they were strong enough, they were light enough to make it through the looming darkness.

Chapter End Notes
Thanks to Weestarmeggie for letting me pick her brain, and then reading this over, and then repeat! And thank you all for reading and sticking with this story. The comments I get on it, and other forms of love, here and elsewhere consistently make my days!
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 39: Interlude- Sirius

He was beginning to think that Black blood, along with carrying a propensity for transfigurative magic and insanity, might also grant one a touch of the sight. Because for the second time in his life he'd felt uneasy, to the point where he was absolutely convinced that something was catastrophically wrong. But his godson was sleeping in his bed, under his care, and there was no rat to chase, at least not one he had any idea how to locate. And even if there had been, he couldn't fail Harry like that twice.

This determination didn't mean that he got a wink of sleep.

Therefore, Narcissa's head in the floo early the next morning was no surprise, nor was it a relief, but it was at least a confirmation that his instincts were on point.

"We need to meet," she said, her voice flat, and she didn't appear to have gotten any more sleep than he had.

Normally, even with him, Narcissa was all about propriety, unless she was truly annoyed with him, she always saw to the pleasantries. Such a terse greeting was utterly out of character for her.

"What's going on?"

"I shouldn't say much through the floo, but suffice it to say, he's back."

Sirius would have sworn his heart stopped in his chest when he became aware that she was still talking.

"It's your decision if you'd like Harry to be involved in this discussion, but just so you know Draco and Hermione will both be present."

"I'll bring him," Sirius wheezed, barely able to catch his breath, "he has as much, if not more right than anybody to hear what happened. We'll be over in half an hour."

She nodded. "We'll have breakfast available," then chuckled bitterly at the inanity; he knew exactly how she felt. "The elves are trying to be helpful..." she concluded.

"I'll see you then Narcissa."

"I-" she hesitated and her face softened. "Give him a hug Sirius, it'll help, I know it helped me."

He just smiled tightly in return and her head disappeared from the flames.

Telling his godson that Voldemort had apparently been resurrected from his wraith state was just about the worst experience of Sirius' life, and that was saying something. Because Harry didn't fall to pieces, or ask a millions questions. Much worse than that, he just sat there and took it stoically. It was as if he'd come to expect that bad things were just bound to happen to him. It only took Sirius a few moments to understand that was exactly what his godson had done, and it felt like his heart was being crushed in his chest.
He certainly didn't begrudge Lucius his job in having to tell them all exactly what had happened, especially after the way Hermione let out this absolutely heartbreaking keening sound the moment she found out that her friend had been killed, and then bolted from the room. For the first time he almost even felt sorry for the man and what he was embroiled in.

When it was decided that they were going to meet with Dumbledore, Sirius almost relished in the idea of the ensuing confrontation. He had some serious issues with the things that had happened to Harry since he'd entered Hogwarts- and with things that had happened before that- most of which he held Dumbledore responsible for, but he had been attempting to divert attention away from Harry (which had proven futile) so he had held back in the past. It was petty, but he was quite certain they were about to catch the man flat footed and he had always enjoyed a good prank, even on days like today.

He sent the headmaster an owl and wasn't surprised when he replied right away, and for the first time Sirius was thankful for Dumbledore's intense interest in Harry. He was certain the quick response was due to him being Harry's guardian. That was something he would be discussing with Dumbledore today, he refused to allow his godson to become a weapon to be aimed at Voldemort.

After brunch at Malfoy Manor where they all picked over their food he flooed to Hogwarts, straight into Dumbledore's office. The man was seated behind his desk and if Sirius wasn't mistaken he looked graver than normal.

"Good afternoon, Sirius, to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

Sirius had no intention of beating around the bush. "I'm afraid what I have to say you are not going to find to be a pleasure Albus, but I suspect you already know that. Voldemort-" Sirius was proud of the fact that he didn't stutter over the name as Harry absolutely insisted on using it and he didn't think Dumbledore would be particularly impressed if he appeared afraid- "has been resurrected."

Dumbledore sat forward in his chair very quickly. "Did Harry tell you this?"

"Harry? No. How would Harry know?"

"Harry has been known to react to Voldemort's presence, I thought perhaps he felt his return."

"You mean through his scar," Sirius asked knowingly.

Dumbledore just stared at him and slowly inclined his head.

"Because you had a professor who was possessed by Voldemort teaching my godson for a full year?"

The elderly wizard didn't respond to this.

"Albus, you are far too old and far too shrewd not to have realized what was going on inside your own school. But I'm no fool either. As soon as I heard Harry's recollection of events I knew that Voldemort's presence, as well as that business with the Philosopher's Stone, was meant to test my godson. I don't know what you think you discovered, I don't care. His scar is clean, he is just like any other fourteen year old boy now."

"Sirius."

He held up his hand. "No, that's my final word on the subject. Now, back to the reason for my visit. Voldemort's return, can I assume from your reaction, or lack thereof, that you already knew this."
He nodded.

"And that Neville Longbottom was killed in the process?"

Dumbledore's eyes became ineffably sad, he removed his spectacles and rubbed his forehead, suddenly looking every single one of his his hundred plus years; however much Sirius sometimes didn't trust his motives, the headmaster cared for his students.

"I won't ask you to reveal how you got your information, I don't need to know. I got mine from a source who was present at the resurrection, a source who would like to speak to you."

Dumbledore's head shot up. "You speak of somebody within Voldemort's ranks, a Death Eater?"

"He has the mark, yes, but even I can admit that I don't think he qualifies as a Death Eater any longer. He wishes to be an informant for the Light."

"And this person can be trusted?"

"Yes, I watched him and his family for awhile in my other form. They had no idea who I was at the time. What I witnessed convinced me. However, we realize that my word may not be enough. He is willing to come here now and take an unbreakable vow that he is no longer loyal to Voldemort."

"By all means then, ask him to come through," he said it casually but Sirius didn't miss the way he palmed his wand.

"He would like for his wife to accompany him, she has things to add to the discussion."

"Very well."

Sirius stuck his head back in the floo to tell the Malfoys they could come through and a minute later Lucius stepped into the office closely followed by Narcissa. Sirius cackled internally at the surprise the elderly wizard was unable to mask as he spotted them.

"Albus," Lucius greeted, offering his wife his arm.

"Hello Albus," Narcissa echoed, wrapping a deceptively delicate hand around her husband's forearm; Sirius actually felt sorry for anybody who was stupid enough to mess with her.

Dumbledore regarded them for a long moment. "I take it that things between the three of you are not as contentious as you led me to believe when you asked for my help securing Sirius' freedom then?"

Lucius just shrugged.

"Very well. Lucius, Narcissa, please have a seat. I believe we have much to discuss." He transfigured a chair into a loveseat and they sat. "You too, Sirius," and Sirius took the chair next to them which Dumbledore had indicated with his wand.

Dumbledore immediately turned his attention to the blond couple. "So you have had a change of heart, Lucius?"

It was stated so condescendingly that even Sirius took offense, even though he agreed with the sentiment. Did Dumbledore really think this was a way to gain allies?

But Lucius was a Slytherin, he barely blinked. "I did what I had to in order to survive the last war, I had already decided when I was barely into my twenties that I was done with the Dark Lord, there
was simply no escaping him. But it is true that my feelings about blood purity have evolved since then."

If Dumbledore had been standing up Sirius was fairly certain you'd have been able to knock him over with a feather. "I see, and may I ask what brought this about?"

"A muggleborn witch," Lucius explained simply. "Draco has brought a muggleborn witch into our family. They were ritually betrothed at Easter."

"And you accept this?"

Sirius could practically feel both Malfoys fighting the urge to roll their eyes; he didn't bother to resist the urge. There was absolutely no reason they would be here, and with him of all people, if they didn't accept Draco's choice.

"I was dubious at first," Lucius responded, "when I met her years ago. But now I consider her to be my daughter. We," he looked at Narcissa and she took his hand, "always wanted a daughter. Now we have one, we will do whatever we must to protect our children."

"I thought that I had heard the younger Mr. Malfoy was betrothed to a pureblood from France."

Sirius felt his eyebrows climb his forehead. There it was again, the headmaster demonstrating a rather disturbing interest in the personal lives of his students. Then again, given where he believed the Malfoys sat on the political spectrum, perhaps he'd thought it prudent to keep a particularly close eye on them and their son. Draco would one day be the one setting their political agenda, after all.

"A smokescreen to disguise where his true interests lie, which is much closer to home," Lucius answered, voice cool.

"Are you insinuating that I know the young woman in question?"

"She is one of your students," Lucius nodded. "Hermione Granger."

Dumbledore's mouth actually fell open slightly and Sirius hid a smile behind his hand.

"Your son is betrothed to Harry Potter's best friend?" He turned to look at Sirius, his gaze penetrating, he only paused for a moment, he was far from stupid. "Ah, things are beginning to make sense now. You gave Miss Granger your protection at the request of the Malfoys as they were not in a position to offer it themselves?"

Sirius gave him a sharp nod.

"And is Harry aware of the situation?"

"Not until recently, but right now he's at Malfoy Manor waiting with Hermione and Draco as well as the Grangers."

Dumbledore sat back in his chair. "Extraordinary, muggles at Malfoy Manor. A Slytherin and a Gryffindor together. This could do extraordinary things for our world," he marveled.

"Yes, but we have to get rid of the dark bastard first, which is why we are here," Sirius reminded him.

Dumbledore's gaze returned to the Malfoys, his eyes calculating. "What do you want?"
"Want?" Lucius drawled but the way he fidgeted with his walking stick betrayed his annoyance.

"I have my own spy, perhaps I don't wish to utilize your services if I feel the price is too high."

Lucius shook his head. "You're referring to Severus?"

Dumbledore nodded.

"That is exactly why you need me, I knew exactly who you were talking about. If I knew he was your spy, the Dark Lord surely does too."

"Severus convinced him he was a double agent, I believe he trusted him completely."

"Perhaps, perhaps not," Lucius shrugged like it didn't matter. "But that was thirteen years ago. Thirteen years he's been in your hip pocket, under your protection. He avoided Azkaban on your word alone. And don't you think it's rather telling that the Dark Lord was here, possessing one of your professors for an entire school year and yet he never sought out Severus for assistance?"

That actually seemed to bring Dumbledore up short, he stroked his beard, obviously buying time. "I see your point, that is troubling," he eventually admitted.

"And even if the Dark Lord did trust Severus, and continues to do so, his access will still be limited," Lucius added.

"How can you know that?"

"Because I know how the Dark Lord runs his organization. Severus was very young when he was vanquished for the first time, he hadn't had time to work his way up in the ranks, and he would have had a slower time of it anyway, as he is a half-blood and doesn't come from an old family. And now, simply because of the sheer amount of time that he spends in your proximity, he will be kept out of most strategic planning. He will be considered useful for his potions knowledge and to keep an eye on you, that is all."

"I was under the impression he was inner circle."

"The Dark Lord is very good at making you feel exactly as important as he needs you to feel. And have you considered that it's possible that Severus exaggerated his access to the Dark Lord to you? He needed your protection, it would have been to his benefit to make himself sound important."

"I trust Severus completely."

Sirius rolled his eyes.

Lucius just shrugged again. "That is your prerogative, I am not here to convince you otherwise and frankly I don't care. I was merely asking a question. But was he able to tell you that Peter Pettigrew was the spy within your organization during the last war? Because I would have been. Furthermore, I don't need anything from you. I do have a few requests, but nothing that requires any sacrifices on your part. I simply want to see him gone so that my children are safe."

Dumbledore let out a long, slow breath. "Your requests?"

"I assume you are re-forming your Order?"

"Yes."

Lucius nodded. "Good. But my identity and my family's true loyalties will remain a secret from
them until such time as I deem it necessary to inform them."

"And Severus?"

"Especially from him as he is the only one of them who will be spending any significant time with the Dark Lord, and while you may trust him completely, I do not. And even if I did trust him not to voluntarily reveal my identity to protect himself, you must know that the Dark Lord has ways of making you tell him things against your will. Severus is a mighty wizard, but he is not mightier than the Dark Lord. No, Albus, the less people who know, the safer I am, and more importantly, the safer my family is. This will stay between those currently in this room, and those waiting at Malfoy Manor. If I can't report to you directly, Sirius can act as a go-between."

"You expect the Order to trust the word of an unknown entity?"

"I expect them to trust your word."

Dumbledore sighed. "Very well, I suppose that is not unreasonable."

Sirius narrowed his eyes in the Headmaster's direction, suspicious that he had given in so quickly. Then again, Dumbledore wasn't only a shrewd politician, but the equivalent of a general. He had to know what a boon the Malfoys were for the cause. The Order hadn't actually defeated Voldemort last time. In fact, they had been on the brink of defeat themselves. They needed more weapons in their arsenal this time, they couldn't depend on the tragedy/miracle that had occurred in Godric's Hollow on Halloween 1981 to repeat itself.

There would certainly be some internal griping when the Order learned there was an anonymous source inside Death Eater ranks providing them information. Moody would be apoplectic. But they trusted Albus completely, and he would be able to talk them around.

"Anything else?" Dumbledore asked.

"Either a secure facility within the school where we," Lucius gestured between the three visitors, "can continue to train our children after they return for the year, or permission for them to leave several nights a week."

"Do you think that's wise? They're only children."

"Right," spat Sirius. "Because Voldemort never targets children."

"Furthermore," continued Lucius, "in case you've lost track, all three of them are entering their fifth year. They will not be children much longer. In fact, due to various life circumstances, I feel hard pressed to continue to call them children even now. The Dark Lord has already targeted Mr. Potter on multiple occasions, there is no reason to believe he will stop. And Draco and Hermione, as a Malfoy and a muggleborn respectively, are both in direct danger. It would be the height of foolishness not to offer them extra tuition."

"And why is that Albus?" Sirius took over. "Why does he seem determined to come after my godson? It cannot be a coincidence that when he couldn't get to Harry for his ritual he went after Neville Longbottom, the son of the other family you sent into hiding in '81."

Dumbledore was practically squirming in his chair at this point and Sirius knew that he knew something about Voldemort's interest in the Potters. He'd confessed as much to Harry after the incident with the Philosopher's Stone, he'd simply refused to tell him what it was. And perhaps he had been right, perhaps that was not a burden to be born by an eleven year old. But Sirius was a different matter.
"Is there a prophecy about my godson?" Sirius insisted.

"I'd rather not say."

"There were rumours of one, amongst the Dark Lord's followers," Lucius interjected.

"It's best, safest, for Harry if it was kept quiet."

"Says who, you?" Sirius reared forward in his chair. "I am his guardian! And frankly, Lucius and Narcissa have done far more to protect Harry than you have," he sighed and looked at Lucius. "I really didn't want to expose Harry like this."

It was Narcissa who answered though, sounding both worried and sympathetic. "I thought we decided it was best to know for certain."

"I still think so, I just don't like it."

"Expose Harry!" Dumbledore looked most alarmed. "What does that mean?"

Lucius tapped his cane against the stone floor and made a 'tsksing' sound, shaking his head.

"There is a Hall of Prophecies in the Department of Mysteries at the Ministry. It is every citizen's right to see if there are any prophecies pertaining to them and, if so, to come and collect them if they so choose. What?" Lucius smirked at the frantic look on Dumbledore's face. "You didn't think I would know about that? I have a seat on the Wizengamot, Albus, some members may choose to keep their activity within the Ministry largely symbolic, but surely you know I'm not one of them. Now, most people would prefer not to know if they have a prophecy, so the place and the process has been largely forgotten about, but it still exists."

"You mustn't!" Dumbledore exclaimed, "word of Harry Potter visiting the Ministry, to the Hall of Prophecies no less would never be kept quiet."

Sirius huffed and resisted the urge to stomp his feet. "You're forcing my hand, Albus. If you can't or simply won't tell me what you know, because I need to know what I'm dealing with. I need all the available information."

Dumbledore just sat there looking between the three of them for the longest time. "I'll tell you, though I really do advise against it."

"I really must insist," Sirius didn't waver.

"Very well," he sighed, standing and walking over to a cabinet in the corner. He opened it, removed a stone basin which he then walked back over and placed on his desk.

Sirius exchanged a pointed look with Narcissa and Lucius. Dumbledore had a pensieve? Those things were so rare they were practically myths. But the artefact in question would certainly come in handy and the fact that Dumbledore had allowed them to see it spoke volumes. The Headmaster raised his wand to his temple and pulled what looked like a chain of white mist from his head, and then directed it into the pensieve.

"This is my memory of hearing the prophecy in the spring of 1980. Once I discovered that Voldemort had learned the contents of the first half of it, I knew which families to send into hiding." He pressed a series of runes carved into the top of the bowl and the ghostly figure of the woman Sirius recognized as Harry's divination teacher, rose from within and began to speak.
"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches… born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies… and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not… and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives… the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies…"

There were a few beats of silence and then Lucius actually snorted. "And that gentlemen and my lady, is why only fools chase prophecies. What a load of codswallop, and a vague load of codswallop at that."

"What do you mean, Lucius?" Narcissa asked.

"For instance, it said 'the seventh month,' well the seventh month in what calendar: Chinese, Coptic, Julian, Ptolemaic? Shall I continue? And of what year? It's entirely unclear on that point, we could be talking hundreds, even thousands of years in the future."

"Prophecies are usually made when the event is imminent," Dumbledore interrupted.

"Usually, not always," Lucius snapped. "But that's not even the most troubling part. What does vanquish mean in this context? How can one die at the hand of the other if neither can live while the other survives? Because both would have to be alive at the same time, at some point, in order for one to kill the other. Though, perhaps that is more a metaphor than anything else," he sucked in a long breath through his nose, and for the first time Sirius was willing to admit that he was very happy Lucius was on their side. "I could go on and on. And if you accept that this refers to Mr. Potter, I could make a case that it was fulfilled that night in 1981."

"You're right," Narcissa gasped, "the Dark Lord's body died that night and by all accounts Harry caused that. And with the deliberate act of targeting Harry, he was acknowledging that this referred to him, therefore marking him as his equal."

"You're being optimistic," Dumbledore responded, he looked aggrieved but Sirius wasn't sure he believed it. "I'm afraid Harry will have to be the one to face him."

"Absolutely not!" Sirius shouted. "I know that because of this Voldemort will continue to come after my godson, but we're not going to act like this whole war rests on his shoulders. I won't allow it!"

"Sirius-"

"No, I don't care about your opinions on this matter. I'm beginning to find that I care very little about your opinion on most matters! I do recognize, though, that most of the witches and wizards in this country view you as the Leader of the Light, therefore I do think you're an important ally, but that is all! Although I do have a question for you. If you believe that Harry is fated to fight Voldemort, why are you opposed to him being trained? Why hasn't he been in training all along? As his headmaster it was well within your purview to offer him extra tuition the moment he entered this castle! Extra tuition you are singularly qualified to provide!"

"I'd hoped we had time. I wanted to spare him the burden."

"Well we obviously don't," Sirius barked. "And if you call what has been happening to him in this school for the past four years 'sparing him the burden' then you are delusional!" He struggled to catch his breath but plowed on. "And another thing, how did Voldemort find out about this prophecy? I doubt you told him, and a seer never remembers giving a true prophecy."
Dumbledore had the good grace to look...like something at least approaching guilt. "Unfortunately we were in a public place and were overheard."

Sirius just blinked at the man and tried to figure out what still wasn't adding up. It only took a moment before it clicked; as much as Dumbledore liked to give the impression of being omniscient, he wasn't. "How did you discover Voldemort had learned of the prophecy? You obviously didn't know right away, it was more than a year before you sent the Potters and Longbottoms into hiding. And more than that, how did you get such specific information that he was only aware of the first half?"

"He did have a spy in the Dark Lord's ranks," Lucius interjected calmly.

"Yes, one that you just made a very good case for not having access to this kind of information. Lucius, you said that you didn't even know for sure that there was a prophecy, much less its contents. What are the chances that Snape would have known about this?"

"I do find it difficult to believe."

"Unless he was the one who overheard it in the first place and went running to tell his master, but when he found out Voldemort was targeting the Potters, he started to feel guilty."

"Why would he care about that?" Lucius questioned.

He pinned his stare on Lucius. "As you said, a muggleborn witch. He wanted Lily, he always wanted Lily, and he couldn't have her if she was dead." He turned back to Dumbledore. "So, he came to you and warned you that she was in danger. And you manipulated him into spying for you. Am I right?"

Dumbledore's silence spoke volumes.

Sirius scoffed. "It's so fucking ironic. Lily begged him for years to take a step back from his friends who thought of her as filth, she told him they were dangerous, that no good would come from being associated with them. She was a loyal friend to him even when he would barely acknowledge her. She stood up for him against us more times than I can possibly tell you. She took him back time and time again until one day she just couldn't take it anymore! But even after that she felt terrible, like she'd let him down. And he waited until the most powerful Dark Lord Britain has ever seen is hunting her family, her baby, to listen to her." He leapt up. "Is he here? I'm going to fucking kill him."

He turned and strode towards the door, but all of a sudden Narcissa was standing in front of him, blocking his path. She actually took his face in her hands. "You can't Sirius and you know it! Think of Harry. This is a time to tread lightly."

He slumped and put his arms around her, wondering when his cool cousin had become a source of comfort. "She was the best of all of us, Cissy," he choked out. "So ridiculously, naively kind. She should be here. I'm a poor replacement for James, much less her. And she deserved better than this."

She turned her face to speak directly into his ear. "If this is true, I'll help you kill him myself when this is all over."

He pulled back, startled.

She shrugged. "It's a bad idea to mess with a Black."
He let out a startled chuckle but then another thing occurred to him, and he spun on his heel and walked up to Dumbledore's desk, pounding one fist on top of it. "You have this man teaching Harry! How sick is that! And he treats him like dirt!"

Dumbledore opened his mouth, ostensibly to object.

"Don't tell me he's exaggerating. I have Hermione and even Draco's independent assertions as to his behavior. I thought that it was because of me and James, but now I'm betting it's at least partially because he resents the fact that James Potter's son lived while Lily died."

Dumbledore ignored that accusation while he looked pointedly at Lucius. "You don't seem to have any problem with the boy being exposed to Death Eaters."

Sirius resisted the urge to growl, his inner grim was right at the surface at the moment. "Lucius and I don't see eye to eye on more issues than I can count, but he's been honest with Harry and it is completely within Harry's control how much he has to be around him. You, on the other hand, have basically locked him in a room twice a week with a man who was, at least in part, responsible for his parents deaths. Should I be worried that you'll be hiring Peter to teach Defense next year?"

His raging was once again interrupted by a gentle hand on his back. "Go back to Harry, Sirius," Narcissa murmured. "Lucius and I will finish getting things squared away with the Headmaster. He probably wants to hear about last night and I doubt you want to sit through that again."

Sirius knew he was being handled. He just didn't care. He strode towards the fireplace, scooped up a handful of floo powder, and tossed it in, but before he stepped into the flames he turned back to Dumbledore.

"I'll be hiring Harry and Hermione a private potions tutor. And you tell that man to stay away from my godson, I don't care what excuse you give him. It would be in his best interests if he stayed away from me too. Don't mess with me on this, Albus."

He spilled out of the fireplace at Malfoy Manor and came face to face with his godson, Hermione, and Draco who just stared at him. He could only assume he looked as agitated as he felt.

"Well that was interesting."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to weestarmeggie for beta reading this. Thanks to you all for reading!
It was Harry's birthday, so he, along with Draco and Hermione had been given the afternoon off from training and tutoring. Hermione was stretched out on a towel on the soft and pristine sand of the beach in front of the house where they were living for the summer, Holly coiled up beside her, basking in the sun.

Holly, who had arrived in the United States tucked carefully inside Harry's carry-on luggage, wrapped in his invisibility cloak. Their other familiars had been forced to stay home. Hermione missed Crookshanks, so Holly was a comfort.

They were both watching Draco and Harry on their brooms. She couldn't actually understand Holly's hissing- which was something that was more than a little annoying to her. Why wasn't parseltongue something that you could learn? She really would have liked to be able to properly communicate with the reptile.

Despite that obstacle, she could still tell that Holly felt similarly to her; both amused by the boys' antics and a little frightened for their safety. According to Harry, Holly had taken great pride in making Draco comfortable with snakes and had adopted him as one of her brood- because she considered them all as belonging to her.

The boys were chasing the professional training snitch Hermione had bought for Draco for his birthday last month. It was a purchase Hermione was quickly becoming to regret. Because they were maniacs and she would have liked to have some peace of mind.

If Draco and Harry's respective quidditch captains could see them training together, they'd probably have coronaries. Then again, the brutal way they were pushing each other and the amount of smack talk being bandied back and forth between them probably indicated that their new friendship would actually heighten their rivalry rather than diminish it. Hermione suppressed a sigh at the thought.

And, as if on cue to test her nerves, Harry suddenly whizzed by Draco at such close range that Hermione was certain they'd both be knocked off their brooms, but they only laughed uproariously as they barely missed each other. Hermione didn't bother to suppress her groan. Boys were so weird. But she didn't regret being here with them for a moment. She closed her eyes and thought over the past month.

One week to the day after Voldemort's resurrection she, Draco, Harry, and Sirius had boarded a plane to America. Everyone had easily agreed that it was safest for them all, but especially Harry, to travel by muggle means. Since becoming acquainted with the Malfoys, Hermione had learned how much money really did talk and they were departing the country faster that she ever could have imagined.

Passports had quickly been arranged for Harry and Sirius through Gringotts (Draco already had one from the previous summer when he'd traveled to France with the Grangers). A house had been purchased on a remote island off the coast of the state of Georgia, it had been warded, and a cadre of tutors had been employed for the three teenagers. And their summer plans were set.

It was with great excitement that the four said their farewells to the Malfoy and Granger parents and headed for Heathrow. Somewhat ironically, amongst the three wizards, Draco had the most
experience with muggle international travel. But none of them had ever been on an aeroplane, or even inside an airport, which was something they had all failed to consider while making their plans.

For Hermione it was like traveling with three toddlers, which was rather charming, at first. It was nice to see them marvel over everything. However, cute quickly turned into hair pulling frustration. Because three toddlers would have been easier to manage; she would at least have had a size advantage on small children, and a chance at wrangling them. She'd never had any chance with the three full grown toddlers who accompanied her and had no intention of being corralled. And to make it worse, they played off of each other.

They pointed at everything, and what they weren't content to just point at they touched, and when that wasn't enough they poked. Unfortunately for Hermione, in Draco's case, the poking included her arm, over and over and over; whenever he saw something he wanted her to look at, which was often. Before they'd even gotten on the plane she'd snapped at him that if he didn't stop, she was going to break his finger. Harry had laughed over that remark for five minutes straight.

And because the combined fortunes of the three men in the group could probably have purchased several small countries, they flew first class. Which should have been a treat for Hermione, except it made the flight attendants considerably less likely to scold her companions for their (loud) enthusiasm. Sirius eventually calmed down, but Harry and Draco did not.

Harry and Sirius were seated in the row in front of her and Draco, and Harry kept turning around in his seat and popping his head over the headrest to tell them something. Draco kept fidgeting, and they both chattered incessantly. It was honestly very unlike them both, so Hermione wasn't prepared to handle it, and she eventually gave up. Somewhere over the Atlantic, utterly fed up, she forced Harry to trade seats with her. She'd fallen into the place next to Sirius, placed her head on his shoulder, and ignored the way he was shaking with laughter.

They landed in Atlanta several hours later with Hermione's sanity considerably more intact, and then transferred to a much smaller plane for a short journey south. When they arrived in Savannah, Hermione was relieved to discover that they had hired not only a car, but a driver for the two hour journey to their house. She knew that Sirius knew how to drive, in theory, but he hadn't done so in more than a decade and she had been more than a little worried that he might forget which side of the road he was supposed to be on. And she was too tired to stay awake and keep watch.

She fell in love with the house the moment she laid eyes on it; three storeys with wide wrap around porches surrounding each one and right on the beach, it was beautiful. They quickly fell into a routine, Sirius had actually drawn up a schedule for them. They had lessons not just in defense but charms and transfiguration.

Draco had always been a good student, but Harry buckled down even more than he had for his tournament training. It had been a lot of work but Sirius and their parents had been very careful that they had time off, so it had also been a lot of fun. They had also- inadvertently- drafted Harry into their muggle studies. He'd had a myriad of questions when he'd discovered Draco reading a muggle biology text and when they'd informed him that they were both trying to remain on pace with kids their age in the muggle world, he'd been intrigued. And then he'd seemed to take it as a challenge.

Hermione was drifting in that lovely place between sleep and wakefulness and she didn't notice when the boys went silent, nor that they'd landed on the beach a few feet away from her until she felt a shadow fall upon her, blocking her sun. She slowly opened her eyes and blinked at the two figures looming over her.

Both wearing only swim trunks, their broomsticks in hand, they also had grave expressions on their
faces. And that's when she noticed that in addition to his Nimbus 2001, Draco was holding the Comet 420 which Lucius had purchased for her to learn to fly on at the same time he'd bought the Slytherin team brooms. She'd avoided using it at all costs—she just couldn't trust brooms, perhaps it was illogical but it was how she felt—and was usually successful distracting both Draco and Lucius from trying to instruct her on riding a broom by asking for Abraxan riding lessons instead.

Unfortunately, her sweet foal Selene, and all the rest of the Abraxans were at Malfoy Manor and apparently Draco and Harry had decided it was time for her to learn.

"No," she said firmly.

"Come on," Harry cajoled.

"Doesn't it drive you crazy that there's something you can't do?" Draco added.

She glared at their stubborn expressions. "I've decided I liked it better when the two of you hated each other."

They both laughed.

"You did not," insisted Harry with a roll of his eyes. "Merlin, the sneaking around must have been exhausting."

"It was. Which is why I deserve a little relaxation. You boys just go back to your game, I was soaking up some sun," she settled back on her towel and endeavored to pretend that they weren't there.

"Nice try," Draco snorted.

"Actually, I thought it was kind of pathetic," Harry responded.

Hermione's eyes popped open without her permission and she gaped at them. Were they ganging up on her?

She went with another route. "The pair of you know how I hate brooms," she pleaded, feeling a little pathetic.

They looked at each other and fell to the sand. Draco pulled her into his lap, placing a kiss against her neck. Harry had finally stopped looking away at these easy, affectionate gestures and simply rolled his eyes.

"Mia, it's irresponsible of you not to learn to become at least comfortable enough on a broom to be able to use one in an emergency," Draco said.

"Excuse me?"

"We're too young to apparate," Draco reminded her, stroking her waist, "we might not always have a portkey or floo on hand, and it's much easier to ward against those things than it is against brooms anyway. You should at least become proficient on a broom, not just for your own safety, but for all of our peace of mind."

She would have believed she was being played, and she still thought she was— at least a little— but then she looked up to see the expressions of genuine concern on both of their faces. And she relented. Draco's point was not without merit, she couldn't explain exactly why she'd dug her heels in so completely over the broom issue.
"Okay," she answered quietly. "But I'm not going up by myself at first. I want to be taught properly. Nobody learns to drive before they've ever even been in a car," she groused.

"Huh," Harry grunted.

"What?"

"That's actually a really good point."

"Oh, thank you so much for admitting that," she said with a dramatic roll of her eyes.

"Hermione," Harry answered gently. "I've never blamed you for not liking to fly. I even kind of get it, it doesn't come naturally to you. I've just always found it frustrating that it's the one thing you've sort of conceded. You wouldn't give up on anything else like this."

She narrowed her eyes in his direction and scrambled off of Draco's lap, feeling like she'd just been played, but she couldn't ignore the challenge. "Okay, who's going to teach me?"

They exchanged a glance.

"I just assumed Malfoy would be the one," Harry admitted.

"Do you not want me to?" Draco asked her.

"It's not that."

"Tell us what it is then, Mia."

She shrugged. "The two of you have different styles of flying."

"Really?" Draco smirked. "I'm pretty sure I've heard you describe us both as 'irresponsible maniacs' or something of the sort."

"Oh, you're both that. I just meant that you're all about technique, because that's how you were taught. Harry relies more on his instincts. You and Lucius have both attempted to teach me in the past, and I just wondered if Harry's method might work better for me, as I tend to overthink things in general." She shrugged. "No offense," she added in a small voice.

His expression was inscrutable for a moment, and then it softened. "I'm not offended. That's a smart thought, and a good idea." He looked at Harry who had a proud little smile on his face.

"You trust me?" He looked back and forth between them.

Draco just shrugged. "To keep me safe, absolutely," Hermione answered without question, "not to scare the life out of me? Not so much. But I'd really appreciate it if you could resist the urge."

He walked over and took the Comet from Draco. "You should learn on this, I don't think you'll have any interest in borrowing my Firebolt in the near future."

"That sounds good," she agreed quietly.

She mounted the broom in front of Harry, as instructed, and then they rose up into the air, Draco keeping pace beside them. Harry had placed her hands on the broom and then covered hers with his. He didn't speak, he just let her feel how he guided and steered the broom. After awhile he began to quietly tell her what he planned to do before he did it, and soon enough she began to react to him, until, without her fully realizing it, they were steering the broom together.
After a while his hands were only hovering above hers. "I think that's enough for today," he finally told her quietly and helped her land on the beach.

Only when her feet were firmly back on the sand did she realize what she'd just accomplished. She looked back and forth between Harry, and Draco who had been beside them the whole time and had just landed as well, squealed and hauled them both to her, one arm around each of their necks. Harry patted her awkwardly and she promptly let him go and turned to kiss Draco soundly. She knew him well enough to understand what a concession to his pride it had been to allow Harry to be the one to help her.

It was only when she heard applause that she realized they'd been joined on the beach by Sirius, as well as her parents and Narcissa who were all visiting for a couple of weeks. Apparently, they'd spotted what was going on and had come out to investigate.

Hermione scurried over to her abandoned towel and beach bag, ruffling inside until she found her wand as Holly watched her with obvious interest. "What do you think girl, can I manage it?" She murmured.

Ever since Harry's performance during the first task both Hermione and Draco had been anxious to learn the patronus charm for themselves. It was a theoretically impractical spell, rarely useful and magically exhausting. But their experiences with Dementors as well as just being in the presence of Harry's patronus convinced both Draco and Hermione that it was something they wanted to learn; being able to conjure that kind of positive force could only be a good thing.

Much to Hermione's annoyance Draco picked it up quickly. Though his breathtakingly beautiful abraxan patronus left her unable to be truly cross that he'd managed the piece of magic before she had. Being in the presence of Draco's patronus was utter bliss for her, she could only assume that their connection increased the effect that his particular version of the charm had on her.

But Hermione had been most frustrated that she'd had so little success with the charm. She rarely achieved more than a mist and the effort had nearly exhausted her; she'd been forbidden from trying it for several weeks lest she be unable to perform in her lessons due to magical exhaustion.

She concentrated on the sight of so many of the people she loved most gathered on the beach. On Harry who had just been so patient with her. And mostly on Draco, who was beaming at her with pride, no hint of resentment that she'd essentially just chosen Harry over him; on the way he loved her, and she felt safe in his arms. She strode up to him and pressed her back against Draco's chest, drawing strength from his touch.

"Expecto Patronum."

There was laughing and crying; Hermione experienced some messy combination of both as a silver abraxan, Selene's twin in patronus form, galloped down the beach.

"Well," Sirius broke the silence, "I guess if there were any doubts about what they are to each other… It's too bad, Kitten could have had her pick of wizards..." he cackled.

And with that Narcissa shot a stinging hex at his bum that had him trotting down the beach and into the waves. Hermione turned and met Draco's eyes and he enveloped her into his arms without another word.

"Love you."

"I love you too."
Narcissa was anxious, but also sad to return home after two lovely weeks with the children in America. She’d enjoyed the trip. Even the traveling had been surprisingly comfortable; muggle transportation was a marvel. Portkeys could be so disorienting and taking one across the Atlantic—which was about the limit of their safe travel distance without dividing the journey—would have probably left her queasy for a full day afterwards. And Richard and Helen had explained to her that there were private- and much more luxurious- versions of the so-called aeroplanes. She would have to look into that.

She was, however, inexpressibly happy to be reunited with her husband. They had rarely been parted for so long over the duration of their marriage and she had assumed that he would feel the same way. That he would have been missing her and that upon her return that they would spend an enjoyable evening at home. His terse greeting of a kiss to her cheek and a crisp: "I need to show you something," was a disappointment, but she trusted him enough to know that whatever he wanted must be important.

When they entered his study she spotted a large map of Britain spread across his desk.

"Lucius, what is this?"

"I figured it out. While you were gone, I figured out a way to track down the others," he gestured vaguely to the Dark Lord's journal they'd thus far been keeping at Cliff House, but which now appeared to be contained within some kind of shield, as she felt none of the usual side-effects from its presence. "At least I thought I had." He slumped and tugged at his hair.

Narcissa sucked in a breath; Lucius hadn't betrayed his nerves so clearly since she'd been in labor with Draco. She wasn't sure if she was more annoyed or concerned by this particular reaction.

"Lucius, you were never supposed to work with this alone, it's dangerous!"

"I-" he took a deep breath, "could you perhaps berate me later? Look at this," he gestured back to his desk.

She glanced at the map, it appeared to be a complete map of Britain which was, at the moment, focused and magnified on London.

"What's that?" She asked, gesturing towards a red dot. She rounded the desk, attempting to follow the dot's path as it zoomed around like it was lost and frantic to find what it was looking for.

"The result of my location spell. It's meant to seek the soul piece closest to that which we have at hand," he gestured to the diary then he handed her several sheaves of parchment. "Perhaps you could tell me where I went wrong, I was certain my calculations were sound or I never would have attempted it, but it appears I erred."

She took the parchment he'd shoved into her hands, aware of the gravity of her husband's confession given his usual reticence to admit when he was wrong, but she was mostly mesmerised by the racing dot on the map.

There was something there.

"You said it would seek the closest soul piece?" Narcissa clarified.

"Yes, but it's obviously malfunctioned," he practically growled, his frustration obvious.
"I don't think so," she countered.

"It's dancing around the map Cissa. I didn't expect an exact location, but it's rounding an entire cluster of blocks."

"Yes, but one of these streets- one on which it seems to be lingering- I recognize the name: Grimmauld Place. My Aunt Walburga and Uncle Orion used to live there. But I can't remember the exact address."

Lucius fell into his desk chair and raked a hand over his face. "It's in the house Black donated to the Order for their headquarters, the one he grew up in, isn't it?"

"Yes," Narcissa answered, her mouth opening and closing in surprise. "Of course, that makes perfect sense, we have to get it out of there, Lucius, who knows what it will do to those people! Or in what irresponsible way they might attempt to dispose of it!"

"But the house is under the Fidelius so you can't remember the exact address," he sighed, and she saw the realization of what he'd been missing flash across his face, "nor can a location charm find it, the vicinity yes, but not the exact location. Sirius basically told us as much before he left, but he was obviously limited in what he could disclose. But do they actually think they are safe there? I can't be the only one who knew of Orion Black's residence when he died. I didn't recognize it immediately, but I would have figured it out eventually."

"Well don't encourage that kind of talk, Lucius."

"Of course I wouldn't," he rolled his eyes, "but the Fidelius charm is fallible. They must know that, Potter's parents are proof. And surely they could find a better location than the childhood home of their wealthiest member who also just so happens to be the member of a dark family, but is also potentially the most infamous blood traitor of all time- the Dark Lord may not be able to find its exact location, but I imagine he will eventually send people to stake out the area to see if there's any activity. I very well be one of them!"

"I don't know," she sighed, unable to fault his logic. "I'm uncertain if any other Order members have Sirius' resources and are in a position to offer an alternative location, but I'm fairly certain that they aren't. Regardless, Sirius is going to have to come home for a few days, he's not going to be happy about it. But he can deal with it for this. Maybe, while he's locating the- thing- he can also find a way to convince them to move elsewhere."

Lucius snorted. "Well said."

"However, if Sirius just shows up and demands to search the house he'll have to explain himself to Dumbledore, there's no way he will be missed poking around there. He needs an excuse."

"He should be able to do as he likes in his own house," Lucius scoffed.

"Of course he should, but he's given the use of this particular house over to the Order and it will look suspicious if he suddenly tries to take it back, or just demands to search it out of nowhere."

Lucius was quiet for a moment before he snorted in reluctant agreement.

"Do you think we should tell Dumbledore what we seek?" Narcissa eventually asked.

"I think that I trust Dumbledore as far as I could throw him without magic. I don't know that we haven't made a mistake in regards to bringing him into our confidence at all."
"What else were we to do?"

"I don't know. But he's already proven unwilling to take my counsel. He's made an enemy of Fudge, not just an adversary but an outright enemy. Sirius might be able to talk to him- Dumbledore is one thing, Lord Black is another- but I'm almost certain he's determined to bury his head in the sand. He genuinely doesn't want to believe the Dark Lord is back, which is why I advised Dumbledore to work around him instead of insisting he announce the Dark Lord's return!"

"I know," she soothed, stepping between his legs and stroking the pads of her thumbs across his cheeks. She shared his frustration. It seemed that Dumbledore took none but his own counsel, so it was hard to bring him into their confidence until they felt that he had no choice but to follow their lead.

Lucius had warned Albus on more than one occasion that it was a bad idea to alert the public of the Dark Lord's return. He may have been Chief Warlock and Supreme Mugwamp but he had no proof, and no matter the tragedy of the Longbottom boy's death- which had never been confirmed, as his body had yet to be found- most people simply didn't want to believe that the Dark Lord had returned. And it was strategy that they needed to win the war, not sentimentality.

Albus had his followers, but most people wanted to believe the Ministry. And it was so much more difficult to recruit people to your cause when they thought you were out of your mind. Perhaps that was why the Order had always been so small, or perhaps people had just been complacent, content with the state of things unless they were personally threatened.

Dumbledore had only made things worse by running to the press with the news of the Dark Lord's resurrection when Fudge had been unwilling to deal with him. At his age, with his political experience, Narcissa couldn't understand how he didn't see that.

Lucius and Narcissa stood in silence for a few moments, his hands cupping her hips, forehead resting against her abdomen.

"There's something unnatural about his relationship with that snake as well," Lucius added eventually. "It's become blatantly obvious since you've been gone, I can't continue to pretend it isn't true, as disturbing as the ramifications might be."

"You think the snake is one?"

"I think that would be imminently foolish to make her into one. And in some ways it doesn't matter. I just know that she's dangerous and must be taken care of."

"Add it to the list, then," she sighed.

He met her eyes and let out a throaty chuckle. "Welcome home, love."
Chapter 41

The day after Narcissa and Hermione's parents returned to England, Sirius had been suddenly summoned back as well. He was grave and tight lipped about the necessity of his trip. But the three teenagers were absolutely flabbergasted when he informed them that because he would only be gone a few days, while their tutors would still be coming in on their regular schedule, at night they would be on their own.

It was an incredible display of trust that all three of them were determined not to betray… too badly. And since Sirius' last instructions to them were: "Don't do anything I wouldn't do." They all just decided that they'd basically been given permission to break a few rules.

Harry joked about having a party but then they realized that they didn't actually have anybody else to invite. So, instead, Draco and Harry broke into Sirius' stash of Firewhiskey and cigars- Hermione had no interest in either- but she did laugh at their drunken antics, and even more the next morning when they were sick as dogs. Draco spent the four nights Sirius was gone in Hermione's bed, while Harry pretended not to notice, but as they hadn't done anything that could possibly make Narcissa a grandmother before her forty-first birthday, Hermione also didn't feel too guilty about it.

When Sirius returned- looking much more upbeat than when he had departed- he had just glanced around at the tidier than usual house, smirked at them, but asked no questions, and that had been that.

The rest of the summer was even more wonderful than the other three summers since Hermione had started Hogwarts. She missed her parents and Narcissa, and especially Lucius since he hadn't even been able to visit. But living in the same house as Draco- and to a lesser extent Harry and Sirius- the whole time made up for the people she was missing.

And the best part was, for the first time in their relationship aside from their brief forays into the muggle world, she and Draco didn't have to hide. They could hold hands and kiss and cuddle whenever they wanted. They could work together in their lessons. They could eat their meals side by side.

The only downside for Hermione was that living with three men wasn't always a cake walk. There was just a lot of testosterone. And when she came down for breakfast one rainy Saturday morning in August and overheard Sirius suggesting that they spend the day watching a Sylvester Stallone movie marathon for 'inspiration,' she immediately turned on her heel and marched back upstairs to write a letter to Claire begging her to come for a visit.

Then she penned one to her mother asking for her assistance in stopping her father in his campaign to brainwash the wizards in her life with action movies. There was enough real fighting in her life, the last thing she wanted to do with her free time was watch Rambo gun people down.

Claire arrived three days later and stayed for the last two weeks they were in America. Their Hogwarts letters arrived several days after Claire did. Hermione was shocked when only she and Draco made Prefect.
Harry wasn't the student either of them were, but he was the strongest Gryffindor fifth year boy by quite a large margin, plus he'd proven he could juggle his school work and play quidditch and that wasn't even considering how well he'd performed in the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Hermione couldn't think of any reason to withhold the honor from him.

As it turned out, the only person not enraged about the entire situation was Harry himself. He was resigned, even unsurprised. "When has my life ever been fair?" He'd asked after she and Sirius had finished ranting and raving: "my parents, Sirius in prison, the Dursleys, not being told about magic, the Tournament, now the prophecy," his voice dropped into a harsh whisper at the end.

"Harry," Sirius sighed.

"No, I know you all think it's nonsense. But Voldemort believes it, so he's going to keep coming after me, I don't think it's foolish to believe that it's almost inevitable that I'll have to fight him. It wouldn't even be the first time. I appreciate you all sticking by me, but it's just true."

Since learning of the prophecy at the beginning of the summer, they'd mostly been able to keep Harry upbeat, but he sometimes slipped into melancholy. Not that Hermione could really blame him, he'd had a hard life. And while in some ways things had improved, in others it had actually gotten worse. There were people who seemed all too eager to lay the weight of the world on his shoulders.

They all just stared at each other, unable to come up with any way to refute Harry's assertion, especially considering they'd spent the entire summer planning and training for such an eventuality.

"We love you, Harry," Hermione eventually said quietly, and reached over to take his hand, Sirius clapped him on the shoulder and Draco took Hermione's free hand, linking them all together.

Three days before the start of term they were back on British soil. It had been decided that Harry and Hermione would be shown Order headquarters in case they had need to take refuge there. Considering that said headquarters were located in Sirius' property, nobody could really argue with the idea.

Sirius had also demanded that the two teenagers be allowed to attend an Order meeting to meet the members of the Order, and because he believed they had earned the right to hear what was going on. Because sometimes ignorance wasn't bliss, it just made you a sitting duck.

They departed for the meeting from Potter House. Before they left Sirius handed Harry a slip of parchment, waited for him to read it, and then instructed him to give it to Hermione.

*The headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix may be found at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, London.*

"Do you have it memorized?" Sirius asked. They both nodded and he offered each of them an arm. "Ready?"

"Yep," they answered in tandem.

Sirius took a deep breath, he had obviously not been looking forward to this. "Let's go."

Hermione grasped Sirius' arm tightly, she knew now, from experience, that sticking close to him would somewhat ameliorate the side effects of side along apparition. They'd had theoretical lessons on apparition over the summer and often apparated along with an adult so that they would get used to the sensation. The adults swore it would help them learn the skill more easily themselves when
the time came. She hoped that was true, because side along apparition sucked.

They landed on the stoop of what appeared to be a rather worn down townhouse in central London. Hermione looked at Sirius, askance.

He smirked at her in return; she'd begun to see a family resemblance between him and Draco when he did that. "Welcome to my childhood home."

He opened the front door and Hermione peered inside. She glanced at Harry and could see that he was thinking the same thing that she was: no wonder Sirius had run away from home. It was dark, and dreary, and if a house could feel malicious, this one certainly did. They stepped inside and looked around.

"Didn't your family have elves? How did this place get so dirty?" Hermione asked as she looked around, there were visible cobwebs hanging from the ceiling; this place would have given every elf she knew a coronary.

"There was only one left," Sirius answered. "His name is Kreacher and he went a little crazy being here by himself after my mother died, so that's how it got into this state." Sirius took a deep breath. "He recently did me a great service and wanted to be put back to work as a reward, but Molly doesn't like him and wouldn't let him do his job, so he's been sent elsewhere."

Well, that was...an oddly vague explanation. She could only assume this great service had something to do with the trip back to England Sirius had made over the summer, but Hermione had accepted they weren't going to be told what that had been about, which probably meant that she actually didn't want to know.

"What's this?" Harry asked, walking up to a set of curtains, and Hermione understood his curiosity, given that they appeared to be hung on a windowless wall.

"No!" Sirius bellowed lunging for him but it was too late, Harry had pulled them open and then the corridor was filled with the sounds of a woman screeching about her house being defiled by blood traitors and mudbloods. Hermione stepped back in shock, Harry caught her around the waist and Sirius struggled to pull the curtains back over the portrait of a plump middle aged woman who, given her features, was obviously a Black.

"What the bloody fuck was that?" Harry asked, he pulled Hermione closer and she looked over her shoulder to see the disgust on his face as he glared at the newly re-covered portrait.

"My dear mother," Sirius answered gravely. "I am sorry," he said when Harry turned his glare on him.

"Harry," she whispered, squeezing the hand he had protectively clasped at her waist. "It's not his fault."

Harry relaxed, but before he could respond, they heard the sound of footsteps thundering down the stairs. Hermione looked around frantically- she was now seriously on edge- to see a troop of redheads nearly falling down the stairs: the four Weasley siblings who were still Hogwarts students.

"You'll learn real quick to avoid waking Mrs. Black," one of the twins called out as the quartet approached them.

"I can imagine," Hermione murmured, and could only stare in shock as Ginny practically shoved her aside and threw her arms around Harry's neck. His eyes went wide and he looked at Hermione
over the younger girl's shoulder in obvious alarm. But she could only shrug, she wasn't very well going to pry Ginny out of Harry's arms, that would only make things more uncomfortable.

"Harry, good to see you mate!" Ron exclaimed, "Ginny let him go. Hermione, hello," he added in a much more subdued tone.

The twins hovered around them looking exceedingly amused by the entire display.

Ginny shot her brother a dirty look but released Harry.

"Hi Ron, how's your summer been?" Harry asked, automatically returning to Hermione's side. It was just something he did automatically these days; she and Harry and Draco had rarely been apart for two months, it really didn't mean anything, but Hermione saw the way Ron's face fell and his eyes narrowed at the maneuver.

Hermione sighed internally. She was going to have to talk to Harry about Ron and about how he seemed to be threatened by her. She'd been trying not to insert herself between them, or offer any opinion at all, but it was unfair to allow the issue to be decided before Harry even really knew there was an issue. Ron meant something to him and it had to be his decision if he wanted to let that go.

"Well, we've been here at headquarters, so that's been great," Ron answered with false cheerfulness. "But probably not as great as whatever you two have been up to," he finished, obviously bitter.

Harry's eyes narrowed at his tone.

"Don't exaggerate things Ronniekins," one twin said.

"We've been stuck here cleaning, without magic," the other chimed in.

"We're not allowed to know anything about what the Order is actually up to, much less be admitted to any meetings, it's been anything but exciting," the other finished the thought, as only they could.

"Yes, well," Sirius cleared his throat. "Speaking of, Harry, Hermione, and I are due in a meeting now."

There was a cacophony of protests from four Weasleys asking to be included.

Sirius held out both of his hands. "You should take this up with your parents. I'm responsible for these two and I think that it's important that they be given all the available information. But I cannot make that decision for children not under my care."

Sirius led them to the kitchen, the sounds of the Weasley's complaints still drifting down the corridor. Hermione' first thought when she realized where Sirius had taken them was that the kitchen was an odd choice for a meeting space, surely this house had larger rooms that were actually designed for such things? But then she saw Mrs. Weasley bustling around, preparing a meal and she understood. The red-headed woman turned around at the sound of them walking in the room and frowned.

"These meetings aren't for children," she tisked.

"I agree," came a growl from down the table, Hermione whipped her head around to see who had spoken and had to suppress a flinch at the sight of Alastor Moody. She stepped closer to Harry and he immediately took her hand. Neither of them had ever met the real Moody, but their memories had taught them to be wary of him. And to hear Sirius tell it, he was nearly as vicious as the Death
Eater who had been impersonating him.

"Your objections are and have been noted," Hermione could practically hear Sirius rolling his eyes. "But it's not your decision. They're mature enough to handle this and their occlumency is better than nearly everybody in this room. If anybody gives up our secrets, it's not going to be them."

Mrs. Weasley huffed but didn't say anything further and Sirius led them around the table where there was enough space for the three of them. He and Harry positioned themselves protectively on either side of her which made her roll her eyes, but she didn't protest.

"Wotcher Harry, Hermione," Tonks greeted them with a bright smile from across the table. "How was your summer in your super secret location? It must have been sunny," she eyed their tans and gave them a wink.

She felt Harry sit up a little straighter next to her. "It was brilliant! We learned loads but it was fun. And yeah, it was sunny, but that's all I can say or I'll have to obliviate you," he said with a cheeky little grin.

All of a sudden there was a large plate of food placed in front of her: some kind of meat casserole, dumplings, and mashed potatoes all topped off with a more than healthy portion of gravy. While it smelled delicious, the portions were more than she could ever consume in one sitting. Also, the food itself was far heavier than anything she would eat except on special occasions; there wasn't a fruit or vegetable in sight.

Their summer fighting instructor was also a physical fitness expert and he had drilled into their heads the importance of a healthy diet. That, combined with the copious amount of fresh, local produce and seafood that had been available to them over the summer and they had become accustomed to, meant that the idea of consuming such a rich meal made Hermione feel a little ill. Not to mention that they'd already eaten at Potter House. The elves were over the moon to have them back and anxious to try out some new recipes (Hermione had a feeling the vegetable garden was about to get a massive expansion.)

She glanced warily at Harry who looked just as reticent as she did. It seemed rude to refuse when they'd already been served, but then again, wasn't it a little rude to serve them without asking first? Luckily, Sirius came to their rescue.

"Molly, I owled ahead to let you know that we were eating before we arrived."

"Well, wherever you've been, they weren't fed properly. They are far too skinny."

"No, actually, they're in fantastic shape." He turned to them. "Are either of you hungry?" They shook their heads in tandem and Sirius reached over and pushed the plates away from them. "I know that you're a mother, Molly, and that you worry, but these two are my responsibility, whether you like it or not. Please stop trying to undermine my authority, especially in my own damned house. It makes you look petty and it puts Harry and Hermione in an incredibly awkward position."

The silence in the kitchen was deafening. Luckily, at that moment, Professor McGonagall strode into the room, closely followed by Professor Dumbledore who called the meeting to order. Hermione looked around in surprise and did a quick head count, she thought they'd be waiting on quite a few more members. There were barely even twenty people in the room. This was the entirety of the Order? She knew that Remus was out on a mission, so she could only assume that there might be others that were as well. Still, this was not a positive sign.

By the end of the meeting Hermione was choking back frustrated tears. They were doomed. From
what she could tell the Order had accomplished nothing in the two months it had been re-formed, except to alienate the majority of the populace. And they had no further plans.

Remus was trying to infiltrate himself with the werewolves- a risk Sirius had begged him not to take as it was doomed to failure, he'd been living as a wizard for too long. Apparently Hagrid and Madame Maxime had gone to parlay with the giants which seemed like a massively stupid thing for two half-giants, or really anybody to do. And Bill Weasley was their goblin liaison- the goblins, who would stay out of any wizarding conflict until they had absolutely no other choice.

The only thing they actually seemed to actively be doing was guarding the prophecy in the Department of Mysteries. Which, in Hermione's opinion was like drawing a big 'X marks the spot' on a map for Voldemort. He already knew the prophecy was there, of course, but this basically announced that the Order believed it to be important. And what was the point of standing guard over it in the first place? Only Harry or Voldemort could retrieve the thing and Harry wasn't going down there. Did they actually think Voldemort was just going to go waltzing through the Ministry to pick it up himself?

When the meeting concluded Hermione couldn't get out of there fast enough, so while Sirius stayed in the kitchen to chat with some of the members who were loitering, Harry and Hermione went in search of the Weasley children looking for a distraction from all they'd just heard.

When they strode into Draco's suite at Malfoy Manor later that evening, Hermione was surprised that Harry was the first one to speak after they spotted Draco; Crookshanks draped across his chest, he was stroking his head as he read, and Nox was lounging against the top of the sofa where Draco lay.

"They've been cleaning the house all summer. Without magic. What a waste of time. Merlin, what are the Weasleys thinking? That if they don't admit that they're targets then nobody will come after them? They're leaving their children totally vulnerable," Harry growled, pushing his glasses up onto his forehead and rubbing his eyes.

Draco sat up, transferring Crookshanks from his chest to his lap and Hermione curled herself against his side. "It's not your fault Potter, or your problem, really. You really need to get over this martyr complex you have."

Harry flopped into an armchair next to them. "But they wouldn't be in danger if they weren't associated with me."

"Shut up Potter. Do you really believe that? The Weasleys are a light family, notorious and outspoken blood traitors, they were always going to be a target." Draco kicked at Harry's shins and he easily dodged. "If anything they, along with everybody else, owe you a debt. Your family's sacrifice bought our society fourteen years of peace for their children to grow up in."

There was a heavy silence as they all contemplated that heartbreaking truth. "Harry," Hermione eventually said tentatively. "Do you think sometime when you go to Godric's Hollow to visit your parents I could come along? I'd like to pay my respects."

Harry looked at Hermione, his eyes soft. "Yeah, I'd really like that, I think they would too. Though I don't know when it will be safe to go back there again."

Hermione sighed, she hadn't considered that.

"Hey," Harry perked up obviously intending to change the subject. "I've been waiting to ask you all night. Do you know what was with Ginny? She's never been that...touchy-feely before."
It wasn't just the hug when they'd arrived at headquarters. When they'd gone to talk to the siblings after the meeting she'd attempted to practically deposit herself on Harry's lap. And then she'd stuck to his side, stroking his arm; she and Ron had practically fought for his attention until they left. It had been highly uncomfortable to witness.

Hermione snorted. "Don't tell me you didn't know that she has a crush on you."

"I thought she'd gotten over that."

"No, she just learned to be more discreet about it. Honestly, Harry, after the Tournament I'm probably the only girl in Gryffindor Tower and most of the rest of the school who doesn't have at least a tiny crush on you. I can only assume she's gathered her courage to make a move before somebody else can beat her to it."

"Great," he griped, "just what I need, a whole slew of witches after me for all the wrong reasons."

"You poor sod," Draco mocked.

"Easy for you to say," Harry shot back, glancing at Hermione pointedly. "What can I say, I'm a lucky wizard," he smirked at Harry and squeezed Hermione's shoulders. "How was it otherwise?"

Harry and Hermione exchanged a look. "A disaster," Hermione answered, "at least in terms of how they plan to win the war. If it wasn't for your parents and Sirius I would be terrified right now."

Draco's eyes went wide. "Surely it can't be that bad?"

With Harry's help she launched into an explanation of how their perceptions of the Order: a (very small) group of well meaning witches and wizards who, despite the fact that many of them had individual talents that could be valuable, seemed to be completely incompetent as an organization.

Draco swore quietly when they were through, and then they all sat in silence for awhile.

"I'm thinking of offering the Weasley twins a business loan for their joke shop," Harry said all of a sudden.

"What?" Hermione nearly screeched the question.

"You were there," he insisted, "some of that stuff they've invented is kind of genius. Those extendable ears will sell like gangbusters. And Remus has been encouraging me to make some of my own investments. This is something that interests me, and I think it would be a good way to honor my dad," he added quietly.

That took some of the wind out of Hermione's sails. "But they're so irresponsible, Harry! Do you really want your name associated with something like that?"

"Which is why they could use a responsible backer," Draco interrupted.

Hermione stared at her betrothed. "You think that this is a good idea?" She asked incredulously. After all, he had been the one who had pointed out to her that the twins could be bullies.

"I think it's an interesting idea, like Potter said. And as much as I don't agree with some of the pranks they pull, some of them are rather brilliant. If Potter invests he'll have some contractual control over their behavior- no experimenting on underaged students, for example- or they lose his backing."
"Oh," Hermione breathed. "Well that's a good point." She turned back to Harry, "do you really think they could be successful? It seems risky."

He shrugged. "I know I'd buy a lot of their products, and if you think about it, I'm probably their target audience, so that's a good sign. And knowing them, they have a million other ideas we haven't heard about. And yeah, it's a risk, but one I can afford to take. It's rare for new businesses to get funding in our world, most of them are owned by old families who don't want to fund the possible competition."

"And given what the pair of you just told me, the Order could use as many members with legitimate professions and ties to the community as it can get. It's better for everybody if they are businessmen and not just troublemakers who nobody takes seriously," added Draco.

Hermione nodded as she thought through the issue. "You both make very good points," she conceded and smiled at her friend. "Smart thinking Harry, sorry I jumped to conclusions."

"Is Hermione Granger admitting she was wrong," he grinned, clearly relishing the moment.

"Yes, yes," she rolled her eyes. "Hey Harry, does Mrs. Weasley always act the way she did tonight?"

"From what I can tell. I haven't spent much more time with her than you have, but she definitely spent those few weeks I spent at their house after first year trying to fatten me up. Why?"

"It's just, if my mum or even Narcissa was like that I think I'd feel stifled, and it might make me want to act out too. And now that I think about it, Bill and Charlie both moved out of the country right after Hogwarts. From what Ron said today, Percy is rather estranged from the family." She shrugged, "I think she means well, but it's a little much. I mean, like Sirius said, she was trying to boss him around in his own house and he's an adult."

"Yeah that pissed me right off," he answered, and then seemed to consider that, "do you think that's why Ron was being so weird about us being away for the summer? He wanted to get away too?"

Hermione sighed. "Yeah, I knew I was going to need to talk to you about that."

"Okay," he prompted.

"Ron's jealous again."

Harry made an annoyed sound. "Merlin, really? What does he want me to do, give him half of the Potter vaults? I have no control over which family I was born into."

"Well it's partially that, and if he knew more details about where we were, and the kind of accommodations we had this summer it would probably be even more so. But I was referring to our relationship."

"Our relationship? But we're not together. He knows 're wearing a small fortune's worth of jewelry to show that," he snorted gesturing to the charm bracelet Lucius and Narcissa had bought her to celebrate her betrothal to Draco in lieu of the Malfoy crest signet ring she was now entitled to wear but couldn't, for obvious reasons.

"No," she shook her head, "not my relationship to you. Your relationship to me."

"What's the difference?"
"What I mean is that he's envious of my position in your life. Our first three years he had a certain amount of social currency for being 'Harry Potter's best mate.' Not that he doesn't care about you, I'm sure that he does, but he was kind of stuck on being your most important friend, I don't think he really has any experience being the most important anything to anyone..." she trailed off, she was thinking it through as she spoke, and now that she'd voiced the thoughts, it was actually kind of sad. "I think he thought he was getting that back after he was chosen to be your hostage during the second task. And then when you were distant with me after you found out about Draco. But after Easter we were closer than ever. Anyway, he resents me for usurping his place, especially because there are all these things we can't tell him, all this time we spend together he isn't a part of. It makes him surly," she shrugged.

Harry frowned, seeming to think that through. "He could have believed me about the Tournament though, helped me train like you did. He could have learned occlumency with me and then we could tell him more."

She held up her hands. "I'm not saying you owe him anything, especially not anything as precious as your friendship and trust, and especially when he's shown he can be a disloyal git. I'm just telling you what seems to be happening."

"That actually makes a lot of sense," he sighed. "Should I do something about it, do you think?"

"That's entirely up to you," she shrugged. "Do you miss him, do you want to spend more time with him?"

Harry thought about that for a long time, Draco sat silently at Hermione's side rubbing her upper arm.

"I don't know if I miss him, or if I just feel like I should miss him. Like I should feel guilty for leaving him behind."

"Play it by ear mate," Draco advised, "I mean, this time last year who would have thought we would all be here together? That you and I could be in the same room together without trying to hex each other, much less be friends. You just never know what's going to happen. And you aren't preparing for a fight, you're not going to get your arse kicked by Master Jensen if you don't have a plan of action."

Harry's eyes lit up at the mention of their rather overzealous American dueling tutor and he snickered and nodded. Hermione kissed Draco's cheek and wondered when her boys had grown up.

Draco was alternatively seething and brooding. He'd woken up brooding. It was September 1st which meant back to Hogwarts, back to pretending and hiding. But Hogwarts was also where Hermione would be, so he was going, there wasn't another option.

And then he'd sat down at breakfast and seen the Prophet and his mood turned ten times more sour. It was front page news. They'd found Longbottom's body.

His mother was tense and silent. His father wouldn't look him in the eye. Draco read the article and immediately knew that it was no coincidence that Longbottom- Neville- had been discovered just in time to make the papers for the start of term at Hogwarts, because it made Dumbledore look like a fool. Actually, Draco was coming to believe he actually was a fool, just a powerful one.

And it destroyed Longbottom's reputation. They were saying that due unpopular at Hogwarts and his only- sane- family being his grandmother, he'd given in to depression and he'd run away from
home, and had finally succumbed to an animal attack. It was the Ministry's official stance and the paper didn't question it. They argued that couldn't have been killed by You Know Who in late June, because his remains were fresh (it was like nobody had ever heard of a stasis charm.) Draco had known his classmate hardly at all. He'd seen him around school, of course, but he'd only spoken to him perhaps a handful of times first year, and then it was only to taunt or berate him; after that he'd just ignored him for Hermione's sake. But he was innocent, and he had been Hermione- and Potter's- friend. Seeing his memory dragged through the mud hurt.

When they arrived on Platform 9 ¾ his eyes were immediately drawn to Hermione. The longer they were together the easier it became to locate her in a crowd, her magic called to him. Even from a distance he could see her eyes were red and puffy, it was obvious she had been crying. She was huddled in a group along with her parents, Sirius, and Potter who had an arm draped across her shoulders and he was inexplicably jealous. Not because he was threatened by Potter, he was actually happy that she had him, but because he longed to be part of that group. He wanted to hold Hermione. Hell, he wanted to give Potter his condolences. He wanted to go and be with the people he actually cared about. And yet he had to pretend that he despised them in favor of people he actually did despise. If he never looked at Crabbe or Goyle again it would be too soon. And so he started brooding again. He said farewell to his parents, he did his best not to be too perfunctory about it. He was learning his lesson about how short life was, he even let his mother hold him for as long as she pleased.

He wasn't angry with either of his parents, per se, it was just that he wanted Hermione, and because of them he couldn't go to her. So, perhaps he actually was angry with them, but he also loved them, and the very thought of what had happened to Neville Longbottom kept him from just storming away from them. "I love you, Mother," he murmured into her ear before clasping his father's shoulder and making his way to the train.

The entire journey was a trial. From the moment Pansy danced into his compartment cackling about the morning's Prophet, to having to ignore Hermione in the prefects compartment, and especially the idle gossip of so many of his fellow Slytherins. Their excitement over the Dark Lord's return made him feel sick.

He managed to pass a message to Hermione as they brushed against each other while they were patrolling in opposite directions, asking her to find a way to wait and take the last carriage to Hogwarts once they reached Hogsmeade. He easily bullied every other student into leaving him alone once he'd boarded the carriage. Every student except for Theodore Nott, whom he could neither intimidate or brush off, it would look too suspicious.

"My Father was gone a lot this summer," the other wizard began as he seated himself.

Draco schooled his features. "On business?"

"Perhaps the same kind of business your father was on?"

Draco regarded his schoolmate, his friend, warily. What was he fishing for? An ally? Information?

His thoughts were interrupted by Hermione climbing into the carriage. It took everything he had to keep from offering a helping hand, but she didn't miss a beat. She glared at them both.

"Nott, Malfoy," she greeted with a curt nod. "Good summer?"

He just nodded and then had to stop himself from strangling Theo when he smiled at her. "Very nice, thank you for asking. Congratulations, by the way."
"For what?"

"For making Prefect, and for your betrothal, though I'm late on that part."

That seemed to catch her up short. "Well, thank you, on both counts," and her eyes flitted, ever so briefly, to Draco.

But he was as confused as she was. Draco glanced at Theo but he couldn't discern his motives in speaking to Hermione so cordially. And soon the carriage came to a halt and they disembarked at the Hogwarts gates.

When they reached the castle doors Potter was waiting on them, a look of pure terror on his face. It brought Draco up short.

"Mione, thank Merlin you're finally here, we're going home!"

"Home! Harry, we can't go home, it's the start of the school year, we have to go to the feast!"

Potter stepped forward and took her gently by the arms. "Please listen to me Mione. Nobody else will, they all think that I'm a nutter."

"What's going on?"

Before Potter could open his mouth Holly emerged from his collar and began hissing. He stroked her head, trying to comfort her, but a feeling of dread was building in Draco's chest, it was obvious the snake was distraught.

"Holly sensed that something was off the moment we passed through the wards," Potter explained. "She said that an old one had awakened and that her magic had been tainted."

"Old one?" Hermione asked.

"I don't know, neither does Holly. But the moment I walked into the castle I heard a voice."

Draco watched Hermione go totally still. "A voice?"

"Speaking parseltongue. Telling me it meant to rip and tear and kill. And that it, whatever it is, is searching for its master, wanting instruction." He flipped his glasses onto the top of his head and wiped his eyes, Holly rubbed his jaw with the top of her head.

"Harry, we have to tell somebody!"

"I agree, but we are not setting foot in that place," he gestured to the castle at his back, "until we know it's safe. I've done my best to warn the other students, but I have a promise to keep to Sirius and your parents," he pulled her into a hug.

Potter looked at him over Hermione's shoulder. He knew the other wizard well enough to see that he was genuinely terrified, and that he was silently pleading with Draco to follow his lead and get the hell out of Scotland.

Draco wracked his brain. What could he say to excuse going along with the suggestion of a wizard who was, by all accounts, his enemy? But then is came to him: he'd go with his old fall back. He looked at Theo.

"My father will need to hear about this. Not to mention that if there's even the slightest chance that Potter's right, and I go in that castle before he has a chance to investigate, well my mother will see
fit to remind me that she is a daughter of House Black."

Nott actually shivered. "I'm with you then. My father won't question me too thoroughly if I tell him
you left too, and I don't want to step foot in there either if there's a monster in there which I can't
even hear coming."

By that time Potter had practically begun dragging Hermione back through the grounds towards
the wards, and she kept glancing back at him furtively. He casually touched his finger to the side of
his nose, hoping their secret sign would give her some reassurance and strode after them, his fellow
Slytherin at his side.

He sighed to himself. What disaster had befallen them now?

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Weestarmeggie for beta reading. Thanks to you all for reading!
Chapter 42

Hermione refused to let Harry activate his portkey until Draco was close enough that she got one last look at him and she was certain that he’d be getting himself away from Hogwarts post haste.

In the minutes it had taken them to move beyond the wards she had decided to accompany Harry back to Potter House rather than take her own portkey home or to Malfoy Manor. From what she could tell Theo Nott seemed intent on following Draco and she couldn’t risk giving them up, and she figured Sirius had a much better chance of helping them figure out what had just happened than her parents did anyway.

She finally caught a glance of Draco who gave her a small nod. "Okay let's go," she told Harry, holding one of his hands tightly, her other gripped Crookshanks' basket. Holly was hissing desperately from beneath Harry's collar. So desperately that Hermione began to panic, as she didn't have to be a parselmouth to understand that the snake was terrified. She had never felt so relieved in her life as she was when she landed in the floo room of Potter House.

She immediately turned and pulled Harry into a tight hug. "Oh what's happened now!" She lamented.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm sorry I scared you."

She pulled out of his arms and dug one finger into his chest. "None of that, this isn't your fault."

"Harry!" Sirius called, running into the room. "What's the matter?"

Harry looked over, and then away from his godfather, like he was ashamed.

"Stop it! You didn't do anything wrong," Hermione hissed at him and then she turned to Sirius. "There's something dangerous at Hogwarts. Harry and Holly both sensed that something was wrong."

Holly emerged from Harry's collar at that moment and began hissing her agreement, it didn't matter that neither she nor Sirius understood what she was actually saying, her meaning was clear.

"What's going on?" Sirius entreated Harry.

Her friend appeared to fall into something of a trance as he contemplated Sirius' question: "Danger at Hogwarts," then his eyes snapped to hers. "We have to stay away." His eyes fell shut and when they opened again they were full of tears. "I'm serious, Hermione, call Draco, tell him to stay away from Scotland. There's something really, really bad happening."

She just nodded as Sirius stood with his hands on his hips, waiting for a better explanation. She decided to wait and see what he would say before she called Draco. Harry shook his head like he was trying to clear his thoughts.

"As soon as we crossed the wards Holly warned me that something was off. She wanted to turn around right away but I couldn't exactly jump out of the carriage, but I was on my guard when we
got to the castle. I'd only been in the Entrance Hall for a few moments when I heard a voice, speaking parseltongue. Nobody else seemed to hear anything at all."

"Was this voice speaking directly to you?" Sirius asked uneasily.

"No, it wasn't like that. Though it was looking for somebody, searching for somebody who could instruct it, but I didn't get the feeling that it was me it was looking for, or that it even sensed I was a speaker, it was just like overhearing a one-sided conversation. I've just become very attuned to parseltongue. To everybody else it probably just sounded like background noise. You know how loud it gets in all the excitement of being back at school."

"And what did the voice say?"

"That it wants to rip and tear and kill. But the words weren't the worst part, I swear I could feel sinister magic. It- whatever it is- longs to do damage. We have to get those kids out of that castle!"

Harry was staring at Sirius with a plea in his eyes, but the older wizard just stared back at his godson, shifting his weight uncomfortably. It was obvious that he didn't know how to respond. Hermione fought the urge to scowl at the man. She liked Sirius, a lot, but as much as he tried to hide it, it was clear to her that Harry's parselmouth abilities made him uncomfortable. But couldn't he see how much Harry needed his reassurance right now? Her friend was already blaming himself for the nights events, ridiculous though that was.

"I'll call Draco now," she interrupted their staring contest, "maybe Lucius and Narcissa will have some ideas about what to do next." What she didn't say was that she was fairly certain that they would be a little bit more open minded about Harry's claims.

Sirius cleared his throat and looked at her, nodding. "Yes," he cleared his throat again and she realized that he was becoming emotional, that he was afraid for Harry, and she felt badly for judging his reaction so quickly. "Yes that's a good idea."

She nodded at him in return, then closed the distance between herself and Harry and gave him a tight hug. "It'll be okay," she muttered, holding him for a moment before stepping back and activating her mirror.

Narcissa and Lucius were partially finished with the first course of their dinner that evening when Lucius suddenly startled in his chair. Narcissa immediately determined from his reaction that there had been a disturbance in the wards and she sighed, wondering what it could be now. She'd just wanted a quiet night with her husband.

She had been trying not to feel melancholy, but the Manor seemed empty. True, the children had been absent for almost the entirety of the summer, but in the days she'd had them back she'd gotten used to having them around again, if only for a few days, and to lose them again felt especially jarring.

"Draco has just arrived via his emergency portkey- he's brought somebody along with him," Lucius announced, there was a slight pause. "It's definitely not Hermione."

At that news she immediately drew her wand and ran from the room. Lucius disappeared with a pop behind her. It was bad enough that Draco had needed to use his portkey, that alone was a bad sign. But she couldn't imagine why he would willingly allowing anybody but Hermione to tag along with him. It was utterly out of character and seemed ominous.

When she reached the floo room Lucius had- of course- already arrived and was standing in the
doorway with his wand drawn. She peaked around his body to see her son standing beside Theo Nott, they both looked unharmed. If she didn't know any better she would have thought this had been a planned journey.

"Little Dragon, what are you doing back here?" Narcissa asked automatically.

Draco's face went bright red at the childish moniker, but he shifted his gaze from Lucius to her. "As I was telling Father, Potter said he heard a voice in the castle speaking parseltongue. Telling him that it was going to rip and tear and kill. Potter might be a complete pain in my arse," Theo snorted but Draco just shrugged. "But we all know he's a genuine parslemouth. We've seen proof of it," her son continued, "and he was waiting at the doors of the castle to drag Granger home. It's no secret how close they are. I figured if he was that concerned I didn't want to stick around either. Dumbledore's useless, and if it's a trick we'll find out soon enough, but it seemed safer to come home."

"You're right Draco," Lucius responded, "that was sound reasoning."

Narcissa said nothing but she did admire her son's acting and his ability to think on his feet.

But at the same time she felt terrible for him, could practically sense his devastation at how he'd just spoken of Hermione with anything less than the highest respect. However, even as she was busy concentrating on Draco, she didn't miss the way Theo looked at Draco, like he didn't quite believe the story he was telling them.

But Theo didn't contradict it. "Well, Potter has always been very protective of his pet mudblood," he shrugged, "I shared a carriage with her and Draco so we arrived at the castle together and I heard what Potter told her. I too thought it was better to be safe and get out of there than sorry. Draco was kind enough to let me tag along with him."

Narcissa noticed that he glanced at each of them while he spoke, as if evaluating their responses. And then she saw Draco clutch at the breast pocket of his robes and knew that somebody- most likely Hermione- was attempting to contact him on his mirror.

"We should get you home, Theo, dear," she gestured towards the floo. She felt badly about it, it seemed cold to just send him away, so she added: "Though, you should feel free to come to us anytime, if you need anything. However, be cautious about who you use that kind of language around in the future. Times are...changing, you don't want to offend the wrong people."

Theo didn't hesitate. "Of course. Thank you Lady Malfoy, Lord Malfoy," he bowed slightly in Lucius' direction, "for not begrudging me the use of your heir's portkey."

"Of course, our Houses are allied," Lucius answered easily, "please let your father know that I will contact him as soon as I have news of the situation at Hogwarts, whatever it may be."

Theo hesitated briefly, shooting Draco a peculiar glance before stepping into the floo. Draco's shoulders sagged even as he scrambled to remove his communication mirror from his pocket.

"Hi."

"Hey," Narcissa heard Hermione respond. "You arrived home safely?"

"Yeah, Mother just sent Nott home so we're alone now, obviously."

Hermione let out a long breath. "Good, we're at Potter House. I thought that was better than going straight home, as I have no idea what to tell my parents considering that I don't even know what to
"Think for myself. We thought it would be best if we could meet to talk it over."

"He called you a Mudblood," Draco blurted looking wretched, and Narcissa felt her heart clench.

"Who did?" Hermione asked.

"Theo, he called you Potter's 'Pet Mudblood.' And I didn't say anything against it."

Narcissa immediately grasped Lucius' arm and there was a long period of silence. But when Hermione responded she sounded strong and sure.

"That's okay." She said calmly.

Draco's face crumpled. "Okay?! How is that okay?" He demanded, and Lucius had to restrain Narcissa from going to him.

"We both knew that you were going to have to maintain a certain persona," Hermione answered. "We've talked about it many times. Actually, I think Neville's death should have alerted us to the idea that this was probably coming, things are escalating." She lowered her voice. "Your father is Inner Circle, Draco, you cannot risk his safety or yours by not toeing the party line, so to speak."

Draco's breath hitched. "I feel dirty, I don't like it."

Another long pause and then an uncharacteristic giggle. "I don't mind if you want to get dirty with me."

Narcissa gasped. Lucius laughed. And Draco went so red Narcissa was worried he was actually going to rupture something.

"Draco!" Hermione shrieked, "I can't believe you didn't tell me that your parents were listening!"

At that declaration Draco cast a hasty glance in their direction and quickly fled the room. Lucius held himself very rigid for about twenty seconds before he erupted into laughter again, bending over at the waist and clutching at his stomach. She wasn't sure she'd ever seen him lose control like that.

"What in Merlin's name Lucius?!!" She finally demanded.

"Did. You. See. His. Face?! We might as well have caught him with his trousers down! I'm not sure I've ever been so amused in my life."

"With everything going on, that's what you're concentrating on?" She huffed. "And I did not care for Hermione's reference. Does she believe that we still think of her like that?"

"She didn't mean it like that," he smirked at her. "She was trying to lighten the mood and make Draco feel better."

"But Lucius."

"I, for one, take great comfort in the fact that there is still a part of them that can behave as typical teenagers; flirt and embarrass themselves in front of their parents. Don't you?"

"It's not that," Narcissa sighed. "I'm afraid of losing them," she confessed after a moment of mulling over the true source of her discomfort. "This is going to be so difficult for them both. What if Hermione decides this family isn't worth it and distances herself? Draco will follow her anywhere."
"If she feels insecure in her place in our family...I don't know what more we can do," he cupped the base of her neck and brought their lips together. "And give her more credit, she loves us Cissa, you know she does."

She buried her face in his shoulder. "Of course, you're right," she admitted quietly.

She felt his arms wrap around her. "Still struggling to see Draco grow up? Is that, perhaps, what this is about? I heard what you called him just now, you haven't used that nickname in years." She didn't have to look at him to know he was smirking at her.

"Partially, perhaps," she admitted. "Sometimes it still just comes as a shock, how quickly he's becoming a man. I just want to protect him. It would be difficult enough under normal circumstances and these are far from normal."

"Hermione is a boon to our House, you made me see that," he reminded her.

"Of course, I know that, that's not my concern!" She defended herself. "Some other terrible thing is always happening," she reminded him. "If they were younger, perhaps I could just... take them away."

"We considered it when they were younger," he reminded her, "we could still get away with it, technically. Neither of them are of age and I'm sure the Grangers would give us permission, but again, that would be the end of Hermione's life in Britain, which means it would also be the end of Draco's. Not to mention that I don't think that either of them would leave willingly, and they've grown powerful enough that I'm not certain we could force them into anything they truly didn't want. And can you see our Mignonette willingly leaving the Potter boy? And Draco will certainly not leave her."

"Yes," she chuckled humorously. "Which is why, if I had to do it again, I might have gone through with it years ago, damn the consequences. You know them as well as I do, they're preparing to fight. Not just preparing for it, but expecting it."

He took a deep breath, running his hands up and down her back. "I suppose we should have expected that, bringing a Gryffindor into the family. And then there's Potter and Black's influence to consider."

Narcissa rolled her eyes to herself and sighed, trying to regain her composure. "At least whatever happened tonight, they didn't hesitate to flee Hogwarts. At least they're that sensible." She offered, hoping for some form of reassurance.

"I know love, which is another thought to cling to, as well as every bit of joy we can find for as long as we can."

Narcissa didn't know if she found that to be a lovely sentiment or simply terribly fatalistic, she leaned into her husband and let him comfort her as best he was able. They stood there until their son came rushing back into the room, his cheeks still alight.

"Mia, Sirius, and Harry want to pop over," he announced.

It was a testament to his emotional distress that he referred to Hermione by her nickname and Harry by his given name.

"Tell them the floo is open," Lucius answered.

Less than five minutes later Hermione stepped out of the flames and she virtually fell into Draco's
arms. He held her tightly and made soothing noises.

"I'm absolutely fine," Narcissa heard the younger witch say. "But I hate that I have to stay away
from you, especially when stuff like this happens." Hermione pulled away. "What was that with
Nott?"

Sirius emerged from the fireplace just in time to hear her question. "What was what with Nott?" He
asked.

"He spoke to me and Hermione in the carriages earlier," Draco provided, "and then he hitched a
ride on my portkey."

"And you think we should be discussing that now? Aren't there much more urgent things going
on?" Sirius demanded.

But Hermione was not at all cowed by his demeanor.

"I think that if our-" she motioned between herself and Draco, "cover is blown, then yes, we need
to discuss what to do immediately." She looked at Lucius. "Theo's father is marked, is he not?"

She was gazing steadily at Lucius, but there was no judgement in her expression, and he nodded.

"What did happen?" Narcissa heard herself asking.

Hermione looked up at Draco. "What do you think? My instincts told me he was testing you…
though I'm not sure to what end. And I got the impression you'd been talking before I entered the
carriage, so perhaps what I heard was out of context and I got the wrong idea."

"No," Draco shook his head. "I agree, he was testing me, though I don't know what the test was."

"He was downright polite to me."

"Yes, and then he turned right around and called you a...that word almost as soon as he got here."

"He seemed to be gauging our reactions when he said that," Narcissa interjected.

"I noticed that too," added Lucius.

"Nott is a Slytherin through and through," said Draco. "He is capable of being far more subtle than
that, so I'm thinking that even though he's not ready to reveal what it is yet, that he has an agenda
and he wanted to let me know. I think he was...feeling me out."

Lucius eyed their son. "Keep an eye on him."

Draco simply nodded at his father.

"Yes, that's all well and good, but in order for him to do that we're going to have to figure out
what's lurking around Hogwarts hissing threats at my godson!" Sirius practically yelled, with his
usual dramatic gesticulations.

"Come in all of you," Narcissa sighed, "I'll have the elves bring us a light supper. I know the
children didn't get an opportunity to eat and Lucius and I had just begun." Sirius glared and stalked
passed her, Harry gave her an apologetic look but she shook her head; he was not responsible for
her cousin's theatrics.

Ten minutes later they were seated in the family sitting room with a spread of cold cuts, bread,
cheese and fruit on the coffee table, which nobody was touching. At least most of them were seated, Sirius was stalking the room.

"Tell me again!" He demanded of Harry.

"Stop!" Hermione cried. "He's told you everything he knows." She sat on a sofa sandwiched between the two boys. Her hand in Draco's, as was normal for them, but Harry was leaning into her side as if he was seeking her protection, his face buried in his hands.

"Sirius-" Narcissa hissed, "calm yourself!" She watched him take in the sight of the three teenagers huddled together and visibly slump.

"I freaked out a bit," he admitted.

"Really?" Draco answered sarcastically as he clumsily tried to comfort his betrothed and his new friend at the same time, wrapping his arms around Hermione while Harry continued to lean into her.

Narcissa watched with interest as Holly slithered out of Harry's collar and onto Draco's arm. It was not the first time she'd gone to him, but it was still an unusual behavior. She continued up his arm and then butted her head against his neck, hissing all the time. Narcissa was not a parselmouth, but it was clear even to her that the snake was repeating the same phrase over and over.

"What is she saying Harry?" She asked quietly.

"She says there's danger."

"No shite," Sirius barked.

Harry huffed. "At Hogwarts. A big ancient danger." With narrowed eyes he looked in his godfather's direction. "She's very insistent, she doesn't think she's being taken seriously." Suddenly he let out a startled laugh. "She's ready to bite us with just enough enough venom to make us sick and keep us from going back." He raised his eyebrows at his familiar, "I think I'll pass on that Hols."

The floo alarm sounded and Lucius hurried out of the room to go answer it in his study. He returned in a matter of minutes. Narcissa could tell that while he was more exasperated, he was at least not more alarmed by the call.

"It was Dumbledore, he wants to come through."

"He has no right to be here," Narcissa hissed defensively, she straightened her spine when she took in the surprised looks of nearly everybody in the room at her unfettered response. She made a concerted effort to moderate her turn. "I just think that we need to get a better picture of what's going on before he's allowed anywhere near Harry."

"Narcissa," Lucius said softly, "I don't like this more than you do. But he won't let this be. It's better to appear cooperative and not give him time to rally his forces."

"Merlins saggy bollocks," Sirius swore quietly, "your stupid husband has a point," he pouted, "we definitely can't appear to be hiding out."

Narcissa looked between the children, wanting to send them away, but she also agreed with her husband and cousin. Dumbledore wouldn't be satisfied until he'd spoken with Harry. And anything said between Harry and the headmaster would quickly be passed to Hermione and Draco, so there
was really no use. She sighed and nodded her assent to Lucius.

Dumbledore strode into the room mere minutes later, glanced between the adults, and his eyes narrowed on his students huddled on one couch.

"I admit I must speak to Harry. But do you really believe it's wise to allow other children in on this discussion?" He asked as he made himself comfortable in an empty armchair without waiting to be asked.

"I think that's none of your concern," Sirius barked, "how did you even know Harry and I were here?"

"A reasonable deduction," the elder wizard shrugged, as if it was nothing. "After neither Harry, Miss Granger, nor Mr. Malfoy appeared at the Opening Feast, and knowing their true home relationships, I assumed they were together. I also assumed they had been equipped with means to leave Hogwarts, if they felt threatened. After overhearing some talk between other students, I surmised they had- in fact- felt a threat to their safety and gone home. When I failed to locate them at Potter House, I tried Malfoy Manor."

"Well you've found us, Albus, what do you want?" Sirius asked in a manner that might have appeared open, even magnanimous, if it wasn't so obviously sarcastic.

"I need to speak to Harry, he is the sole witness to this so-called event."

Sirius looked at his godson. "Are you willing to speak to the headmaster about what happened earlier?"

"I want to help." The boy said, his eyes wide and guileless. How he'd remained so innocent, and had turned into such a great friend to her children remained a mystery to Narcissa. He had every reason to be angry and disenchanted.

Dumbledore nodded. "Excellent. If you will leave us…" he looked around the room expectantly.

"Albus," Sirius interrupted. "Harry is a minor under my protection. What kind of guardian would I be if I left him alone to be questioned, and especially about such a sensitive topic? I know how people think about parselmouths."

Narcissa watched the boy's eyes dart about frantically between all the people in the room. She caught them and tried to send him a reassuring look, but he quickly looked away. So she sought out Hermione's gaze, and thankfully her girl seemed to understand immediately. Hermione shot her a small smile and leaned in to whisper something to her friend.

He sat up straight at whatever she'd said to him, confidence restored. "Like I said, I want to help, but it's been a long and stressful night. For my own peace of mind I'd like Sirius and Hermione to stay with me."

Dumbledore let out a long and badly disguised sigh of disappointment but conceded. As if he had a choice.

When he finally departed two hours later Sirius was roiling with anger. And she couldn't even fault the way that Lucius plied him with firewhiskey given the look he'd had on his face in the aftermath. She allowed his to chug two full glasses before she glanced at him and dared ask: "What happened?"

"He wants to use my kid to draw out whatever monster this is." His voice was a monotone that
frightened her much more than his temper ever had.

She just stared at him, anger building in her chest. "I have a Black family athame I was planning to
gift to Hermione, but I'd be willing to use it to kill him and use the blood sacrifice in a protection
ritual." She was only partially in jest.

He barked out a laugh. "I appreciate that Cissy. But, as much as I hate to admit it, I think we're
better off with him alive."

"Probably," she admitted reluctantly. "What did he want exactly?"

"For me to bring Harry back to the castle to tell him what he heard and where, then try and draw it
out- I assume with parseltongue, and track it."

Narissa gasped at that horrible, dangerous suggestion.

"Spoken like a man who is not a parent," Lucius interrupted her thoughts. "Though it's becoming
almost expected. However, his willingness to play Russian roulette with our children's lives is
utterly disturbing in somebody who is in charge of them 10 months out of the year. Imagine if we
had children who were more reluctant to tell us what was going on?"

"Godric, it's actually painful to agree with you Malfoy. But I think we can also agree that our
children go nowhere near that castle until they've resolved...whatever this is?"

"I can easily agree to that," Lucius lifted his glass in a salute.

"But what of the rest of the children? Is he going to evacuate the school?" Narcissa felt like she had
plenty on her plate as it was, but she couldn't help but worry.

"No. He claims that he can't do it on such little evidence as the word of a fifteen year old wizard
who can't even explain what he experienced," Sirius bit out, his eyes dark, his expression
dangerous.

"Don't forget yourself, Cousin," she said softly, "Harry needs you."

His head snapped up and at first it seemed like he was going to unleash his fury on her, but then he
just nodded. "You're right," he conceded. "He says the Ministry would never let him get away with
it and would just suspend him, given that he's already on thin ice with them. That they might even
use this to attempt to force him out of his other positions in the Wizengamot and ICW. They've
done a good job making him look rather unstable lately, this might be enough to push public
opinion over the edge."

"Which is his own fault," Lucius growled.

"Yes," Sirius tossed back the rest of his drink. "The thing is that he makes a good point, he scares
the hell out of Fudge he would do anything to get rid of him. And while there are many ways in
which I don't trust Dumbledore, he's a mighty wizard, and the students are probably at least
marginally safer with him in the castle."

"Should we sound the alarm ourselves?" She asked.

"We can't," Lucius answered, his voice flat.

"Why not?" She objected.
Sirius let out a long sardonic laugh. "We've now reached the quota for how many times in one evening I can bear to agree with you, Malfoy," he said, then turned to look at her. "But he's right, Narcissa. All it would do is paint a target on Harry's back. Because who would believe us? People don't trust parselmouths. On top of which, they don't ever want to believe that there's something wrong, and the worse it is, the more they want to bury their heads in the sand. Until recently, Dumbledore was probably the most respected wizard in the country, yet how many people have taken him at his word that Voldemort is back? We could spread the word quietly that something is amiss at Hogwarts and see if that makes a difference, but I doubt it will."

They were silent for a long time as they all digested this sentiment, nobody able to refute it. Sirius got up and poured himself another drink.

"You should eat something," she told him.

He sighed but nodded and she called Jema and asked the elf to bring some of Sirius' favorite foods. That probably wouldn't make a difference, but it was worth a try.

"So, any ideas what we're dealing with here? Other than a homicidal reptile?" Sirius asked as he choked down a yorkshire pudding.

Narcissa rolled her eyes but just shook her head and looked at her husband. He appeared to be lost in thought. "Lucius?"

His head snapped up and he met her eyes. "The Chamber of Secrets."

"Pardon?"

"I think this may be about the Chamber of Secrets. We've both heard the stories, Cissa."

She had, of course, they were more like legends in Slytherin, but she wasn't at all certain why Lucius had decided they were related to what Harry had told them tonight.

"That's a myth," Sirius snorted, interrupting her thoughts.

Lucius didn't even bother to look at him. "Yes, and almost all myths have some basis in fact, Black. Consider this: Salazar Slytherin is one of the most famous parselmouths of all time and I've been thinking of what Holly told Mr. Potter: that this creature, whatever it is, is ancient."

"Yeah, I guess it makes sense that old Sal would leave a monster hidden just waiting to be awoken in a school full of children."

"Actually, the way we Slytherins tell it, there is a monster in his chamber, but it was never meant to attack the student. In fact, he put it there to be called upon if Hogwarts needed protection."

Sirius scoffed. "Protection from what?"

"Muggles of course," Lucius answered, crossing and then re-crossing his long legs. "If you recall, Slytherin lived more than half a millenium before the Statute of Secrecy was enacted. In his day it was a real fear that if enough muggles simply discovered the location of Hogwarts that they could have attacked it and eradicated an entire generation of magicals in one fell swoop."

"That's rubbish. What could a bunch of muggles do against a castle full of witches and wizards?"

"Funny, Black, I thought you had more respect for muggles than that. Haven't you spent enough time with the Grangers to understand? They may not have magic, but they are clever and
resourceful. And we're talking about a castle full of untrained witches and wizards- of children- and they're teachers. If enough muggles banded together they could do it, and you know it."

Sirius seemed to consider that but all he did was shrug. "It doesn't sound like whatever this thing is has any interest in protecting anything though."

"No, but remember, Holly also sensed that its magic had been corrupted. Which almost certainly means its original purpose has also been corrupted."

Sirius pinched the bridge of his nose. "This is all very fascinating on an intellectual level, but how does it help?"

"I don't think the timing of this is a coincidence."

"What do you mean?" Narcissa prompted, she could see Sirius was beginning to get frustrated, but she knew Lucius was still working out his thoughts and needed patience.

"What are the chances that Mr. Potter attended Hogwarts for 4 years, and for one of those he had a snake familiar, and he never encountered this creature? Then, the Dark Lord returns and almost the moment Mr. Potter enters the castle again, he does?"

Sirius shot up in his chair. "You think this is connected to Voldemort? That he's, what, controlling this thing?"

Lucius shrugged, it appeared to be a casual gesture but Narcissa knew it to be anything but. "I think it is a sound theory, it is also the only one that I have."

"But how would he be controlling it? Wait. Do you think it could be a horcrux?"

"It's a possibility, but not necessarily."

"Are you going to explain what you mean by that?" Sirius snapped.

"Give him a moment, Cousin," she said quietly. Sirius had a need, almost a compulsion to talk a problem out, whereas Lucius had a similar need to get his thoughts straight before he shared them. So she was relegated to referee.

"When the Dark Lord returned to bodily form," Lucius eventually began to speak slowly, "it- I don't know how to explain it properly other than to say it reenergized his latent magic. Those of us connected to him felt it," he rubbed at his left forearm. "I think it's possible this creature is similarly connected to him- perhaps as a horcrux, perhaps not- and was also re-awakened by his resurrection."

Sirius let out a long breath. "Are you telling me you think that, on top of everything else, Voldemort is the Heir of Slytherin?"

"He likes to boast that he is descended from Slytherin. So, strictly speaking, yes. But if this theory is correct, he's grossly abused the privilege of his bloodline and his parslemouth abilities. In the end I don't think that magic will be kind to him for it."

"Well isn't that just peachy," Sirius snarked, letting his head fall heavily against the back of his chair.

Narcissa held her husband's gaze. It was a brilliant and terrifying theory.

"I still don't see how this helps," Sirius griped.
"It is a place to start researching," she defended immediately, "and it's much better than the nothing you and I had."

Lucius continued to hold her gaze, his eyes softened gratefully. "Fuck," she heard Sirius mutter, "just fuck."

Draco grasped Hermione's hand tightly in his own as they walked, side by side, down to the lake the next morning. She didn't need to be led, but he relished in the comfort of her presence and the sensation of her fingers intertwined with his. He hadn't thought he'd be home today. He had fully expected to be back at Hogwarts, ensconced in the dungeons, pretending to hate the woman at his side.

"You're tense," she said quietly, squeezing his fingers.

"And you're not?" He challenged.

She sighed and dropped his hand as they reached their favorite spot. She peeled off her dress leaving her in her tiniest bikini (and he knew that for certain, he had them all memorized) and walked towards the lake bed. "Of course I am, but I was also hoping we could take advantage of this time alone."

"I'd like that," he murmured, watching her, mesmerized by the look on her face while she glanced over her shoulder at him while she waded into the lake. He knew that look: she wanted him to come after her, to touch her. He followed at a measured pace, untying his muggle trainers, kicking them off, and pulling his tee-shirt over his head.

He met her about ten feet from the shore, treading water, her back to him and she seemed to be ignoring him, but she'd intentionally stopped in a place where he could still stand. She had surely heard him approach but she didn't turn until she felt his fingertips dance along her side. When she did, she grinned at him, wrapping her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist.

"Hi," she whispered.

"Hi."

She kissed him long and slow, brushing her fingers over his lips after she pulled away. "This seems silly. We were together all summer, but I feel like I never see you anymore."

"I know what you mean. We're hardly ever alone anymore," he conceded. "I've missed you too," he whispered against her cheek.

Sirius and Harry were not bad company. In fact, he'd thoroughly enjoyed sharing a house with them for the summer. But it had sometimes felt- to him- like they were in the way of his relationship with his betrothed. He had been spoiled by summers with whole afternoons alone with just her; back when their lessons had been less structured, and she hadn't had a friend on hand demanding her attention. In the past, if Claire had been around, she had sensed when to make herself scarce.

Sirius tried to be thoughtful of their privacy but his enthusiasm sometimes got the best of him. Potter was largely oblivious. And Hermione- lovely, giving witch that she was- had never wanted to make him feel like the third wheel.

So, he took the opportunity now that he had it to savor the feeling of his skin against hers and smiled as he skimmed his fingertips up and down and curves of her hips and waist. He especially relished the way her skin erupted into goosebumps in the wake of his touch.
"What are we going to do?"

He didn't need to ask what she meant. "Ride it out, Mia. For now we just ride it out." He pulled back to look at her face. "Unless you have a better plan which involves running to New Zealand and living under assumed names?"

She buried her face in his neck. "I know you were joking, but I wish we could do it without the guilt killing us. Why can't we take everybody we love and just run?"

"For the same reason our parents haven't already done it. It's not feasible, not without completely compromising our safety and our futures."

"Yeah," she breathed and let him just hold her in the water, it was such a delicious sensation, having their bodies pressed together like this while completely submerged, their hot skin surrounded by the cool water. "I'm a terrible person," she confessed.

He snorted. "Of course you're not."

"Yes I am. Something really bad is happening at Hogwarts, but a big part of me doesn't want them to figure it out so that our parents and Sirius have an excuse to take us away. Does that make me a coward? I really think that it makes me terrible."

He sighed and placed kisses all over her face. "If you're terrible, then so am I."

"It's going to be okay," she nuzzled his neck. "If we say it enough, it'll come true."

Chapter End Notes

AUM is back! Thank y'all for your patience! To those of you who contacted me, concerned about my well being, I was so touched. I hope I responded to you all but all your thoughts were noted. Can we just say that life can be brutal, stories don't write themselves and leave it at that? I hope to have more out much sooner next time, as always thanks for reading!

This has not been beta read as my usual editor and BFF has something way more important going on, so be gentle. Weestarmeggie, I'm resenting that ocean between us even more than usual tonight. I know you probably aren't reading this right now, but I'm sending you my love babe!
Chapter 43

Lucius made his way through the master suite and into the former lady's boudoir which Narcissa had converted into her private research study. She called it her war room. Lucius was not fond of that term, it hit a little too close to home for his tastes.

He found her seated at her desk, several books in front of her, writing on a long scroll of parchment.

"What are you doing?" He questioned in greeting.

"Cross referencing these creature texts, there's a disturbing amount of disagreement between them so I am trying to determine the most common opinion on several of the creatures that meet the criteria we know of so far that could be the one at Hogwarts."

"That's sensible."

"Well, I am sensible," she responded, an edge to her voice.

He sighed and she finally turned to look at him her face set in a hard expression which softened when she met his eyes. "You're home safe."

"I am," he attempted to moderate his tone. "As I told you I would be," he couldn't help but add.

She gazed at him coolly. "I apologize for the way that I expressed my concerns."

Something about the prim way she said that almost made him want to laugh- because she didn't usually don that personae in their home, much less when she was alone with him- and he fought to keep a smile off of his face. "You mean that you don't really believe that I'm a stubborn, thoughtless arse?"

"Oh I do but that was not a very lady-like way of putting it," she looked up at him through her lashes coquettishly.

He bit his lip to keep from laughing. "And will I still be sleeping in a guest suite for the foreseeable future as promised?"

"I haven't decided." They just sat there looking at each other for a few minutes until her shoulders slumped. She stood and made her way over to him and put her arms around his neck. "I was worried about you."

"I know, and I'm sorry for that, but I think that from now on very few things are going to come without risk."

"I'm aware of that. But I still think this was a foolish one to take."

Lucius had decided earlier that morning that he needed to go to Hogwarts, to meet with Severus and just get a general feel for the atmosphere in the castle. The night before, things had been so chaotic that he had failed to consider that at some point, and some point soon, he was going to have to go to the Dark Lord and report what had happened.
The man had always been almost obsessed with the goings on inside Hogwarts, Lucius might not survive failing to tell him something like this, especially considering what he suspected about the Dark Lord's connection to this creature. Which meant that he needed as much information as possible as quickly as possible.

However, Narcissa had vehemently disagreed with his proposed course of action and had expressed that opinion colorfully and loudly.

"We keep telling the children not to put themselves in unnecessary danger and then you turn around and do something like this."

Lucius bit back a vicious retort. "But I am not a child, Narcissa. This mark on my arm means that I am going to be in danger. I have a responsibility to the children to take risks so that they don't have to, and to end this war, hopefully before it really starts. Did you tell Draco and Hermione where I was going?"

"Of course not," she huffed, "I didn't want to worry them. They're down at the lake swimming and having a picnic, oblivious. They volunteered to help me research but I knew they'd be able to tell that I was anxious. However, I believe I'll take them up on it when they come in. The two of them are really something as a team, it's like they can read each other's minds and it helps them solve problems with remarkable efficiency."

"I know," he chuckled, but decided this was not the time to remind her that he knew them as well as she did. 'I've seen it, it's because rather than thinking in the same way they are complementary. Draco is intuitive whereas Hermione is more analytical.' He led her over to a settee in the corner of the room and they sat.

"Anyway," she sighed, "I need all the help I can get, there are a disturbing number of possibilities," she gestured to the desk covered in books.

He nodded and decided to change the course of the conversation. "Severus sends his regards."

Her mouth tightened. "Did he say anything? Or did you notice anything unusual in the castle?"

"He said a great many things, and also nothing at all. And before you can ask, nothing appeared amiss, it was just like a normal first day of classes."

"So you learned nothing."

He shrugged. "Apparently, the professors did a sweep of the castle last night, they found nothing. Severus appears to believe Mr. Potter, but only because Dumbledore does. His hatred for the boy is...irrational, almost maniacal. The way he describes him you would think he was the most spoiled, attention seeking, misbehaving teenager in existence. It's actually almost the opposite of the boy that I know. And he's no fan of Hermione's either, but you knew that, you've heard him talk about her. However, it's worse now that Black has hired them a private potions tutor."

Narcissa's eyes flashed. "Worse how? Do you think he's a danger to them?"

"Not physically, no," he shook his head. "He's not insane, he wouldn't harm a student. Also, I think deep down he knows that he's being irrational and that it's not really Mr. Potter he hates, but that it's just a reflected hatred for the boy's father and godfather, so he wouldn't take it that far anyway. However, I no longer think Black was being dramatic in pulling him and Hermione out of Severus' class."

Narcissa just quirked an eyebrow in question.
"I believe Hermione has the confidence to let Severus' opinions just roll off her back, but Mr. Potter does not. He will lash out against the man or he will wallow, neither is healthy."

"Are you ever going to call him Harry? He's Hermione's best friend and is becoming close with Draco and even Claire. And he's a regular visitor to our home."

Lucius sighed. Frankly, he feared for the boy, except that he would have preferred if he didn't. He already had Draco and Hermione to worry about, he was trying not to get invested in another child, but he was coming to accept that was a hopeless wish. If for no other reason than Narcissa seemed bound and determined to mother him.

"Harry then," he agreed with a sigh. "But surely you know what I mean, you saw him last night. He blames himself for everything that goes wrong and he's going to need to be strong for what's to come. I can see that he has the mettle within him. The gracious way he accepted Draco and Hermione's relationship, and even my place in his life speaks to that fact, I think. But it's something that needs to be nurtured and Severus is certainly not the one to do it."

"Ha! I knew it! I knew that you liked him!"

"Well, I'm not ready to help Black murder Severus on his behalf," he looked at her pointedly and she rolled her eyes.

"You know I said that to calm Sirius down, he's irrational about many things and Severus Snape is at the top of that list. I couldn't have him storming off and ruining our plans. He needed to feel like he had an ally. That said, I can count on my fingers the number of people I wouldn't plot to murder given the right circumstances."

Lucius chuckled, but he hated that things had come to this. "When did you become so bloodthirsty?"

She went very still and then turned to him with a gemlit eye. "Let's not pretend husband. It was the moment the healer placed Draco in my arms. The same thing happened to you when I placed him in yours only minutes later. I know I told Sirius that you shouldn't mess with a Black, and that's true, but you really shouldn't mess with a mother. Or, I think, a father."

"Speaking of Black, did you talk to him?" Lucius prevaricated. When she called him 'husband' she was truly annoyed with him. "And don't expect me to start calling your cousin by his given name."

That made her laugh. "I wouldn't dream of it. And yes, he was very happy to agree with me about the fact that you are an idiot for- and I quote: 'risking his life all for the pleasure of speaking to Snivellus,'" she rolled her eyes.

"I bet he was very eager to agree with you," Lucius snorted.

She huffed but ignored his comment. "Meanwhile he's been keeping an eye on the map and he hasn't noticed anything out of the ordinary."

"Well, we didn't expect him to. I'll admit that thing is a clever piece of magic but we can't expect it to be omniscient. It doesn't recognize pets so there was no reason to believe it would be able to locate any other creatures."

"Yes, I know" she sighed, "but it was worth a try and it's certainly disappointing. Anyway, he and Harry are going through the Black and Potter libraries. We were planning on having dinner this evening to compare notes."
Lucius nodded, between these three ancient family libraries they probably had more information at their disposal than any other private collection in Europe.

"He mentioned something else. I think he was hoping I'd warm you to the idea before he gets here."

"So, I'm assuming I'm not going to like it? Nevermind, it's Black, of course I'm not."

"I doubt you're going to like what he's thinking. But keep on digging that hole."

"Go on," he sighed, wondering if it was too early in the day for firewhisky, but then he remembered what he would have to do later and he discounted the possibility of having a much desired drink.

"He thinks we need to tell Albus what we know about the horcruxes."

Lucius sighed again, unwilling to admit he had been considering that as well. Given this new development it was clear that things could be hidden in Hogwarts that the headmaster knew nothing about. Not only did that mean that they had to consider that this creature might be a horcrux, but even if it isn't, the Dark Lord may have hidden one inside the castle. Or, if Lucius was right about the Chamber of Secrets, in there. Lucius didn't think he could justify hiding this information from Dumbledore, as wary as he was of the man.

"Did he explain his thinking?"

"He has several reasons. First, if there is even a small chance that Dumbledore knows how to destroy them he thinks we need to ask him. And I agree." She grasped Lucius' wrist. "We keep acting like we have time to figure all of this out, but I think that this has reminded Sirius that we very likely may not. We really have no idea what our timetable looks like. Second, he believes we need to offer the headmaster something. He's very angry that Sirius wouldn't allow Harry to help, and he made an indirect threat that he would report Hermione to the Ministry for not being at school, as technically she's in violation of the law as a muggleborn."

"He did what!" Lucius went to stand up but Narcissa grabbed his arm. "There's nothing you can do, and you know it, you'll only anger him and that won't help anything. He won't say anything for now because he doesn't want the Ministry involved in this, so don't go and push him into doing something rash, or blow your cover."

"I despise having to work with him," he growled.

"I know," she consoled. "Anyway, Sirius mentioned he's been missing from the castle, per the map. He thinks he's meeting with the Order."

"Oh good, there's a dangerous creature stalking his school and he's not even there."

"I know," she sighed.

"I thought Black was a member of the Order? They meet at his bloody house. How does he not know for sure if that's where Dumbledore is?"

Narcissa shot him a look suggesting that she was disappointed by his reasoning. "He is, but Albus is obviously not very happy with him at the moment. They've been at odds since Sirius took guardianship of Harry and he just made things more combative last night. Dumbledore's going to want people who trust him unquestioningly surrounding him and for all of his faults, Sirius knows better than to do that, and Dumbledore knows it. Honestly, I think they really must be desperate to
still be using his property. Did Severus mention them gathering?"

"No, but he wouldn't have said anything to me. That's something he would save for the Dark Lord or keep to himself. And that's assuming Dumbledore even consulted him in the first place."

Narcissa ducked her head and began toying with the buttons of his robes. It was unlike her to be so lacking in subtlety. "Did you get any further indication from Severus as to his loyalties?" She asked as she released her hair from the pins holding it back, and shook it out.

It was all Lucius could do not to betray any sign of frustration at her obvious maneuver. "I know what you're doing."

"What?" She asked innocently.

"I'm not quite that easily handled. If you want to go on holiday some place I don't fancy, or if you've gotten it in your head that you want to redecorate our entire wing, you're welcome to attempt to seduce me into it. But it's not going to work about this."

"It was just a question."

"Cissa," he sighed, "we discussed this."

"I know, but every time you get summoned I feel like you're just walking into the lions' den with nobody to even watch your back. Severus seems the natural choice. He would do it."

"No, love, he wouldn't, that's just not how these things work. Even if I understood for certain where Severus' loyalties and motives lay, I wouldn't share my position with him, and I don't believe he would thank me if I tried to do so. It is enough that we each keep our own secrets."

He and Severus were friends of sorts. At least as much as two people who came from such different backgrounds and who were as distrustful as they both were could be. There had been too many years between them at Hogwarts for them to be more than passing acquaintances. However, in the years since Lucius had joined the Hogwarts Board of Governors he had come to appreciate the younger man's company and his insight into the goings on in the castle. And he trusted him more than he did any of his other fellow Death Eaters, but wouldn't expect him to put his own neck on the line for him, nor would Lucius be willing to do the same.

Narcissa was grasping at straws and they both knew it, but he had been trying not to be too harsh with her. He really didn't want to tell her too much about how the Dark Lord operated. She could handle it, he was confident in that fact, but she shouldn't have to.

"I'm sorry, I was not as prepared for this as I thought I was."

"I'm not certain there is anyway to prepare for what we are in the midst of."

They sat quietly for a few minutes. "When will you go to the Dark Lord?"

Lucius' eyes fell shut at her simple acquiescence. "Tonight."

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Lucius apparated into the entrance hall of the dilapidated manor house that the Dark Lord was using as his base of operations. Not that there were- thankfully- all that much in the way of operations these days, the wizard in question had thus far (with some subtle persuasion from Lucius and a few of his wiser fellow Death Eaters) been content to lay low and take advantage of
the fact that the Ministry was refusing to acknowledge his resurrection.

The house had barely been cared for- much less lived in- in decades. It was very unlike the wizard Lucius had met when he was still just a child (he realized now that he had been a fifth year upon his first introduction to the Dark Lord, Draco's age, which was a thought that sent chills up his spine) but for some reason the Dark Lord couldn't be bothered to spare the time or the magic to make his surroundings more habitable. Nor did he make any effort to hide its muggle origins from his followers.

Lucius could now recognize that the man had always been a monster. But he had still fallen so far, it was difficult to witness. It was especially difficult to stand before him feigning respect when all he felt was disgust.

He was still, to be sure, a powerful wizard but he was not the brilliant, meticulous man Lucius had once known. However, that was cold comfort to Lucius because he had become unhinged, if not outright insane, and that made him unpredictable which, in turn, made Lucius' position more dangerous.

Upon entry to the house it appeared to be deserted, but Lucius had to assume that Wormtail was lurking around somewhere. In theory the rat was no real threat to him, but even the idea of his presence made Lucius uneasy. He was sneaky and had no sense of honor.

Perhaps Black was wearing off on him. He made his way to the former ballroom, the room in which the Dark Lord now used to meet with his Death Eaters. He did his best to clear his mind as he walked.

He had a theory that some of the Dark Lord's natural magical abilities had been dampened in his new body- especially his talent for legilimency, as the man had never bothered to hide when he was searching through one's mind in the past, and his efforts since his resurrection seemed meager at best. However, Lucius was still uncertain and it wasn't a risk he was willing to take.

When he arrived he genuflected in front of the Dark Lord's makeshift throne and waited until he lifted his vibrant red eyes in recognition of Lucius' arrival before he stood again. Nagini was curled up at the Dark Lord's feet and Lucius has to suppress any reaction to her presence, though he longed to step away from her.

Her presence wasn't a surprise. The Dark Lord kept her very close, which made sense, as did Lucius' horror by her very existence. Because the more times that Lucius encountered her the more he became convinced that she was a horcrux, and there was no telling how that could warp a living being. Her magic was more repulsive than either the diary or the locket, the two objects he'd encountered that he knew were horcruxes. He might have feared her more than he feared the Dark Lord himself.

"Lucius, to what do I owe this unexpected..." the Dark Lord drummed his fingers along the arm of the chair and smiled maliciously, "I shall not use the term 'pleasure.' This unexpected visit?"

"My Lord," Lucius bowed his head as he spoke, "I have news from Hogwarts."

The Dark Lord tilted his head only ever so slightly, but Lucius knew this was actually a sign of supreme interest.

"As you know," he continued, "today was the first day of term and when my son was returning to the school last night he heard something interesting, and perhaps troubling, which I thought you should be made aware of."
"Continue."

"Before he even reached the castle he was intercepted by the Potter boy."

"Harry Potter? Why would Harry Potter be seeking out your son?"

Lucius shook his head. "He wasn't, My Lord. You see Draco has been named prefect, he waited to take the last carriage from Hogsmeade in order to make sure he'd fulfilled his duties and he was unfortunately forced to share a carriage with a Gryffindor prefect who also happens to be Harry Potter's friend. Potter was searching for her and Draco just happened to overhear their encounter."

"You're referring to the mudblood? Harry Potter's prefect friend?"

Lucius winced internally, realizing his mistake. In an effort to distance Draco from Harry he had inadvertently drawn attention to Hermione. "Yes, My Lord," he was forced to admit.

"Severus tells me that she's the top of her class, above your son," he smirked and arched what would have been an eyebrow, if he had any.

Lucius tamped down his surprise. He wouldn't have imagined the Dark Lord would have cared about that kind of information, certainly not enough to remember and repeat it, and so he had to scramble for a response. "As I said, My Lord, she is a Gryffindor, you know how Dumbledore favors them, I'm sure that's the only reason."

"Really?" He sneered. "Because Severus says she is very clever. It's clear he doesn't care for her and he's still willing to admit as much."

"She is a mudblood," Lucius deflected. "Perhaps she is clever enough, but how powerful could she possibly be?"

"But mudbloods have their uses," he shrugged casually. "For instance, Lily Potter could have been very useful to me, had she been willing. And this particular mudblood: best friend of Harry Potter, I believe she is also the ward of House Black- Severus says Lord Black dotes on the girl, it would be a real blow to the light if she consented to join us. Don't you agree?"

Lucius' heart was pounding in his chest. He'd thought the most immediate danger was to Draco, and of course Harry, he had never imagined the Dark Lord would take an interest in Hermione (or that he would even be aware of her existence.) Severus probably thought he had been giving up relatively innocuous information on Harry Potter. He hadn't lied to Narcissa, he didn't think the younger wizard actually meant Hermione any harm, but this still made Lucius want to return to Hogwarts and strangle the man for putting her in this position.

"I must confess that the thought never would have occurred to me but, as always, My Lord knows best."

"I know that under normal circumstances Draco would not desire to associate with a mudblood but perhaps he could begin cultivating a friendship, or something more, with this one as a favor to me."

"I am sure he would be happy to serve in whatever way he can. However, in this instance I don't know how successful he will be. Their history is...not good."

"Your son is a Slytherin, is he not?"

Lucius just nodded, he was trying not to panic. How had this meeting gone so completely off the rails?
"He is wealthy, from a good House. What I'm saying is that he is not without his enticements."

"Of course, but he is betrothed, My Lord, it is widely known."

"I am aware, but I am certain that a witch of such murky origins would be flattered by any attention she received from such a prominent wizard."

Lucius scrambled for something to say, anything to take the attention off of his children. But he obviously remained silent too long because the Dark Lord's gaze, which had turned thoughtful as they conversed, turned downright malicious again.

"I have graciously forgiven House Malfoy for not coming to my aid in my time of need, haven't I, Lucius?"

"Yes, you are a most gracious Lord." The words were like sawdust in his mouth.

"And you spent that time while I was indisposed worming your way back into the good graces of society," he hissed, it almost sounded like he'd partially switched into parseltongue. It was chilling. "It is time that you made that work for me."

"I understand My Lord, of course, we are here to serve."

"Good, now back to the matter at hand. What did young Draco learn from Harry Potter?"

"Apparently, as soon as Potter entered the castle he heard a voice. It was speaking parseltongue."

"And we are certain the boy truly possesses the gift?"

Lucius took a deep breath. He'd known from the beginning that this was where he truly had to tread lightly. As far as the historical records could demonstrate, the only Parselmouths in Britain for hundreds of years had been directly descended from the Gaunt family. It was a gift the Dark Lord treasured highly and, if he could have found a way, Lucius was certain he would have hoarded it all to himself. Telling him that he believed his mortal enemy shared that gift could easily land him at the wrong end of the older wizard's wand.

"My Lord, you are of course aware that I have not been gifted with the ability, but I did witness the Potter boy utilize it during the first task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. It appeared genuine."

"Show me," he demanded.

Lucius took a fortifying breath, pushed the memory to the forefront of his brain, and waited patiently to allow a madman into his head.

"Legilimens."

Lucius immediately decided he would have preferred a round of the Cruciatius. This was like being ripped apart. At least this confirmed his theory that the Dark Lord had lost some of his ability, because while he'd never bothered to be gentle in the past, this was different. As a gifted legilimens himself Lucius could tell that the pain was due to the fact that the Dark Lord was struggling and in his frustration was attempting to rip through his mind.

When he finally pulled out of his mind Lucius did his best not to fall over.

"It seems you are correct," the Dark Lord stated. "I do wonder…” he linked his fingers across his lap and appeared to become lost in thought. "The power…” he whispered.
Lucius swallowed thickly, of course he had linked this to the prophecy.

He scooted forward on his throne- a little too anxiously for Lucius’ comfort, even as he'd almost expected this reaction. "And did Potter say anything more about this voice?"

"Something to the effect that it wanted to rip and kill. And also that it was looking for its master."

"And Draco took his word for it? Severus describes Potter as rather desperate for attention."

Again, Lucius had to tread carefully. It wouldn't do to appear that he was willing to put too much stock in what Harry Potter did or said. "I've spoken to Severus about the boy and Draco describes him differently, which is, I suppose to be expected. He is Potter's peer and Severus is his teacher, their perspectives are different. That said, I think Draco thought the danger could be real and I was unwilling to take any risks with my heir. So, when he came home I kept him there. However…"

"Yes?"

"My son is only fifteen, in many ways he is still a child. It's possible that he latched onto this as an excuse to extend his summer holidays."

That actually made the other wizard laugh.

"But I also thought it was important to come to you with this information. Especially considering the bit about this voice seeking out its master. That seemed like an odd thing for the boy to make up. I also thought the timing was too much of a coincidence."

"Oh?"

"Yes, My Lord. Those of us who are honored enough to bear your mark all felt your resurrection, your return to full power would have been impossible to miss, it was glorious My Lord." Lucius paused to consider if he was pushing his flattery to far but then decided better too much than too little. "You are the greatest wizard of all time and a descendent of the great Slytherin. It occurred to me that you might have a servant at Hogwarts who is attempting to seek you out and that I may somehow be of service."

"You have, in fact, done very well Lucius."

"And is there something you would have me do, My Lord?"

"Why yes," he grinned, it was a disgusting sight. "We are going to use this to run Albus Dumbledore out of Slytherin's castle and when the time is right we will take it for ourselves, as is my birthright."

"I look forward to it, My Lord," Lucius bowed as his mind began to race.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry for the lack of Dramione but this seemed like the right place to stop, and I'll admit that writing Voldemort is intimidating and exhausting, so I hope you like this. Thanks to my Alpha, Weestarmeggie who keeps me going with advice and baby pics :) Thank you for reading!
Chapter 44

Hermione gave Sirius a hug and laughed and squealed when he picked her up and swung her around like a little girl. She was old enough to be amused and not embarrassed by his antics. It helped that he wasn't actually her parent. She'd already bid her parents farewell earlier that morning in the privacy of their home and then Portkeyed to Potter House. Sirius had then escorted her and Harry to Platform 9 ¾ for the second time that September.

Harry on the other hand was ducking and blushing as his godfather ruffled his hair and loudly proclaimed how much he was going to miss him. He groaned out loud when the man bent down to say good-bye to Crookshanks, who was not hiding his anger at being confined to his basket. When Sirius was finally finished with his fun the platform was almost empty, but out of the corner of her eye she saw a pair of very blond heads, and more than that she could practically feel them rolling their eyes in their direction.

It was all well and good for Sirius to childishly amuse himself, but it meant that there were no empty compartments to be had. When they reached the back of the train they finally found one with only one occupant: an oddly dressed girl reading a magazine upside down. Harry and Hermione looked at each other, shrugged and he politely opened the door for her.

"Hello," she greeted the blonde.

The girl looked up in her direction but her eyes were far away. "You're Hermione Granger," her gaze shifted to Harry, or at least somewhere in his vicinity, "and Harry Potter."

"Uh, yeah that's right," he answered, "I'm sorry I don't know your name."

Hermione was ashamed to say that she didn't know it either, she barely even remembered seeing the girl around, and Hogwarts wasn't that big. Add to that, she was sitting in a train full of students minutes before it was set to depart, all by herself. That didn't sit right with Hermione, it reminded her a little too much of the girl she'd been before Hogwarts.

"That's okay, most people don't. It's Luna, Luna Lovegood."

"What a pretty name!" Exclaimed Hermione, "I have an Abraxan who I named Selene. So, as you might guess, I'm partial to the moon." Hermione shook herself, telling herself to stop babbling, and extended her hand. Luna took it immediately. "It's nice to meet you. Do you mind if we sit here?"

"Not at all," Luna answered, her smile bright.

"Thanks," said Harry, dragging his trunk and Hedwig's empty cage inside following Hermione. They levitated their trunks onto the luggage rack and then seated themselves across from Luna. Hermione placed herself between Harry and Crookshanks' basket.

"You can let your cat out," Luna said, eyeing the basket with a tilted head.

"Are you sure?"
"Of course, intelligent creatures don't like to be caged."

Hermione sighed. "I know, I hate doing it to him but we went through muggle London and he draws so much attention if he's free."

"That's because he looks like a miniature lion and is completely capable of delivering a mauling," snorted Harry.

Hermione ignored him, but Crookshanks, who was emerging from his carrier shook out his 'mane' and glared at the wizard, almost daring him to test his capabilities and then leapt right in to Luna's lap.

"Crooks!" Hermione cried.

The other witch just laughed. "It's okay we're old friends, I'm happy to see him."

"You are?"

"Yes," she peered at Hermione, "is that not okay?"

"No, of course it is. I was just surprised. He doesn't like most people, he's very picky and is a good judge of character," she paused. "Which I guess says something about most people. His name is Crookshanks, in case you didn't know."

"Oh that's lovely. I'm glad to know, I felt badly not addressing him properly."

Harry let out a cough that badly suppressed a laugh, because with the exception of his Mistress, nobody had ever called anything about Crookshanks 'lovely.' Hermione elbowed him in the stomach.

"I bet you wish you could ride with your friend, don't you?" Luna cooed at Crookshanks, apparently oblivious.

"His friend?" Hermione asked.

"Of course, Draco Malfoy's familiar. Then again, familiars often echo the feelings of their masters, though Crookshanks and Draco's cat aren't mates. I believe they consider themselves to be something like siblings which also makes sense given your relationship with Draco." Luna finally looked at Hermione. "I'm sorry, what's her name- Draco's cat that is? It seems especially wrong not to use it now that I know this guy is called 'Crookshanks.'"

Hermione just sat there with her jaw hanging open, vaguely aware that Harry, with his quick reflexes, was throwing up a ridiculous number of privacy spells.

When Hermione didn't say anything Luna frowned. "Oh, I know you and Draco are a secret, don't worry. I won't tell. I've known for years."

"I- Luna, what are you talking about?" Hermione stammered, suddenly wishing that after Harry had found out about them, that she had demanded somebody teach her how to do a memory charm.

"You and Draco are bonded," she answered simply. "It's probably the strongest one I've ever seen, it's really very lovely, but you must miss him at school."

Hermione looked at Harry helplessly who just gave her a small shrug. "Luna."

"I promise I won't tell. I'll take an oath if you like, I know that you don't have any reason to trust
me," the blonde continued, her voice guileless and innocent.

"I don't know," said Hermione, she didn't know why she was hesitating, intellectually she knew that she should demand an oath immediately, but she wanted to trust this girl.

"We're cousins you know, me and Draco."

"You are?" Hermione frowned. She thought she was fairly familiar with the Black and Malfoy family trees which, thank Merlin, intertwined a lot less often than some, especially amongst the Sacred 28.

"Yes, his mother's mother is my mother's mother's sister. But his grandmother disapproves of our family so we've never met." She shrugged, like it was no big deal.

Hermione snorted. "Druella's disapproval is practically a character recommendation."

"Is she unkind? I thought maybe she just thought my family was odd, a lot of people do."

"She tried to poison me once," Hermione blurted.

Harry started to cough violently. "She what?!"

"Well that seems a bit extreme," Luna said calmly. "I suppose your blood status is something of a problem for her."

"A bit," Hermione answered wryly as it began to sink in why she wanted to trust Luna so badly, that she already did so enough that she was blurtling out very personal information. Even though by all outward appearances they had nothing in common except for their hair color, something about Luna reminded Hermione of Narcissa. And how quickly she had come to trust Narcissa. She made a mental note to never mention that to the older witch since Luna's sense of style would probably give Narcissa heart palpitations.

"She's foolish though," Luna continued. "You and Draco make a powerful couple, you'll have magically gifted babies."

"Uh, thank you," was all Hermione could think to say about this casual observation regarding her reproductive potential. "Harry, we should probably take the charms down, they're against the rules and I'm a prefect, plus you probably don't want to draw any more attention to yourself right now by getting into trouble."

"Are we seriously not going to talk about how you just casually dropped into the conversation that your boyfriend's grandmother tried to poison you?"

She rolled her eyes. "I'll tell you all about it later, honestly it's not all that interesting." She chuckled. "Unless I include the part about the love triangle between Draco's two grandmothers and his grandfather Malfoy."

Harry gaped at her for a second before shaking it off and pointing his wand at the door. "Finite."

It was only a minute or two later when Ron and Ginny appeared. Ron slid the door open and scowled at Crookshanks. "You let that monster out? Put him away Hermione, you know he hates me."

Crookshanks stretched in Luna's lap, the only sign he'd even heard the insult was a slight twitching of his tail. Scabbers' departure hadn't improved Ron's relationship with her cat at all. Hermione
suspected he didn't want to admit he had been wrong about Crookshanks and because he didn't even attempt to be nice to her familiar, Hermione had quit apologizing for the fact that he regularly tried to use the redhead as a scratching post at least a year ago.

"He was here first, Ronald. If you don't like it you can always go sit somewhere else."

"Harry?" He whined.

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Don't put me in the middle of this," Harry snapped, then he stood up, picked up Crookshanks' carrier, placed it on the luggage rack and sat back in its place, putting himself between Hermione and the window. "It's not my fault you can't get along with a cat."

Ron huffed but said nothing, just stowed his trunk and flopped down next to Luna, presumably because there was more room on that side. Ginny sat down next to Hermione looking visibly disappointed and Hermione could only imagine it was because there were no seats available beside Harry, which she suspected, was also why Harry had moved. Luna murmured her 'hellos' to both of them and Hermione realized they all knew each other.

After that the compartment was mostly quiet until the train started moving. Since this was their second journey in less than a month there was no need for a prefect meeting because they'd already gone over all the policies and been given a patrolling schedule on September 1st. Hermione was grateful, it meant that she wouldn't have to spend the better part of an hour watching Pansy Parkinson attempt to cuddle up to her wizard and pretend she didn't care. That is, she was grateful until Ron opened his mouth again.

"Hogwarts won't be the same without Dumbledore," he sighed.

Hermione felt Harry tense beside her- she knew he was very sensitive about Dumbledore's ousting from Hogwarts, despite the fact that the old wizard had helped plan it himself in a bid to help secure Lucius' place as one of Voldemort's most trusted followers, her best friend still felt responsible.

"I don't see how it'll make much difference," she snapped. "It's not like we ever saw him except at meals. I'm not even sure what he actually did."

Ginny's head whipped around and Ron's mouth dropped open. "You wouldn't understand, Hermione, you didn't grow up like we did," Ginny practically whispered.

"Actually," she contradicted, "I think I understand better because of the way I was raised. I didn't grow up thinking that he was practically a god."

"We were safer with him in the castle," Ron insisted.

"You mean the castle where he'd been a teacher for the better part of a century and failed to notice a giant basilisk living in the basement and then when he was told about it, he just went on with business as usual?" Hermione sniped.

"That's not fair Hermione, if Sirius had just let Harry help find it the school would be safe and Dumbledore would still be in his rightful place."

"Have you lost your mind!" She screeched, blindly reaching for Harry's hand and squeezing. "Do you hear yourself? Do you understand how dangerous that would have been?! How insane that idea is?"
Ron literally waved her off. "He would have been fine with Dumbledore."

"It took an entire team of creature experts to track down that thing! They brought in a parselmouth from Asia who's older than Dumbledore! He had no business asking Harry to do that job! Sirius did the right thing, the responsible thing! And you know what, this is not the first time there's been a great danger at Hogwarts that Dumbledore failed to address: First Year there was a teacher being possessed by Voldemort and Hagrid trying to raise a bloody dragon in his hut! Second Year, well Lockhart was a menace. Third Year there were the Dementors. Last year he didn't keep Harry out of that Tournament!" She let out a long breath. "I think I feel safer now that he's gone!"

And then, in what couldn't possibly be a coincidence, a tall blond appeared at the door to the compartment and wrenched it open. He found her eyes immediately, clearly checking to see that she was okay. She could tell that he was furious but was disguising it with a sneer.

"What's going on? Merlin, Granger, I could hear you screeching from all the way down the car."

She sighed. "Nothing for you to worry about Malfoy."

He eyed them all in turn. "Well keep it down, will you? Some of us are trying to have a peaceful trip."

"Or what, Malfoy, you'll whinge to Daddy again?" Ron hissed.

Draco just blinked at him, then his eyes flicked ever so briefly to Harry and Hermione, and then back to Ron. "Are you truly complaining that I told my father what Potter said and he got rid of the actual monster in our school?" He asked incredulously.

"He was just throwing around his money."

"Yessss," Draco answered, drawing out the word, "he spent a literal fortune rendering Hogwarts safe again. How dare he?" He finished sarcastically.

"Dumbledore would have taken care of it," Ron insisted, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Right."

As she watched the exchange Hermione realized that this actually played right into their hands. If Voldemort wanted Draco to seduce her to his cause she'd give him the perfect opportunity.

"Well I'm grateful," she said softly.

Draco's eyes snapped to hers. "What's that Granger?"

"I'm grateful that your father alerted the Ministry to the problem and had the school evacuated and even more grateful that he paid to have the beast found and exterminated. Sirius explained that the government couldn't have afforded it on its own and as a muggleborn who hasn't taken her O.W.L.s I'm not eligible to attend school elsewhere. He probably saved my magical education."

Hermione saw the moment Draco understood what she was doing. He smirked and then he leered. "Our pleasure Granger. I guess this is as good of a time as any to tell you I switched patrolling duties with Smith so I'm your partner tonight, I'll meet you outside the Great Hall after the feast."

"Why would you do that?" Harry hissed, thankfully catching on and remembering his part.

Draco shrugged. "I have plans the night I was set to patrol. I'll see you later, Granger," he winked,
slammed the door closed and walked away.

"What was that?" Ginny breathed, she looked at Hermione. "It's almost like he was flirting with you."

Hermione snorted. "He wasn't," she said firmly, she knew her betrothed was actually disgusted by the very idea of the charade they'd just enacted.

"I think he's up to something Hermione."

Well that was truer than the other witch could possibly know.

"He was just trying to get under my skin. I won't give him the satisfaction."

Hermione had to keep herself from skipping to meet Draco after dinner. So, she focused on the speech the new Headmistress had made as she wondered if, perhaps, the plan Lucius, Narcissa, Sirius, and Dumbledore had hatched wasn't going to backfire on them. They had assumed that upon Dumbledore's ousting McGonagall would be instituted as Headmistress.

The Umbridge woman the Ministry had appointed was...something. Hermione knew that Draco had met her before, and she truly thought he'd been exaggerating. But she really did look like a toad. A toad clothed in more shades of pink than Hermione had known existed. However, far more disconcerting than that were her words. She wasn't just a puppet or a Ministry lackey. Hermione's instincts told her that her agenda was insidious.

Harry could obviously sense that she was uneasy and so he kept bumping her shoulder as they made their way out of the Hall. He made a big show of threatening Draco if he so much as looked at her sideways. Normally she would have been amused by the way they sniped at each other, but the sense of dread building in her gut prevented that.

She and Draco lingered in the Entrance Hall, ensuring all the students made their way towards their dorms and didn't attempt to sneak away. After about ten minutes Draco turned on his heel without speaking and Hermione hurried after him. She recognized where he was leading them, and she removed the old piece of parchment from inside of her robes.

"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," she murmured. She watched as the map came to life and watched the secluded alcove where she knew Draco was headed. "We're good," she whispered to him.

He nodded but didn't turn around, just carefully ducked into the alcove in question and the second she followed she found herself in his arms. He nuzzled her neck. "Sirius' map is going to make this a much more pleasurable year," he practically purred.

"We're supposed to be using it to watch our backs, not to find places to snog. And anyway, it belongs to Harry. He's being very kind to let us borrow it for patrols."

"Don't rain on my parade Mia."

She kissed his jaw. "Sorry, except I'm really not. We have to be careful. That woman is up to something."

"Oh, she's totally a Ministry spy."

"Well obviously, but more than that, she's... slimy."
"She's a toad. I told you this."

"I see what you meant," Hermione answered wryly. "How often do you think you can get away with finding excuses to patrol with me? I didn't expect you to find a way to make it happen this quickly."

"Don't underestimate my determination to spend time with you. Plus, remember my father just saved the school, I can pretty much ask for whatever I want," he smirked.

"Spoiled brat."

"Unapologetically."

Chapter End Notes

I know this is kind of a sketchy description of what happened with the basilisk, but I promise it will be further explained in upcoming chapters. Thanks for reading!
Chapter 45: Interlude- Sirius

Sirius stood around the desk in the study of the safe house that he and Lucius had purchased for the family. They were joined by Dumbledore. All of them were gazing at the three objects sitting on the desk. He knew it weighed on all of them that two of the pieces were priceless artifacts which had been tainted beyond imagination.

The whole situation was horrific. Sirius had already known that for a long time, but it continued to surprise him when, at every step, things seemed to get worse.

"Well, this is indeed a horcrux," Dumbledore said, giving the diadem a final poke. "Well done."

Lucius rolled his eyes in Sirius' direction. They'd already informed the elder wizard that they had a third horcrux, but he'd wanted to examine it personally. In fact, he'd wanted to examine all of them together. They'd acquiesced, the man was older than the two of them combined, it was only right that they do their due diligence and make sure they hadn't missed anything. But he was talking to them like they were his students again.

Sirius shuddered and took another step back. "Does anybody else find it super creepy that there's more of Voldemort's soul in this room than there is walking around in that body of his?"

"Yes," responded Lucius mockingly, "super creepy," he drawled. He paused and then sighed. "But if you'd seen him lately you would not have any problem at all believing that to be true."

"I think I'll pass on that particular privilege, thanks," he snorted. Sirius had encountered Voldemort on a couple of occasions during the first war, but he was really not looking forward to meeting this particular iteration of the wizard- if he could even truly be called a wizard any longer.

Suddenly Lucius stood up a little straighter. "I maintain that they all need to remain intact until we can gather the rest of them."

Dumbledore sighed. "And I maintain that we need to destroy them as soon as you receive the basilisk venom you requested from the rendering. I don't believe Voldemort will be able to feel their destruction and it's too dangerous to leave them intact."

"You do not believe he will be able to feel their destruction, but you don't know. You are not the one who has to go stand before him!" Lucius swore with a rap of his walking stick against the side of his desk- something Sirius had noticed he rarely had with him at home but always carried in Dumbledore's presence.

"It's a chance we will have to take."

"It's a chance you're asking me to take and I will not do it! Without me you would have none of the horcruxes, nor the means to destroy them! You wouldn't even know for certain he'd made horcruxes, you admitted that it was one of many theories you had!"

"Lucius-"

"No, do not attempt to placate me, my mind is made up. Black and I will divide them up and keep them safe until such time as they can all be destroyed at once then we will be free to go after his body, with any luck their destruction will weaken the magic holding that construct together. This is
not the Order of the Phoenix, Dumbledore, you do not give orders. You are only even in this house as a courtesy." Lucius looked at Sirius for backup.

He sighed. On one hand he really wanted to go ahead and get rid of these nasty buggers. He especially didn't want to keep storing one of them, even if he didn't reside in the property where he was keeping it.

On the other, if Dumbledore was wrong and Voldemort figured out what they were doing it put the entire mission at risk. They could lose every advantage they had and possibly get their spy killed.

Deep down Sirius knew he was being petty in even hesitating to agree with was just that the man was being an even more insufferable bastard than usual lately over his part in killing the basilisk and discovering another horcrux.

But really, all he'd done was get the pertinent information from Voldemort (and okay, admittedly that probably hadn't been much fun). They had taken that information to Dumbledore who agreed that it was a near certainty he would be suspended from Hogwarts if not outright fired if a basilisk was discovered in the castle on his watch. He believed it was worth it to ingratiate Lucius further with Voldemort as there were other teachers who could protect the students.

Then all Lucius had to do was whisper in Fudge's ear, spend a small fortune hiring a team of creature experts (but he had a large fortune) and then take the opportunity to wander around the evacuated castle with the Marauder's map and the horcrux locating map. So, he'd happened to find one, so what? That was just luck.

And yes, he'd been the one to design the means to locate the horcruxes in the first place- but that was because Sirius had been at the beach with their kids at the time! Plus, Sirius had been the one to get them the locket, even though all he'd done was order Kreacher to retrieve it...Okay, he was being very petty. And probably more than a little jealous that he hadn't really seen any action which, considering his responsibilities to Harry, was something he needed to nip in the bud right now.

He owed his godson too much to go looking for trouble trying to one-up Malfoy. He sighed.

"Malfoy's right, Albus, it's not worth the risk. We'll keep them safe," he said grabbing the locket without waiting for further argument and apparating to the cottage he'd inherited from his Uncle Alphard. He put it in the box where he had been storing it and warded said box to the teeth as quickly as possible. Then he apparated back to the safe house- Harry, Hermione and Draco were due at any moment.

Malfoy arrived back just minutes after Sirius did. They had all agreed that the horcruxes would never be in the same building as the teenagers unless they absolutely couldn't help it. Even Narcissa had stayed away from tonight's meeting, it was something of a surprise to Sirius but he knew that his cousin was especially sensitive to magic, so perhaps she hadn't put up much of a fight.

They waited in the parlor along with Dumbledore. It had been easy to convince the Ministry to allow all three teenagers to leave the school on Saturdays for private tuition, the same thing Dumbledore had previously agreed to allow. They were tripping all over themselves to do anything Lucius asked, and Fudge seemed almost as anxious to do a favor for Lord Black. Of course the Ministry didn't know that the three students were all traveling to the same place.

Dumbledore offering his assistance as tutor after he'd been suspended had been a big surprise. Sirius had been tempted to refuse, and he was certain Lucius had too, but as Narcissa pointed out,
"when a wizard of Dumbledore's calibre offers your children private lessons, that's simply not something you refuse, no matter how you feel about him personally." (Damn that woman for being the voice of reason).

He heard the sound of a portkey arrival and then Hermione literally stomped into the room, hair flying behind her. Harry trailed in her wake looking rather miserable.

"That horrible woman! What is wrong with the Ministry? How could they think that- that TOAD is a better choice for headmistress than Professor McGonagall? Those corrupt bastards!"

"How long has she been like this?" Sirius whispered to his godson who had come to stand beside him. Sirius now had a very strong suspect as to the source of his misery.

Harry sighed. "All week," he nearly whined, "I mean she's right, that Umbridge woman is awful, but there's only so much I can stand to hear about it. And the Malfoys have taught her to be all...straight faced and Slytherin in public so she takes it all out on me!" His gaze shifted to Dumbledore. "What is he doing here?" Harry hissed.

"Wait until Draco gets here, we'll explain."

Hermione continued to pace and rant, spitting mad just like she had been the first time he'd met her. Dumbledore's- to whom she seemed oblivious- eyes were sparkling with amusement and even Lucius' mouth was twitching.

"Sitting in on our classes! Auditing our teachers! Fawning all over the purebloods! Waddling around like she owns the place! It's disgusting, I'm going to, I'm going to-"

"You're going to do what, Kitten?" Sirius could no longer contain himself.

She turned on her heel and pointed an accusing finger in his direction. "Don't mess with me, Black! Or I'll come after you too!" She spat, sounding so much like Lucius that Sirius actually burst out laughing.

He was still getting control of himself when they heard the sound of another portkey arrival. Harry breathed an actual sigh of relief and then Draco strolled into the room, but the expression on his face was determined. He walked right up to Hermione and pulled her into his arms, she immediately melted against him.

Sirius watched in fascination. He'd spent the summer watching them alternatively frolick along the beach like the fifteen year olds they were, and then buckle down in their lessons- even those in muggle subjects they'd taken on voluntarily- with a maturity most adults probably couldn't muster. And he'd rarely seen anything like their relationship, their understanding of each other was something to behold, he couldn't even fault Lucius and Narcissa for allowing them to tie themselves into such a serious betrothal.

Sirius smiled to himself. They'd only been back at school for a week but he'd missed them terribly. This summer with them had been a balm to his soul he hadn't known he'd needed. Or perhaps, hadn't wanted to admit he needed. His first summer with Harry had been wonderful, but there had been a degree of awkwardness between them that had finally dissolved over the last school year. And Hermione and Draco had been great additions.

"I know you're mad," Draco continued. "I've been able to practically feel your temper about to explode from across the Great Hall for days. But losing it won't do any good, you'll just wear yourself out before our lesson and Father won't so much as let you pick up your wand if you lose
control of your magic."

She huffed and turned her face into his neck. "That woman keeps looking at you like she wants to pet you or something, it's disgusting."

"Eww, Mia," he wrinkled his nose, "I don't think it's like that."

"No, I didn't mean to imply it was sexual, just that she's deluded enough to think that if she gives you enough of her attention she'll gain your family's favor."

"I- okay." Draco ran a hand down his face. "I see what you mean, but losing your temper is still not the right answer because eventually you'll slip up in front of her and that won't do you, or any other muggleborn any favors," he finished pointedly.

"Nice guilt trip Draco," she groused, but there was no heat in it. "Do you have a better suggestion?"

"Yes, I was thinking we could handle her the way we handled Lockhart."

"Who's Lockhart and what happened to him?" Sirius leaned in and whispered to Harry.

"I'll tell you later, this I have to hear," he whispered back.

Hermione pulled back to look at Draco, a slow, almost frightening smile, creeping up her face. "Have I told you lately how much I love you?"

"Always nice to hear it."

"It'll be more complicated, since we don't actually have her in class," she answered, toying with his collar but she was now grinning at him.

He shrugged. "I'm up for the challenge, and I like to think we've gotten more sophisticated since second year."

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "That was you two? I must say I'm impressed. I thought it was an older student who had instigated Professor Lockhart's, shall we say, flight from the castle."

Hermione let out a little shriek and they flew apart so quickly that the normally almost preternaturally graceful Draco tripped over his own feet and his father- who was now openly chuckling- stepped forward to catch him.

"Sir," Hermione squeaked. "What are you doing here?"

"I apologize, Miss Granger, I didn't mean to startle you." He actually bowed slightly in her direction. "Now that I am unemployed I've offered my services as one of your tutors. I find that I've missed teaching and I've rarely had the opportunity to give such personalized attention to my students."

"Oh," she responded and Sirius noticed she glanced ever so fleetingly at Lucius and Draco. Draco didn't respond but Lucius gave her a slight nod. "Well thank you, sir, it's an honor."

"Of course Miss Granger."

"May I ask what you'll be teaching us?" Sirius could tell Hermione was having a hard time standing still. She'd gone from furious to delighted at a speed that would have given the average person whiplash. The witch couldn't be more Narcissa's daughter if she'd actually been born to her. He knew Hermione was not particularly pleased with Dumbledore as of late, but like Narcissa, rather
than dwell on that she'd jumped on the opportunity she was being given.

Dumbledore shrugged. "This and that. I have special expertise in using transfiguration as an offensive tactic that I'm told you haven't had much instruction in and it's a technique most opponents won't expect."

Hermione inhaled sharply, and Sirius knew she was trying to contain her excitement.

"Shall we get started?" Asked Lucius.

"Wait," Harry interrupted. "I want to know what they did to Lockhart."

Draco crossed his arms over his chest and Hermione glanced nervously at Dumbledore who looked positively delighted.

"I am no longer your headmaster, I assure you, I will not attempt to assign you detention. In fact, I am most curious myself."

"We tag teamed him," Draco provided. "Nobody knew or even suspected we were friends so we basically took turns asking him questions he couldn't answer or to explain something that didn't make sense, or to demonstrate something we knew he probably wasn't capable of. We built on each other's points, but nobody realized what we were doing was intentional because they didn't think we could possibly be working together."

Harry's mouth dropped open. "I- wow." He ran a hand through his hair. "How did I not see that?"

"People rarely see past their preconceptions," Hermione said quietly.

"Luna does," Harry responded.

"Well Luna is special."

"Yeah," Draco snorted, with an accusatory glare in each of their directions.

"Who's Luna?" Sirius asked.

"Apparently, she's their new friend," Draco continued to glare, "who they like to share all of our secrets with. No matter how I feel about it."

"Like I told you, it wasn't like that. But if you insist we can talk about later," Hermione glared right back. "But I'd prefer if Narcissa was around for that. I have some questions for her I didn't feel comfortable putting in a letter, is she coming?"

"She'll be by later," Lucius provided, he glanced at Sirius and he knew they were both wondering if this new development was something they should be worried about. Draco was the most naturally cautious of the three and it was very unlike he and Hermione to disagree, especially so openly.

"Okay good," answered Hermione, looking away from her betrothed.

"Whatever Mia," Draco snorted.

Sirius glanced at his godson who just gave a slight shake of his head.

"So, that's it, Lockhart was so intimidated by two second years that he quit?" Harry asked in an obvious effort to change the subject.
"No, actually," Hermione answered. "Draco found a boggart in the dungeons. He asked the elves to capture it in an old suitcase which we transfigured to look like a present and left it on his desk as an end-of-term gift."

She looked up again and smiled at Draco, shyly. His eyes went soft and they simultaneously bit their lips. It was exactly the kind of look you would normally expect to see couples their age exchange, but it was odd from the two of them who were normally so comfortable together.

"Mia and I have a bet about the form that the boggart took," Draco took up the story and sighed dramatically. "Too bad we'll probably never know unless he's stupid enough to write a book about his time at Hogwarts or something."

"Ah," Dumbledore interrupted, "I believe I can help you there. When Gilderoy tendered his resignation he mentioned that he'd had a vision from the future and that if he stayed at Hogwarts he would lose his hair."

Harry made a choking sound. Hermione and Draco just stared at each other before he slowly started to raise his arms above his head in a sign of victory. "I knew it. I knew it. I knew it!" He pointed at Hermione, and then began to jump up and down, "you thought he was most vain about his smile but I knew it was the hair!"

"That's only because you're so vain about your own hair, you prat!"

He shook his head vigorously and began to stalk towards her. "You're not going to distract me, admit it."

She huffed.

"Come on Mia, don't be a bad sport. Admit it."

"You were right."

"I'm sorry, what was that?"

"You were right, and I was wrong," she said more loudly, but she was suppressing a smile as he closed the distance and threw an arm around her shoulders.

"Merlin, they're exhausting," Harry muttered but Sirius noted that he eagerly trotted after his friends when Lucius announced that it was time to get on with the reason they were there.

Lucius and Sirius both lingered at the back of the group.

"Should we be worried about this Umbridge woman?" Sirius murmured to him, out of the corner of his eye he saw the other wizard shrug.

"She is not a physical or magical threat to any of them," he answered. "Moreover 'she makes my daughter angry enough to throw a temper tantrum' isn't really reason enough for me to get her fired."

That startled a laugh out of Sirius.

"And even if it was, they'd just put another lackey in her place. At least I'm familiar with this one."

Sirius sighed, but couldn't disagree.

"Do you know anything about this Luna person?" Lucius asked after a pause.
"First I'm hearing of her."

Lucius sighed. "Well it's always something, isn't it?"

Sirius couldn't disagree.
Draco sighed in frustration at the complete lack of subtlety with which a group of nearly ten Gryffindors were attempting to sneak back to their tower after their M.A. meeting.

The M.A.

Marauder's Army.

Sirius had nearly exploded with pride when Harry and Hermione told him what they'd decided to name their little rebel group. There had actually been whooping and fist pumping. The only one to escape a hug had been Lucius. They had all been thankful for that fact. Actually, Draco had just been thankful that nobody had seemed to notice how very un-excited he was by the idea.

Merlin save him from overly excitable Gryffindors.

He ducked behind a tapestry so that nobody in the group would see him deliberately not catching them and leaned back against the wall to wait. Sometimes he really wished he was a little more successful at telling Hermione 'no.'

He'd known the minute he'd seen Educational Decree #24: No student organizations, societies, teams, groups and clubs may exist without the knowledge and permission of the High Inquisitor that it was no coincidence it had appeared just days after Hermione and Potter hosted their first information session about the possibility of starting a defence club. The Ministry was determined to keep them meek and powerless.

Hermione had been outraged. She'd almost done several very stupid things as a result. Draco tried to appear unruffled by it all, but actuality the fact was that their government being threatened by the idea of a populace possessing even basic defensive skills bothered him more than he really cared to think about. So he did his best not to.

What he could not do was ignore his betrothed. However, he had hoped that they would just give up on the idea of the defence group once it had been officially forbidden. And Potter had seemed mostly content to do just that.

Draco suspected it was due to his discomfort over the way that he'd been made the de facto leader of the group. But, of course, Hermione was not. She was fundamentally incapable of sitting back and letting any perceived injustice pass by. On parchment she was a terrible match for somebody as naturally selfish and self-centered as he was. But she made him better and he adored her for it.

She declared that she didn't care if it was against the rules. They were lucky enough to have parents and guardians who had the knowledge and resources to teach them to defend themselves. But most of their fellow students didn't, and so they were going to proceed with their plans for a defence group. And he'd known immediately that he would do whatever he could to help her. Whether he liked it or not.

And he decidedly did not.
But that was how he found himself huddled in a small alcove on the last night before the Christmas holidays were to begin like a scared first year. An Inquisitorial Squad badge ('Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition' Hermione had quipped with a roll of her eyes when the name of the group was announced) pinned to his robes next to the Prefect's badge he'd actually once been proud to wear, instead of in his common room enjoying some spiked eggnog and leftovers from the Feast.

His only consolation was that the lure of sweets had been too much for Crabbe and Goyle to resist and they'd stayed behind, so he was patrolling alone. Because not only did he find their presence beyond tiresome but, even as stupid as they naturally were, if he had to confund one of them again to keep them from seeing something they shouldn't, somebody was going to notice.

And then the newest irksome presence in his life made herself known.

He heard her humming before he saw her coming from the crack between the wall and the tapestry concealing him. She was skipping, her long blonde hair flying behind her like the tail of a kite. He resisted the urge to groan; she was even more conspicuous than an entire crowd of Gryffindors. And just his luck, she stopped directly in front of him, then pulled the tapestry aside and stepped right into his space, smiling at him but not quite meeting his eyes.

"Hello Draco, I see that you're doing an especially bad job of catching students out of bounds tonight."

"Hello Luna," he said, biting back a grimace. "I do my best."

He wanted to like this girl, as much as he'd ever wanted to like anybody, which wasn't a lot. But she meant something to Hermione, he'd even go so far as to say that Hermione admired her. More than that, she'd never had to lie to Luna, which meant a great deal to her, bleeding heart that she was.

But the younger Ravenclaw frankly scared the hell out of him. She saw things she shouldn't, knew things without being able to explain how. And if he was being honest, he resented her intrusion into his little world. His relationship with both Hermione, but especially Harry, had been hard won and here she'd waltzed right in and they treated her like she'd been their friend for years.

When Hermione had pointed out that she was his cousin, he'd reminded her that they were actually second cousins. He'd also made sure to note that there were few people in the castle he wasn't related to in some way, and told her that if a blood relationship was a litmus test for trustworthiness, then he expected she'd be organizing a field trip to visit his Aunt Bellatrix in Azkaban.

She had been less than impressed by his flippancy. She had then given him her 'I'm so disappointed in you' look. Which was actually worse than his mother's version of the same look- and that was saying something- and quietly informed him that she simply thought it was always nice to have more family.

So, he was trying.

"I know Hermione appreciates it," Luna added, interrupting his thoughts. "It's lovely, what you're willing to do for her."

"You think stalking her around the castle like I have some kind of perverted sexual interest in her is lovely?" He snorted.

She smiled brightly at him. "It's actually rather funny to those of us who know better," she sobered.
"But I can see how it would be disturbing to you, which is why it's lovely that you're willing to do it anyway."

Draco didn't have anything to say to that, but felt oddly touched. He'd been struggling all term with his order from the Dark Lord to pursue Hermione in order to essentially deliver her into his service. It made him feel dirty no matter how much his betrothed tried to reassure him that she knew he would never actually use her in such a way. It especially disturbed him how she tried to act like it was no big deal. So, he appreciated the younger girl's compassion.

Luna reached into her bag and removed a hoop about the size of a dinner plate, wrapped in leather cord, it contained the same cord woven across the diameter in a pattern which was something like a spider web. It was decorated with iridescent glass beads and had feathers dangling from it. It was rather pretty in a rustic, primitive sort of way. She pushed it into his hands.

"Happy Christmas."

"Um, thank you, but what is it?"

"You're braver than you think you are, but you need some help keeping your brain uninfested. Just hang this over your bed and it will protect you." She went up on her toes and kissed his cheek. "I'll see you next term. Hermione will be along momentarily, she and Harry were going over some plans for our next meeting while this one was fresh in their minds."

She ducked out and then skipped down the corridor, leaving Draco with a healthy helping of guilt. "Damn it," he muttered to himself, he was going to have to find something to send her in return. Whatever she'd just done had been weird, but he couldn't question that it had also been nice.

It was mere minutes later when Hermione slipped out from under Potter's invisibility cloak and into his hiding place. He was unsurprised, he had assumed they would use the Map to locate him. They were, thankfully, quiet and subtle about the entire maneuver.

"Go away Potter!" He hissed.

There was a slight chuckle and whoosh of cloth and Draco was confident he'd left before he kissed Hermione.

She grinned at him when he pulled away. "Hey, what's this?" She carefully touched Luna's gift which he was still cradling in his hands- not really knowing what else to do with it.

"Luna stopped by to give it to me."

"Oh! It's a dream catcher! How thoughtful!" She took it from him and tucked it into his robes, leaving it with a small sticking charm, as it was too big for any of his pockets. "Keep it safe."

Again, he hid his grimace. "Hi," he greeted her officially, covering her mouth with his again.

She giggled. "You'll see me tomorrow, Draco. You don't have to act like this is the last bit of me you'll get for weeks." However, despite her words he felt her pleased smile against his lips at his neediness.

He pulled her further against him. "Don't tell me that I'm the only one to be tired of this game."

"No, of course not, but I have an early Christmas present for you."

"Oh?"
"The Weasley twins made it very clear that they plan to prank Umbridge as a parting gift for the holidays. They wouldn't give me the specifics, but I have faith in them."

"I guess I'll have to console myself with that." Another thing to hate about this term: his father had politely asked (ordered) them not to bother Umbridge too much, because apparently the devil you knew was better than the devil you didn't and if they ran the woman out of the school she might be replaced by somebody Lucius had less control over. Draco had a hard time imagining how that could be worse, because Delores Umbridge was the most odious person he'd ever had the misfortune to meet, but Lucius assured them that she was both predictable and easily manipulated which was in their favor; and he trusted his father.

Hermione held out her hand for him. "I'd like to stay here with you but it's a stupid risk to take, especially on the last night of term. Escort me back to my dorm?"

He took her hand and squeezed it very briefly. "I love you," he whispered.

She touched her finger to the side of her nose and winked at him.

Then they stepped out into the corridor and made a big show of loudly half-fighting, half-flirting all the way to Gryffindor Tower. Draco didn't know exactly what his father had said to Umbridge, or maybe even the Minister, but he and Hermione were never bothered when they were together, even after curfew- as long as they didn't push it too far. The only thing Draco enjoyed about the entire arrangement was that he was allowed to make sure Hermione got home unmolested on a regular basis.

He couldn't say what he wanted to say to her in full view of several portraits, so he just kissed her hand like a pureblood engaged in a traditional courtship, and watched her disappear through the portrait hole. He then made his way down to the dungeons. The Slytherin common room was sparsely populated, but not empty.

"Hey Malfoy!" Theo Nott called from his place, lounging on one sofa.

"Yes?" Draco arched one eyebrow at the other wizard.

"Where have you been?"

Draco sighed and went to sit in an armchair close enough to him to converse. He and Nott were only fifth years, but their wealth and family status assured that they were already at the top rung of their house, and everybody in their vicinity scattered to allow them to have a private conversation.

"I was patrolling, you know that."

"On the last night of term? We both know you could have made somebody else do it for you and stayed here for the party."

Draco shrugged, trying to appear unaffected. It felt like the line he was walking got thinner everyday. "I had a lady to escort back to her tower," he explained loftily.

Nott snorted. "Are you seriously trying to seduce Granger? Your family can't be happy about that."

Draco narrowed his eyes. "I do as I'm told. You know that better than anybody."

"Do you?"

It was said with such disbelief that Draco almost reared back in surprise. On top of that, it felt like
Nott's eyes were boring holes into him. He'd never before noticed how blue his eyes were- it was a little unnerving. But that paled in comparison to watching the series of emotions flash across his housemate's face: doubt, incredulity, disgust, fear, and then the worst of all- something which took Draco a few moments to process...disappointment.

It was the most open his pseudo-friend had ever been with him and it left him feeling cold.

"I do," he swallowed.

"Well I suppose this was always going to be the way of things," Nott answered, and then he got up and walked towards the door to the boys dormitories without another word.

Draco rushed- while putting in a considerable effort not to appear to rush- back to his room. He threw himself onto his bed and tried to figure out what had just happened. He felt like he'd just been judged and come up lacking.

He considered calling Hermione but almost immediately decided this was something he wanted to work out without her. Probably because he couldn't be certain if he should be ashamed of himself for some reason- because he certainly felt ashamed.

He couldn't work past the fear and disappointment on Nott's face. He lay flat on his back rubbing the heels of his hands against his eyes repeatedly until he decided to call the person who might, might just be able to understand his dilemma.

"Sirius Black."

It was close to a minute before the older man answered, he'd obviously been asleep but Draco was relieved to see he apparently hadn't been interrupting anything else.

"Hey kid, what's up?"

"Sorry to wake you."

"It's okay, I assume you wouldn't have if it wasn't important."

Draco sighed. "Nott confronted me in the common room earlier. Actually," he paused, "it would be an exaggeration to call it a confrontation, it wasn't anything dramatic. I was out after curfew and he wanted to know where I had been. I made a quip about walking Hermione back to Gryffindor and he asked if my family wasn't upset in my interest in her. I told him I was just doing what I was told. Implying heavily that, you know, the Dark Lord had given me an order to get close to her which I'm certain he already suspected. But when I said that- Sirius- he just looked so...let down."

"I'm sorry, Draco, I'm not following. I'm obviously aware of the situation but I don't know what you're asking me."

"I feel like he's been testing me since the beginning of term. Wondering where my loyalties really lie. His father- I don't really know all that much about him other than he's a lot older than my parents. Like maybe the age of the original Death Eaters. I've spent the past few years being very quiet about my ideas about blood purity, I wonder if he thought I'd changed my mind. My family is kind of riddled with blood traitors. And I wonder if he thought he could maybe seek refuge with my family like you did with the Potters."

Sirius' eyes fell shut. "Oh kid."

"It's just a hunch, but I feel terrible for not considering it before. He's a friend."
Suddenly Sirius was surrounded with a bunch of ghost like animals that Draco recognized as patronuses, he could tell they were speaking to Sirius but he couldn't hear them.

"Okay, okay," Sirius said, "I hate to do this but I need to go, but we'll talk about this over the holidays, I promise."

"That's fine, I understand. I never thought anything could be done tonight. Whatever's going on, be careful."

"I'm always careful."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Whatever, old man," he said, closing his mirror at the sight of the older wizard's rude gesture.

He let his head bounce against the mattress and allowed himself a few moments to wallow.

He was pretty sure that his teen years were supposed to be full of discovery and- at least if the muggle magazines Hermione had purchased and laughed uproariously at over the summer were any indication- a lot of unnecessary drama. She'd read some of the articles aloud to him and Potter and he'd counted himself lucky that he hadn't had to face such utter nonsense. He would do so gladly now, in exchange for their circumstances.

He recognized that he could be totally misreading Nott's intentions. He hoped that he wasn't because he did actually consider the other wizard a friend and he didn't fancy fighting a war against him, but he would wait for advice on that matter.

But this all just made him recognize another issue he'd completely ignored: all of Slytherin. Whatever Theo Nott intended there were surely people in Slytherin who were scared and felt boxed in by familial circumstances or due to their house affiliation, and didn't feel like they had anywhere to escape. Little kids- in many cases- who didn't have open minded parents, a Hermione, or a family like the Potters willing to take them in. And they were no more prepared to defend themselves than the rest of the Hogwarts population- except they also didn't have an M.A.

"Fuck," Draco said aloud to his canopy.

They were going to need yet another plan.

Hermione was anxious to get home. She thought that things would be better, that she would feel a little bit more centered once she was away from Hogwarts. But then she entered the common room the morning that they were set to return home for the Christmas holidays and found Harry waiting for her.

He looked like he'd barely slept.

"What's up?" She wondered, plopping herself down next to him.

"Mr. Weasley was injured in the Department of Mysteries last night and Sirius called me first thing to let me know. They don't know if he's going to pull through."

She let out a long breath. "Okay," she took Harry's hand. "We have to be strong, if for no other reason than we don't want Umbridge to know that you have a method of communication outside of the castle which is faster than an owl."

"Good call." He squeezed her hand and then pulled her up and led her to breakfast.
Once they were settled Hermione glanced over at the Slytherin table to see that Draco looked completely untroubled, which in the scheme of things was meaningless. Both because he was a startlingly good actor, and because it was entirely possible that he hadn't been alerted to any possible emergency in the Weasley family. Especially considering that even Hermione hadn't been. But mostly it was just that, even from across the enormous room, she knew that he was putting up a facade; she just didn't know why.

They ate breakfast in a daze, very aware of the lack of redheads at the Gryffindor table. They were able to speak to their Head of House who assured them that Mr. Weasley was alive, but that he was hanging on by a thread. They took a walk around the Black Lake to try and settle down but it didn't do much to help.

Soon they were boarding the Hogwarts Express. They found a free compartment and Luna quickly found them.

"Draco is very troubled," she warned Hermione almost immediately.

"I- yes, I had a sense. I'll talk to him as soon as I can."

The other witch just nodded.

"Thank you for what you gave him, that means a lot."

"You don't believe in them. Or in the things that I see."

Hermione swallowed her pride. "I'm not sure that I do, but it's enough for me that you care."

Luna smiled. "That's a very lovely and open minded thing to say."

It made Hermione feel a little ashamed of herself, she should probably start cutting Draco a little slack when it came to her new friend. It really wasn't that easy accepting new things into your life.

"Thank you."

When they arrived at Kings Cross they were quickly hustled off the platform by Sirius, he was more no-nonsense than she'd ever seen him. Once they arrived at Potter House and were greeted by the Grangers who had come for this very reason, Sirius made a floo call to Malfoy Manor to ensure that they had the all clear to come through.

Hermione and Draco had a brief reunion but made a mutual, unspoken decision not to draw it out- it had been less than a day since they'd really seen each other, not to mention that Harry and Sirius both were known to be vicious with their teasing.

They sat down for what Sirius had termed 'family dinner' over the summer, despite the fact that it had usually only been the four of them; and Lucius had never been present at all. It made Harry beam and Hermione feel warm inside so she'd never protested.

Harry was fidgeting terribly and Hermione was shocked he'd been able to hold out this long. "What happened to Mr. Weasley?" He blurted as the soup was served. "Is he okay?"

"Mr. Weasley?" Draco asked, "what is Potter talking about?"

And so, in turns, Lucius and Sirius explained to them how Mr. Weasley had been guarding the Hall of Prophecies. Voldemort had gotten impatient trying to find a hole in the Ministry security and had sent Nagini in as a scout. He had called Lucius to his side to help tell him how to direct her because Lucius had been in the Department of Ministries many times as a Wizengamot member.
Lucius explained that hadn't been too concerned, he'd known Voldemort couldn't actually get to the prophecy unless he went to get it himself, or was somehow able to convince Harry to do so. He hadn't expected that the Order was still guarding it. Thankfully, Voldemort's glee over Nagini's assault on a senior Order member distracted him enough to allow Lucius to excuse himself, flee, and sound the alert.

Until Sirius had informed him he'd had no idea that the Order member in question had been Arthur Weasley.

"Will he be okay?" Harry asked.

"They don't know," Sirius answered, "there's something in that snake's venom that keeps blood from coagulating, which isn't unheard of, but she's just not a normal snake… he can only be given so much blood replenisher before it stops working."

"What about a blood transfusion?" Hermione's father interrupted.

"I'm sorry, what?" Asked Sirius.

"We muggles don't have magic to power a blood replenishing potion, obviously. So when somebody needs blood, it can be donated from another person with the same blood type. That might be better for Arthur so he doesn't use up his reserves of magic simply keeping enough blood in his body to keep him alive."

"Oh, I'm not a healer but it certainly seems like it has potential."

"It's not a perfect solution, but it might buy more time, maybe alternating it with the replenishing potion," he continued thoughtfully and then looked around the table and sighed. "This isn't mealtime conversation, come with me and I'll give you the details.

Sirius nodded, "yes, we can floo St. Mungo's and see what they think," and followed him out of the room.

Hermione found herself wringing her hands, she understood at least the basics of what her father was thinking. She was proud of him, but her anxiety had little to do with Mr. Weasley's condition.

"What are you thinking, love?" Narcissa asked gently.

"I thought you had convinced Professor Dumbledore that guarding the prophecy was a waste of time. I- he confuses me so much. I see him almost every week, he's a great teacher, absolutely fascinating! I don't understand how somebody so brilliant can also be…" she wiped at her face, beyond exasperated.

"I truly think he's doing his best, dearest," Narcissa attempted to comfort Hermione, "But I also think he's spent too much time being regarded as the smartest, most powerful person in any room he enters. And on the other hand considering anybody who doesn't necessarily bow down to that personae, to be the enemy. You're right, he is brilliant. But I believe that can be as much a curse as it is a gift and that it's skewed his perspective. I think it's been a very long time since he truly trusted another."

"So he's making all of his decisions on his own?"

Narcissa just nodded.

Hermione looked around at the people she loved most dearly in the world. "Well that just sounds
terrible."

The silence in the room following her statement spoke volumes.

Chapter End Notes

I just want to make it clear I haven't forgotten about the blood quills, I have not mentioned them because they haven't been made to use them. This Harry knows better than to constantly go around arguing with her and screaming that Voldemort is back. Also, and more importantly in my mind, he has Sirius' protection. Umbridge is a terrible person, but to reach the position she did in the Ministry she must be at least somewhat politically savvy, i.e. she's not going to go around torturing Lord Black's godson (or his ward, Hermione, though in canon Hermione never used the quill). Canon Umbridge targeted Harry because he was vulnerable and she considered him to be a threat, this Harry is a lot less of both.

I put A LOT of thought into these story choices. If you are confused or think I've forgotten something you are absolutely welcome to ask me about them- in fact I really like talking to y'all- explaining my thought processes and I'm so thankful when somebody finds a plot hole so I can fix it. But please be polite about it. 99% of you are fabulous but a rude review can be really disheartening and I don't care how you feel about a piece of writing, I don't think there's really any excuse for calling somebody stupid. Ever. Okay I'll get off my soapbox.

But while I'm writing an A/N as long as the chapter, just to clarify, sorry guys, I don't have an update schedule. I've gotten a few questions about how many chapters I anticipate this story having. 60-65 is my best guesstimate, but I admit it's hard for me to know how many words it'll take me to get from point A to point B. Whew! Thanks for staying with me!

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