What Worth A Life?

by DaronwyK

Summary

During the Battle of Hogwarts, Hermione's life is saved by the most unlikely person possible. The repercussions of that one act change the entire course of her life, and she is drawn into a web of Politics, Ancient Magic, and Romance.

Notes

Cross Posted from FF.net. This is primarily a Hermione/Lucius fic, if that's not your cup of tea you will not enjoy this story, but I hope you give it a try. Also note that there is very little time between the trio's capture at Malfoy Manor and the Battle of Hogwarts, it's of my own opinion that Hermione would have had Polyjuice potion in her kit and not needed a month to brew it.
Hermione felt the spell wrench her wand from her hand, sending it spinning away uselessly. The battle had been furious, and she’d been separated from Ron. Voldemort had fallen, but his Death eaters had started retaliating. She felt her body stiffen as she fell hard and looked up into the face of the last wizard she’d ever wanted to see in this life. Dolohov. She felt tears escaping from her eyes as her mind screamed.

“I’d been wanting to catch up with you again…Bellatrix had promised to let me play with you more.” He stroked her face and then dragged her out of the open and behind a pile of rubble. “Pretty mudblood…” He tore open her shirt and she was helpless to even struggle. “Maybe I should drop the spell. I love listening to you scream.” She felt his tongue lick a wet hot line along her jaw. Not again…not again.

Hermione saw a flash of green light and suddenly she felt Dolohov’s spell release as he fell, lifeless, on top of her. Someone wrenched him away and she was looking up at the bloody and battered form of Lucius Malfoy. She was so stunned she couldn’t do anything more than gape.

“Miss Granger, do keep still.” He made a quick gesture and her shirt was repaired, he then offered her a hand. “Come…there isn’t much time.”

She took it mostly out of shock, and let him pull her to her feet, pressing a wand into her hand. “Why?”

“Because I have need of your help, and you owe me now,” he said quietly and led her through the chaos to where Draco laid behind some rubble. He was unnaturally pale, twitching randomly from the aftereffects of some curse or another. “I need you to levitate him, and I’ll repel any attackers. We need to get him to help.”

Hermione nodded. “Mobilicorpus.” She cast the spell and moved with him, heading for the edge of the anti-apparition wards. She could hear the impact of spells against the shielding charm the Elder Malfoy had cast around them. They moved through the forest and once they were far enough they stopped.
“Are you aware of what a wizard’s debt entails, Miss Granger?” Lucius moved to stand in front of the young woman.

“I know that I owe you my life, or anything else you might ask of me,” Hermione said, meeting his cool eyes. He was far more lucid than he had appeared at the Manor. It made her wonder how much of his behaviour there had been an act. There was no one here now but the two of them.

“In return for your life, you will do everything in your power to keep my son out of Azkaban. If I should be executed, you will watch over him until he is well.” Lucius’ voice was serious. “If you swear to this, I will surrender myself to your custody, Miss Granger.”

“I swear, on my magic, to do as you have asked,” Hermione said quietly. “And I also promise to try and do what I can to keep you from being executed.” She added, noting the look of surprise on his face. “You saved me, I can at least try.” Hermione was practically dead on her feet, she ached everywhere, but she stood strong not wanting to show weakness to this man in particular.

“Very well,” he said and took hold of her arm and Draco’s and focused on St. Mungos, apparating the three of them directly into the triage room. A healer he recognized ran over. “Healer Keena, save my son,” he said to the man.

“Of course Lord Malfoy.” The Healer called for help and soon they had taken Draco away.

As they took him away, Lucius turned to Hermione and handed her his wand. “The Aurors will be here soon enough, I won’t put up a fight.” He gave her his word and sat down, weary from the battle. “You should rest while you can.”

Hermione nodded and sat down, closing her eyes a moment. “Is it really over?” she whispered.

“Yes Miss Granger, I believe it is,” he said quietly. “Have you been healed from what happened at the Manor?” he asked, looking over at the young witch. He saw her draw into herself, and knew that she hadn’t been. “Do your friends know what they did to you?” He asked even softer.

“No.” She swallowed, hating that she was shaking a little. “I told them she was using the Crucius curse…that was why I was screaming.” She blinked rapidly trying not to cry. They hadn’t stopped long enough to deal with it. Dobby had been dead, and there had been so much to do. She’d simply downed a bottle of pain relieving potion and got on with everything.
“You need to be seen to,” he said and stood, walking over to meet Healer Keena as he re-entered. “How is my son?”

“He’ll live, though we’ve had to place him in a magical coma to allow his core to replenish and the damage done to heal fully. It could take several months,” the healer said quietly. “But he will pull through. You got him here in time.”

“Thank you. The Aurors will be arriving soon to take me away. See to it they do not try and move my son,” Lucius said.

“No one touches my patients, Lord Malfoy,” Healer Keena said with a small smile.

“The young witch there will need to be seen to. Antonin and Bellatrix tortured her rather extensively. She hasn’t sought healing and I fear she may have been violated,” he said very quietly. “Anything she needs is to be seen to.”

“Will she let me treat her?” The man asked candidly.

“Once I’m taken into custody, I believe she will,” Lucius said quietly, not flinching when three Aurors apparated into the room with an audible snap.

“Lucius Malfoy, you’re under arrest. Resist and we have permission to use lethal force.” The man in charge stated.

“He surrendered himself to me.” Hermione stood and moved into their line of sight. “My name is Hermione Granger, Kingsley Shacklebolt will know who I am.”

“Where is his wand then?” The Auror demanded.

“Here.” She handed the wand to the man. “It’s one he picked up during the battle. I’m not sure who it belonged to,” she said.
“Why would he surrender to you?” One of the aurors sneered.

“In return for letting him bring his son here for treatment, he agreed to surrender and await arrest,” she said.

“Well…we’ll take it from here Miss.” The auror said and they flanked Lucius.

“Get your wounds seen to Miss Granger, Healer Keena is quite trustworthy.” Lucius said, meeting her eyes and wondering if he’d ever see the stubborn girl again. For such a little thing, she had proven surprisingly resilient. He’d known older, more experienced witches and wizards that could not have held out against even half of what they had done to her.

“I’ll watch over your son,” She promised with a slight nod just as he and two of the Aurors disappeared. Her eyes shifted to the one who remained.

“Kingsley said if I were to find you to bring you to your friends,” he said.

“Miss Granger is in need of medical attention, let her friends know she is safe.” Healer Keena moved forward. “Also, let them know that I’ve dispatched groups of healers to the school to start prioritizing the patients that need immediate transport,” he said and gently put a hand on the young witch’s arm. “Come now Miss Granger, I really must insist,” he said and led her away, taking her back to the room where Draco lay on bed. There was a shimmering, translucent glow all around him.

“Really…I’m fine…” she protested as he had her sit down.

“No, you are not,” the healer said softly and cast a diagnostic spell. He swore and transfigured another chair into a bed and went into the cupboard and handed her a set of pajamas. “There’s a small bathroom there, shower and get changed into those. I’ll be right back with some potions that you need to drink and then you should rest.”

“But my friends…” She protested.

“Will want you to be safe, and you are safe here, Miss Granger,” he said. “No more arguments, shower, change, and then straight into bed.”
Hermione took a long look at the man’s determined face and knew she was beaten. She nodded and went into the little bathroom and started the shower, looking at her reflection in the mirror and barely recognizing herself. She had lost a lot of weight on the run, she was covered in blood and dirt, and there were dark circles under her eyes. She undressed, peeling off her filthy clothes and throwing them onto the floor. The red, inflamed cuts on her arm spelling ‘mudblood’ were oozing and hot to the touch. She was covered in bruises and scrapes and she could see the half-moon shaped bite marks in her skin where Dolohov had ‘played’ with her before Bellatrix had really gone to work.

She felt the bile rising in her throat and she threw up into the toilet trying not to remember. The things he’d whispered while he’d hurt her, torn into her…things he’d have done again if not for Draco’s father. Her head swam for a moment before she wiped her mouth off and stepped under the spray. She scrubbed herself clean, blood and dirt swirling down the drain. Aches and pains she had ignored came crashing to forefront until most of her body was one throbbing center of hurt. She dried her hair mechanically and dressed in the clean pjs. She padded back out and saw the Healer standing beside Draco’s bed, monitoring something.

“How is he?” she asked.

“Alive,” The healer said. “If you had waited much longer to get him here, he might not have survived. His magic was sustaining him, and we’ll need to keep him in a coma to let him recover fully.” He explained. “Now…into bed.” He said kindly and grabbed a small tray with four potion bottles on it.

“What are those?” Hermione asked and climbed into the bed, pulling the blankets up around her.

“One is a general pain relieving potion.” He handed that to her first. “This is to heal all the soft tissue damage, and prevent infection,” he said and had her drink that down. “This…is to make sure that you suffer no lasting consequences from your sexual assault,” Healer Keena said very gently. “If you find you need to talk to someone, I can certainly arrange that.”

Hermione looked at the blue liquid in the vial and she drank it down, a little surprised that it didn’t taste as vile as most healing potions did. There was a strange aftertaste of licorice. “No…but thank you.” She whispered.

“And this is dreamless sleep. I won’t force you to take that, but it is there if you want it,” he said and left that corked vial on her bedside. “The door is warded against anyone entering but me or healers I authorize to enter.”
“How long do I need to stay?” She asked him.

“At least 24 hours, after that you may discharge yourself if you wish.” Healer Keena could see she wanted to be anywhere but here. “I’ll check back in a couple of hours, the first patients will be arriving from Hogwarts.” He took his leave, giving her some space to breath.

Once he was gone, Hermione picked up the vial of dreamless sleep and drank it down. She didn’t want to dream, didn’t want to remember any of it.

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“Miss Granger, I can appreciate your point of view, but I cannot simply let the man go.” Kinglsey said, watching the young witch standing in front of his desk. He’d been appointed as interim Minister of Magic until a proper election could be held in a few months. Things were quite frankly a mess.

“I’m not asking you to set him free! Give him house arrest or community service, but you know that I’m in the right. The likes of Lestrange and Greyback...they are evil and deserved death. Lucius Malfoy saved my life and asked me for nothing in return. He chose to surrender and face whatever punishment was handed to him. You pardoned Draco for acting under duress, for all you know Lucius was acting under the same duress to protect his wife and son. His wife is dead and his son may never wake up; I can think of no greater punishment than that,” Hermione said, trying her best to fulfill her promise to the man. She’d discharged herself after only a day in St. Mungo’s. They needed beds and she didn’t want to lay there and have people feel sorry for her.

“If I give him house arrest, he will need someone to watch him Miss Granger,” Kingsley said after a moment, considering it. “All right, two years of house arrest. If he can manage to follow the restrictions I’ll set on him and keep out of trouble, I will clear his name. But you will have to act as his guard, the Auror ranks are spread too thin as it is chasing down the escaped Death Eaters, and most I would assign to him would fabricate offences to get him sent to Azkaban. Be certain you are willing to do this,” he said.

Hermione nodded. “I’ll do it,” she said, face tight. “You’ll have a release order ready today?” she asked.

“I can have it drawn up within the hour,” he said.
“Let him see his son, at least once before he begins his house arrest?” she asked, mind already whirling.

“You can take him there on the way to the manor,” Kingsley said. “He’s being held downstairs, you can go down and inform him of the conditions. No magic for two years, no wand, and he is under your care until the two years is complete. He doesn’t leave the Manor without Ministry approval, for any reason.” Kingsley said. “If he doesn’t agree to that…he can serve his time at Azkaban.” He was certain the proud old bastard would refuse.

“I’ll go down and explain it to him,” She said. “If you could bring the release orders down, once they’re ready?”

“He doesn’t deserve your help Hermione,” Kingsley said.

“His son protected us as much as he could when Harry, Ron, and I were taken prisoner by the Snatchers. He hesitated calling Voldemort when Harry was revealed, though it could have cost him his life, and then he saved me from Dolohov. He didn’t have to. It took time when he was in a hurry to save his son. Then all he asked was that I try and protect Draco. He asked for nothing else…” Hermione said quietly. “He deserves at least the chance to change.”

“You’re a better person than most,” he sighed and nodded. “I’ll join you downstairs when the order is ready.”

“Thank you Minister,” Hermione said politely and left his office, taking the elevator down to the lower levels. She nodded to the Auror on duty. “The Minister sent me down to speak to Prisoner Malfoy.” She told the man.

“Yes Miss, he sent word. Right this way.” He escorted her down the dark hallway to a cell near the end and unlocked it. “He’s chained up but I can stay if you need me to.” He offered.

“I’ll be fine, thank you.” She said and stepped into the cell and her eyes widened when she saw the state of him. She waited until the Auror left to approach him. “Mister Malfoy?” She said.

Lucius lifted his head, looking at her with one eye, as the other was swollen shut. “Miss Granger… what an unexpected surprise.” He managed to say.
“I managed to secure your release, with some conditions of course.” She said, walking around the table and crouching in front of him.

“What conditions?” he asked, honestly shocked that she had managed such a feat. As the days after the battle had ticked by he had become resigned to his fate. He only hoped that he’d face execution swiftly.

“Two years of house arrest, during which you will not be permitted to leave the manor, or use magic. To ensure you abide by these rules they will have someone stay with you to…observe.” Hermione said carefully, biting her bottom lip a little.

“And who would that be?” He regarded her curiously. Even with only one eye he could see her discomfort and knew that it was likely to be someone he would not like.

“Me.” She said simply.

He was stunned into silence for a moment, before his usual skepticism kicked in. “Why would you sacrifice two years of your life for me? I’m hardly some bastion of goodness, Miss Granger,” he said cynically.

“You saved my life, I can spend two years repaying that.” Her eyes didn’t waver from his face.

“You realize they’ll require you to live at the Manor. You’ll be as much a prisoner there as I am.” Lucius said quietly. “You should not have to be there, after what happened.”

“I’ve already made up my mind, and I’m sure Draco told you once or twice how terribly stubborn, and hard headed I can be.” She gave him a brave smile, though to be fair the thought of being in that place did scare her. She’d spent every night since leaving the hospital waking in a dead sweat to nightmares, she supposed it hardly matter whether she had them in Ginny’s room at the Burrow or a room in Malfoy Manor.

“Once or twice.” He nodded, he gave her a half smile. “How is my son?” He asked her, changing the subject to something far more important to him.
“Still in a coma, but Healer Keena is very positive about his odds of a complete recovery. He’s responding well,” she told him. “I got Kingsley to agree to let you visit him on the way back to the Manor.”

“Your powers of persuasion are impressive, my dear.” He closed his good eye for a moment. “Thank you.” He said.

“How badly are you hurt?” She asked him, eyes running over him critically in the low light. His lips were dry and cracked, there was a sallowness to his skin that she particularly did not like.

“I’ve have worse, Miss Granger…do not trouble yourself. Tell me what has been happening, I’ve been rather cut off from news.” He said, knowing that acknowledging his injuries would only make them hurt more. It was far better to remain in a state of elegant denial.

“Kingsley Shacklebolt has been named interim Minister of Magic until elections can be held.” She started with that. “Professor McGonagall has been named Headmistress of Hogwarts and she’s overseeing the clean-up efforts there. Professor Snape is in St. Mungos, but they’re not optimistic about his recovery. He was on death’s door when Harry was able to get healers to him. Harry’s testimony secured pardons for Draco and Professor Snape.” She stood and went to sit in the chair that was bolted to the floor but decided not to when she saw some disturbing stains on the metal. “Right now everyone’s still reeling.”

“I’m glad Severus is alive.” He gave a small smile. “What do your friends think about you championing a lost cause?”

“They have their opinions.” Hermione said quietly, remembering the screaming match that had ensued last night at the Burrow when she’d told Harry and Ron where she was going today. It had been Arthur that had settled things, coming to her defence and shutting the two young men up. “But it’s my decision, and not theirs. They can either respect my reasons for making it, or not,” she said. “Kingsley should be here soon with your release papers.”

“Well…it’s not like I’m going anywhere until he does.” Lucius managed to drawl, even beaten within an inch of his life, chained to the wall like an animal, he could still play the superior aristocrat. Hermione wondered idly if it was a personal gift of his or something genetic.

Not having much else to say Hermione lapsed into silence until Kingsley opened the door and entered with another Auror who went over to Lucius and released him from his bonds, roughly picking the man up and all but throwing him into the metal chair.
Hermione had to bite her tongue, but gave Kingsley a look.

“That will be all Auror Smith.” Kingsley said and the man stormed out. “I trust Miss Granger informed you of the conditions of your release?”

“She did, most concisely. For all intents and purposes, she will be my jailer for the next two years, and I will not stir foot off the property without Ministry consent, nor will I be allowed to perform any magic during that time,” Lucius said. “I would ask that you allow Miss Granger to magically seal me into my quarters on occasion, so that she’d be free to leave the manor when she has need. I see no reason why my punishment should be a jail sentence for her as well.” He said catching Kingsley’s eye.

“I believe that is acceptable.” Kingsley said, thinking somewhat better of the man for suggesting it. Of course it would be hard to think any worse of the wizard than he did.

“Very well, then I agree to those terms.” He said.

Kingsley nodded and with a wave of his wand the manacles disappeared. He cast a basic cleaning charm on the other man and then turned to Hermione. “He’s all yours Miss Granger…be careful.”

“I will Minister.” She said.

Lucius stood, holding himself carefully. The room was tilting rather alarmingly and he was not fool enough to try and walk out of the room. “If you’d be kind enough to lend me your arm Miss Granger?” He forced himself to ask, pride smarting from the fact that he could not walk very steadily under his own power. There was little help for it unfortunately, days with little water and even less food tended to have negative results on one’s equilibrium.

Hermione moved to his side and let him lean on her. “Let’s be on our way.” She said and walked slowly beside him, not making him rush. They ignored the hateful glare from the Auror on duty at the desk and got onto the elevator and headed up to the lobby. “How badly are you hurt?” She asked again.

“Nothing that cannot be mended. A healer can tend to me while we look in on Draco.” He said, unable to repress a wracking coughing fit that left blood on his hand.
Hermione frowned, and when the doors slid open she helped him to the floo. He travelled ahead of her, and was leaning against the wall when she came through behind him. She took his arm and went to the reception desk. “Mr. Malfoy is here to see his son, and if Healer Keena is available to look at him as well that would be much appreciated.”

The young witch at reception nodded. “I’ll let him know where you are. Do you know how to get to Mr. Malfoy’s room?”

“Yes, thank you.” Hermione said and helped Lucius down the corridors and into Draco’s room. She got him sitting and poured him a glass of water. Draco was sleeping peacefully, the shimmering magical glow still surrounding him as he rested.

Lucius drank the water slowly, not gulping it down like he truly wanted to. “Thank you, Miss Granger. I truly did not expect you to be able to honour that part of your promise.” His eyes were on his son, grateful that he would be all right.

“I gave my word that I would try…I take my promises seriously Mister Malfoy.” She said quietly and sat down in the other chair. “We can stay as long as you need to.”

He nodded, only looking away from Draco when the Healer entered the room. “Miss Granger, could you give me a few moments with the Healer?” He asked her.

“I’ll wait outside.” She said, willing to give him some privacy. She stood and walked past Healer Keena, giving him a polite nod.

Once the door shut Lucius allowed himself to sag in the chair. “I have need of your skills, Thomas,” Lucius said in a ragged voice.

“Of course.” The healer moved in and cast a diagnostic spell and quickly dealt with the broken bones and punctured lung. “Those Aurors are glorified thugs, I swear.” He muttered with heat and had Lucius drink another glass of water. “I’ll go and fetch some potions. Can I admit you for a few days?” He asked the man.

“No, I have been sentenced to House arrest…under Miss Granger’s supervision. She tells me my son is healing well?” He asked, less concerned with himself.
“Very well. I can fire-call with regular updates if you will be unable to visit. If I cannot keep you here, I’ll send you home with a set of potions and I expect you to rest.” He said firmly. “Can I send Miss Granger back in?” He asked carefully.

“Please.” Lucius nodded his agreement, feeling too drained to argue with the sometimes pushy healer.

Hermione entered and sat back down. “Are you feeling better?” She asked, not prying.

“I will require a few days of rest and some potions, nothing too dire.” He said, mind already cataloguing the things he needed to do as soon as they returned to the Manor. The wards would need to be reset, to keep out unwelcome guests and to be certain they recognized Miss Granger as someone who belonged there. The House elves would need to be coaxed from hiding and he’d set them to work removing all traces of the Dark Lord’s residence there. Miss Granger would need rooms prepared for her use, and well away from *that* part of the house. Kingsley and he would have a very long talk, once he was a free man again, about forcing the young witch to live somewhere that she been tortured so brutally. Elements above and below, her screams would haunt him until the end of his days.

The healer came back in and handed Hermione a warded package. “He’s to take one vial of each potion in the morning with something to eat. If you notice him becoming short of breath, or losing any co-ordination you are to firecall me here and I will come through immediately. If I am not here, St. Mungo’s will know how to reach me.” He met the witch’s eyes, trying to impart that he was more injured than he let on. “Lucius, if you would take these now?”

Lucius nodded and took the pain reliever first, closing his eyes for a moment while it worked… easing the pain and relaxing the tense muscles in his back and legs. The blood replenisher and bone strengthening potions were taken in quick succession as they tasted quite vile. “Thank you, Thomas,” he said and handed the empty vials back. “We should go, Miss Granger.” He stood and paused a moment, reaching out and taking his son’s hand. “Keep me informed of his condition.” He looked at Thomas who nodded.

Hermione stood and held the warded package of potions carefully. “If you’re ready to go.” She said, feeling a bit like an intruder to such an intimate moment.

“Yes, there are a few things we will need to take care of at the Manor before we can rest.” He said decisively and made himself leave the room. He walked under his own power out to the reception room. “The destination you need to request is Malfoy Manor, Entrance Hall.” He told her and took a handful of the floo powder and after speaking his destination, stepped boldly through.
“What happened here?” Hermione said as she stepped through, promptly tripping over a piece of broken furniture. She was saved from falling on her face by Lucius’ hand on her elbow. The marble floor was littered with broken furniture, looking almost like a battle had been fought here.

“It appears as though some of the Death Eaters that escaped the battle returned here and had a little fun. Bilby!” He called into the dark.

There was a little pop and an older house elf appeared. “Master is alive! We were worried when no one returned Master.”

“Tell the others I have returned. This is Miss Hermione Granger, she will be a guest for the foreseeable future and I require the gold suite to be prepared for her. Have the others start clearing the debris. Is anyone else inside the Manor?” He asked the old Elf.

“No Master…we made them all leave when they started to tell lies about your death, Master. No one be entering that’s not family.” The old elf nodded sharply, ears back in anger.

“Mistress Narcissa is dead, but Draco will be returning home when he is well.” Lucius told them. “Have the lamps lit and the fires started in the study, the gold suite, and my rooms.” He instructed the elf and closed his eyes as the little creature popped out of existence.

“I’m very sorry about your wife.” Hermione said, watching the slight droop of his shoulders.

“There will be time to grieve later.” He said. “How familiar are you with warding and ward stones?” He asked her.

“I’m fairly familiar with basic ward spells, but only have an academic understanding of the kinds of wards on an old wizarding property.” She admitted.

“Well, let us further your education. Before we can safely sleep in this place, I need to reset the
wards to keep out unwelcome guests.” He said. “Leave the potions there and come with me, there may be surprises left behind that will require a wand to dispose of.”

Hermione didn’t question him, but drew her wand and followed him. He took her through a part of the house she didn’t remember and down a wide set of steps into a finished basement space. “How big is the manor?” She asked him.

“You’ll have plenty of time over the next two years to discover that for yourself.” Lucius said with a small smile on his lips. “This is where my mother would work on her potion’s research. You are welcome to use it whenever you wish,” he said generously and walked to the far wall and moved a wall hanging back. “This, Miss Granger, is the Manor’s Heart stone,” he explained. “All wards are keyed through it, and if it were ever found and destroyed, the wards to the Manor would take years to rebuild and centuries to regain their full strength.” He told her and placed his hand on the stone. It was just slightly larger than the other stones in the wall, but nothing else distinguished it. He closed his eyes and concentrated, removing the checks that had crippled the wards since his imprisonment in Azkaban. He let the power run through him and finally he opened his eyes. “If you would come here Miss Granger, and grab that pen knife.” He nodded to the little blade on the work table.

Hermione approached, feeling the heady thrum of magic in the air as she drew closer. She offered him the knife, confused as he shook his head.

“Cut your thumb, just a little. I need to key you to the blood wards. If you’re to be my guest for the next two years, you should enjoy the protection of this house. I will not have you harmed under my roof again.” He said quietly, still focusing on the wards as they pulsed through him. He knew some of his former compatriots were still at large, and he’d feel badly if one of them harmed her when he could have prevented it.

Hermione nicked her thumb and offered him her hand, gasping a little as he took her hand and traced a strange pattern on the stone with her blood. The stone seemed to literally drink it in until there was no trace of it. Then Lucius pressed her palm to the stone and covered it with his own. She sucked in a hard breath as the magic of the house surged into her, shoving deep into her bones as if tasting her magic. “What?”

“The Manor is getting to know you.” Lucius said with a small smile. He could feel the manor drinking deep of her magic, and feeding her some of its own in return. “Every Malfoy that has been born since the manor was built, has fed blood and magic into these wards, one day when you are gone a tiny bit of your magic will linger on here as well.”

“Do you do this for all your guests?” She asked, having to concentrate to speak as she felt a little weak in the knees.
“No.” He said simply and when he felt the wards settle back, he drew her hand away from the stone and dropped the wall hanging back. He steadied the young witch with a hand on her elbow. Through the wards he’d been allowed to feel her magic as well. It was deep, complex, and largely untapped. He found himself more intrigued by the young woman, as opposed to less. “I’ll show you to your rooms and you’ll forgive me if I leave you to get freshened up?” He said.

“Of course.” She blinked as if coming out of a dream. “That felt…”

He chuckled a little. “It is a most…intense feeling the first time you encounter such magic. Come Miss Granger, there is a fireplace connected to the floo network in your suite and I am sure there are one or two people you will need to inform about your new living situation. Your parents at least.” He said and stopped seeing the look that fell across her face.

“I…I should let Mr. and Mrs. Weasley know that the Minister agreed to my proposal, and the terms he insisted upon.” She said softly.

“Forgive me, I was unaware something had happened to your parents.” He had not heard about any raid involving them, though they had been looking. The Granger couple had been rather high on the Dark Lord’s list of targets.

“They’re quite all right, just not entirely aware that they ever had a daughter.” She met his pale grey eyes, trying to convey without words what she had done. “It seems I did it a little too well and reversing it is quite impossible.” She closed her eyes for a moment, refusing to cry.

“I am very sorry Miss Granger…” He said simply and escorted her back up to the main level and then up the main staircase to the third floor. He didn’t press her, aware that his attempts at comfort would likely be poorly received.

Hermione followed him through the massive house, eyes taking in the various portraits as they walked. She could see little flurries of activity as the house elves popped in and out, cleaning away the debris and remnants of the Death Eaters occupation of the Malfoy ancestral home. She nearly walked right into Lucius’ back as she realized he had stopped. “Sorry.” She muttered.

He gave her a bit of an amused look and opened the door for her, motioning for her to enter ahead of him. “If these rooms are not to your liking, I am sure I can find something else.”
Hermione walked into what appeared to be an elegant sitting room. The room was done in white and gold. The furniture was all styled in what looked like Queen Anne fashion, and there was a pleasant sitting area, and many bright windows with white draperies. Even this late in the afternoon the light streamed in, suggesting to her mind that they faced west. “It’s a very pleasant room.” She said.

“Your bedroom is through there, and there is a well-appointed bathroom attached.” Lucius said. “I thought you would enjoy having a private area to entertain your friends.” He said. “My rooms are at the end of the hall. If you need I can have one of the House Elves go and retrieve your things, you just need to tell them where to go.”

She shook her head and touched the discreet handbag she had been carrying. “Expandable charm… my belongings are all here.” She said. “I’ve been carrying it since the attack on Bill and Fleur’s wedding.” She took it off and set it down with effort.

“Very well, I’m going to get cleaned up and changed into more suitable clothes. I’ll stop by and see you when I am finished.” He said.

“Thank you, I think I’ll do the same and then make my fire-calls,” She said and once he was out of the room she closed the door behind him and leaned against the wood. She was shaking finely and she clenched her hands into fists to stop it, taking deep and measured breaths. She could do this… face her fears, face him, and face this house. She had to.

‘Move,’ she whispered to herself. She pushed away from the door and walked to the door that led to her bedroom, opening it and gasping. Alone she could let herself gape a bit. A beautiful white and gold accented four poster bed dominated the room, matching wardrobes and a dressing table with a mirror completed the set. There was a reading nook by the window, made plush with soft pillows. She indulged herself a little bit and smiled going and opening the door to the bathroom. There was a white claw foot tub, the floor was white marble flecked with gold. She’d never been in such a luxurious room before. She passed by the mirror.

“Oh my, you’ve had a rough day haven’t you dear?” The mirror said sympathetically. “Hot bath and glass of wine perhaps? It’ll fix you right up.”

Hermione’s eyebrows rose and she found herself nodded. “That actually sounds lovely.” She admitted and managed to keep from jumping as the tub began to fill and a little table popped in with a glass of red wine and a little plate of chocolates. “Thank you.” She said politely and while the tub filled she went out and got her bag, digging out her shrunken down suitcase and resizing it. She pulled out a pair of clean jeans and a soft blue long sleeved shirt. She went back into the bathroom and locked the door, before undressing.
Hermione went to a little tray of bath oils and after smelling some she added a tiny bit of vanilla to the water and closed her eyes, breathing in the soft aroma that wafted through the room. She slipped into the bath and let the heat soothe away the aches and pains. She kept her wand nearby. After the battle of Hogwarts she’d gone to see Ollivander, needing to replace her lost wand. Her new wand was vastly different, and the old man had said softly that it was hardly surprising as she was forever altered by the war. She’d tried to pay him but he’d simply pressed it into her hands and smiled gently before sending her on her way. She looked at it in the soft light from the windows. It 11 inches, made of hawthorn with a core of Thestral hair. He’d told her that it had been made by his father and sat waiting for the right person for a very, very long time. She had touched it and she had felt it sing to her, filling her with a warmth and light even stronger than her first wand. She would not lose this one.

She leaned her head back against the curved edge of the tub and closed her eyes. Her mind playing over the argument with Ron and Harry last night.

“Hermione No! Are you insane! He’s a bloody Death Eater, a murderer! He sat there and watched that bitch Torture you! You’re not going to do this! It’s Mental!” Ron grabbed her arm as she tried to leave the room, bodily spinning her around and then stilling as she pressed her wand against his throat.

“Don’t,” She all but hissed at him, body rigid until he released her. “I *KNOW* better than you what he did…what SHE did. You just had to listen to me scream. I lived it. I felt it.” Her eyes narrowed. “You don’t know, and you should be glad you don’t.”

“Hermione…you have to understand how this sounds. I get helping Draco…but this is his father, he wasn’t forced to join Voldemort. If I didn’t know you’d been to St. Mungo’s, I’d almost think you were under the Imperius curse.” Harry said, moving forward slowly. “Ron…back off and give her some space.”

As Ron moved back, Hermione let out a shaky breath and tucked her new wand away. She knew she had overreacted but Ron had surprised her and she had simply reacted. “It’s my choice. You spoke for Snape and Draco…I have to do this Harry.”

“What’s going on in here?” Arthur entered, looking between the three young adults. He could see just how poised to flee Hermione was and he looked at his son and Harry, almost feeling their anger and confusion.

“She’s going to talk to the Minister in the morning, about clemency for Lucius fucking Malfoy!” Ron snarled. “She’s lost her mind.”
Arthur looked to the young witch again, seeing tears in her eyes. “Boys, why don’t you go upstairs and let me have a little talk with Miss Granger.” He said, his tone brooking no argument. “Come on Hermione…let’s have a nice cup of a tea.”

The boys grudgingly left the room and Hermione nodded quietly. “Yes Mr. Weasley.” She said and followed him to the kitchen. Molly was at St. Mungo’s, sitting with the twins. George had nearly died, and Fred was little better. She sat down at the table while he set the kettle to boil.

“You can call me Arthur,” He said and sat down. “What happened during the battle? I know you ended up with Lucius in custody and delivered his son to St. Mungo’s for treatment. While you are a capable duelist, I doubt you could have bested him in combat.” There was something more going on, that much was clear.

“He saved my life.” She whispered. “Dolohov had me, he was going to….” She shuddered and closed her eyes, trying to keep from panicking. “Mister Malfoy killed him, he saved me.” She opened her eyes and met the kind gaze of the patriarch of the Weasley clan. “I owe him a wizard’s debt.” She said.

“Did he ask this of you?” Arthur asked, knowing that if that was true she really had no choice but to try. It was old magic. While choosing to not honour a wizard’s debt was unlikely to kill you, it was not unheard of for there to be less direct consequences.

“All he asked was that I make sure his son was safe, he asked nothing for himself.” She whispered. “Narcissa is dead and without her help, Harry wouldn’t have survived. And at the manor when Bellatrix was hurting me, she ordered Lucius to call Voldemort. He hesitated….just long enough for Dobby to save us. When we got to the hospital, he made sure I was taken care of before he would go with the Aurors…I could see that he was sorry for what happened to me. I just need to try. Kingsley will never let him go, but if I don’t even try I don’t know that I can ever look at myself in a mirror again.” She felt tears in her eyes.

Arthur just reached over and touched her hand. “I’ll have a word with the boys. Whatever my feelings about Luctius Malfoy, if he saved your life I know that your sense of honour won’t let you stand by. Whatever happens, I respect your integrity. You’re a brave, capable young woman and you’ve proven that you have the sense to make your own choices. Just be sure that they are choices you can live with.” He squeezed her hand firmly.

Hermione shook the memories away and sipped her wine. She looked at herself in the water. Her wounds had healed, bruises erased by the potions she had taken but she was still very thin. Stress and living on the run had taken its toll on her body. Her fingers traced the shiny pink scar on her
forearm, ‘mudblood’. It had been made with a cursed blade and nothing so far had erased it. She shook her head, not willing to dwell on it. Not now.

She got out of the bath once clean and dried off before redressing. She grabbed the plate of chocolates and carried it out to the sitting room and putting it on the coffee table. She sipped her wine and then took a pinch of floo powder and tossed it into the flames and placed a fire-call to the Burrow, smiling as Molly’s face appeared.

“Hermione dear…are you all right? We were starting to get worried.” She said.

“I’m fine Mrs. Weasley.” She made herself smile. “Kingsley agreed to place him on house arrest, the only condition being that I stay at the Manor to ensure that he doesn’t get up to anything nefarious.”

“For how long!” Molly sounded outraged.

“He’s been sentenced to two years, after which his debt to society will be considered paid. I took him to see his son and then brought him to the Manor. I’m just getting settled in.” She explained.

“You just wait until I get a hold of Kingsley! He cannot be serious asking you to watch over that man. You have no business being alone with him, it’s completely inappropriate.”

“He’s been a complete gentleman Mrs. Weasley, I’m his son’s schoolmate after all. Please, Minister Shacklebolt and I came to this agreement together, I need to see this through.” She said to Mrs. Weasley. “Your husband knows my reasons.” A part of her needed to do this, beyond the bounds of the life debt she owed him. She had been part of Harry’s merry band since coming to the wizarding world. She needed to do this on her own.

“I’ll still be telling him that I disapprove.” Molly frowned but nodded. “I won’t interfere unless you feel you need my help, you know you’re like family to us dear. I worry about you.”

“I know. You’ll be my first call if I need anything.” She promised and after getting an update about the twins, she ended the fire call. She took a long sip of her wine and popped a chocolate into her mouth. She heard a knock at the door and she rose and headed to open in. She nodded politely.

“I hope everything is to your liking?” He asked.
“The rooms are perfect, thank you.” She said.

“I thought I might show you to the library, and the breakfast room. With just the two of us in residence, it seems ridiculous to use any of the larger dining rooms.” He said. There was also one room he’d asked the elves to seal permanently. He wouldn’t have her wandering in there and reliving what had happened to her.

She nodded. “That would be nice.” She said quietly and joined him, trying not to focus on how surreal it was in the wake of the war for the two of them to be walking side by side, the Pureblood Death Eater and the Muggle-born heroine from the Order. The few times they had crossed paths he always intimidated her, in part because he was tall and carried himself with this supremely arrogant air. Today he was just…different. She couldn’t put a finger on it but she could feel something had shifted.

The Library was on the second floor and she felt a soft smile crossing her lips at the sheer scale of it. It had to take up at least half of the entire second floor of the house. She stepped inside and saw the comfortable looking arm chairs by the fireplace and the inviting rows of bookshelves.

“I imagine you’ll find a thing or two to amuse yourself with in here.” Lucius said, leaning against the door frame for a moment while her attention was diverted. He remember his son’s many rants about the bookish nature of this particular girl. It was clear she had a pure enjoyment of reading, beyond a simple desire for knowledge or need to expand her repertoire of spells. “Please feel free to make as much use of it as you wish.”

“How expansive is the collection?” She asked, pausing by a glass display case and puzzling over the strange artifact in it.

“Far beyond the reaches of Hogwarts restricted section.” He chuckled. “Now, I must apologize but I am greatly in need of some dinner and then I think I will retire early.”

Hermione reluctantly pulled herself from the tantalizing room and joined him as they returned to the main level. He pointed out his study, the drawing room, and the breakfast room where they would eat their meals.

“If you are ever in need of some solitude, the elves will happily serve your meals in your room. There may be days when I have need of that myself.” Lucius said and sat down. This particular room was not large but had garden doors that would open up onto the patio in nicer weather.
Hermione nodded, smiling as dinner appeared for them. It was a simple meal, but it smelled delicious. There was roast chicken and potatoes with steamed vegetables and a plate of pastries off to the side for dessert. She felt her stomach growl a little and realized she hadn’t eaten much since last night. Only managing tea and a slice of toast this morning. She sat down across from her ‘prisoner’ and smiled as he poured her a glass of wine, offering it to her. “Thank you, Mister Malfoy.” She said politely.

“If you ever have a desire for something particular, the house elves will be happy to oblige you.” Lucius said. “I would ask, however, that you try and restrain the urge to free any of them.” He gave her a little look. He’d heard about her foolish quest to end House Elf slavery.

“I’ve…outgrown that little personal quest. While some elves like Dobby enjoyed their freedom, I came to understand that forcing freedom on most of them would be a kind of cruelty itself,” she said and sipped the wine, helping herself to chicken and politely passing side dishes across the table to him.

“Youthful ideals can be hard to move past,” Lucius agreed, enjoying his meal. They said little as the meal progressed and he found himself watching her a little here and there. She had lovely table manners, clearly her parents had instilled them in her from a young age.

She finished her dinner and helped herself to a little pastry. “I suppose we should speak about this arrangement.” She said, feeling a little light headed from the wine.

“I believe there is little to discuss. Kingsley clearly is unwilling to accept my word that I will abide by his restrictions, but I give you my word that I will. If you desire I can inform you of my plans for the day at breakfast, and other than that I see no need for us to be constantly in one another’s company unless we have a desire for some pleasant conversation. I will not enter your rooms without an express invitation, and I would ask that you extend me the same courtesy. Of course in the event of an emergency I would understand an invasion of my privacy.” He said, helping himself to some dessert as well.

“I would grant you the same permission.” Hermione said graciously. “Would you be averse to me having company over on occasion?” she asked him. He had inferred that it would be all right, but not outright said it.

“Not at all, I’d simply ask for some notice so that I can make myself scarce. I highly doubt your friends will want to socialize with me,” he said with a small sneer. “There is a slightly larger dining room across the hall if you wish to host a small dinner party.” After his house-arrest was complete he would have a great deal of work to do to rebuild his reputation in this brave new world.
Allowing friends of this young witch access to his home, with his blessing, would be a small first step.

“That’s very kind, thank you Mister Malfoy.” Hermione smiled, thinking about having some of her friends over in a week or two for dinner. Just to reassure them that she was safe and not at his mercy or some such nonsense.

“No, not at all. I do not wish you to feel as though you are a prisoner here.” Lucius said.

Hermione nodded quietly. “Well… I should say goodnight. It’s been a very long day.” She stood and nearly jumped out of her skin when he caught her wrist.

“Forgive me, I did not intend to upset you,” Lucius said and stood. “I won’t make reference to it again.” He released her wrist and offered her his arm. “Let me see you to your rooms, Miss Granger.” He could be a gentleman, and hope that it put her at ease.

She looked surprised but took his arm, letting him walk her up the flights of stairs to the third floor. He left her at her door with a nod, continuing on down the hallway to his own rooms. She went into her suite and shut the door behind her…confused and off balance. It was becoming a familiar feeling around that man. She knew logically she should be afraid of him, but for some reason she wasn’t.

She undressed and pulled on an oversized t-shirt, crawling into bed. She felt like she’d been running on auto-pilot for days now. Her injuries had been healed but she still felt them, deep inside. She pulled the blankets around her, her wand tucked under the pillow in case she needed it. The look in Harry and Ron’s eyes this morning at breakfast haunted her now, cold…judgmental. They hadn’t said a word to her when she’d left for the ministry, and after everything that had happened it made her feel even more alone. At least when she’d been tortured she’d had them to hold onto. She was staying strong to protect them, protect the mission. It hadn’t mattered what she’d endured for them. It didn’t matter that when she’d been alone and helpless, they hadn’t been there to save her. They just hated that she was trying to help the person that HAD. She cried softly into her pillow, muffling her sobs. The war was over…they had won…why did it hurt so much?

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Hermione whimpered, twisting and turning on the bed. She was caught in the grips of a nightmare, or a memory, or some strange combination of both.

She was lying naked on the cold, black marble. She was crying softly, curling into a ball. She felt a hand tangle in her hair as Bellatrix dragged her back away from the wall. “No! No!” She screamed, fighting against that cruel hand.

“You dare tell me no! You filthy mudblood whore.” She hurled her across the marble. “CRUCIO!”

She screamed, this pain even worse than what Antonin had done to her before being called away by the Dark Lord. When it stopped she just laid there and sobbed, shaking from the aftereffects of the torture curse.

“You WILL tell me what I want to know…or I swear, Antonin will seem a sweet compassionate lover compared to the men I will let have you. Even a filthy little muggle like you has some use to men like that.” Her voice hissed into Hermione’s ear, cutting through the pain. “What else did you steal from me….TELL ME!” She made a harsh movement with her wand and pain blossomed inside Hermione’s stomach, a memory of feeling Antonin on top of her, inside her.

“No!” She screamed.

Lucius could hear the screams in his chambers and he grabbed a heavy dressing robe, leaving his room and going to Miss Granger’s suite. The pitch of her screams made him break his promise to stay out of her rooms and he went directly to the bedroom. She was tangled in her sheets, sweat making her hair damp and she was flailing, fighting off the demons in her mind. He made himself move forward and sit on the edge of the bed, reaching out and placing his hands on her shoulders. He didn’t shake her, but merely held her. “Miss Granger! Hermione!” He called her name, trying to
break through. She didn’t respond, too deeply entangled. He mentally swore, hating what he needed to do. He closed his eyes and focused, using the power of the wards to enter her dreamscape.

He was in the hallway, outside the drawing room. He could hear her sobbing now, hear Bellatrix’s voice demanding things from the girl. He opened the door and walked in, seeing the naked, bloody form of Miss Granger on the ground...watching Bella carve into her skin with a cursed blade. He shuddered as the girl screamed again, struggling under the other witch. He drew his wand and aimed it at his sister-in-law. “Avada Kedavra.” He spoke the curse, watching the dream version of Bella fall lifelessly to the ground. He removed his cloak, and after pulling Bella off the younger witch, he wrapped the shaking girl in it and picked her up. “You are safe now, Miss Granger…” he whispered and carried her out of that room. “You need to wake up now...wake up.” He commanded her, drawing her up out of the dream with him.

As Lucius came back to himself, he saw her eyes snap open as she woke, fear making her brown eyes impossibly wide and wild. “Easy now, you were having a night terror.” He soothed her, not releasing her shoulders until he saw some understanding enter her gaze. As he released her and went to move back, he had to keep from jumping when the girl all but threw herself at him, hugging him around the middle...sobbing into his chest. He froze for a moment, hands hovering in the air unsure exactly what to do. He settled on stroking her damp hair and resting the other hand on her back.

“You’re all right now,” he said, hoping that was the correct things to say.

Hermione didn’t care that it was Lucius Malfoy. She’d felt him in her dream. He’d pulled her out. No one else knew, but he hadn’t even needed to ask; he’d just known and he’d *cared*. She held on tight, terrified that he wasn’t real, that she’d slip back into that nightmare. Sometimes she thought that defeating Voldemort was just a dream, and that room was her reality. That room and the pain.

“Take slow deep breaths...you’re safe now,” he whispered. Lucius simply held her, whispering empty platitudes until she began to relax. He was very relieved when she finally released him and moved back. He carefully didn’t examine what motivated him to tuck a stray piece of hair behind her ear. “Are you all right now?” He asked her.

She swallowed, unbelievably embarrassed by her behaviour. “I’m sorry...I didn’t mean to wake you.” She managed to say, looking down at the blanket, unable to meet his eyes.

“I’m glad you did, no one should be trapped in such a hell,” he said and tipped her chin up so she could meet his eyes. “Do not ever be ashamed of needing comfort after something so terrible. Do not be ashamed of any of it. You could not have prevented it. You did not deserve it.” He could see
the self-loathing on her face and knew someone needed to tell her these things.

“But I’m…” She broke off, feeling fresh tears. “I feel so dirty…” She closed her eyes, unable to bear his gaze on her.

“Shhh, none of that.” He brushed a tear away with his thumb. “There is nothing wrong with you. Come, you should have a shower and get changed into some fresh things. I’ll have the elves freshen up your bedding.” He helped her untangle herself from the sheets, ignoring how little she was wearing. He waited until he heard the shower start running to call the elves. He had them add a little calming potion to a cup of tea for her and they dried and refreshed her bed. He had them pop in a proper nightgown for her to change into.

It was a short while later that she came out of the bathroom, hair charmed dry. He was quiet as he helped tuck her back into bed. “Drink your tea, and then you should try and get some more sleep if you can.” He said kindly.

Hermione was much more subdued and she obediently took the cup of tea and sipped it, feeling a kind of artificial lassitude settle over her. Distantly she realized he’d had the house elves drug her, but she knew that it was not exactly malicious in nature. Quite the opposite really. “Thank you… I’ll try and get a little sleep.” She said.

“Good night then, Miss Granger.” Lucius nodded politely and withdrew from her bedroom, trying not admit how effected he was by what he had seen in her dream. She had been dressed when Bellatrix had dragged her into the other room but if was honest with himself, he had known. Antonin was a depraved creature, she would not have been the first prisoner he’d have forced himself on. Bellatrix’ complicity only made it worse in his mind. The poor girl. Despite all of it she’d protected her friends, holding true. That was what had moved him to hesitate in that moment. The beautiful strength that radiated from her. Then he had noticed Dobby, a full second or two before the others. He knew the Elf could get the girl to safety so he had delayed, staying his hand long enough for Potter to hex him. It was a simple enough thing, a few seconds to spare the girl any more humiliation, or pain under his roof. He had seen what Bellatrix had been doing to her arm, and was familiar with that particular Black family heirloom. He would offer to help her with it later, when she’d had some time to distance herself from the dream.

Lucius went to his room and poured himself a glass of brandy, not entirely sure he’d find sleep any time soon after that. He had seen and done so many terrible things in his life that little ever disturbed his sleep anymore, but he remembered in the beginning when it had. He knew intimately what it felt like to wake up behind silencing charms, screaming so loudly your throat was raw and there was no one there when you finally rested yourself from those horrors. He could have left her alone, but he’d felt pity for her, knowing that a kind touch or soft word could settle the fear back into the far corners of the mind. It was wholly inappropriate, but the whole situation was quite frankly. She was far too young, too vulnerable to be staying alone in his home with him. Lines
could get blurred too easily, were likely already blurred beyond recognition. It had been a very long time since someone had needed him. He rubbed a hand over his face and resigned himself to the fact that he would have to continue looking after the girl. She had no one else.

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Hermione woke, cheeks burning with embarrassment as she remembered the events of last night. She threw the duvet over her head, wishing she could hide there for the rest of her life. Had she seriously clung to Lucius Malfoy like a distraught five year old? God, he must think she was some pathetic child after that display. She made herself get up and get dressed, brushing her teeth and finally in a fit of aggravation spelled her hair straight and left it loose. She decided that she couldn’t hide up here all day and she made herself head downstairs to get some breakfast. She entered the breakfast room, seeing Lucius sitting there with a copy of the Daily Prophet open on the table in front of him and a mug of coffee in one of his hands.

“Good Morning, Mister Malfoy.” She said quietly and sat down, pouring herself some coffee and adding cream and sugar.

“Good morning, Miss Granger. I do hope you managed to get a little more sleep,” he asked solicitously.

She blushed a little and nodded. “Yes, thank you.” She sipped her coffee. “I should apologize for my behaviour last night.” She cautiously lifted her eyes, expecting to see scorn written across his face.

“Not at all, you were quite distraught. We’ll simply try not to make a habit of it.” He left it at that as a rather extravagant breakfast appeared between them. “You made the paper, page four.” He mentioned casually.

“Do I want to read it?” She gave him a dubious look. Normally her name in the paper was having to do with some nonsense about her and Harry.

“You should, good or bad, it’s always best to know what is being said. You can’t address it if you are unaware,” Lucius said, face giving away nothing as he offered her the newspaper.

Hermione reached out and took it, turning to page four and having to scan down to see the story. It was a photograph of her heading into the Ministry yesterday, wearing the smart little business suit
with matching heels.

*War Heroine Champions Case of Known Death Eater!*

Yesterday, Miss Hermione Granger, rumoured to have been nominated for an order of Merlin for her efforts during the war on behalf of her close friend and fellow war veteran Harry Potter, was spotted entering the Ministry for a meeting with the new Minister of Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt. She was seen leaving not even an hour later with known Death Eater, Lord Lucius Malfoy. Questions posed to the Ministry were answered with an official statement that Lord Malfoy had been granted a reduced sentence in consideration for selfless acts during the Battle of Hogwarts, during which it is rumoured he valiantly saved the life of Miss Granger. Neither party has been available for comment but the Prophet will endeavor to keep you appraised of this story as it develops.

Hermione made a bit of a face and set the paper aside. “At least they didn’t publish a picture of you, especially in the state you were in,” she said, helping herself to some eggs and toast.

“They know better,” he said simply. “It’s a very concise story, and we’ll both be doubtlessly contacted for a proper interview.”

“Do you know this reporter? I’m quite leery of most of them after my run-ins with Rita Skeeter.” She repressed a shudder at the mere thought of that woman.

“I am familiar with him. His family is from America, they immigrated just after the Grindelwald debacle. He’s a sensible man, and tends to keep from writing anything salacious,” Lucius said, watching her again. “Might I make a somewhat personal enquiry?” He asked her after a moment’s contemplation.

“Given what happened last night, I’d say so,” she said.

“What are your goals? What do you want to do now that the war is over?” he asked her.

“I’d always wanted to get into politics, if I’m honest,” Hermione admitted. “There are a lot of things I’d like to do, things that I think need to change.” She swallowed a little nervously, knowing the man across from her had spent his whole life trying to keep power out of the hands of people
He nodded. “You’re ideally positioned to pursue that goal, if you make the right moves,” he said, grey eyes locked onto hers as if considering what he wanted to say, and how he needed to say it. “Do you know what happened to the first Muggle-born Minister of Magic?” he asked her. She was a clever girl, she likely knew exactly what had happened.

She set her coffee mug down and took a deep breath. “Your father helped pressure him to step down soon after his election. He didn’t think the man had any business telling him, or any other pureblood what to do.”

He grinned. “That was likely part of his motivation, as my father’s personal views make my own seem most tolerant. However, Mr. Leech made a few critical mistakes which proved fatal for his political career. He forgot who had gotten him elected, and the promises he had made. He passed several, extremely controversial bills in the short months following his election. Bills that made everyone very nervous, not just the pureblood families, but even some of the half-bloods as well. I bring him up as a cautionary tale, Miss Granger. Allowing yourself to see the world as black and white, is how we ended up where we are now. The Dark Lord was always fond of saying ‘there is no good or evil, there is only power’.

“While I tend to disagree on his dismissal of absolutes, there is some truth to it. Very few people are purely good, or purely evil. We all of us have the capacity for both inside of us. Any spell can kill, and some dark spells can be used for good purposes. After all, did I not save your life with an Unforgivable?” He grinned as her cheeks coloured. “If you really want to affect change, Miss Granger, and I believe you truly could, you first must understand the world you wish to alter. See yourself not as a muggle-born witch, but simply a witch. Part of a world that has existed in the shadows for centuries, with rich traditions and a culture that becomes more forgotten every year. Understand why men like the Dark Lord were able to inspire such a following, and then make certain that it can never happen again. The more we divide ourselves, the easier it is to fight amongst ourselves.”

Hermione frowned. “When did you start feeling this way?” It was clearly something that had been in his thoughts for some time.

“A long time, Miss Granger. But mistakes of my youth kept me from moving openly on many of those aims, and prevented steps I tried to take to start healing those divides. People saw only my former associations and ascribed their own reasons to my actions,” he said.

“What kind of actions?” she asked, having some of her eggs.
“You are aware I was on the Board of Governors for the school, yes?” He asked, pleased when she nodded. “I suggested that in addition to Muggle Studies, there should be a course for all muggle-born, or muggle-raised students on wizarding culture and etiquette. Dumbledore accused me openly of attempting to indoctrinate the children and spread prejudice and the class never came to be.” He shrugged. “I asked for the reinstatement of the Annual Yule ball, and it was met with similar resistance as an archaic practice that was best left in the past.”

“I would have loved both those suggestions. The year of the Triwizard tournament we had a Yule Ball and it was incredible.” She smiled fondly at that memory. “I can see what you mean…but there are few books on wizarding culture, so how can anyone learn?” She asked him.

“I could teach you.” He offered. “If you really wish to learn. I can introduce you to people that will be able to further your political aims, and with some assistance you could rise very quickly through the Ministry.” Lucius said, offering her that. She was young enough still that her opinions could be moulded, at least somewhat. He was in the unique position to help her bridge the vast divide between her goals and possible attainment. The Malfoys never backed a losing horse, and Miss Granger had all the hallmarks of a political sure bet. She was intelligent, had good standing in popular opinion, and was a pretty enough girl that with a little help could be extremely elegant. “Yes…with a little help, you could well be Minister of Magic in the next ten years.”

Her eyebrows rose nearly to her hairline. “Why would you ever want to help me?” She didn’t understand.

“Because, you silly little girl, it helps him.” Came the disgruntled voice of an elderly witch in the portrait over the fireplace. “Do use the brain he seems to think you have.”

“I beg your pardon?” Hermione turned her head to look at the woman.

“He’s in disgrace at the moment, backing a popular public figure will help him regain some social acceptance.” The witch said. “Clever…if transparent.”

“Yes, thank you grandmother.” Lucius said drily. “I won’t be under house arrest forever, and it would be a welcome thing to be able to walk down the street without being hexed on sight.” He told her. “You’re a reasonable young woman, I’m sure you can see the advantages.”

Hermione nodded, unable to deny that she could see the very great appeal of his offer. “What would you want in return for all of this help?”
“Merely your friendship, or the appearance of it in public.” Lucius said. “Not right away of course, we were enemies on opposite sides of the war, but over time it would not be unexpected for us to develop a casual friendship.” He said. “You would attend the odd event at the manor, we would converse at Ministry functions…nothing so terrible.”

She buttered a muffin and considered. “I would like to learn about our world.” She said and took a bite of it, and couldn’t come up with a rational argument against what he was saying. “I accept your offer, Mister Malfoy…and your terms.” Hermione said.

He nodded elegantly. “Excellent.” He said. “How is your breakfast, to your liking?” He asked.

“It’s delicious.” She said.

“I plan to take my potions once I’m finished eating and just rest for most of today. If you need me, Miss Granger, I will be in my rooms. I may join you for dinner.” He said and stood. “We’ll continue this conversation at a later time.”

“Of course.” She said. “I hope you’re feeling better.” Hermione had to admit her curiosity was rather piqued by his comments. It made her want to learn more about what Noddy Leech had done that was so controversial.

“In the Library there are books on Ministry legislation, if you are curious about anything that might have been passed in the last hundred or so years.” He said casually on his way out of the room, knowing precisely the turn her mind had taken. This had the opportunity to be quite fun.

Hermione finished her breakfast, and heard a tapping at the door to the garden. She stood and opened it to see an owl sitting just outside on a perch. “Well hello there.” She said and accepted the letter. It was addressed to her. She got the owl a piece of bacon and once it was finished it flew off. She didn’t recognize the seal of the letter and she broke it, unfolding the letter to read it.

Dear Miss Granger,

By now I am certain you’ve seen today’s edition of the Daily Prophet and I hope that nothing in the article alarmed you unduly. It was quite the breaking story and holding it back would have been quite out of the question. Normally I do like to inform the subjects of my writing about a story before it hits the paper. So my apologies if I have upset you. I am writing to request the pleasure of interviewing you, at some time in the next week or so about the war and your efforts, as well as to why you supported Lord Malfoy’s release. In return for an exclusive interview I would of course allow you to read the article prior to publishing and request reasonable changes if you feel I have
lost the script, so to speak.

I look forward to hearing from you,

Most cordially,

Henry T. Arnebolt Jr.

She folded the letter up and decided that she would discuss it with Lucius later before replying. Her instinct was to grant him an interview, it seemed very reasonable. She’d also want to speak to Harry and Ron, so that some things could be kept private. She rubbed her temple as another owl swooped down, she recognized the Hogwarts crest. She smiled, seeing that it was an invitation to tea from Professor McGonagall, and if she was unable to get away for tea then to owl back with a time for her to come to Hermione.

She went to her room to compose a reply. She sat down at the little writing desk in her sitting room and pulled out a piece of parchment.

Headmistress,

I was pleased to receive your letter this morning. I assume you’ve been made aware of my situation beyond what was reported in the Prophet. Given the newness of our agreement, I do not feel entirely comfortable leaving the Manor for an extended period of time. If you would find it convenient to come for tea tomorrow I have a private sitting room we might make use of. I believe around 2pm would be ideal. If that is not possible please return an owl with a more appropriate time. The Floo address you will need to use to visit me will be Malfoy Manor The Gold Suite.

I look forward to seeing you.

Hermione J. Granger.

She cast a simple drying charm over the paper and then folded it neatly. She realized she didn’t know where the owlery was at the manor and mentally cursed at having to bother Lucius so soon after he’d gone to lie down. She stood and made her way out of her rooms and down the hallway towards his door. She swallowed and knocked politely.

“Come in Ms. Granger.” His voice called through the door.

She took a breath and entered, seeing him sitting in a chair by the fireplace, a book in hand. “Forgive the intrusion, I was curious as to where the owlery was.” She said a bit sheepishly.

He gave her a small smile. “I can take you there. A short walk in the sun will do me some good I
imagine.” He set the book aside and stood. “Receiving post all ready?” He said conversationally as he walked her out of his rooms and back towards the stairs leading down to the main level.

“Two letters actually. One was from the reporter who wrote the article in the Prophet today, requesting an interview. The other was from professor McGonagall, wanting to meet with me for tea. I was going to invite her to come here tomorrow, if that’s quite all right?” She said, realizing she should have asked him. House arrest or not, it was still his home.

“Perfectly all right Miss Granger. You are free to entertain your own guests while you are in residence here, as you recall I simply asked that you give me some warning ahead of time. You do not need my permission to have tea with your teacher.” He said, wanting her to feel at ease here.

“Thank you.” She said.

“As for the reporter, I would suggest replying in a day or two and grant him an interview… provided his terms are acceptable.” He said, heading through a short hallway and outside into the informal garden. “Be prepared for what you wish him to know, and be certain your friends are clear on your wishes. It wouldn’t do for him to be able to discredit you with Ron or Harry’s testimony.” He suggested.

“That had been my first instinct.” She said.

“I realize that you are likely somewhat nervous about leaving me unattended, but it would likely be easiest for you to speak with Harry and Ron about this in person at the Weasley’s home. Perhaps going to dinner on Sunday would be acceptable?” He suggested. “I am quite content for you to ward me into my room while you’re gone.” He said to her. “Best to make an appearance, lest they think I have *you* under lock and key.”

She laughed a little as they rounded a bend in the garden and she saw a quaint little building that must be the owlery. She followed him inside and he pointed out a little barn owl.

“That is Ness, she’ll do well as your owl while you’re staying here.” He said. The little barn owl had been one he’d used when his regular owls were already occupied. It would be best for the young lady to have an owl dedicated as hers. He planned for her to be quite engaged with expanding her social circle over the next year or two.

“Thank you. She seems very sweet.” She careful reached forward and brushed her fingers against
the soft buff feathers. “Can you deliver this to Minerva McGonagall?” She offered the letter and smiled as the little owl took the letter and took off. “I do love magic.” She whispered.

Lucius chuckled a little. “Since we’re outside all ready, perhaps you’d like to see the grounds?” He offered as they left the owlery.

“As long as you’re fine to walk that much, I know you are supposed to be resting.” She said, taking his arm when he offered it.

“We can rest here and there.” He said, pleased that she was comfortable enough to take his arm. It was a beautiful day, warm and sunny. This was infinitely better than staying alone in his room. He took her through the wild informal gardens and then into the more structured areas around the house. He would sit down on the various benches when he started feeling fatigued and simply watch her explore. He could see that she liked roses, her eyes gravitating to them more than any other flower. He filed that away, and continued the tour until they ended up back at the patio off the breakfast room. “There is more to see but walking would be tedious.” He opened the door for her and motioned her through ahead of him.

“The gardens are beautiful.” She smiled.

“Bilby…tea for two.” Lucius said and sat down at the table. A short moment later an elegant tea service appeared and the two of them settled in for a relaxing afternoon. There was not a lot of conversation but the silence wasn’t strained and Lucius felt no need to fill it. Silence could reveal more about a person than talking could. A person who could sit in silence without being uncomfortable was content with their own company, and had an active mind that could engage itself without needing outside stimulation. He imagined the young woman sitting with him had spent many hours in her own company. He hoped that over the next two years she’d not have too much cause to rely on herself for intelligent conversation.
Hermione was surprisingly nervous when tea time rolled around. Her floo flared to life and Minerva McGonagall stepped out and shook some non-existent dust off her robes. She smiled when her eyes settled on the young witch she’d come to visit.

“Professor.” Hermione smiled at her. “I’m glad you could make it.”

“It’s good to see you looking well, Miss Granger,” Minerva said. “Though I wish the circumstances were somewhat different.”

Hermione nodded. “Please have a seat.” There was a full, formal tea set out.

“This is a very pleasant room,” Minerva said, pleased to see that despite her concerns Miss Granger seemed quite at ease and most certainly not in any danger. “I’ll be able to reassure certain parties that you’re not being kept in a cell in some corner of the basement.”

Hermione laughed a little. “Ronald, I assume?” She rolled her eyes, unsurprised when the older witch nodded. “He was not well pleased that I decided to do this.” She poured the tea for them both, letting the Professor fix it the way she preferred.

“They are merely worried about you, and to confess so am I. You’re not normally one prone to rash decisions Miss Granger, despite the lie you told about the troll in first year.” She arched an eyebrow.

“You knew about that?” She looked rather sheepish.

“Of course I did, I was not nearly as oblivious as I appeared.” She chuckled. “However, it showed remarkable loyalty to your friends so I never saw fit to call you on it. Students love to think they are smarter than their teachers.” She sipped her tea. “I wanted to speak to you about your Newts, in particular. While many of the students from your year will be returning for an 8th year, with your situation that will not be possible. Kingsley explained the entire affair to me, and despite my misgivings about the recipient of your good will, I can only commend your principles.” She met her eyes. “You are more than capable of directing your own studies, and so I feel you will be quite
up to the challenge of sitting your Newts in June with the rest of your year mates. The entire staff has agreed that they will be available to you for tutoring, and any support you might require.” She smiled. “If that is something you’d want to pursue.”

“Of course it is.” She smiled, unable to keep from looking as happy as she felt. “Thank you, I know this isn’t precisely a normal thing to offer.”

“There are provisions available in the school bylaws, granted they were intended for a witch that was unable to finish her schooling for family reasons, but I don’t believe anyone would object to us stretching the rules a little for you.” Minerva winked a little. “These sandwiches are lovely.”

“Yes, the house elves have been particularly pleased that I brought their master home. I keep finding little plates of sweets everywhere.” She chuckled.

“How have things been with Mister Malfoy?” She asked.

“He’s been fine, actually. He’s been polite, and quite the gentleman.” She knew it sounded strange to her ears, she couldn’t imagine how it sounded to her Professor’s.

“That doesn’t surprise me as much as it likely should. I knew him when he was at school and he was always a keen observer of those around him. He had no compunction about networking with half-bloods or even particularly intelligent and gifted muggle-borns. He measured everything by gain, and I doubt that part of his personality has changed much over the years. It was one of the very great differences between him and his father, Arbraxas.” She sighed. “So long as you show him respect Miss Granger, I am quite confident he will continue to show it to you. I will caution you however, men like Lucius Malfoy have a way of changing the people they associate with. It can be subtle, but over time you may find it hard to recognize the person you become.” Her tone was soft, and a little sad.

“Is that what happened between you and Professor Dumbledore?” Hermione asked her.

“To put it simply, yes. I had my own goals and ambitions, and I assure you teaching was not in the realm of possibilities.” She snorted. “Albus had a clever way of shifting your thinking until you made the choices he wanted you to make. I still maintain he was a Slytherin in Gryffindor clothing.” She muttered.

Hermione laughed a little. “He certainly liked playing with people’s lives.” She finally said. “I’m
just grateful we survived the game.”

“As am I, Miss Granger…as am I.” She said. “Try not to be too hard on young Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley, wizards always take longer to grow up than witches. You’re taking your first steps on your own path and I imagine they feel somewhat left behind. It’s a very natural thing, but I somehow always knew your path would lead you away from them. You were always too clever for Mr. Weasley, and Mr. Potter sees you as the sister he never had…and I believe you share that sentiment.” Minerva said.

“Harry is like a brother to me…our time alone hunting the Horcruxes reaffirmed that for us. I’m glad he has a chance to have a life of his own now, without the pressure of being the Boy Who Lived. He deserves that, and I think he’ll come to see that I deserve to have my own life apart from being part of ‘The Golden Trio’.” She rolled her eyes at the moniker that the papers used to describe the three of them. “I don’t feel all that shiny and bright these days.” She nibbled at a pastry.

“War has a way of darkening the soul Miss Granger, I hope you realize that you are not alone in feeling that.” She said. “I won’t pretend to understand what you’re dealing with, but should you ever need someone to speak to my door is always open to you. No matter whether it’s a day from now, or a year.”

“Thank you Professor.” Hermione smiled softly.

“Enough of that…you’re not my student anymore Miss Granger. Please call me Minerva.” She said.

“Then I insist you call me Hermione.” She said in turn. “Is growing up always this hard?”

“I’m afraid so…but the thing to remember is it won’t kill you.” Minerva said.

“Here’s hoping.” She said, not entirely sure about that. The two witches turned their conversation to safer ground, discussing the rebuilding schedule for the damaged sections of the castle and some of the newly appointed staff members.
“Did you have a pleasant visit with the Headmistress?” Lucius asked politely as they settled down to dinner.

“I did, she got me caught up on everything happening back the school and let me know that I’ll have the chance to sit my Newts in June. She believes I’ll be able to prepare on my own.” Hermione said, helping herself to the roast potatoes.

“It is an ambitious undertaking, but I am certain you will be equal to the task. What classes will you be attempting?” He asked, pouring himself some wine.

“Transfigurations, Potions, Charms, History of Magic, Defence against the Dark Arts, Arithmancy, Ancient Runes and Astronomy. I decided that Care of Magical Creatures, Divination and Muggle studies were rather a bit much.” She said.

He smiled. “While I am sure you have offers from the teaching staff for tutoring as you require it, I did extremely well in my Newts in Transfiguration, Defence, Arithmancy and Ancient Runes. I’d be happy to help where you might require it.” He offered.

“I may accept your help, especially with Ancient Runes. I’ve been told I approach it too academically, that a true understand needs to felt.” She shook her head.

“Your professor is not wrong. It’s a very old form of magic, from before we really used wands and spells for things. The blood wards of the manor are rune based, it’s what makes them so very potent. You felt the power there, that’s a beginning to understanding it. A true understanding of Runes is to understand the nature of your own magic. Everyone has a natural predisposition to a given branch of magic, be it protective magic, offensive magic, light or dark. Runes cast in a way that enhances your own abilities will always be stronger than runes cast in a spell that draws from your weaker abilities.”

Hermione listened as he launched into a lecture on elemental magic, something that had only been touched on briefly in her books and not even mentioned in her classes. He wove it into the history of magic itself, going back to the times of Merlin. It was clearly a subject he was both intimately familiar, and passionate about. They lingered over desert, and continued their conversation over a glass of wine in his study.

“How do you discover what elemental affinity you really have though?” Hermione asked, relaxing in the chair across from him.
“I have my suspicions about yours.” Lucius smiled a little, eyes meeting hers quite boldly. “It would not be too difficult to test either.”

“I’d like to know.” She smiled, finding herself captivated by the little smile on his lips. She’d never have thought he’d be someone she’d want to converse with. There was a great deal of intelligence hidden behind that arrogant sneer. She wondered idly how Draco had turned out to be such an idiot.

He paused as if considering and then nodded and stood. He offered her a hand. “Then let’s find out if my suspicions are correct.” He was pleased when she took his hand without hesitation. He tucked her hand into the crook of his arm and led her out of the house, into the gardens. It was pitch black outside, only faint light coming from the crescent moon. He knew exactly where he was going and had walked this path in the dark many times. There was a small circular clearing, four bowls set on pillars at about waist height. There was a fountain in the center of the circle and a large brazier suspended above it. He moved forward and whispered to the fountain and the brazier flared to life. He turned back to his guest, watching her eyes as she took everything in.

“What is this place?” She asked quietly.

“It’s a place of worship, for a religion that has no real name but who’s rites are passed down through the generations, father to son, and mother to daughter. A religion that must be practiced in secret these days, since many equate it with blood-based bigotry and discrimination. We draw our power from the elements in nature all around us, Miss Granger. All things in balance, and fed by the magic inside of all of us.” He circled the brazier and paused to look at her. “Do you trust me, Miss Granger.”

“I shouldn’t.” She said, not insulting his intelligence with an obvious lie. “But yes…I do.”

“Then close your eyes a moment.” He said and moved around the circle, one bowl filled with water, one with earth, another with embers from the brazier and the final one stood empty. He approached the young woman, struck but just how compelling she looked bathed in firelight and shadow. Such a strange witch. She had every reason to fear him, she was aware of the evil things he had done…or at least had to suspect, but here she stood with her eyes closed trusting him to not do anything unpleasant.

Hermione could feel him as he moved around the clearing. She couldn’t hear much, he was almost entirely silent on his feet as he moved and then suddenly he was right behind her. She gasped as he guided her forward and lifted her right hand, his own lightly wrapped around her wrist.
“Tell me when you feel something, it may be a very weak sensation the first time…but try and push out with your magic, feel with more than your skin.” He whispered into her ear.

Hermione let him guide her, trying to do what he’d said. It was hard to focus on anything but the feel of him so close to her, his hand on her skin. They walked a little further and he lifted her hand again and suddenly she felt…something. She frowned, reaching for the strange tugging sensation she could feel.

“There…” Lucius said and shifted his grasp on her wrist, pressing her palm down into the bowl.

Her fingers curled into the earth, and she felt something strange and alien travel up her hand. It was like the thrumming of really deep bass, silent but vibrating against her magic. It was almost too intense as it built and she tried to pull away but Lucius was like stone…keeping her from pulling her hand away.

“Don’t fight it, open to it, and accept the power it offers.” He kept speaking into her ear.

She stopped fighting it and it stopped being so overwhelming, settling against her spine and pooling there with a strange kind of heat.

“Earth. The realm of protective magic, wards and shielding, as well as fertility, life, and death magic. People who identify with this element carry a depth, a strength that is not easily conquered. The eternity of stone, the silent strength of the mountain.” Lucius spoke into her ear, releasing her wrist as she accepted the power into herself. “It suits you.” He said.

Hermione felt the power fade back and she opened her eyes, withdrawing her hand. “That was incredible.” She turned, finding him still standing much too close. “What’s your element?” She asked him.

Lucius moved back and walked to the next bowl, hovering his hand over it and closing his eyes. A delicate column of water rose from the bowl and wrapped around his hand, dancing against his skin. “Water.” He opened his eyes and the water fell back down into the stone bowl. “It’s a more flexible element, both offensive and defensive. Water can destroy or restore.”

Hermione nodded, and looked at the other two bowls. “What about fire and air?”
“Fire is a very offensively motivated element, I’d lay good money that your friend Mr. Potter’s affinity lays there. Air tends to a flexible sign, though it differs from water in the kinds of spells it resonates with and the personality traits are much different.” He said.

Hermione nodded. “So this place, the elements…are they all tied into the culture you want to help teach me about?” She asked him.

“It is.” He nodded. “But it’s beyond late, and we should both retire for what’s left of the evening.” Lucius said and with a wave of his hand the fire extinguished.

“You’re quite adept at wandless magic.” Hermione noted.

“It takes practice, but most witches and wizards can learn to perform basic spells without the benefit of their wand.” He said and offered her his arm to lead her back to the manor.

“Why don’t they ever teach us any of this?” She asked, shaking her head a little.

“Different priorities.” He said and shrugged. “There is more to magic than could ever learn in school. It’s just a beginning to knowledge, not the end.” Lucius said. “Most don’t ever go deeper, but the knowledge is out there, for those with a curious mind. Wandless magic is always a good skill to keep to yourself, you never know when you might find yourself without one.” He stole a glance down at her.

She nodded. “True. Do you think the surviving Death Eaters will come after me?” She shivered a little, the night closing in around them tightly and making her feel more vulnerable than she had been.

“They cannot hurt you here, you have my word on that Miss Granger.” He said, reaching over to place a hand over hers where it rested on his arm. “You’ve suffered through enough, let others fight the battles for now.”

She nodded, falling into silence as they returned to the house and he left her at her door. “Goodnight Mister Malfoy.” She said.

“Sleep well Miss Granger.” He said and lifted her hand to his lips, placing a chaste kiss across her knuckles. He wasn’t entirely sure what motivated the urge to do it, but he tried to never deny
himself the things he wanted. He turned and left her there, a blush staining her cheeks.

Hermione watched him go before slipping into her room and going to get ready for bed. She smiled a little more at the little vase of roses on her bedside table. They hadn’t been there earlier, that much she was sure of. She undressed and pulled on some pajamas before curling into bed. She could still feel the kiss of magic against her skin, and it wrapped around her, sending her into a night of restful sleep.

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Four days after their late night exploration of her elemental affinity, Hermione Granger stepped through the fireplace at the Burrow and was instantly pulled into a warm hug by Molly. She returned it, letting the older woman hold her tight.

“I’ve been so worried about you.” She whispered softly.

“I’m fine, but I missed all of you.” She said and drew back, letting the older witch see that she was fine. “Where is everyone?” She asked.

“The boys are off playing Quidditch, and Ginny went with Arthur to visit Fred and George, they’ll be back in time for dinner. Come and give me a hand in the kitchen.” Molly said. “How are things going at the Manor?” She asked, trying to be open minded about the whole situation.

“Actually better than I thought they would.” Hermione sat down slicing some apples that Molly popped in front of her. “I really only see him at meals, and I’ve been exploring his library. Even if I managed to read a book a day for the next two years I doubt I could make a dent.” She chuckled.

“Well it is one of the largest private libraries in Magical Britain.” Molly chuckled. “I’m glad there are some consolations for having to stay there I suppose.” She grumbled a bit, checking the chicken as it cooked. “What will you be doing about your Newts then, Harry and Ron received letters from the school inviting them to return to complete them.”

“Minerva actually came and had tea with me the other day, and since there are provisions in the school charter for students to self-study for their Newts under certain circumstances, they’ll be bending those rules a little to give me the same opportunity.” She said.
Molly nodded. “I suppose your situation is preferable to the one that the rules were originally intended for.” She remembered a few girls that had gotten into ‘trouble’ and left school early, returning only to write their Newts.

“I would think so.” Hermione shook her head. “He also made sure that Kingsley would allow me to seal him in his rooms on occasion so I could get out of the house here and there. He’s been most considerate, given his pre-war stance on people like me.” She said, giving Molly a smile as she got her a cup of tea.

“I’m sure he has been, just be certain you don’t allow it to lull you into a false sense of security. Lucius was always charming, and turned more than one witch’s head in our school days. Don’t let the charm make you forget what he is, and what he’s done.” Molly held her eyes. “I don’t think he’d harm you, but I wouldn’t put it past him to try and make you believe he’s your friend to get you to overlook things he’s plotting.”

“Trust me, Mrs. Weasley, I won’t ever forget what he is.” She said quietly, wanting to put the woman at ease. “I owe him a wizard’s debt, that’s all this is.” She reassured her.

“All right. I won’t keep harping at it, but I do expect you to come to dinner every now and again. Too much solitude isn’t good for you.” She said and together they got dinner ready.

While they were setting the table, Harry, Ron, Bill, and Charlie tromped in…getting sent off to wash up by an indignant Molly Weasley. Hermione vanished the mud they had tracked through the dining room, wondering where on earth their manners were. Honestly! She accepted a mug of hot cocoa and went to sit in the living room while Molly finished off cooking.

“Hey ‘Mione.” Harry said as he came into the livingroom.

“Hey Harry. Ron still mad at me mm?” She guessed, not seeing him at Harry’s heels.

“Yeah, mostly he just doesn’t understand it.” Harry came and sat down with her. “Are you really ok there?” He met her eyes, not judging.

“I am. After everything that happened, I thought being there would be horrible, but it’s actually been nice. I needed some peace and quiet, and the Manor certainly offers that. Mister Malfoy mostly just stays out of my way, and I only really see him at breakfast and dinner.” She said. “He had the House Elves seal off the part of the house where everything happened…he didn’t want me
to have to go there again.” She said quietly. She discovered that when she’d gone exploring the other day. It had been thoughtful of him. Bilby had told her that he’d ordered him to seal it off that first night.

Harry nodded. “I went to St. Mungo’s yesterday and visited Professor Snape and I looked in on Draco.” He told her. “I imagine he’s pretty worried about him.”

“He is. He knows the healer in charge of Draco’s case, and the man seems optimistic but I can see that he won’t be easy until Draco wakes up.” Hermione said. “How are you doing? Really?” She asked Harry, taking advantage of the little bit of time they had alone.

“I’m not sure, honestly.” He admitted. “Everyone here’s been keeping me really busy but…now that everything’s over there are things I need to do and I don’t really want to do them with a half-dozen people in tow.”

“Why don’t you come and visit me next week? There are some beautiful gardens at the manor and we can talk a bit more about everything.” She offered.

“I’d like that ‘Mione. Maybe even tomorrow?” He asked a little hesitantly. He had a few things he wanted to talk over with her, and they’d need more than a handful of minutes before dinner.

“You’re welcome any time.” She said. “Why don’t you come around lunch? We can eat and then go and spend some time outside and talk everything over? My personal floo is Malfoy Manor Gold Suite.” She told him.

“Sounds good.” He said and reached over, taking her hand in his and squeezing it firmly. He was going to say more when the Floo flared and Arthur and Ginny came through.

“Ah, Hermione…glad you could make it. Is dinner almost ready?” He asked, brushing some soot off his clothes.

“Almost, Molly was just finishing off the dessert.” She smiled and stood, going and accepting a hug from Ginny. “How are the twins?” she asked.

“Should be able to come home in a few more days. Fred could probably come home today but he won’t leave George there alone,” Ginny said and hugged Hermione tightly. “Are you ok?” she
asked softly.

“I’m fine…I promise,” Hermione told her, aware that her friend had a few personal reasons to think badly of Lord Malfoy, and they were very valid.

“He hurts you I’ll turn him into a toad and use him for potion ingredients.” She said quietly.

“I know you would.” Hermione winked.

“Diner’s ready! Harry, go and get the boys. Ginny, Arthur get yourselves cleaned up.” Molly’s voice commanded.

Soon everyone was seated at the table. Hermione was sitting between Harry and Ron and it was incredibly uncomfortable. Ron was ignoring her, to the point where she was direly tempted to hex him within an inch of his life if he didn’t pass her the rolls soon. As if aware of his impending doom he passed the rolls to her, still not looking at her. Hermione mentally counted to ten and then looked at Molly.

“Mrs. Weasley, could you excuse Ronald and I for a few minutes? I think we need to have a talk.” She looked at the Weasley Matriarch who nodded.

“I think that’s a good idea, why don’t you two take a few minutes out in the garden?” Molly gave her youngest son a hard look.

“But I’m not done eating!” Ron grumbled but under his mother’s stare he stood and stalked outside, following Hermione.

Once outside Hermione cast a general silencing charm around them so they could yell and scream without anyone hearing what they were saying. “All right, whatever the hell is up your stubborn arse sideways…get it out now!”

“You’re mad at ME! You’re the one acting like a mental case!” Ron growled at her. “Living in that place…with HIM! How do you think that looks?!”
“I’m there at the request of the new Minister of Magic, Ronald… it doesn’t *look* like anything.” Hermione’s jaw nearly hit the floor. She felt her temper flaring. How dare he insinuate anything like that?!

“I thought we had something, and you didn’t even discuss this with me before running off to save a bloody death eater!” Ron said.

“We don’t have anything Ron! That kiss…it was just the stress of everything. If you had any real feelings for me you’d have trusted me. Instead you got jealous over HARRY of all people! He’s like my brother for Merlin’s sake! Now you’re jealous over Lucius Malfoy! Do you have any idea how utterly insane that is? I’m a muggle-born witch, he’d likely sooner go to Azkaban than think of me that way. Do you really think I’d be interested in a man old enough to be my own father, who’s committed the crimes I know he has! God… you are so bloody thick!” She shoved him hard.

“If you can’t pull your head out of your ass, then that’s your problem and I don’t want anything else to do with you. I’m not going to wait around for you to decide that I’m worth being with. I deserve a whole better Ronald Weasley, and I will not put up with being treated this way. For your information, I owed the man a LIFE DEBT. I was defenceless…and Dolohov was going to rape me and then probably kill me. Where were you?” There were tears in her eyes. “You weren’t there. He was. He didn’t have to help me, but he chose to. He took time that he didn’t have, that Draco didn’t have, and saved me from that monster. So you’ll forgive me if I don’t ask your permission to repay that with a couple of years of inconvenience.” She pushed past him and fled back inside.

“Hermione?” Ginny stood, following Hermione as she all but ran through the kitchen and into the living room. “What did he do?”

Hermione wiped the tears away angrily. “Nothing…I just…I need to go. Tell your mother I’m sorry, I just can’t stay.” She shook her head and took a pinch of floo powder and threw it into the fire, before stepping through to her rooms at Malfoy Manor. She went to her bathroom and splashed cold water on her face, trying to find some composure after her tearful escape from the Burrow. She knew it had been horribly rude but she just couldn’t do it. She wanted to just curl up in bed and hide but knew she had to go and undo the wards on Lucius’ room.

She took a steadying breath and left her rooms, going down the hall and taking down the simple wards that had sealed the door. She knocked at his door, wanting to let him know she was back.

Lucius opened the door and frowned at the puffiness around her eyes. “You’re back early Miss Granger, is everything well?” he asked.
“Well enough. I just wanted to let you know I’d taken the wards down,” she said quietly. He’d given her a lot of space since that night in the garden, as if he’d crossed a line with the kiss to her hand and was trying to apologize by staying well away.

“Please, come in and have a drink. You hardly look as though things are fine,” he said and moved back, letting her enter his front room. He went and poured her a glass of brandy, pressing it into her hand and leading her over to sit in one of the arm chairs by the fireplace.

“I just had an argument with Ron, that’s all,” Hermione explained quietly, her eyes on the dark liquid in the glass he’d handed her.

“I take it the argument was about your presence here,” Lucius pressed a little, seeing that she was quite a bit more upset than she wanted to admit.

“Yes…and no. It was about a lot of things that just came to a head.” She sipped the potent liquor, suppressing the urge to cough a bit.

“Do not waste your tears on him, Miss Granger. You’re far too good for him, even a blind man could see that,” Lucius reassured her. She was intelligent and sophisticated, truly pearls before that particular swine.

“I loved him for a long time. I really did. But I was never first in his thoughts, I know that now. I knew it when he spent that year messing around with Lavender Brown,” she said the girl’s name like a curse. “I never forgave him for that. Last year during our quest to destroy Voldemort’s Horcruxes…he started getting irrationally jealous about the time I spent with Harry. He actually left us. We needed him and he just left.” She felt tears fall down her cheeks. “I knew then that I could never really be with him, because I couldn’t trust him to be there for me.”

Lucius reached over and placed a hand over hers. “First loves always break our heart the hardest Miss Granger, but they help us move forward. Take the time to move through your heartbreak, just know eventually it won’t hurt quite as bitterly as it does now.” He said.

“Did you ever have your heart broken?” She lifted her eyes then, wanting to know.

“Of course,” he said and sat back. “When I was at school I was madly in love with a girl, and I thought she loved me. She was beautiful, witty, and very clever. I was going to defy my father to marry her, even knowing that my father would likely disown me for it. He’d already arranged my marriage to Narcissa you see. One night I snuck out of my common room, intending to surprise her on her way back from the astronomy tower, I saw her in an alcove with someone else.” He said,
stopping as he remembered that night. “I was…inconsolable for months.” He said quietly. “I graduated, still in pain from that betrayal and quietly married Narcissa as our parents desired.”

“Are arranged marriages common?” she asked him, moving to a slightly safer topic.

“Fairly common, at least amongst the pureblood families,” Lucius said. “Given my own feelings around my marriage, I chose not to arrange a match for Draco. I’ll let him choose who he’ll be spending his life with…I think he deserves that.”

Hermione smiled. “Harry was at St. Mungo’s yesterday to visit Professor Snape…he stopped in to see Draco.” She said.

“That was kind of him.” Lucius said.

“Harry’s coming tomorrow to visit me, and he’ll likely be here for the afternoon.” She told him.

“I’ll entertain myself with a good book then.” He nodded, watching as she sipped the brandy in her glass. “What is your relationship with Mr. Potter?” He asked her.

“He’s like the brother I always wished I’d had, it’s why it was so silly that Ron was jealous of him. We just understand one another, and I know if I ever needed anything he’d be there without question.” She smiled.

“Friends like that are rare Miss Granger, hold onto them.” Lucius said, a small smile crossing his face. She really was quite lovely, and he couldn’t understand how Mr. Weasley was only just seeing the appeal of her. To Lucius however her real beauty was in her mind, her wit and intelligence made her all the more compelling.

She finished her glass and set it aside. “I should go…I think I’m just going to turn in early.” She stood.

“Goodnight then Miss Granger. Pleasant dreams.” He stood as well, giving her a half bow.

“Goodnight Mister Malfoy.” She blushed a bit as she turned and left his rooms.
Harry came through the floo into Hermione’s room, and he went and gave her a hug. “I’m sorry he’s such an ass,” he whispered into her hair, holding her tightly for a long moment.

“I’m so angry with him,” Hermione said into Harry’s chest, letting him hold her. “I didn’t know whether to cry or throttle him,” she admitted.

“Well, Molly sure tore a strip off him deep enough that it’ll take weeks to fill in and then Arthur took him off for an even longer talk,” Harry said and moved back. “He owes you an apology.” He said.

“It’ll be a while before I’m willing to hear it.” She said decidedly. “Let’s have some lunch and then I’ll show you around.” She grinned, not wanting to spend her day worrying about that prat.

After lunch, she and Harry headed outside and sat down under a massive oak, resting in the shade. “So, what did you want to talk about?” She asked him, her head resting on his shoulder. Moments like this let her imagine they were back at school, just relaxing after classes.

“I got a letter from the Wizengamot…they want me to claim my seat, and I got a letter from Gringotts about coming to look over the papers for my full inheritance.” He said. “I guess I’m just a little nervous about all of it. I never really thought I’d survive the war, so I tried not think about what was going to come after.”

“No one ever really told you much about your family and everything that came with it. If you want I could go with you to the bank.” She offered.

Harry considered and shook his head. “No, I think this is really something I need to do on my own. You won’t always be there to hold my hand through things. But once I have the papers I might want to pick your brain about some things.” He said. “I mean, I grew up in a bloody broom cupboard until I was eleven, and now I have hereditary seats, family estates, vaults of gold, and family heirlooms. I can’t even wrap my head around it.”

Hermione smiled softly. “You know you can always ask for my help…with anything. Even if you
She said, slipping her fingers into his and squeezing lightly.

“Thanks ‘Mione.” He smiled. This wasn’t the kind of thing he could have ever discussed with Ron. He loved the big idiot, but his jealousy had always been an issue. Hermione had little tolerance for bullshit, but she never made him feel badly for just being who he was. “You know I can kinda get why Malfoy was always so high on himself, this place is pretty incredible.” Harry said. It was a lot nicer than the last time they’d been here. It felt…lighter somehow.

“Yeah, I know I shouldn’t feel this at ease here, but I do.” She admitted, sitting up a little as she saw Lucius walking towards the Owlery. She’d ask him about it over dinner.

“What’s he really like? I mean the few times we came across him he was pretty horrible.” Harry said.

“He’s not that bad.” She said. “When he gets talking about something he finds engaging, he can talk for hours about it. He really cares about history and culture. There are so many things we didn’t learn in school that are quite fascinating.” Hermione said. “And god…the library Harry…it’s just incredible.”

He chuckled a little. “The way to your heart is through books mm?”

She elbowed him. “Don’t you start too,” she said and gave Harry a warning look.

“Is *that* what he said?” Harry shook his head, thinking Ron was an even bigger idiot than he’d given him credit for. He was beginning to think that his friend had gotten off light. Wizards had indeed died for less.

“He said that it ‘looked bad’ me staying here with him.” She rolled her eyes. “It’s ridiculous. After everything that happened, I just need some time to deal with it all. Surprisingly, being here is letting me do that Harry.”

Harry slipped a hand over hers and squeezed it. “You never told any of us what happened that day.” He said softly.

“I’m not ready to talk about it. I might never be able to,” she said quietly. “Just believe me when I
say it was horrible, more horrible than you can imagine.” She closed her eyes. “I don’t know that I’d have been able to hold on much longer than I did, I was trying, but I just wanted it to stop.” She could feel tears threatening.

Harry shifted and pulled her into a hug, stroking her hair. “You held on long enough, you kept them from calling Voldemort with that stinging hex. You saved our lives, all our lives.” He said and held her. “Don’t you forget that, because I never will. You stayed with me, through all of it. No matter what happens, I’ll be there when you need me.” He promised softly. She’d always been there for him, through everything. He might not understand her need to help Lucius Malfoy, but if this was something she needed to do then he was damn sure he’d support her. If that bastard tried anything with her, he’d make sure no one ever found the body.

“Like I could have left you on your own…you’d have gotten caught in a day.” She grinned and sat up, wiping away some tears.

“Probably less.” He winked at her, trying to lighten the mood.

“Most likely.” She said. “How is Professor Snape?” She asked him.

“Awake.” Harry said. “I’m heading there once I leave. I guess we were all right, he’s just too damn mean to die easily.” A small smile passed over his lips. “He’s pulling through. The healers warned me that he’s not out of the woods but that it’s a very good sign.”

She smiled. “Give him my best wishes. I know getting the chance to know him is really important to you, after everything you saw.” She said meeting his eyes.

“It is. I never knew how much he’d sacrificed for me, for my mother. God Hermione, he was the one that found us that night. Seeing him holding her body, I’ve never seen so much pain on anyone’s face before.” He said softly. “I need him to know I don’t blame him for anything. I want to help him move on.”

She nodded. “Just be there for him, it’s all you can do.” She said. “And remember, he’s still Severus Snape.” She winked. “Sharing his secrets with you won’t change who he is…it might even make him more hostile for a while.”

“Yeah, I’d figured that.” He chuckled. “He only did it because he thought he was dying.” He sobered a bit.
“You should go and see him.” Hermione said. “Send me an owl and let me know how he is. I still need to get ready for my first exclusive interview tomorrow.” She rolled her eyes.

“Better you than me. I’ve already told them I want to be left alone.” Harry said. “I’ll make sure Ron doesn’t say anything about what happened at the Manor, past whatever you tell them. It would be a shame for his cowardice to ever be known after all.” He winked at her.

“You sneaky Slytherin.” She teased him. “I’ll owl you after and let you know how the interview goes.” She said softly.

“Ok. Let’s head back, and then I’ll be on my way to St. Mungo’s.” Harry finally said and offered her a hand up. They walked back into the Manor and she gave him a hug before he headed off through the floo.

Hermione ran a hand through her hair and headed off to spend a little time in the library before dinner. She’d found an interesting volume on elemental magic, and wizarding holiday rites during her exploration of the bookcases the other day. She curled up in her favourite chair and opened the book, reading about Yule.

As the day passed into evening, Hermione’s cheeks began to blush as she started reading about a very…particular ritual tied to spring rites. She blushed even darker as Lucius entered the library and headed over, recognizing the book in her hands instantly with raised eyebrows.

“What made you select that book Miss Granger?” Lucius asked as he sat down, clearly enjoying her discomfort.

“I was wanting to read more about the different holidays, I didn’t anticipate what I’d find.” She closed the book and set it aside. “Surely some of that has to be fictional…”

“While I do not believe this is something we should discuss, Miss Granger, I will say that while salacious, those particular rituals are indeed well founded in fact.” He cleared his throat a bit, having a very good inkling just what ritual she’d been reading about.

“Ah, well that’s um…good to know.” She settled on, hating that she could feel her face burning. “I saw you going down to the owlery today.” She said as a way of changing the topic to something a little less embarrassing.
“Yes…I had some details regarding Narcissa’s funeral arrangements to handle.” He said quietly.
“It seems that my wife made alterations to her will when I was sent to Azkaban. She’s requested to
be buried at the Black family plot, alongside her parents.” He looked into the fire. “I’d sent a
request to the Minister to be allowed to go to the Black cemetery to see to her, but I have been quite
firmly reminded that I am under house arrest and there are some sacrifices to be made.” His jaw
tightened, as he tried very hard to control his temper.

“But she’s your wife…” Hermione was stunned that Kingsley would be so unfeeling.

“Precisely my argument. However, he claims that he cannot spare an Auror to escort me, and that I
will just need to get used to the fact that I cannot have everything I want.” The denial chaffed
horribly at him. “In light of that…I find myself needing to ask a favour of you Miss Granger, if you
would be ever so kind enough to consider it.” He looked clearly very uncomfortable with the whole
issue.

“Of course, what can I do to help?” Hermione sat forward in her chair a little.

“Would you perform the rites required to lay her to rest properly?” He asked her, making himself
meet her eyes. “As legal heir to the Black family, I will ask Harry to be there to oversee the burial.
However there are certain things that need to be done for her. I would not ask if there was anyone
else that could do this.”

“I would be honoured to act in your stead.” She said quietly. “Just tell me what needs to be done,
and I will make sure she’s seen to properly.” Hermione could see how tightly he was holding
himself, and she realized this was costing him a lot to ask her.

“Thank you.” He said softly. “After your interview tomorrow, I’ll walk you through the rituals.”
Lucius turned his eyes to the fireplace. “If I become short with you, I apologize. Such matters are
family business and not intended for outside consumption.” His face was a stoic mask, completely
closed off to his houseguest/jailer.

“I’ll be respectful, and keep what you share with me in confidence.” Hermione promised softly.
“Did you want to talk about her?” She asked.

He merely shook his head and stood. “I won’t be joining you for dinner this evening, I fear I would
not be terribly agreeable company.” He gave Hermione a polite nod and left the library.
Hermione sighed, unable to really make sense of his strange mood, but understanding that grief was an intensely personal thing. It didn’t surprise her that a man like Lucius Malfoy needed to deal with the loss of his wife in private. She went downstairs to have her dinner in solitude, hoping that he would decide to join her, but not surprised when he did not.

“I just wanted to thank you again, Miss Granger, for agreeing to meet with me.” Henry Arnebolt said as he settled into his chair across from her in the Malfoy’s formal drawing room. He had a notebook on his lap and a self-inking quill. The young witch sitting across from him was a picture of composure. He hadn’t really been all too certain what to expect when he’d received the letter inviting him here for the interview. She was very pretty, but dressed modestly in a dark blue dress and soft grey robes over them. She looked completely at ease with her surroundings, though he imagined that she was simply faking it well.

“You can thank me by telling my story faithfully, though to be honest I don’t really understand what’s so interesting about me in particular.” She said, reaching for her tea cup. She’d offered the reporter some but he had declined.

“Come now, Miss Granger, there’s no need to be so modest. You’re reputedly the best friend of the Boy-Who-Lived, and fought by his side all last year in your quest to destroy You-Know-Who.” He said with a bit of a smile.

“Harry has been my friend since we started at Hogwarts together, of course I fought beside him… that’s just what friends do Mr. Arnebolt.” She said.

“Do you mind if I start off with some questions about you? Your years at school, and your family?” He asked.

“Not at all.” She said, getting ready.

“It seems to be fairly common knowledge that you are by far the brightest witch of your age. Have you always been academically gifted?” He asked her.

“As far as I can recall, yes. My parents both insisted on me making full use of my brain, and never succumbing to pressure to hide my intellect. Though, I imagine I’d have more friends if I had.” She
chuckled a bit. “Harry and Ron were never intimidated by my intelligence and I was fortunate to have Professors that challenged me, and inspired me to continue to question and improve my knowledge.” She said, and she went on to answer some fairly normal questions about her school years, favorite classes and charming anecdotes. She found herself relaxing somewhat.

“There were rumours in your fourth year that you and Mr. Potter had something of a romantic entanglement, despite your appearance at the Yule ball with Mr. Krum.” He asked.

“Harry and I have always been very close friends, but that’s all. That rumour was the complete fabrication of Rita Skeeter, who seemed to enjoy inventing the news rather than reporting it.” She arched an eyebrow. “Mr. Krum and I attended the Yule ball together, and enjoyed a friendly correspondence until the war broke out in earnest. The last I heard from him he was newly engaged to be married, and I could not have been happier for him.” She said, hoping to quash any thoughts of her being involved with him. Viktor was a dear friend, and she knew that now that things had settled down she really should reach out to him.

“I’ll ask, simply because there will be wild speculation otherwise, if you are currently involved with anyone romantically.” He said, deep down fairly sure that she was not but he had been wrong in the past.

“Sorry to disappoint your readers, but I am currently quite unattached, and likely to be so for a while. My responsibilities leave little time for social engagements.” She said.

“Let’s talk a little about those responsibilities, if we might?” He said.

“The Minister released Lord Malfoy on the condition that I agree to monitor him, and ensure his compliance with the terms of his house arrest. For the next two years, my time will not entirely be my own. I’m also planning on sitting my NEWTs next June with many of the other students whose seventh year was disrupted by the war. The Headmistress has very kindly allowed me to self-study for my exams and that will be quite the undertaking.” She said and they spent a little more time expounding on the classes she was planning to challenge Newts in and what she thought some of her challenges might be.

“Now, there were rumours that you championed Lord Malfoy’s case to the Minister because of actions during the final battle. Are you quite comfortable talking about them?” He asked her.

“It was not just his actions during the final battle, though if not for them I wouldn’t be currently sitting here with you. After Voldemort was defeated, his remaining followers started to attack students and members of the order without discrimination, trying to do as much damage as they
could before fleeing. I was drawn into a duel with Antonin Dolohov, and not for the first time. I was disarmed and stunned, I don’t know what would have happened if Lord Malfoy had not stopped him in that moment. He saved my life, taking time from getting his son to safety. All he asked of me was to protect Draco, something I would have done anyway. Draco had already earned my respect and gratitude for his actions sometime before.” She said and took a moment, sipping her tea and mildly wishing she’d put a drop of two of calming potion into it. “I helped him get Draco beyond the wards so we could apparate to St. Mungo’s. He surrendered his wand to me, and made sure I received attention from the healers before allowing himself to be taken away by the Aurors.”

“You mentioned an incident before the final battle? Do you mind telling me about that?” She asked.

Hermione took a steadying breath. She’d stick to what Harry and Ron knew. “Shortly before the final battle, Harry, Ron, and I were captured by the Snatchers. I knew they’d take us to the Death Eaters, so I cast a stinging hex on Harry’s face so that he would be quite unrecognizable for a while. I was hoping to buy us time to escape. The Snatchers brought the three of us here, to Malfoy Manor, and presented us to Bellatrix Lestrange.” She paused and took a deep breath. “Draco bravely refused to identify Harry, though he knew it was him. In my possession at the time I was carrying the Sword of Godric Gryffindor, when Bellatrix spotted it she became infuriated. Apparently she had hidden it in her vault at Gringotts. She was certain I’d stolen it from her. She had Ron and Harry locked up in the basement while she proceeded to ‘question’ me.”

“If you need a break Miss Granger…that’s quite all right.” Henry could see just how pale the young witch was, and could only imagine what a questioning by Bellatrix could have entailed.

“No, I’m fine it’s just a rather horrible memory.” She said and had some more tea as she gathered her composure again. “I don’t know how long she tortured me, but I refused to tell her anything. I think she was going to kill me when somehow Harry and Ron had gotten out of the basement. The swelling in Harry’s face had gone down, and Bellatrix ordered Lord Malfoy to call the Dark Lord. She had a blade to my throat to keep my friends from doing anything to rescue me. Lord Malfoy hesitated…I believe on purpose. I think he saw Dobby, a free house elf that befriended Harry years ago, and knew that if he waited a second, we could all escape. He had no wand at the time, and that was the only help he could offer. It was just enough. Dobby sent a chandelier crashing down nearly on top of Bellatrix and I. She released me and Dobby apparated the three of us out of the manor to safety. Bellatrix had thrown a dagger at us as we were apparating and unfortunately it struck Dobby. He saved us, at the cost of his life.” She said very softly. “He was a brave, selfless creature.” She said, unable to help wiping a tear away. “If Lord Malfoy had actually called Voldemort in that moment…I can’t say for certain what would have happened, but in my heart I know that all of us would have died.”

“I think I can speak for everyone, Miss Granger, in expressing our gratitude that you did live, and continued to fight in the face of everything.” He said quietly. “I have only one more question Miss Granger. What do you see as the way forward for our community?” He asked.
“Unity is the only way forward, Mr. Arnebolt. We need to come together, and heal the wounds that have been festering for so long. No more labels, no more infighting. We’re all part of this world, and if we can find ways to embrace each other, then men like Voldemort, and Grindelwald cannot find footing. I can’t say precisely how that is to be accomplished, because I still have a lot to learn about this world. I consider myself still very much a student, after all I’m only 18.” She gave him a charming smile.

“Do I sense a possible career in the Ministry in your future Miss Granger?” He asked.

“It’s something I’ve been considering,” She nodded elegantly. “I want to serve the magical community in whatever way I can. I’ve got some time to think it over, and evaluate all my options.” She hedged politely. “For now my only plan is to focus on my studies and honour the assignment that Minister Shacklebolt has given to me.” She said.

“Well, thank you again for your time Miss Granger. I’ll send you a draft of the full article probably tomorrow and you can send me any concerns or revisions you might want.” He said.

“I will look forward to your owl, Mr. Arnebolt.” She stood and walked with him to the entrance hall. He gave her a polite half-bow before leaving and she let out a long held breath. A chuckle from behind her, caused her to turn.

“It wasn’t that bad I hope?” Lucius said.

“No, he was most…restrained.” She said, having her suspicions about why that was.

“Good, I would have been most displeased with him if he had badgered you against my express wishes.” He said.

“You spoke to him?” Her eyebrows rose, not so terribly surprised that he had, but that he had admitted it to her.

“Of course I did. I am acquainted with his family. I merely impressed upon him the very great favour you had done for my family, and left him with the impression that if he were to distress you in any way I would take personal offence.” He said and shrugged. “A small thing.”
“It’s not small to me.” She said quietly.

He inclined his head. “You look very nice today, Miss Granger.” He paid her a compliment, taking in the well composed outfit. He had not come down for breakfast, knowing her meeting was this morning. He wanted to give her space to get ready for her first command performance as it were.

“Thank you.” She smiled. “Will you join me for lunch?” She asked him.

“I think I will.” He crossed the floor and offered her his arm. “You’ll be needing some more outfits in that vein.” He said.

“Oh?” She looked at him out of the corner of her eye.

“Your…casual clothing is acceptable enough when you are relaxing, but as you start to have more visitors and head out into the public eye, it will be important to project the right image.” He said carefully as they entered their little breakfast room. He led her to her seat and then took his own. “If you will allow me, I can recommend a stylist that can see to your needs.”

“A stylist? Isn’t that a little much?” She gave him a dubious look.

“Ten years is not a long time in the world of politics. You need to show that you can move seamlessly between the various circles in our world. Don’t bother yourself about the expense, consider this as merely part of our little bargain.” He said, pouring himself some coffee.

“I suppose it can’t hurt to meet with them at least.” She said, wondering just what she’d gotten herself into after all.

“I’ll send an owl to Madame Fillieux this evening.” He said, considering the matter closed.

“How are you today?” She asked him, helping herself to some sandwiches and fruit.

“Better.” He said simply. He had spent the evening in meditation, centering himself to control the emotions swirling inside him. He valued his control, it had been hard won, and it was not often he allowed it to be stripped away. “It will likely take us some hours to go over the funerary rites, so I
told the elves we might be having a rather late dinner this evening.” He said.

“We’ll take as much time as we need to.” Hermione nodded, knowing that this was very important and could not be rushed through. “When is the funeral?”

“The day after tomorrow, providing Mr. Potter can be available to open the grounds.” He said. “With so many dead…the ministry is doing the best they can to see that everyone receives a timely burial.” He swallowed a little.

“I’m sure Harry will be able to be there.” She said softly. “I’m sure with your help I’ll be ready to perform the rites.”

He nodded, turning his attention to his food.

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Lucius woke deep in the depths of the night. Something felt amiss. He put on his dressing robe and slipped out of his rooms. It was hard to describe how naked he truly felt without a wand. He knew logically he was fairly safe inside the Manor. His wards were set tight to keep any unanticipated visitors away, and the only other occupant certainly meant him no harm. But ever since the Dark Lord had taken his wand from him, and summarily destroyed it…he’d felt vulnerable. Another two years of feeling this way was most certainly a punishment in and of itself. He was adept enough at wandless magic but it had its limits, and he knew there was a fine line to as far as he could go in Hermione’s presence. Little things did not seem to bother her, but any true spellwork might be more than she felt he should be doing.

They’d spent all afternoon, and well into the evening in the family crypt. He’d taught her the Malfoy family funerary spells, explained the words that needed to be said over the body as well as the ritual removal of Narcissa’s wedding and betrothal rings. They would need to be removed and returned to the Malfoy family vault as they did not truly belong to any one witch. They had graced the hands of every Lady Malfoy since their original commission back in the 16th century. They could only be removed by application of the blood of either her husband or her child. Lucius would send a vial of his blood for that purpose as well as the warded jewelry box they were to be placed back in. Narcissa’s wand would be buried with her, along with a few small items that Lucius would gather from her rooms. Things she had brought with her when she’d married him.

Lucius’s feet moved silently through the halls, hearing nothing from Hermione’s rooms to suggest more nightmares. He continued through the house, checking everything to try and find the source of his disquiet. As he passed a window he noted a storm rolling in, thunderheads starting to pile in the sky. He’d always loved storms, even as a small boy. He’d been punished more than once for playing outside during thunderstorms, nothing had ever deterred him. He considered every bruise
well worth the joy it had brought him.

He found himself in the gallery, observing the reason he’d woken. Hermione was standing in front of a massive bank of windows, watching the storm roll in. She was wearing a pale cream dressing robe over matching pajamas. Her feet were bare and her hair hung in tousled waves around her shoulders. Every flash of lightning highlighted the delicate bone structure of her face. He watched her absently rub her left forearm and he was reminded of her cursed scar and his desire to help her with it. He approached, moving into her peripheral vision a few strides out so as not to startle her. “Bellatrix or Antonin?” He asked softly.

“I’m sorry?” She turned her head a little to look at him as he came to stand beside her.

“Who drove you from your bed tonight? Bellatrix, or Antonin?” He asked again.

“It’s always her.” She said, looking back out at the storm. “Always.”

Lucius nodded, finding it easier to talk to her like this. The darkness closed around them, stripping away the pretense that needed to exist during the day. “Why does she plague you so much more than he does?”

“Because I know he’s dead. I watched the life drain from his eyes, and I knew he’d never hurt me again.” She answered simply. “They never found her body, and no matter what anyone tells me…I know she’s still alive.” She whispered. “I know it’s not over.”

“She cannot hurt you here…even if she is still out there somewhere.” He said.

“I won’t always be here.” She said softly and turned her body to look at him. “She’ll come for me, it’s too personal for her not to.”

Lucius nodded, not able to argue that point. He reached out and ghosted his fingers along her inner arm. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you about your scars…” He said. “I can help you remove it.”

“Healer Keena said there was nothing that could be done.” She said softly, shaking her head.
“Through my marriage to Narcissa, I acquired a certain knowledge of some of the Black family heirlooms, including that knife.” He said and met her eyes. “It will not be pleasant but I can get rid of that reminder of what she did to you.”

She pulled the sleeve of her robe and pajamas back and looked at the ugly scar there against her skin. “What would you need to do?” She asked.

“I need to cut through the scarring, reopen it and then heal it with a specific spell. It does require the use of a wand though.” He said, unsure if she would allow it. She lifted her head then and met his eyes. There was a strange intensity to those deep brown orbs, lightening flashed and sparked off the little flecks of gold in her iris.

“Can you use mine?” She asked softly, aware of the lines she was crossing here but right now she just didn’t care.

“I can.” He said. “It will be painful…there is no way to prevent that.” He warned.

“I don’t care. I don’t want to carry that disgusting word on my body a minute longer.” She said.

“Come, we’ll go to my room.” He said and motioned for her to come with him. He took her up to his room and told her to help herself to a drink. He went into the bathroom and got some towels and grabbed a pillow as well. “Take off your dressing robe.” He said, bringing a chair over beside the loveseat. He put the pillow down there.

Hermione untied the sash and slipped the robe off, placing it over the unused chair. She was left in just her silky cream pajamas and she went over and sat down on the loveseat.

Lucius held out his hand for hers, accepting it with care. He handed her a facecloth. “You may need to bite down on that.” He said and gently guided her to lay back, taking her left arm in his lap and pushing her sleeve up, baring the cursed scar. “Last chance before I begin, we don’t have to do this tonight.” He said, meeting her eyes.

“Just do it…I can take it.” She said, voice shaking a little.

Lucius nodded and lifted her wand, it was still an alien feel in his hand, but he took a moment to impress on it that he was trying to help its mistress. He watched her bite down on the cloth and he
began. Lucius watched her body twist and tense as he cut through the scars. He heard her muffled screams and saw the tears, but he didn’t let it still his hand. He’d done far worse, and knew how to compartmentalize so that it didn’t leave him wanting to retch or shake. He only paused periodically to wipe away the blood, and when he was finished the letters were bleeding freely. He’d needed to go quite deep to release the scarring. He spared a look to her, she was pale…sweat beading on her upper lip and she’d clearly passed out from the pain. He began to process of sealing the cuts now, whispering the incantation to erase its evil mark. The incantation was inscribed onto the hilt of the knife, but he remembered it. Narcissa had shared it with him when telling him about her childhood…and the things her mother had done to her and Bella as punishments.

Finished at last he leaned back in his chair, back protesting the length of time bent over. He vanished the blood on the floor and quick ‘scourgify’ cleaned the blood from his pants and the edge of the couch. He stroked his hand along the now unblemished skin of her forearm and then pulled her sleeve back down, tucking it against her chest. He stood and got himself a drink, tossing it back. He truly did not enjoy inflicting pain. Though of all of the Dark Lord’s circle, he knew he was one of the most skilled at doing it. The others enjoyed themselves far too much to ever be truly effective. He was eternally grateful that the young woman had not been given to him for interrogation. He knew too well there would not have been much left of the girl at the end of it. Bellatrix, Antonin, and the others resorted to brute force and someone with a strong enough will could sometimes hold out. He went to the bathroom and dampened a cloth before going back and gently patting her face with it, wiping away the salt tracks on her face. Unbidden his thumb brushed against her bottom lip, causing him to move back and let her be. Using her wand he summoned a soft throw from the bedroom and covered her. He merely sat back in his chair and dozed lightly.
Hermione’s eyes opened to soft light streaming into the room. She was rather disoriented and saw Lucius sitting in a chair beside her, face relaxed in sleep. Her wand was lying on the floor. She just took a moment to watch him in a rare unguarded moment. Asleep he looked much younger, the lines around his eyes softened. She shifted and pulled her sleeve up, looking at the smooth expanse of skin. It was gone. She remembered the pain, so much worse than it had been when Bellatrix had cut it into her arm the first time. Now it was a distant memory. He’d clearly cleaned her up after he had finished, and then sat and kept watch over her. A soft smile touched her lips as she sat up slowly, not wanting to wake him.

“How do you feel?” He asked, opening his eyes as she moved.

“My jaw’s a little sore but I feel fine.” She said, blushing a bit as she sat up.

“You lost a fair bit of blood, you might feel a little tired today.” He said rolled his shoulders, standing and going to grab her robe for her. “Bilby…coffee for two.” He called, grateful when it appeared on the little side table. “Cream and sugar, Miss Granger?” He asked, fixing himself some.

“Yes please.” She said and slipped her robe on, belting it around her waist. She tucked her wand away, hoping that Kingsley never found out about her letting him use it.

“Here.” He handed her a mug and sat back down in the chair without moving it back. “Thank you for trusting me.” Lucius said.

“I know some might think it foolish, but if you’d wanted to do me harm, you’ve had plenty of chances.” She said. “I’m not afraid of you in that way.”

Lucius nodded. “That night in the department of Mysteries, Antonin hit you with his personal invention didn’t he?” He asked.

She nodded. “Yeah, nasty spell.”
“You should have died, I’ve seen the results of that curse.” Lucius said, regarding the young witch across from him. It was Antonin’s favourite curse and as far as Lucius knew his own invention. It caused all the internal organs to rupture, making its victim bleed to death internally as well as suffer immeasurably.

“I’d cast a silencing spell on him, so he had to cast it non-verbally. As it was, I had to take regenerative potions for quite a while.” She said, shivering a little as she remembered. “I should have killed him in the café that day…how many people would still be alive if I had?” She looked into her coffee mug as if the answers to those questions were hiding there.

“Some, it’s hard to say.” Lucius said. “I could tell you that you did the right thing, letting him and Thorfinn live, but I’m not going to lie to you. It was war and enemies like that, you don’t let them walk away Miss Granger. If you ever get Bellatrix in your grasp, don’t hesitate because she certainly won’t.” He said quietly.

Hermione nodded, feeling cold straight through. If she had killed him then, he’d never have been able to lay hands on her that night. “I’ve never actually killed anyone before.” She admitted softly.

Lucius looked surprised. He remembered that last battle, curses and hexes flying through the air like wild fire. People bleeding, screaming, and dying all around them. “For lack of opportunity, or desire?” He asked, needing to clarify.

Hermione lifted her head looking confused. “What do you mean?”

“In the duels you’ve been in, did you just never have the chance to strike a killing blow, or did you have the chance and choose to disable rather than kill?” He asked her, having a fairly good idea which it was.

“I suppose I had the chance, and didn’t take it.” She answered him.

“The only good enemy is a dead one, Miss Granger. If someone comes after you, with your death in their eyes, don’t ever take the risk that they can get back up again. Ideals are lovely, but they are not worth dying for.” He said.

She nodded simply in return.
“Bellatrix will wait, she will plan, and then she will come for you. You humiliated her when you stole her wand. If she is alive, she cannot let that stand. You need to be ready for her when the time comes, Miss Granger.” His grey eyes were intense.

“Why do you care?” She asked finally, not able to understand why he seemed to.

“I’m not entirely sure why, just be assured that I do.” Lucius said and leaned back, sipping his coffee.

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Lucius entered Narcissa’s rooms, unable to help feeling like an intruder. These rooms had been closed to him since the birth of their son. He’d left Hermione in the library reading over the ritual by herself. They had run through it more than a dozen times, and he was quite certain she’d acquit herself admirably. He needed to do this on his own.

“Itsy…” He called, waiting for the little elf that had tended to his wife since her marriage to him.

“Yes Master Lucius?” Itsy popped in, the little thing clearly sad.

“All of your mistress’s things are to be packed away, except for her personal chest. I need to retrieve some things that she wished to be laid to rest with her.” He said to the little creature. “Your mistress was very fond of you Itsy.”

“Thank you Master. Itsy was fond of Mistress Cissy too.” The little creature walked to the bedroom to begin packing everything away in chest for storage.

Lucius went into his dead wife’s closet and found the small rosewood trunk and brought it out, sitting it on the bed. He opened it and removed a small keepsake box, a worn leather bound journal, and a framed picture of the two of them at the Yule gala thrown by Dame Greengrass. He looked…bored, but Narcissa was smiling and resting her head on his chest. He took a deep breath, remembering how it had been in the beginning. She had loved him, and he’d been too lost in his own heartbreak to return it.

“I’m so sorry Cissy.” He whispered and sat down on the bed, the weight of everything settling on his shoulders. He’d married Narcissa because he was expected to, he’d been gentlemanly, and tried
to be kind. He’d never expected her to love him, and been completely unprepared for it. After Draco was born, things had changed. He knew that she’d given up on him ever loving her in return and turned all her affections onto their son. Lucius had been left on the outside, never able to break into that circle of two. Narcissa loved their son with a fierceness he’d never understood, and driven him away simply by taking complete charge of Draco. Lucius had tried to be there for his son, but he’d always felt like a stranger to him. Never quite sure what to say, or do, in a given situation. He and Narcissa had lived almost separate lives, seeing each other only at meals and on holidays. She was at his side during social events, ever the dutiful wife, but outside of that she didn’t seek his company. It had been cold, and lonely for them both. He mourned the loss of her, but the pain he felt was more guilt than anything else.

Her final wish to be laid to rest with her family spoke clearly to him. The rest of her will had made him feel almost ill, expressing her desire for the Black Lordship to pass to her son…who was more Black than Malfoy in her eyes. He would never allow it, never give up his son, but he knew that it was not truly his choice. Draco was of age and had the right to choose for himself. Potter might currently hold the Lordship, but by blood Draco would have the better claim, if he chose to forsake his own father. There was a sick feeling in his stomach that his son would choose just that. He’d seen the condemnation in his son’s eyes all this last year, the realization that Lucius was not the perfect man he’d idolized as a child had clearly been hard to accept.

He gathered everything and then turned on his heel and left the room…not wanting to see his wife’s things disappear bit by bit. He’d leave them in the attic for Draco to go through if he wished later. His feet took him down to Narcissa’s sunroom. It was dark now but the smell of the orchids she had loved to grow filled the air. Standing in the darkness, Lucius let himself be surrounded by the scent of their blossoms. He closed his eyes and just remembered her, saying goodbye in the only way he knew how. In the dark, no one would ever see the silent tears on his cheeks.

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Lucius came down to breakfast the next morning and was treated to the sight of Hermione at the breakfast table in her lovely cream silk dressing gown, a hint of powder blue pajamas underneath. It was the first time she had come down in anything other than regular clothing, but he forced himself to not be taken aback. It spoke to her level of comfort around him, and he quite approved.

“Good morning, Miss Granger. Did you sleep well?” He asked, as he settled into his place at the table.

“Yes, thank you.” She said, blushing. It was early and she’d almost hoped to be able to have breakfast and go back upstairs to dress before he came down.

“Please, don’t be embarrassed. There is nothing wrong with your attire.” He reassured her and sat
down. After all he had seen her in far less, and in more suggestive situations than sitting in the
breakfast room over coffee. The patio doors were open, letting in a soft breeze and light. An owl
flew in, depositing a thick envelope for her. It accepted a piece of ham and flew off immediately.

Hermione smiled and set it aside. “This must be Mr. Arnebolt’s article. I’ll read it over when I get
back this afternoon.” She said softly.

“Would you mind if I read it over as well?” He asked her.

“Not at all, I’d appreciate a second set of eyes on it.” She inclined her head politely. She also
figured that it would give him something to do today while she was out. She was going to say
something else when another owl flew in and dropped a letter at her hand and immediately flew
off, not even waiting for a reward. She frowned at the clearly expensive feel of the envelope and
the unfamiliar crest on the wax seal. She opened it and removed an invitation printed on heavy
cardstock in gold lettering.

“I’m being invited to a garden party?” She frowned. “Hosted by Dame Greengrass?” She looked at
Lucius who looked quite surprised indeed.

“Dame Greengrass is Daphne’s great Aunt, and the unofficial head of the family.” He said by way
of explanation. “Her garden parties are quite the social event, and to garner an invitation is
certainly an honour. We’ll need to find you an appropriate escort however; going alone would be
quite the faux pas. Leave that with me.” He said simply, already having someone in mind to escort
the young witch.

“What’s she like?” She asked and sipped her coffee.

“Terrifying…” He chuckled. “She takes great pleasure in playing matchmaker to all the young
purebloods in her circle. I still think that she was the one that talked my parents into arranging my
marriage to Narcissa. She will likely send certain young men your way, try not to be too put off by
it. She means well. She’s simply old and I think she enjoys watching everyone squirm a little.”

“Why would she be inviting me? The article hasn’t even hit the Prophet yet.” She shook her head.

“You underestimate your curiosity value, Miss Granger. You’ve fought at Mr. Potter’s side, clearly
one of Dumbledore’s chosen favourites, and yet you stood to defend arguably one of your enemy’s
greatest supporters. A muggle-born witch, championing the cause of a prominent Death Eater. She
will have asked her nieces about you, and likely is interested to take your measure in person. She’ll be expecting you to be out of place, awkward, and unaware of the protocols. We’ll simply need to make sure that you continue to surprise her.” Lucius said. “She is someone you want firmly on your side, Miss Granger.”

Hermione nodded, adding some fruit to her crepes. “Then I suppose we’ll have some work to do.” She said.

“Indeed.” He said, suddenly very glad that Madame Filleux was coming to visit in a couple of days to get Hermione outfitted for her public appearances. “Please pass my thanks on to Mr. Potter for his assistance today.”

“Harry’s more than happy to help, Mister Malfoy.” She said gently.

“Do you have everything you need for today?” He asked her.

“The robes are laid out in my room, and I have the little box she wanted to be buried with her.” She said. “I’ll just need a vial of your blood before I leave.”

“I’ll have that ready for you.” He nodded, trying to keep his composure. Damn Kingsley to hell and back for not letting him do this. He might not have been the best husband in the world to Narcissa, but she had still been his wife. The right to bury your dead was a long honoured tradition, even between enemies in war. He knew this was simply a petty dig at him, and one day he would pay it back in kind. He jumped as he felt Hermione’s hand touch his.

“I’m sorry you can’t do this yourself.” She whispered.

He gave her a small, sad smile. “You have such a tender heart, Miss Granger.” He whispered, the words catching in his throat a little.

“Guilty as charged.” She said and sat back, releasing his hand.

Lucius watched her for a moment before helping himself to breakfast. Keeping a respectful distance between them was going to be something of a losing battle. She was already far too comfortable in his company, and if he were honest he found himself rather enjoying hers. He would simply need to remind himself that she was far too young for him to be thinking about.
“I should go and get ready.” She said and stood. She needed to follow the rituals for dressing in the funeral robes, and say the proper blessings as she put them on.

“I’ll be waiting for you down here.” Lucius said with a nod, knowing this would take some time.

Hermione went up to her rooms and headed to the bathroom. She laid out the candles and added salt to the water in the bathtub before slipping in and bathing. She let the hot water soothe away her nerves and help center herself for the day ahead. This was more than just saying the words, in essence she was acting as a member of the Malfoy family today. It made the responsibility rest heavy on her shoulders. She sank right under the water and then surfaced, letting the water wash away her doubts.

She got out of the bath and dried herself off, watching herself in the mirror. She spelled her hair dry and pulled it back into a simple plait. She opened a jar of white cream and began to trace a set of ritual symbols onto her skin. This was the most difficult part of the process. The symbols marched down her arms, across her collar bone, down between her breasts and over her stomach, ending just above her navel. When she finished the last in the set there was a shimmer of power that raised the hairs on her arms and the cream transformed into a silvery pigment.

“I go forth this day to lay to rest an eminent, and gracious lady of this house.” She said and closed her eyes. “I carry all Malfoys past, and my actions honour all Malfoys to come.” She said and then dressed. The funeral robes were black, embroidered with silver symbols that matched those she had traced onto her skin. She wrapped the sash around her waist and slipped her feet into the black slippers. She could feel the magic wrapping around her. She opened another small jar and dipped her finger in. She traced the dark blue powder over her eyelids and then set it aside. The rest of her face was left unadorned. She left the bedroom, gathering everything she would need to put Narcissa to rest properly.

She headed downstairs and saw Lucius standing there, waiting for her. They’d agreed that she would not lock him away. He was going to pray in the family crypt…where she should have been buried. Their eyes met and he pressed a slender crystal phial into her hand.

“I will see you when you return.” Lucius said quietly, his gaze unreadable.

Hermione nodded and grabbed a pinch of floo powder and stepped in. “Black Moore.” She said clearly and was gone. She stepped out into a dark hallway. She had never been here, but Harry had told her that this estate was where the Black family cemetery was located. She saw Harry standing there and she relaxed a little. “Harry.” She said.
“The Ministry brought her earlier this morning.” He said. “Let me walk you down.” He led her out of the house and out into the very overcast, dreary day. The crushed gravel path led them away from the house and through a stand of trees to a small family cemetery. The coffin stood by a prepared hole. Harry opened the gate for Hermione and together they walked through the headstones to where Lady Malfoy was waiting for them.

“Thank you Harry…I’ll have to take it from here.” She said politely. These rites were not for his eyes.

Harry nodded. “I’ll wait back up at the house.” He didn’t push her, sensing that this was something too private for him.

Hermione watched him go before opening the casket. Narcissa Malfoy lay there, looking peaceful. She laid her possessions in with her. She whispered a soft incantation, protecting the possession from grave robbers and asking for the elements to grant peace to their daughter. She used blue pigment to highlight her closed eyes, continuing to repeat the complex enchantment over and over. Then she opened the warded ring boxes and poured Lucius’ blood over her ring finger, slipping the two beautiful jeweled rings off her finger. The blood disappeared from the rings, almost as if they had absorbed it. She closed the box and slipped it in her pocket. She closed the casket and began to seal it, layering spell upon spell in the correct order to keep anyone from disturbing her rest. She levitated the casket up and into the prepared hole. Another spell filled the hole back in and then there was only the headstone left. She inscribed it as Lucius had instructed.

Lady Narcissa Lacerta Malfoy nee Black

Beloved Wife & Mother

1955-1998

‘It is only with the Heart that one can see rightly
That which is essential is invisible to the eye’

Hermione felt drained from the complex casting. She charmed a spray of orchids across the disturbed earth. “Goodbye Lady Malfoy, may you find peace in your rest.” She whispered as she felt the skies open up and begin to rain. “He misses you. He doesn’t talk about it, but he doesn’t need to. I can see how your loss has touched him. When your son is well again…I’ll bring him here so he can visit you.” She promised and stood, making the long walk back to the house. The rain fell harder, soaking her straight through to the skin.

She entered and called for Harry.
Harry came over and saw her, casting a warming and drying charm. “Let’s get you some hot tea.” Harry offered.

“I can’t stay Harry.” She said quietly. “I need to get back and make sure he’s ok.” She gave him a small smile. “We’ll meet up soon for lunch ok?”

Harry frowned, even more concerned now. “Of course.” He gave her a warm hug. “Just make sure you get something hot to drink once you’re back at the Manor.”

“I will.” She kissed his cheek. “Thank you for this.”

“I can’t believe Kingsley wouldn’t let him attend his own wife’s funeral... hell *I* could have guarded him.” Harry frowned. “Give him my sincerest sympathies ‘Mione.” He said.

“I will.” She said and headed through the floo, eager to get home. She stepped through to the manor and brushed the soot off her robes. “Bilby?” She called.

“Yes Miss?” The little elf popped in.

“Where is your Master?” She asked.

“In his study.” The little elf said and disappeared.

Hermione took a deep breath and headed to his study, knocking at the door.

“Come in.” He called.

Hermione opened the door and paused as glass crunched under her foot. She saw the destroyed remnants of a crystal decanter. She waved her wand, silently repairing the item and levitating it over to the table. She closed the door behind her and went over to his chair. He was staring into the flames, his gaze not wavering. She gently placed the ring box on the little table beside his hand.
“Everything went well then?” He asked, voice rough.

“Yes, just how you wanted.” She promised.

“Thank you, Hermione.” He said her name very quietly.

“You’re welcome...Lucius.” She said in kind and placed her hand on his shoulder a little hesitantly. He lifted his hand and placed it over hers, and then finally moved his head looking up at her.

“Your hand is freezing.” He said, rousing himself from the strange mood he had been in.

“It was raining at the graveyard...I got a little soaked through.” She said sheepishly.

“Why don’t you go and get into some dry clothes and then join me for tea?” He suggested. “We can’t have you getting sick.” He stroked his thumb over the back of her hand.

“I won’t be long.” She said softly, seeing that he didn’t want to be alone.

“I’ll be here.” He said and released her hand.

Hermione headed up to her room and undressed, laying the ritual robes across the back of a chair to finish drying completely. Harry’s charm had gotten the worst of it, but the fabric was still damp. She washed the pigment off her face and then realized the silver symbols were gone. They must have disappeared as she finished the funeral rites. She dressed in a warm blue sweater and her favourite jeans before heading back downstairs. There was tea set out on the little table between the two arm chairs. She could hear the storm raging away outside, the rain beating against the windows behind their heavy draperies.

“Feeling better?” Lucius asked her.

“Warmer.” She said and took the cup of tea. “How are you doing?”
I’ve been better, the past is close today.” He said softly, having some tea himself. He’d had quite enough hard liquor for today if he was going to get through without completely embarrassing himself. “I failed her, in so many ways.” He said quietly. “She deserved far better than I gave her.”

“I’m sure you’re being too hard on yourself.” She said softly.

“Not nearly hard enough, Miss Granger.” He replied. “We were at school together, and she was this force of nature. No one could touch her in Transfigurations, and she charmed the teachers with this little smile she’d give when she knew she had the right answer. The Blacks were infamous for the madness that ran through the family, but it just never seemed to touch her. She was grounded and so damned smart. She always saw straight through me.” He shook his head.

“She sounds like she would have been a great person to know.” Hermione said.

“She never got on well with other women, but she wrapped all the boys in our year around her little finger.” He chuckled a little. “Slytherin, Ravenclaw, Gryffindor, or Hufflepuff...no one was immune.”

“What about you?” She asked.

“I’d been betrothed to her in our sixth year. I was attempting to NOT be enraptured with her, out of spite.” He said, years of hindsight reminding him just how stupid he had been. “My father knew I would eventually do what was expected of me, but I fought him on it as hard as I dared. I resented her, and what she represented. By the time I realized what I’d done, and lost…it was too late. She could never forgive me for it, and I never had the heart to ask her to.”

Hermione could see the regret and pain in his eyes, hear it in his tone. It touched her, deeply. “I wish there was something I could say.” She said quietly.

“Just having someone to talk to is enough. I’ve never had many people I could confide in.” He said frankly. “Beyond Severus and even then, only to a point.”

“Were you both at school together?” She asked him.

“Only for a year. He started his first year as I began my last. I remember him being a scrawny little thing, always hiding behind a book. I was a prefect, and old Slughorn expected the seventh years to
look after the first year students.” He said. “Severus had a hard first year, and after I left school we maintained a correspondence. When his mother died during his fifth year, I started having him around in the summers and over the holidays. He and his old man had a lot of issues too, I suppose that was how we ended up bonding. My father didn’t approve at first, but as he started seeing just how talented my friend was he started to encourage our friendship.” He said, not wanting to go further down that avenue of conversation.

“I’m glad he’ll be ok.” She said softly.

“As am I. Once he’s recovered, I intend to have him over for dinner. I’m certain he will want to see you as well, Miss Granger.” He was forcing himself to address her formally. His name had sounded far too nice on her lips earlier. “At least with the war over, and his name formally cleared he can direct his own destiny at last. I do wonder what he plans to do with it.” He smiled.

“Do you think he’ll ever teach again?” She asked.

Lucius began to laugh. “Miss Granger, I would lay very good money that teaching is the very last thing he wants to do.” The laughter felt good. He let her draw him out of his dark mood, telling some funny stories from his days and trying to keep it light. She reciprocated with a few tales that he had been unaware of from her early years.

“You successfully brewed Polyjuice in your second year, in the middle of a girl’s lavatory?” He finally managed to stop laughing. “Does Severus know?”

“Considering I ended up in the Hospital wing because the hair I drank down belonged to Millicent’s cat and not her, I think he had a fair idea. He didn’t take points so I always assumed that was his way of approving without actively condoning it.” She laughed a little. “Worked a treat on Harry and Ron though, a more convincing Crabbe and Goyle I could never have imagined.”

“You actually thought Draco was the heir?” He smirked.

“Not one of our finer pieces of deduction I’ll grant you.” She shrugged. “It was fueled more by our general dislike of him than anything, he’d been a particular snot that year. It was the first time someone called me a mudblood to my face.” She shrugged, ignoring the fact that it still hurt.

“There’s nothing I can say to undo past wrongs, though I think you know I wish that I could.” He held her eyes as he said that.
“I do.” She’d seen the shifts in him, the difference between the man she’d met at Flourish & Blotts and the man sitting beside her now. She poured them both more tea and together they spent the rainy afternoon in front of the fire.

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Engagements

Lucius was sitting on the couch in Hermione’s sitting room, watching as Madame Filleux worked on magically tailoring a lovely soft blue dress to fit Hermione perfectly. “Now, you will likely see many of your school fellows at the party, but you may only address the girls by their first names. Men are to be addressed as Mr. or Lord, dependent on their status. All men should be addressing you as Miss Granger, any of them using your first name are claiming a very intimate relationship with you, and you cannot allow that.” He coached her.

Hermione nodded. “What else should I avoid doing so as not to encourage anyone?” She asked, sneaking a look in the tall mirror the seamstress had set up.

“Your escort will get you refreshments, accept them only from him or any of the waitstaff directly. Again, any man offering you a drink is trying to subtly claim your attentions. It should go without saying to avoid accepting any gifts as well.” He said, sipping his tea. “This party will feel quite informal but there will be eyes on you, and likely a few society photographers. Listen more than you speak, try and get a feel for everyone’s views and opinions before offering your own. Try not to discuss politics, and most people will have the good manners to avoid dredging up anything to do with the war.”

Hermione nodded. “Who is my escort?” She asked, turning as directed.

“I’ve asked young Mr. Nott to accompany you. Dame Greengrass has been hounding the boy, and he’s far too busy right now to be worrying about courting a witch on top of dealing with the utter shambles his father left their affairs in.” He said. “I understand that like you he will be preparing for his Newts on his own time, and I thought it might be a prudent friendship for you to consider.”

“Theo?” She looked surprised but not put off. The quiet Slytherin boy had usually stayed out of their conflicts with Draco during their school years, and he certainly given her a run for the top of every class they took together. “It might be a good idea for us to co-ordinate a study schedule.”

“I’m glad you think so. He will be able to steer you away from trouble as well, his father was ruthless when it came to etiquette.” Lucius said.
“I’m sure between the two of you I’ll manage well enough.” She said.

Lucius chuckled and nodded. “I am sure you will Miss Granger. I have every confidence in your abilities.” He let his eyes wander the lines of the dress, enjoying how it highlighted her figure. “If Mr. Nott is anything less than a perfect gentleman, make sure you let me know and I’ll have words with him.” He said.

“There we are, Miss Granger.” The seamstress stepped back and smiled. “Just lovely. Now that I have all your measurements I’ll get to work on some casual day robes, everyday dresses, and maybe even start work on some formal wear for you.” She looked quite excited.

Hermione’s eyebrows rose. “That sounds…like a lot.”

“A young Lady should never lack options when attending social functions.” The witch grinned and started packing her things away. “If you have any special requests, Lord Malfoy, please just owl me.” She grinned and was soon gone through the floo.

Hermione felt a little shell shocked and stepped down off the little platform, and went to have another look at herself in the mirror. She had to admit the woman did excellent work. She turned around and looked at Lucius. “Well…what do you think? Do I look as ridiculous as I feel?” She asked.

“You look lovely. Mr. Nott will need to be most vigilant to keep the other young men at bay.” He said with a smile. “You’ll become accustomed to wearing such things. Come and have some tea.” He motioned for her to join him, as he poured her a cup and sweetened it with a little honey. He’d noted that was how she preferred it.

Hermione came and sat down, crossing her ankles as she’d been instructed. “Thank you.” She sipped it and smiled.

“You mentioned photographers?” She felt a little nervous.

“Theodore will guide you through the day, as much as he can. Dame Greengrass may steal you away for a moment or two, but simply be polite and demure and she’ll find little to fault you with. You should be back before dinner, providing things go smoothly with the day.” He reassured her. “The grounds there are delightful, I’m certain you’ll enjoy the gardens in particular.”
“Yes, the Prophet usually dispatches one or two to these events, as does Witch Weekly. You and Mr. Nott will doubtlessly end up in the society pages, and draw endless speculation. Just keep that in mind during the day, and try not to give them the opportunity to take an unflattering photograph. When you are out in public you must always assume you are being photographed, it’s easier to prevent a bad photograph from ever being taken than to keep one from being printed.” He said.

She absorbed that. “Wizarding world paparazzi, who’d ever have thought?” She said.

“Like it or not Miss Granger, you’re famous now and everyone will want their little piece of time with you.” Lucius said. “Hiding away here is only feeding their curiosity, rather than dampening it. We need to give them just enough little tidbits to encourage their interest without revealing too much. Mr. Arnebolt’s article should hit the papers tomorrow, and should serve to wet their appetites so to speak. It sets a very positive tone ahead of your social debut.”

“You’re enjoying this.” Hermione said, a smile quirking her lips.

“Immensely.” He admitted shamelessly. “It’s like chess, but with all of Wizarding Britain as the board.”

“And what piece am I?” She chuckled, unable to help thinking about the life-sized chess game she and the boys had played in first year.

“A Queen.” He said without hesitation.

She blushed a little and helped herself to a little meringue from the tea tray, biting delicately into it. “How is Draco?” She knew that he’d spoken to the Healer that morning.

“There’s been no change. He doesn’t honestly expect there to be much improvement for some weeks yet.” Lucius said. “I just want him home, where I know he’s safe.” He whispered.

“He will be, soon.” She said, sure that he’d pull through.

“I hope so.” He said softly. “Are you ready for tonight’s dinner with your friends?” He asked her.
“Yes, it’ll be nice to see everyone and catch up.” She smiled. “Thank you again for being ok with that many Gryffindors invading the Manor.” She laughed a little.

“I trust you to contain their more troublesome tendencies. I’ll content myself with a good book in my rooms.” He said with an elegant nod. He’d done the same more than once when Narcissa had hosted one of her ladies only dinner parties.

“I’ll keep it under control.” She chuckled a little. The house elves had been buzzing with excitement, looking forward to putting on the dinner party, pleased to have more than the two of them to cook for. Lucius had explained that before the war there had usually been one or two large dinner parties a week here, so they were likely beyond bored.

“Will Mr. Weasley be in attendance?” He asked carefully. He had not asked about who she had invited, but he was concerned for her in regards to the youngest of the Weasley boys. He’d seen how horribly he’d upset her the last time they had spoken.

“Ron was not invited.” She said simply. “I did invite Bill and Fleur but they’ve decided to celebrate the end of the war by taking a proper honeymoon in the Caribbean.” She chuckled. “Once the twins are more recovered I’ll likely invite them to my next dinner, but Ron is most certainly not welcome right now.”

“Good, I do not enjoy seeing you distressed. Would it be rude to enquire who is actually coming?” He asked.

“Not at all.” She smiled. “Harry will be coming of course, as will Ginny. I also expect to see Neville Longbottom, Luna Lovegood, Susan Bones, and Hannah Abbot.” She said. All of them had replied to her owl quickly, reassuring her that they would love to see her.

He smiled. “Not too many Gryffindors at all.” He chuckled. “I’m sure you will have a very nice time.” He found himself rather approving of her first dinner party guest list. It was small, and all of the guests would be forgiving of any mistakes while she got used to hosting. It was also a rather diverse group, so conversation would likely be lively.

“I hope so.” She said, enjoying her tea.

Lucius finished his and set his cup down on the tray. “I should leave you to get changed and see to any last minute arrangements for your dinner party.” He stood and nodded. “Have a pleasant
Hermione smiled warmly and nodded. “I’ll see you later.” She said, watching as he left her sitting room and shut the door behind him. She sighed, hating that she was already missing his company. She went to her bedroom and slipped out of the new dress, hanging it up carefully. She opened her closet and paused, finding a garment bag hanging on the hook with a little note attached.

*I believe this should be your size, and I hope it will be to your taste. ~ L*

She unzipped the garment bag and took a deep breath in. It was a deep purple halter dress. The skirt would flutter down to just past her knees, and she assumed the new heels sitting neatly on the floor just inside her closet were meant to be worn with it. There was nothing extravagant about it, but she knew it would look good on her. She took the dress off the hanger and turned towards the bed and saw yet another surprise. There was a slender black box tied with a white ribbon sitting there quite innocently.

She laid the dress out on the bed and then picked up the box, untying the silk ribbon and lifting the lid. She blushed furiously as she parted the layers of tissue paper to reveal a set of black lace underthings. The bra was strapless and had a low back design, clearly meant to be worn with the halter dress. The matching panties were nothing too scandalous, and there were a pair of silk, thigh-high stockings with a tiny card that explained they were charmed to stay in place unless actually removed. The wonders of magic.

She didn’t know how to interpret such a gift, and decided that she would just not mention it… unless he did. Hermione went into the bathroom and started work on her hair, using several charms to straighten it and then style it up into a simple twist. She applied her make-up and then she pulled on the black lace lingerie. She’d been expecting it to be rough against her skin but somehow it was very soft. She paused a moment to look at herself in the mirror, blushing at the image staring back at her. The black lace was such a stark contrast to her pale skin. She pulled on her robe over top and went out to put on her dress. The only embellishment on it was a little silver embroidery around the neckline. The dress did fit her, very well. She slipped on the simple black heels and walked over to the mirror, barely recognizing herself.

She cast a quick ‘tempus’ and tucked her wand away, forever grateful to find a little wand pocked hidden in one of the full pleats of the skirt. She headed out of her room and went downstairs to check on the dining room. All seven places were set, and vases of fresh flowers adorned the table. The small sitting room was ready with little plates of sweets and such. She was nervous about this, but knew she was being silly. They were her friends.

She left the sitting room and stopped as she saw Lucius watching her from the staircase. She blushed darkly at the intensity of his gaze.
“You look particularly lovely this evening. I was just coming to make sure everything was prepared to your liking.” He said and approached, crossing the marble floor with confident strides.

“Everything is just perfect.” She said with a small smile on her lips, cheeks still pink. “Thank you…” She said, making herself meet his eyes. They both knew she wasn’t thanking him for checking on her.

He reached out and took her hand, brushing a kiss across her knuckles. “A beautiful witch deserves beautiful things.” He said simply and gave her a half bow before turning and heading up the stairs.

Hermione closed her eyes a moment and tried to get a handle on herself. She went to the sitting room and had a glass of wine while she waited for her guests. Bilby would direct them to the sitting room as they arrived. The door opened and she turned to smile brightly as Neville came in, Luna on his arm.

“How have you been?” Luna asked Hermione, dreamy gaze wandering around the room as Neville went to get himself and Luna a glass of wine from the table.

“Adjusting to living here.” Hermione admitted.

“It must be odd, after everything that happened. But you seem quite at peace now, I’d wondered if you ever would again.” Luna said a little sadly.

“I’m feeling more like myself again.” She admitted.

Neville handed Luna a glass of wine and smiled. “Has old Lord Malfoy been treating you well? My gran was fairly scandalized when she read in the paper you’d taken charge of him.” He grimaced a little recalling the old woman’s rant about how he deserved to rot in the deepest darkest cell in Azkaban.

She chuckled. “He’s been surprisingly pleasant. He leaves me mostly to my own devices.” She
shrugged. “There’s beautiful gardens, and a library straight out of my wildest fantasies.” She laughed a little.

Neville nodded. “Good. I suppose you won’t be coming back to Hogwarts then with the rest of us?”

“No, I’ll be studying on my own. Minerva’s made arrangements for me to return in June to write my Newts with the rest of you, though.” She smiled. “You’ll have to keep a leash on Harry and Ron for me.”

“I’ll do my best.” He promised.

The door opened again and Susan Bones entered. “Hermione! You look fantastic.” The pretty Hufflepuff girl said and came over, giving her a quick hug. “Wow.”

Hermione laughed. “You look very nice too. Has Terry noticed yet?” She asked, remembering when Susan had admitted to a horrible crush on the Ravenclaw boy years ago.

She snorted. “Hardly, ah well…his loss.” The red-head smiled and got a glass of wine, trying a little meringue puff. “I was glad to get your letter, it’s nice to have an excuse to dress up and get out of the house for a bit.”

“Let’s all sit down and wait for the others.” Hermione suggested and they all settled down. Hermione and Susan drove most of the conversation, with Luna adding a few strange comments and Neville mostly just nodded to agree with the girls.

Hannah Abbot entered and joined them, giving Susan a bone crushing hug when she saw her. The two ‘Puffs had been best friends since first year. Harry and Ginny were the last to arrive, Harry blaming it on Ginny’s fussing with his hair.

“I think it’ll always be a lost cause Gin.” Hermione grinned. She could see that Neville looked a lot more at ease once Harry arrived, glad to have another guy on hand in the presence of so many girls.

“Now that everyone’s here, Luna and I have an announcement to make.” Neville said and stood.
Hermione smiled brightly, guessing what was coming.

“Luna has agreed to marry me, and we’re planning the wedding for next July, after we graduate.” Neville said, looking very proud.

“Congratulations!” Hermione said, and she and the other girls got up to give Luna warm hugs and to look at the pretty engagement ring that she was now wearing.

“It was a lovely proposal, and I’m glad the nargles didn’t run off with the ring when he hid it in that flower.” Luna said dreamily.

“Bilby. Champagne please.” Hermione said and soon they were all toasting the engagement.

It felt so good to laugh and joke, and dinner was simply perfect. The Elves had outdone themselves, and each course was simply sumptuous. Hannah and Susan were talking excitedly about Luna’s wedding and all the decision’s she’d need to make as well as hinting rather openly that they would love to be bridesmaids.

“Actually…I’d wanted to know you you’d be my maid of honour, Hermione?” Luna asked with a smile.

Hermione blinked and then smiled. “Of course, I’d be honoured.” She agreed.

“And Harry, I’d like it if you’d stand up with me as my best man.” Neville said.

“I’ll be there.” He promised.

After everyone lingered over dessert, before they all reluctantly took their leave. Hermione promised to host another dinner before they all headed back to school in September, and she was left standing in the front hall with a warm smile on her lips. She considered for a moment and then called for Bilby to get her two more flutes of champagne and then she headed for the stairs.
Lucius was nursing a second glass of brandy, and trying to focus on the book in his hands. He’d ordered the dress and accompaniments on a whim the one night, and had debated endlessly over whether it was appropriate to give it to her. It wasn’t of course, but he’d done it anyway. Seeing her wearing his gift had affected him more than he cared to admit. She looked like she belonged there, waiting to greet her guests. Tonight she looked a world away from the silly school girl she had been. He closed his book and set it aside, intending to go and take a cold shower and call it a night. He was just heading through the door to his bedroom when there was a soft knock at his door. He took a deep, steadying breath and headed to the door, opening it.

“Miss Granger?” He lifted an eyebrow seeing the two glasses of champagne in her hands. There was a slight flush to her cheeks that made her look altogether too fetching.

“Neville and Luna just got engaged…join me for a celebratory drink?” She asked with a smile.

Lucius nodded and moved back, inviting her into his sitting room. “I suppose it would be rude to not toast the happy news.” He said and accepted the flute of champagne from her. His keen eyes could tell that she’d likely had a touch too much to drink already, but he’d spent far too much time thinking about the black lace he knew she was wearing under the dress, to be much of a gentleman.

“Very.” She said and sat down on his sofa, surprised when he joined her. She raised her glass, smiling as he lightly toasted her as well.

“To the happy couple then.” Lucius said before drinking.

“I never thought those two would end up together.” She said, sipping her champagne.

“It’s a common thing for young people to rush into romantic entanglements after war. Being around that much death reinforces the need to celebrate being alive.” He rationalized. “Are you and Miss Lovegood well acquainted?”

“Not very closely, but I don’t think she has many close friends.” She said softly. “She just seems so happy with Neville…I’m glad they have each other.” The smile seemed to wilt a little around the edges.

“You will find someone in time, Miss Granger.” He could hear the subtle undertones of envy, and longing in her voice. She was happy for them, yes, but also jealous of what they had. “Such things
“I suppose not.” She nodded. “It was nice to have them all here.”

“You should host a larger party at the end of the summer, have all your year-mates here for an informal ball. A little send off before the seriousness of studying takes hold again.” He suggest, purely for selfish reasons. He wanted to see her in a formal gown.

“A ball?” She laughed a little.

“Certainly. I wager it would be the social event of the summer, and an opportunity for you to reconnect with everyone.” He said.

“You wouldn’t mind?” She looked dubious.

“Would I have suggested it if I did?” He raised an eyebrow, clearly champagne was the magic liquid that could turn Hermione Granger into a regular girl. It was something to remember.

She blushed prettily. “I wouldn’t have a clue where to start? Other than the Yule ball I’ve never even been to one.” She looked all too serious, trying to think through the haze of alcohol.

“We can begin plans after the Garden Party, when you’ve seen what high society can look like in our world.” He said, a smile turning up the corner of his lips.

“All right.” Hermione nodded, sitting up and touching her temple. “I think I’ve had a bit too much to drink.” Everything was a little off-kilter.

He finished his off, and set the glass aside. “Then I should really see you back to your room.” He said, deciding that the longer she stayed here…the less likely it was she was going to make it back to her bed tonight.

“That sounds good.” She nodded, standing a little unsteadily.
Lucius rose and took her arm. “Nice and easy now, Miss Granger.” He grinned a little at the wobbly witch. It was rather endearing. He walked her back to her room, the hallway seeming rather long this evening. As they reached her door he stopped and lifted her hand to his lips again. “Goodnight, Miss Granger.” The young woman’s eyes were locked with his and he shivered a little at the look in her eyes. He froze as she leaned in, brushing a kiss against his cheek. It was the softest brush of skin but it immobilized him.

“Goodnight Lucius…” She whispered before moving back and retreating into her bedroom.

Lucius swallowed thickly and resisted the urge to follow the girl into her rooms. He turned and walked quickly back to his rooms, deciding that a cold shower was now no longer optional.

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Hermione came down to breakfast with her head splitting in two. She’d woken up passed out across her bed still in her dress from the night before. She had a vague memory of being in Lucius’ rooms and a kiss…but surely she’d just been dreaming it. She saw Lucius sitting there, a small potion bottle sitting beside her orange juice. She opened it and took a sniff, smelling peppermint and she looked up at him. “Thank you.” She drank down the hangover potion and closed her eyes a moment while it chased the headache away.

“After last night, I thought you could use it.” He said with a smile.

“I hope I wasn’t…I mean that I didn’t say anything embarrassing.” She said hesitantly.

Lucius smirked realizing she had no memory of the evening. “You have nothing to be embarrassed about my dear, you just clearly have no head for champagne.” He chuckled and enjoyed his morning coffee. “We merely toasted your friend’s engagement and I saw you back to your rooms.”

She blushed. “Good.” So clearly it had just been her overactive imagination at work about the kiss.

“What did you have planned for your day, Miss Granger?” He asked solicitously.

“I was going to spend it in the library. I was reading through some of the legislative volumes.” She said.
“There are surprisingly fascinating aren’t they?” He grinned, pleased that she would be occupied. He had a meeting and it would go better if she were not underfoot.

“Very. I’m reading through the full Statue of Secrecy debates.” She shook her head. “It’s kind of incredible.”

“I’ll make sure to come and get you for dinner.” He smiled. “I’ll be in my study for most of the day.” He said.

“All right.” She nodded and after they finished eating they went their separate ways.

Just after noon the floo in the entryway flared and Theodore Nott stepped out of the fireplace. He nodded respectfully to Lucius. The young man was tall, his black hair getting some length to it now and cool hazel eyes flicked around the hallway. “Lord Malfoy, you asked me to come by?”

“Yes, Lord Nott.” Lucius said and gestured to him to come with him. “Let’s sit in the study and you can catch me up on everything that’s going on.”

Theo nodded and walked with the older man. Once in the study he sat. “The Wizengamot will be convening for the first time since the battle tomorrow. They’ll be confirming the new Lords to their seats and starting the formal trials for the Dark Lord’s supporters that were taken alive.” He said.

“You’ll be assuming your family seat I assume?” Lucius said.

“Yes. As will the newly minted Lord Potter.” He chuckled. “The New Minister has restored the Weasley ancestral seat, but I suppose that was to be expected.” He made a face. “At least his eldest son will be an asset to the assembly when the seat transfers to him one day.”

“What of my seat?” He asked him.

“Because you’re neither incarcerated, nor absolved of your supposed crimes, one of the first orders of business after the confirmations is a vote on whether to allow you to vote by owl, grant your vote to someone else in your absence, or to allow you to attend sessions with your ‘jailer’.” He
smirked.

“The latter would be my preference.” Lucius said.

“I imagined so, I’ve been spreading the word that our supporters should put their votes behind that option.” Theo said. “It’s going to be a power grab though, so many seats are empty now.” He muttered. “I plan to bring a motion to grant the Prince ancestral seat to Professor Snape, and give him the official Prince Lordship…I imagine that Potter will throw his support behind that motion as well.”

“Excellent.” Lucius said. “I appreciate you working in my interests, young Theo.”

“You kept my bastard of a father from forcing me to be marked, you know I abhor debts.” He said simply.

“So did your father.” Lucius chuckled and called for tea.

“It’s one common trait I don’t mind sharing with him.” Theo smirked a little. “So, what’s your play with Granger?”

“Play?” Lucius arched an eyebrow.

“You’re introducing her to *real* society. You’re playing some kind of long game. If I’m to hold her hand and play the charming young gentleman I’d like to know why.” He said.

“She has political aspirations, and I find myself willing to back her. Nothing so out of the ordinary for my family.” Lucius said simply.

“She’s a mudblood, that is out of the ordinary.” Theo said, noting how Lucius’s right eye twitched at the term. Now that was interesting.

“That word is no longer welcome in my home.” Lucius said coolly.
“My apologies.” Theo said, a little smile on his lips saying he was anything but. “Very well, I will be her escort, and mind all my hard won manners while in her company.”

“Good, see that you do.” Lucius said, grey eyes hard. “I may be confined to this Manor for the time being young Theodore, but two years is not very long and I have an exceptional memory.”

Theo swallowed and nodded, reminded just whose study he was sitting in. “Yes sir,” he said, attitude suitably adjusted for the remainder of his visit.
Theo strode through the halls of the Ministry, new purple robes whipping around him as he headed to the chambers of the Wizengamot. He nodded curtly to Kingsley Shacklebolt as he passed him, ignoring the slight narrowing of the new Minister’s eyes. He joined the other new Lords on the floor on the chamber; they would remain there until they were confirmed.

“Potter,” he said to the shorter boy, pleased to see that he’d at least had his new robes properly tailored.

“Nott,” Harry said and nodded in turn. “How long do you think the confirmations will take?”

“In theory they should be fairly quick, though I imagine some of us will be subjected to pointless questioning before we are allowed to take our seats.” He scowled a little. Many of the newly minted young Lords were sons of Death Eaters, and he knew there had been arguments behind closed doors about stripping those families of their seats and votes…possibly indefinitely.

“Pointless questioning?” Harry frowned.

“They’ll ask many of us to incriminate ourselves as unmarked followers of the dead Dark Lord,” Nott spelled it out for him. “As if anyone here is stupid enough to willingly earn themselves a one way ticket to Azkaban. Hence…pointless. They have no grounds to block us from our seats, but they’ll try,” he said. “Once all of that is done, I do have a motion to present that I’d ask for your support on Potter.”

“What kind of motion?” Harry asked, seeing Arthur Weasley come to join them.

“I want to move that the Prince ancestral seat, and its vacant Lordship, be granted to Professor Snape.” Theo said. “There are too many families that have been lost, and he deserves to not just be pardoned for what he did at the behest of Dumbledore, but rewarded. He’d be a voice of reason, and likely a neutral one,” he said.

“You’d have my support in that.” Arthur spoke up before Harry had a chance to.
“And mine.” Harry smiled. “He’s the best man I’ve ever known, and he deserves to be here.” He offered Theo his hand.

Theo reached out and took it, shaking it firmly. “Thank you. We all need to work together now.” It was a necessary evil for the time being. He needed to distance himself from his father’s actions as much as possible. This was a good first step. He offered his hand to Arthur Weasley as well. He could tell that he was being watched, an itch at the back of his neck.

“Indeed we do.” Arthur said.

“All come to order!” A voice boomed through the room.

Theo turned and straightened, turning his eyes onto the new Chief Warlock, Tiberius Ogden. They’d managed to convince him to return and assume the leadership of the Wizengamot. There had been several names bandied about for the position, but he was hardly shocked that a known Dumbledore supporter like Ogden had been handed the job.

“As we read your names, come forward. There will be the opportunity for anyone to ask questions and then the confirmation shall be complete and the new Lord or Lady of the assembly will take their assigned seat. Lord Andrew Thomas Bones, please come forward.” The first name was called.

It took only a handful of people to be called before a pattern became evident. Any of Dumbledore’s supporters were allowed to go and take their seats immediately. Anyone who had been neutral, or worse from a family that had supported the Dark Lord was forced to answer endless questions. Theo was finally called forward and he stood in front of old Tiberius, his shoulders squared.

“Oh, young Lord Nott. By what right do you claim a seat amongst this assembly?” Tiberius asked, the phrasing correct but the tone indicating that the older man did not believe he had any right.

“By right of inheritance, and blood. My family has held a seat on the Wizengamot since 1549, granted to us for services to the English wizarding community. My family opened our home to those needing to be hidden, and continued to offer safe harbour for those being pursued by the muggle witch hunters right up until the implementation of the Statute of Secrecy. Four of my ancestors have sat where you sit today, Tiberius Ogden, most recently my great-grandfather. Unless you mean to show that I am not a Nott, there is no question of the right I have to sit in this assembly.” His voice calm but carried through the chamber. “Let me save all of you the time it will take to subject me to the inane, and insulting accusations that some of my fellows have had to endure. I am not nor have I ever been, a Death Eater, a Dark Lord sympathizer, or a murderer of
muggles. I invite anyone with evidence contrary to my statements to speak it now.” He paused, letting his eyes wander over the wizards and witches sitting around the room. Everyone looked rather uncomfortable. “My father has been sentenced to life imprisonment in Azkaban prison for crimes he committed during the war. I am not my father.” He said with an edge of heat in his tone. “Unless there is something else you’d like to know, Chief Warlock…I will take my seat.”

“Take your seat Lord Nott.” Ogden said shortly and continued with the final names on the list.

Theo took his seat, wrangling his emotions back under control. Hexing the Chief warlock was likely not the best way to convince everyone that he wasn’t his father. Pity, the pompous old bastard deserved it. He mentally sneered as Potter was called forward and old Ogden practically drooled all over him before allowing him to climb the stairs and sit down. He lifted an eyebrow in surprise as Potter chose to come and sit beside him.

“I’d rather sit with someone who isn’t fawning all over me.” Potter said quietly to Nott.

“I can safely promise to never do that.” Theo chuckled and settled back to wait for the last person to take their seat, Arthur Weasley.

“Esteemed witches and Wizards of the Wizengamot. There is one last seat sitting empty, and the curious circumstances surrounding the absence of its holder necessitate the vote I am about to put to you. Lord Lucius Abraxas Malfoy was arrested after the battle of Hogwarts, and has since had his sentence of life in Azkaban commuted to a two year sentence to be served at his home in Wiltshire under guard. However, since only death or a life sentence to Azkaban can remove a Lord from his seat, we will need to discuss options for allowing him to vote in future sessions.” Ogden stood, speaking to everyone. He placed a paper in front of him and tapped it with his wand. “These are the proposed options, please mark your vote and tap the paper twice to have it counted. Unless anyone first wishes to speak?”

Theo stood, waiting to be recognized.

“Very well, Lord Nott.” Ogden said and took his seat.

“While the Chief Warlock has presented us with several viable options, I feel it would be in the best interests of the assembly to consider allowing Lord Malfoy to attend sessions under the supervision of his Ministry appointed Guardian. Voting by owl would unnecessarily prolong most functions, and has only ever been allowed twice in the history of this assembly only when the member in question was seriously ill. There is absolutely no precedent for handing his voting privileges to another member, and it has been determined more than once that allowing someone to
hold multiple votes opens the door to corruption and vote buying. I believe the third option to be the most palatable. There are Aurors always stationed outside this room, and the Ministry is certainly more secure than Malfoy Manor.” He said. “Thank you for hearing me out.”

“Very eloquent, Lord Nott...now, let us vote.” The Chief Warlock said and sat down.

Theodore sat down and selected his vote before tapping the parchment and it disappeared. He settled back in his seat and waited, his thumb rubbing against the band of his family ring. It was one of the only nervous habits that had survived his father’s ‘tutelage’ over the years. He took the time while everyone made their decisions to observe. He’d accompanied his father often enough as a boy, but this was a new vantage point for him. He could see more angles and discern who was trying to communicate with who. The real power in the Ministry was wielded in this room. The Minister could write all the bills he wanted, but nothing could be implemented without the agreement of the witches and wizards in this room.

“Attention, everyone please.” The Chief Warlock stood. “By a mere four votes...Lord Lucius Malfoy is to be allowed to attend future meetings of the Wizengamot.” The man announced, a sour expression on his face.

Theo grinned. There were a few minor motions that came up, nothing too pressing, and then he stood to be recognized. Once he was given the floor he straightened his robes. “As we are all painfully aware, there are many seats in this room that are vacant because their family lines have died out. One of those empty seats belongs to the Ancient and Noble house of Prince. I move that Severus Snape, the legitimate son of Eileen Snape nee Prince, be granted the Prince Lordship and all that it entails, including a seat in this room. Lord Potter has shared his testimony of Mr. Snape’s bravery and valor, and I feel those actions are worthy of great reward. An Ancient house should not be allowed to die out simply because his mother married a muggle.” He let his voice carry through the chamber, hearing the murmurs start. As he returned to his seat the voices got louder, shouting back and forth across the room.

Harry’s eyebrows lifted. “I don’t see why they’re even arguing this?” He said quietly to Theo.

“Lots of reasons, the biggest one would be that the Prince family holdings have been sitting in limbo for nearly twenty years. Granting them to Snape would give him money, position, and power. Things that many of the wizards in this room don’t like to share, never mind with the Half-blood son of a witch that turned her back on her family and our world.” He spoke quietly, eyes never straying from the men arguing. “Severus was just a little too good at playing both sides, to the point where no one outside of Dumbledore and the Dark Lord actually trusted him. Granting him a full pardon is one thing, this is celebrating his deceptions.” He explained. “The nays are getting louder...if you’re going to support this you need to stand up and make yourself heard Potter.”
Harry nodded and stood. “ENOUGH!” He shouted over the others. “Severus Snape sacrificed his entire life to protect me, so that I could vanquish the Dark Lord. I will not sit here and listen to anyone call him a coward, or a liar.” He said forcefully. “I put my full support behind Lord Nott’s motion. There is no man more worthy to sit in this chamber, and if I had to go into battle tomorrow I would trust no one else at my side. He is the bravest man I have ever known, and I’ll have words with anyone who says differently.” He let that sink in before retaking his seat.

“Order…we will have order in this chamber.” Ogden finally said standing. “A motion has been brought forward, all those in favour?” He asked, watching as hands were raised around the room. It was clearly more than half. “All Opposed?” He asked and saw far fewer hands. “The motion passes, the Prince Lordship and all it entails is awarded to Severus Snape. I will send formal confirmation to Lord Prince after sessions concludes. Now any other business?” He asked. There was a general shaking of heads and he nodded. “A schedule will be owled to everyone detailing the upcoming trials for the Death Eaters, as well as the date and time for the Fall session. The Wizengamot is dismissed.” He pounded the carved rock on the bench and everyone began making their way out of the stands and out of the chambers.

“Hey Theo…wait up.” Harry called and hurried to reach him. “I was wondering if you had time to talk?” He asked.

“I was about to go and grab a late lunch at the Centaur Café. You could join me if you like.” In school he couldn’t honestly recall speaking more than a few sentences to the Gryffindor golden boy.

“Sure. If I’d realized the session would go this long I’d have had a bigger breakfast.” He chuckled.

“This was a short session Potter.” He arched an eyebrow. “The longest session on record went three days. After the first day people started transfiguring benches into beds and slept through the debates. House elves brought food and wine.” He smirked.

“How do you know this stuff? You’re just as new to it as I am.” Harry frowned.

“Granger really was the bright one in your group, wasn’t she?” He drawled as they went to the atrium and took a floo to the Leaky cauldron.

As they brushed their robes off, and headed out the back to enter the alley, Harry grabbed Nott’s arm. “What do you mean by that?”
“Potter, I’ve known I would sit in that room since I was old enough to say ‘Wizengamot’. My father took me to sit in on the summer sessions from the time we started Hogwarts, and I read for Merlin’s sake. There are dozens of books about the Wizengamot, the legislative process, and current legislations. I’m sure your friend could point you to a few of them designed for children.” He teased.

“You don’t need to be an ass.” Harry frowned.

“I’m not trying to be, but really Potter…you had to know that someday you’d be head of your family. Surely your Head of House explained the responsibilities you’d have?” He said, looking a tiny bit exasperated.

“No…no one did.” Harry said honestly. “Honestly I think sometimes they forget I grew up around muggles.”

Theo looked absolutely scandalized. “Bloody hell Potter…” He let out a harsh breath and ran a hand through his hair. “Come on, let’s have some lunch and I’ll try and at least fill in the worst gaps for you. You killed the snake-faced bastard, it’s the least I can do.” He said grudgingly. Bloody heir to an Ancient House and he no clue what that even meant.

“Thanks Nott.” Harry said and together the two young Lords headed down the Alley.

Hermione’s stomach was in knots as she paced in her sitting room. She was dressed, and after the sixth hair style she had called it done, leaving her hair in loose, shining waves around her shoulders with just a little bit of her hair twisted back off her face. She jumped at the light knock at her door. “Come in.” She said distractedly.

Lucius entered and went over, taking her arm to halt her pacing. “Take a deep breath, you’re going to do just fine.” His tone was reassuring.

“I don’t think I can do this.” Hermione said. “What if I say the wrong thing, or what if I insult someone without meaning to…what if she hates me…maybe she just invited me to humiliate me…” She was stopped as Lucius pressed a finger over her lips.
“Enough now.” Lucius said and led her over to sit down on the settee. “Firstly, it is far too late to bow out now. Theodore will be here soon and you need to compose yourself.” He said, taking her hand in his. “You will do just fine, and Theodore is there to make certain that you don’t make any fatal missteps. Dame Greengrass is likely already predisposed to like you, she was Gryffindor back in her day.” He shared that little tidbit with a smirk. “Her invitation was genuine, you don’t need to worry.”

Hermione took a deep breath and closed her eyes a moment. “I’m sorry…I haven’t been this nervous in a long time.” She admitted.

“It’s all right, nerves are perfectly normal.” He said and softly rubbed circles on her wrist with his thumb.

“Do I look all right?” She asked him.

“You look perfect.” He reassured her gently. “The very picture of poise and elegance.” He grinned. “You’ll fit right in. Let Theodore do most of the talking, and just enjoy yourself.”

“I’ll try.” She took another breath and forced herself to calm down. Her eyes dropped to where he was holding her hands. She shifted her hand a little to slide her fingers in between his. Her hands looked so small in his. She was startled from the exploration by Bilby, announcing the Mr. Nott had arrived. She drew her hands away reluctantly. “I shouldn’t keep him waiting.” She said softly.

“No, you shouldn’t.” He said and stood, offering her a hand. “Come. Ward me into my rooms and then head downstairs.” Lucius walked back to his rooms, wishing dearly he could see Theodore’s face when he set eyes on her. “Have a lovely time.” He said in parting before going into his chambers.

“I’ll see you later.” She said and finished the now familiar warding spell and then she took a steadying breath and headed downstairs, head high and ready to face anything.

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expression of shock that crossed his face. He dragged his eyes over her and threw all of his previous thoughts out of his mind.

“Bloody hell Granger.” He managed to say. She looked absolutely stunning. Her normally wild hair had been tamed into silky waves, and she was wearing tasteful make-up. Other than the Yule ball he’d never seen her wear an ounce of the stuff. The dress was a soft blue, and highlighted her figure without being trashy. It fluttered down past her knees, drawing the eye to the graceful curve of her calves.


The use of his title shook him out of his stupor. “Forgive my manners, you look very nice Miss Granger.” He gave a respectful bow.

“Thank you.” She smiled and inclined her head politely.

“Shall we? We do not want to keep Dame Greengrass waiting.” He said with a smirk. “She abhors tardiness.”

“Then we’d better go.” Hermione smiled in turn.

“Ladies first.” He said. “The address is Greengrass Gate.” He followed Hermione through after a heartbeat, stepping out and spelling the bits of ash off his dress robes. He offered her his arm and led her out of the gate house and onto a crushed stone walkway. “Welcome to the Green.” He said quietly.

Hermione paused as they rounded a stand of old oaks and the grounds were laid bare to her eyes. The house had to be more than a mile away, a massive expanse of perfectly manicured lawn stretched out from the house and down to the pond. There were airy pavilions spread out and dozens of people were milling around, socializing. “So... how do we do this?” She looked up at Theo, a little daunted but feeling herself rise to the challenge.

“You smile, and try not to fall over on your heels and I’ll start making the introductions.” He smirked. “I realize it’ll be hard for you, but try not to talk too much.” He teased her.

“I can be quiet you know.” She said as they walked down the path together.
“I have six years of contradictory evidence Granger.” He said. “Just this once try and be more like me. Watch and learn, and file everything you see away. These people will smile to your face, but half of them would bury a blade in your back for a dented knut. Everything they say or do gives you clues about what’s really going on in their head, and you never know when it’ll be to your advantage to know how to play them.” He said. “Smile now Granger.” He whispered as they reached the party.

Hermione took a deep breath, and pasted a smile on her lips as he led her into the viper pit. The first person to approach them was a familiar face.

“Hermione! It’s so nice to see you.” Daphne came over and gave the other girl a friendly hug, kissing her cheek. “My great-Aunt has been most eager to meet you.”

“It’s nice to see you too Daphne.” She made herself use the other girl’s first name. It was even harder to not look at the other girl like she’d sprouted two extra heads.

“And the two of you together? However did that happen?” She looked directly at Theo, arching a perfectly shaped eyebrow.

“Both Miss Granger and I will be self-studying for our Newts, as we have responsibilities that will keep us from returning to Hogwarts. We were discussing a schedule for practicing some of the practical work together and she mentioned your great-aunt’s party. I offered to be her escort.” He shrugged.

“Oh Theo…you’re so boring.” Daphne rolled her eyes. “You should take her to see Auntie soon, before she has you summoned.” She said and flounced off.

Hermione arched an eyebrow at Theo.

“She and Draco liked to tease me for living behind my books.” He shrugged. “She is right however, we should make our way over and I’ll introduce you.” He nodded to the largest of the tents.

Hermione looked to see an older woman sitting in a comfortable looking chair. She reminded Hermione a little of Minerva, only with slightly softer features. Her hair was snowy white and held off her face in an intricate series of plaits. The overall impression was one of a Queen holding
court. “All right, let’s go and meet her.” She said softly.

Theo nodded and headed over to the tent. As they approached, everyone that had been conversing with Dame Greengrass moved out of the way, watching closely.

“All right, let’s go and meet her.” She said softly.

“Dame Greengrass, might I have the pleasure of presenting Miss Hermione Granger to you?” Theo said formally.

“Dame Greengrass, might I have the pleasure of presenting Miss Hermione Granger to you?” Theo said formally.

“Ah, Miss Granger. I’ve been hearing quite a bit about you. Teddy dear…why don’t you be a doll, and fetch Miss Granger some of the lemonade? Come and sit with me dearie, we’ll get to know one another a little better.” The old woman’s blue eyes were razor sharp.

“That sounds lovely Dame Greengrass.” Hermione said and sat down chair that the old witch indicated.

“All right, off with the rest of you.” She snapped at the people lingering to watch the byplay. After they left the old woman turned to Hermione. “Bloody vultures, the whole lot.” She said conspiratorially.

“They certainly leave you with that impression.” Hermione agreed, not entirely sure how to take her.

“Well now, I must admit you are certainly not what I expected Miss Granger.” She started off with. “Hardly surprising though, I do detect the touch of Lucius Malfoy in your presentation. That man always had an eye for fashion.”

“Perhaps a little.” She owned. “Lord Malfoy has been filling in some gaps in my knowledge of wizarding culture.”

“Insofar as a wizard can, I suppose.” Dame Greengrass said. “It was kind of you to accompany young Teddy, he has so many responsibilities now and appearing here with an attractive young woman will certainly give him some breathing room.”

“I don’t…” She started to say only to be cut off.
“Come now dear, my grand-niece went to school with you. I am most aware that you and young Theodore Nott have barely ever spoken two words to one another.” She arched an eyebrow at her. “Though you are both quite studious and intelligent, I can tell that there isn’t an ounce of romantic interest between you.”

“He was just being nice enough to come with me, and make sure I didn’t make a complete fool of myself.” She said, not entirely sure if she was being a fool to be this honest with a woman that apparently terrified Lucius, but done was done.

“You’ll do fine dear. A pretty girl with good manners and a clever brain will always find her ideal place in the world.” She smiled. “Give me your hand dear.”

“Why?” Hermione looked confused.

“I am not a seer per se, but I do have a touch of the gift. It’s how I’ve been able to match so many young people together over the years. Now… your hand dear.” She held hers out expectantly.

Hermione gave her a dubious look but placed her hand in the other witch’s, palm up. She stifled a gasp as she felt a rush of energy as the witch read her palm.

“Hmmm, very interesting.” The older woman closed her eyes and focused. “Well, I think for the time being you’ll be an excellent social companion for Teddy, keep the jackals away from you both. You’re a difficult case Miss Granger, you won’t easily find your match, but I have a feeling when you do everyone had best watch out.” She grinned.

“I’m not sure what you mean.” Hermione said.

“You need a partner that can match you intellectually, but guide you romantically. You will not give your heart easily, you’ve seen too much pain in your short life my dear. The wizard that wins your affections will need to first win your trust.” She patted Hermione’s hand. “With trust, passion, and two intelligent minds there is little you couldn’t accomplish.”

Hermione nodded. “Thank you.” She said.

“Now, here comes Teddy with your lemonade. Enjoy the party dear, and if any of those old hags give you a hard time, just remember they’ll never be as young and pretty as you.” She winked
She laughed a little. “I’ll try Dame Greengrass.” She smiled and stood, accepting her drink from Theo.

“You children have fun now. I expect to see the two of you out together more often.” She commanded, eyes locking with Theo’s.

“Of course ma’am.” Theo gave a polite bow and guided Hermione out of the tent. “What was that about?”

“She thinks we’d be a good pair for show, keep the sharks from circling.” She winked at him. “Teddy?”

“Don’t. She is the only one who gets away with calling me that.” He half growled.

“Sorry.” She apologized and sipped her drink.

“It’s all right, it just unsettles me.” He said and took a deep breath. “All right, game face on Granger…time to go swimming with sharks.” He winked at her and headed into the thick of it.

To his very great surprise Hermione did manage to keep quiet for most of the day, letting him make the introductions and direct the conversations. The only hiccup came when old Lady Goyle called her a filthy mudblood whore, and threw her drink in Hermione’s face.

“You crazy old bat!” Hermione said as Theo pulled her off to the side and quickly spelled her clean.

“Are you all right?” Theo asked her and then quickly cast a muffilato spell to contain the impending outburst.

“I’ll be all right after I hex that old bitch! HOW DARE SHE?!?” She felt tears stinging her eyes. Everyone had seen it, what if it ended up in the papers?
“Just breathe Granger, her nephew is hustling her out of here and I doubt she’ll be in public for a good long while.” He said. “Hey…don’t cry.” He saw the tears and panicked. He did NOT do crying women.

“I hate that word.” She wiped at her tears, grateful that he was blocking view of her from everyone else.

“You’ve never let it bother you before.” Theo said, having heard Draco call her that to her face more than a dozen times in their school years.

“That was before Bellatrix carved it into my skin…” She whispered.

“Shit…” He touched her arm, stroking it gently and trying to be comforting. “Do you want to go? No one would think less of you.” He lied easily. The people that would think less of her, likely already thought she was the worst scum of the earth anyway.

She shook her head. “No…I just need a minute.” She took a deep breath. “How much longer should we stay?”

“There will be a little dancing, and then everyone will sit down for tea. After we can say our goodbyes. Maybe another couple hours?” He said.

She nodded and took a steadying breath. “I can do a couple hours.” She whispered a spell to clean her face and fix her make-up. She gathered herself and met his concerned eyes. “Ok…let’s head back.” She said bravely.

“There’s that Gryffindor courage you guys are always crowing about.” He smiled and tucked her hand back into his arm and they returned to the party. “You do dance right?” He asked with a smirk.

“A little.” She answered, never so grateful that her parents had gotten her dance lessons that one summer. “Do you?”

“All of us good pure-blood boys had to suffer through years of dance instruction.” He smirked.
Daphne approached. “Are you all right Hermione?” She asked, actually looking concerned.

“I’ll be fine, I was more shocked than anything.” She said.

“Auntie said to convey her personal apologies for what happened, and if you’d like to leave she’d completely understand.” Daphne said.

“I’m fine, really. Please reassure Dame Greengrass that she has nothing to apologize for. I’m having far too nice a time to leave now.” Hermione said.

“All right. The music should be starting soon, and she said that if you stay she expects to see you both out there.” She grinned at them and headed off.

“That was most diplomatic of you.” Theo said and got her a fresh glass of lemonade from a passing server.

“Hermione!” A voice came from off to their right and Theo had to try hard not to wince as Hermione gripped his arm tightly.

“Mr. McLaggen.” Hermione said coolly.

“Come on Hermione, there’s no need to be so formal.” Cormac grinned. “I’ve been trying to angle over here to see you all afternoon.”

“There is every need to be formal McLaggen, especially when addressing another man’s date.” Theo said and narrowed his eyes threateningly.

“Date? If you needed an escort Hermione, you should have just owled me. You know my family’s big in the Ministry. No need to put up with Slimy Slytherins.” He said winking at her roguishly.

“If I’d had any desire to see you again, Mr. McLaggen I’d have contacted you. Please refrain from using my first name.” She said. “Theo, the music is starting and I believe I promise you a dance.”
She turned her back on Cormack and gave Theo a sickeningly sweet smile.

“Of course.” He met Cormac’s eyes and lifted her hand to his lips. “I’ve been waiting for the pleasure.” He winked at the other boy and led her out to the dance floor, settling his hand on her waist. “So what’s the story there?”

“In our sixth year he was pursuing me like a bloodhound. I let him take me to Slughorn’s Christmas party, but he couldn’t keep his hands to himself. I spent most of the party hiding from him.” She admitted.

“He has absolutely no manners.” Theo said and found that Hermione was a very capable dancer. “A lot of wizards like him think muggle-born and half-blood witches are fair game. They consider it a sport.” He made a face. “It’s disgusting really.”

“Just like him.” She smirked, and found herself laughing as Theo twirled her around effortlessly. He was a little tall, but seemed to compensate for the differences in their height easily. Every now and then she saw him giving a smug look off to the side and knew he was goading Cormac. She couldn’t help but approve. All in all, she found herself actually enjoying herself.

Back in her pavilion, Dame Greengrass watched the young witches and wizards dancing. It reminded her so much of the parties and balls of her own youth, these little gatherings helped keep her young. The little muggle-born witch was a delightful surprise, some much needed fresh air in her usual circle. She was being very careful, that much was evident, but there was a spark to her. The incident with Lady Goyle had been telling. Most young women would have taken the offered escape, this one had squared her shoulders and carried on as if nothing had happened. Brave little lioness. She’d need to find just the right match for her, it would be a pleasant challenge.
A Certain Regard

There had been an atrocious line at the Floo by the time they had pried themselves away from Lord Travers and his new wife. They’d been quite interested in speaking with Hermione, getting her thoughts on changes to the curriculum at Hogwarts. Lord Travers was on the Board of Governors and it was a favourite topic of his. He had been utterly delighted to hear her thoughts on introducing a course for muggle-born, and muggle-raised students to cover basic wizarding culture and etiquette. After some prodding from his very pregnant wife, he’d asked permission to owl her with some thoughts on the proposed class.

“Let’s apparate,” Theo said, looking disdainfully at the line.

“I agree. We’ll need to apparate just outside the Manor, the wards are set against it right now. Did you want to come in for a few moments?” she asked.

“Yes, I’d like to actually speak to Lucius for a few minutes. Just Wizengamot business,” he said.

“Certainly. I’ll leave you two to talk while I get changed.” She said and took his arm as he apparated them to just outside the Malfoy gates. She smiled as the gate swung open at her touch, recognizing her.

“Winning Lord Travers over was quite the feat.” Theo said as they walked, having noticed that she was apparently keyed to the Manor’s wards. Interesting.

“I wasn’t really trying, just giving my opinions.” She shrugged. “I might not have been such an annoying swot if I’d understood basic wizarding etiquette,” she said. “Harry really could have used it.”

“And then some, I can’t believe McGonagall didn’t give him any guidance about being head of his own family once he came of age. It’s insane that they just left him to fumble along.” He shook his head.

“He told me you spent a whole afternoon giving him a primer on Lordships.” She smiled. “That was very kind of you.”
He snorted. “I did it to save myself tedious hours correcting him.” He shrugged it off, but was pleased that Potter had appreciated the time he’d taken. “He still needs to learn a lot, but at least he shouldn’t incite a blood feud accidentally now.” He wasn’t even joking, the other boy didn’t have the first clue.

Hermione nodded as they walked up the path and into the front hall. “Why don’t you have a seat, and I’ll send Lucius down for you.” She walked him into the sitting room.

“Thank you, Miss Granger.” Theo gave her a charming smile. “I had a very pleasant afternoon.”

“I did as well…other than that bit of unpleasantness.” She said. “Hopefully we can avoid that in future.”

“Indeed.” He said and sat down as she left the room.

Her feet took her upstairs and to Lucius’ rooms. She unwarded the door and knocked politely.

Lucius opened the door and smiled. “Did you have a good time, Miss Granger?” he asked.

“I did, Theo was a very pleasant companion. He’s asked to speak to you. I left him waiting in the sitting room.” She said and moved back. “I’m going to get changed and relax a little.”

Lucius smiled, pleased that Theodore had not let his little prejudices reign. “Will you join me for dinner?” He asked as they came to her rooms.

“Of course, I have a lot to tell you about the day.” She smiled and disappeared into her rooms.

Safe in her rooms she slipped off her heels and headed for the bedroom. She went into the bathroom and turned on the water to fill the tub, needing to soak and get rid of any lingering nervous tension. She undressed and twisted her hair up off her neck, glad that she was home. She laughed a little to herself, realizing that she was starting to think of this place as home. Really she had nowhere else. Her parents had sold the house when they’d moved to Australia, and she only had some meager savings of her own until she could finish school and find a job.
She sighed and got into the bath, leaning back and resting her head against the edge of the tub. Her future wasn’t something she’d let herself think much about lately. With the war and all the madness afterwards, she’d been sidetracked. Lucius had been the first one to direct her to thinking about where she wanted to go. The road there however seemed…obscure to her at the moment. For the moment this was *home*, as unlikely as that would have seemed even a few months ago.

The day had gone fairly well, nowhere near as bad as she’d been imagining. She’d actually enjoyed talking with some of the people, especially Lord Travers. He’d been passionate about educational reform and had seemed happy to have a new audience to regale with his ideas. Dancing with Theo had been strange at first, but it had been nice to just be a girl for once. She hadn’t felt like that since the Yule Ball back in fourth year. Making Cormac jealous had simply been an added treat. There had been a few dances they’d sat out because she was unfamiliar with them, something she’d ask Lucius about later. She got a flutter in her stomach thinking about asking Lucius to teach her to dance. She was being ridiculous, he was old enough to be her father and he’d just lost his wife. She covered her face with her hands and made a frustrated sound. This line of thinking was hardly conducive to relaxation.

She gave up and got out of the bath. Wrapped just in her robe, she went to her wardrobe and opened it, seeing her cardigans, t-shirts, and jeans had been replaced by sun dresses, skirts, cute little tops, and summer weight robes. Her trainers were gone as well. There were rows of dressy sandals, ballet type-slippers, and heels. She blinked a bit and some hunting found her muggle clothes relegated to a couple drawers in a secondary dresser against the far wall. Apparently her clothing from Madame Filleux had arrived and the house elves had taken the liberty of rearranging her things. She went back to the wardrobe with the new clothing and pulled out a light yellow sundress and white flats. It was a warm day and she kind of wanted to see everything that had been made for her.

She got dressed and lingered a moment in front of the mirror and smiled. She’d never been much of a girlie-girl, to her mother’s great disappointment at times. Hermione unpinned her hair and let it fall loose around her shoulders, shaking her head a little and found herself quite pleased with the results. The bodice was fitted, and the neckline very modest. The pleats in the skirt hinted that it would flare dramatically if she spun. It came just above her knee, her mind supplying that this was not something to wear in public, lest it be called scandalous. She left her room and headed downstairs, a bit of a skip in her step. She saw the door to his study open and she headed over, knocking politely on the door frame. He was sitting at his desk penning a letter.

“Come in, Miss Granger,” he said, not looking up.

Hermione walked in. “Is Theo gone?”
“Yes he had…,” he trailed off as he looked up, quite unused to seeing her in anything other than muggle jeans and trainers. “He had some business to attend to before dinner.” He recovered and swallowed thickly. Madame Fillieux had earned herself a bonus. “I see you discovered the first part of your new wardrobe.” He managed to form a coherent sentence.

“First part?” Her eyebrows rose.

“Yes, there is another shipment to come, and if you are still interested in hosting a little ball at the end of the summer she’ll need to design a gown for you. Which, may I add, she is most excited to do.” He chuckled. “You look very nice, Miss Granger. Please have a seat.” He said and stood. “Bilby, tea please.” He said and took the seat beside her, the tea appearing on the little table between them. “Theodore spoke most highly of your performance today, despite certain challenges.”

Hermione nodded, letting him pour the tea and she accepted her cup with a smile. “He managed to keep me from losing my temper, though it was a close thing.” She admitted. “I guess I wasn’t expecting anyone to be so cruel to my face.”

“It will *not* be repeated,” he said, meeting her eyes. “I will make certain of that. That kind of language is not something I would have you subjected to.” That word in particular he would eradicate from the face of the earth if he could. It was ugly and base, nothing like the young woman sitting with him. It had been easy to label people like her with that word, but knowing her as he did now made it harder to stomach.

She smiled softly. “Thank you.” Hermione sipped her tea. “I did want to ask you something.” She said.

“Certainly.” He said, pleased that she was not dwelling on that.

“There was some dancing and while I knew a few of the more basic ones, there were some very complex set dances that we had to sit out. I was wondering if you could possibly teach me?” Her teeth caught her bottom lip.

“It would be my pleasure.” He inclined his head. “We could do a little after dinner each night. I’ll have the elves prepared the ballroom.” The prospect of dancing with her appealed far more than it should. “Theodore mentioned that you had a lovely conversation with Lord Travers.” He steered the conversation to something safer.
She nodded. “He was discussing some of his ideas for education reform, and wanted my thoughts. It was very interesting, though I think we were boring Theo and his wife a little.”

Lucius chuckled. “Marcus does get a little carried away at times. He would be a valuable friend to have when you begin your career at the Ministry. I’m sure he’d love to have you in his department. He’s the head of the Department of Magical Education, as well as being on the Board of Governors. It’s not an area of the ministry that gets as much attention as it should since the Headmaster at Hogwarts often sets the curriculum without much input from the Ministry. That is something that I think needs to change.” He said. “The educational standards at Hogwarts have been slipping for the better part of 30 years. There are smaller schools cropping up all over the world and we need to remain competitive.”

Hermione nodded. “And given my relationship with Minerva, it might be easier for me to get her co-operation on certain initiatives.” She said shrewdly.

“Life is all about relationships, and how we leverage them to accomplish our goals. It’s always easier to accomplish change when both sides are content to work together, rather than at cross-purposes.” He said.

She nodded, relaxing into the comfortable leather armchair. “I never thought I’d be this comfortable sitting and talking with you.” She said after a moment.

“I did not expect to find such a ready student in you, but I admit I am enjoying it. You are nothing like I expected you to be.” He said.

“What did you expect?” She asked, a little curious.

“Draco painted you as hard-headed, willfully ignorant, and prideful. I see none of that in you.” He said. “You have a resilience of spirit, and a humbleness in the face of things you do not know. Clearly my son saw only what he wished to, and not what was really there.” He reached over and took her hand. “You gave me my life back, far more in payment than I could have asked.”

She was taken back to the moment in her rooms earlier that day. She slipped her fingers through his, finding it hard to remember how to breath. She watched as he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it gently. She met his eyes, seeing the heat in them. It was the only outward sign that he was as effected by the moment as she was. “I only did what I promised to do.” She said.
He nodded and released her hand. “It is still remarkable.” He said. “I feel I must admit to a certain, regard for you, Miss Granger.” He’d debated addressing the issue, but seeing the light flush on her cheeks and the way she had just looked at him made it less risky to admit to.

“I think you’ve noticed that I seem to have a similar interest in you.” She replied carefully. This was all very new to her, nothing at all like her interactions with Viktor, Ron, or Cormac. This was far riskier ground.

“I have noticed.” He acknowledged and stood, offering her a hand. “Come for a walk with me, there are some things we should discuss.” He wanted to move them outside, into the light and fresh air and out of the very intimate setting they were currently in. He was grateful when she took his hand and stood, letting him lead her out into the gardens. He placed a hand over hers where it rested on his forearm. “This attachment will have complications, for us both.” He started off. “More for you than for me, if I am painfully honest. You’re far too young to tie yourself to someone with a questionable past.” That was the hardest truth, and he needed her to understand that. Her youth was the largest source of guilt for him.

Hermione nodded as they walked, hearing what he said and acknowledging that he wasn’t wrong. “Who I choose to tie myself to is my decision, and no one else’s.” She did say first. “Given the situation we’re in right now, it would be to our advantage to keep things quiet.” She added, knowing that there was too much attention on them right now.

“If we are to consider this, privacy is my first concern. I hate to ask you to lie to anyone, even if they are simply lies of omission, but it would be necessary. Kingsley would not allow me to remain free if he suspected I had seduced you, or manipulated you in some way.” He said, pausing by one of the fountains. “Those considerations aside, I do with to pursue this and see where it leads.” He looked down at her.

Hermione nodded, considering everything he had said. Everything she was feeling was knotting in her stomach and making it hard to focus on anything but the feel of his hand over hers. “My friends, my real friends,” she clarified, “will understand. I just…I’ve never had a real relationship.” She admitted quietly. “The closest I ever came to one was with Viktor Krum, but it was different because of the distance.” She needed to be honest with him.

He smiled and shifted to stand in front of her, raising his hand to cup her cheek. “We have all the time in the world. If I ever make you uncomfortable, please tell me.” Lucius said. He would need to move very slowly with her, both because of her youth and the trauma he knew she had suffered. As much as he longed to have her in his bed, he could wait.

She nodded. “Thank you.” She said and leaned into his touch. He didn’t make her uncomfortable, he made her feel protected and safe. She didn’t know why, but he did. She gasped as he felt his lips
just lightly brush hers. She shivered at the subtle brush of skin and opened her eyes.

“You are worth waiting for, Hermione,” he said quietly. Anything more was halted by Bilby’s sudden appearance.

“Forgive Bilby master. Mister Severus Snape is here Sir…” The little elf looked distraught at having interrupted them.

Lucius mentally counted to ten. “It’s a wonder they kept him in St. Mungos this long.” He muttered. “Set another place for dinner Bilby, and prepare his usual rooms for him.” He ordered and escorted Hermione back to the house. Having Severus here would help keep his behaviour in check as regards the young witch. Nothing like his dour best friend to throw cold water over romantic concerns.

“Is he even well enough to be up?” She looked worried for him.

“Likely not, but trying to force him to stay somewhere he does not wish to be is next to impossible.” He snorted. The man was as ornery as a starving bear when injured. You just gave him a quiet place to recover and let him be as much as possible, else you risked literal life and limb.

They came inside and Severus was sitting in a chair in the Entrance hall. “Lucius, I’d heard you had a house guest. Miss Granger.” He said politely.

“Professor Snape.” She said in return. He looked horrible, paler than usual and his face drawn tight with pain. “Can I get you anything?” She asked, slipping her hand out of Lucius’ arm.

“I have a kit with an emergency stash of potions down in Lucius’ potions room. If you would be so kind as to get the vial with the pale peach coloured liquid, and the round black bottle labeled with a T.” He said to her.

“Certainly.” She said and headed off to get what he needed.

Lucius went over and offered him a hand to stand. “Come, we were about to have dinner, you look like you could use some real food.” He slipped an arm around Severus’ waist and walked slowly. “You know everyone will be in a panic when they realize you’ve slipped away.”
He snorted. “Let them, better that then have to suffer through any more of those atrociously brewed concoctions they’ve been forcing me to consume. It’s a wonder they didn’t poison me. I’ll manage my own potions.” Disdain practically dripped from his words. “I must admit, I thought everyone was joking when they told me that you were being guarded by a school girl.” He gave his friend a sideways look.

“Not so much guarded as…chaperoned.” He clarified, though admittedly his ego took a minor hit either way. “She is merely here to be certain I adhere to the terms of my release.” He settled Severus down into a chair and sat down with him. “She’s been a surprisingly pleasant house guest.”

Severus just gave him a look, trying to read his friend. “I see.” He said simply. “I hope it’s not an imposition to be here.” He’d received a flurry of documents from the Ministry, Gringotts, and foreign Ministries as well in the last few days. It was overwhelming. He just needed to be somewhere quiet and familiar to finish healing and sort everything out.

“You’re always welcome in my home, you know that.” Lucius said quietly.

“So this…Lordship. Do I have you to thank for it?” He asked.

“I had nothing to do with it I must confess. Young Theodore Nott was your champion, in actuality. He thinks very highly of you Severus.” Lucius said.

“As I do of him.” Severus allowed himself a small smile. “I was always grateful he wasn’t dragged into our war, he’s a good boy.”

“He’s smarter than we ever were.” Lucius chuckled. “Would you like a drink?” He asked.

“After my potions, yes.” He said and looked up as Miss Granger came into the room.

“Here you are, Professor Snape.” She said and handed him the two potions.

“I’m no longer your Professor, Miss Granger.” He said quietly, pleased that she had grabbed the correct vials. He drank them both down in quick succession, feeling the pain ease from his body. It
left his mind clear, unlike the juvenile brews they’d plied him with in hospital. He abhorred the numbing of his faculties.

“It feels strange to call you Mister Snape.” She said and sat down at the table, food appearing.

“You may call me Severus.” He said quietly, affording her the privilege he normally reserved for his graduated Slytherins.

She nodded. “How are you doing?”

“Better. I may need to borrow you to assist with some potions, Miss Granger. I’m not yet well enough to be on my feet for the time required to brew them.” He said. “Your skills are more than up to task.” He gave her a rare bit of praise.

“Of course.” She smiled.

“I’m not exactly incapable either.” Lucius sniffed a bit.

“She’s better at following complex directions.” Severus smirked at his friend.

Lucius just stood and poured Severus a tumbler of scotch and handed it to him. “Wine, Miss Granger?” Lucius asked, remaining formal in front of Severus.

“Please, Mister Malfoy.” She said, trying to follow his lead. As he handed her the glass of wine their fingertips brushed, and she nearly dropped the glass.

Lucius gave her a cautionary look and took his seat. “How much have you been able to keep up on current events?” He asked Severus, letting Hermione compose herself. To most people her little wobble would go unremarked, but not with Snape. He was already mentally preparing for the tongue lashing he’d no doubt be getting once dinner was over. He’d hoped for a more pleasant end to the evening, but fate did love to torture him.

“Mr. Potter has been kind enough to keep me appraised of most things.” He said, dark eyes flitting between Lucius and Hermione. “It’s good to see things returning to a semblance of normal, and to
not be thrown into Azkaban.”

“None of us would have let that happen.” Hermione said. “Not after everything you did for Harry.”

“Thank you, Miss Granger.” Severus said, clearly uncomfortable with the praise.

“I for one am most relieved to not be languishing in an Azkaban cell, so I propose a toast.” Lucius said. “To Miss Granger and Harry Potter….protectors of those who once tried to kill them.”

Severus snorted and just drank.

Hermione laughed a little and sipped her wine. When she was finished she excused herself. “I’m just going to do a little reading before turning in. Goodnight Severus, Mister Malfoy.” She said and left the room, assuming that Lucius would help Severus get settled.

“I imagine she spends a fair bit of time in your Library.” Severus chuckled as she left the room.

“You’ve spend your fair share of evenings in there as well Severus.” Lucius chided him. “She has a curious mind, there’s nothing wrong with indulging it.”

“Of course not.” Severus just said and finished his drink. “If you’d be so kind as to help me to my room?” He asked Lucius, starting to fade. He needed to rest.

“Not at all.” Lucius said and stood, carefully helping him up and walking through a set of corridors to Severus’ suite. It was on the ground floor of the Manor, accessible both from the garden and the hall. He helped him to the bed and eased him down before going to shut the door. He turned back to find Severus’ wand out and him casting a privacy charm.

“What the bloody hell are you thinking Lucius? She’s the same age as your SON!” Severus hissed.

“There is nothing going on Severus.” Lucius said firmly.

“Like hell there isn’t.” Severus said. “Lucius, she’s just a child.”
“She is not a child…none of them are anymore.” Lucius said and ran a hand through his hair. “And trust me, her age bothers me more than I care to admit. There are larger concerns that plague me.” He went and collapsed into a chair. “You don’t know what happened to her in this house, what Bella and Antonin did to her in the east drawing room.” He felt ill to even think of it. “Elements Severus, her screams…”

“I knew that they tortured her, but Potter said that she hadn’t talked about it.” Severus said.

“Potter and the youngest Weasley boy were down in the dungeons, they could only listen. I saw part of it that night. Bella used that cursed knife of hers to carve the word mudblood into her arm, cast the cruciatus curse on her again and again. Worse still she’d let Antonin have the girl to start with. During the final battle I saw him go after her, he had her helpless again and was dragging her out of the way… so I killed him. I couldn’t let him do it again.” He whispered. “All of that happened to her under my roof and she returned here willingly. I didn’t ask her to save me Severus, just that she protect Draco. She forced Kingsley to let me go, agreed to stay here and she hasn’t once complained about it.”

“She is a Gryffindor Lucius, they leap before they look and stubbornly plummet on until they hit rock bottom.” Severus said quietly. “Just, take care with her. She’s too young to get caught up in your games.”

“I’m not playing games with her.” Lucius said firmly. “Not when it comes to this.”

“I’ll hold you to your word on that Lucius. She was one of my students, and you know how protective I can be.” Severus would only warn him this once, and then let it be. Miss Granger was a sensible girl, and an adult despite his statements earlier. She could choose her own path, but if Lucius hurt her he would hold him to account.

Lucius nodded, fully understanding the implied threat. He would take his time with Hermione, he owed her at least that much. He would not, however, let her go. He was a Malfoy, and they always played for keeps.
“Now, four stirs clockwise, then six counter.” Severus said from where he sat in a transfigured armchair in the corner of the room. While he never truly enjoyed watching someone else brew, he had to grudgingly admit that Miss Granger did not set his teeth completely on edge. She had a delicate hand, but wasn’t timid as she stirred the mixture. All that had kept her from true brilliance in his class had been her lack of willingness to look beyond the instructions. He wondered if her experiences in the war had altered her hardline approach to things, given her current situation he imagined that it rather had.

“Why not an even split?” she asked him, not altering her stirring.

“I find the potions smoother with the extra strokes to finish combining the ingredients initially. There is nothing worse than a grainy taste of the back of your tongue, Miss Granger. At least that is how I prefer things my own personal usages,” he answered her, watching as she processed the information and paid closer attention to the texture of the mixture. “Now just as you complete the sixth stir, lightly crumble the dried holly leaves in. Roll them between your fingers smoothly. Just like that,” he said. It was a little coarser than he liked but not abysmal for a first attempt.

Hermione did and then added the diced horned slugs in equal measures, as they incorporated into the now peach coloured brew. “Now we let it simmer?” Hermione asked over her shoulder.

“Are you asking or telling me?” Severus chuckled.

“ Asking, since it’s your own concoction.” She grinned.

“Simmer over a low flame for six hours. It will separate out slightly but a vigorous stirring at the end as you take it off the flame will complete it nicely,” he said and leaned back into the chair, closing his eyes for a moment. He knew he *should* be in bed but he needed the potions to continue his recovery. While standard potions would do well enough, something attuned to his own magic and healing abilities would always speed recovery along. He heard the quiet scratching of a quill as she wrote down his instructions for later reference in case she needed to brew a batch for him and he wasn’t able to sit and supervise it.
“Perhaps you should rest a while Professor, I mean Severus,” she said and came over, offering him a hand up.

“Yes, I believe you are correct.” He stood, not allowing himself to lean on the young witch as he would have with Lucius. He walked slowly, but under his own power. “Have the House Elves alert me when it’s time to finish the potion. There are a few final touches you’ll need assistance with,” he said.

“Of course,” she said and left him outside his door. “I’ll see you in a few hours.”

“Thank you Miss Granger.” Severus escaped to the solitude of his rooms. It was incredible how much more tolerable she was when she wasn’t waving her arm around like an idiot, trying to prove she was the smartest child in the room. As if anyone who’d read a single essay of hers, could doubt it. He went and laid down on the bed, closing his eyes as the pain settled to a manageable level.

He had not expected to ever open his eyes again after giving Potter his memories. He had a hazy recollection of a park, bathed in bright sunshine, and a pair of warm green eyes…but the harder he tried to reach for the memory the faster it faded. He’d awoke to find that damnable brat sitting at his bedside, keeping vigil over him. It felt…odd to know that someone wanted him to live. He’d never imagined that he would survive the eventual destruction of the Dark Lord, a fate he had quite come to terms with many years ago. It made it easier to do the things necessary. Fear of death was an impediment and one he’d happily shed. In death he could be with her again, or at least he liked to imagine that it was true.

Now the Dark Lord was finally gone, his dark mark fading to a pale scar. He was being called a hero, there had been hints they wanted to give him a bloody Order of Merlin. He just wanted to fade into obscurity, but between Potter and Nott it seemed he would not be getting that wish. He half wished his grandfather, Oneais Prince, were still alive to see his half-blood grandson finally make something of himself. Old bastard was probably turning over in his grave to know that Severus would sit in his old seat in the Wizengamot. It gave him a certain dark sense of satisfaction, even as the realities of being named Lord Prince made his head throb.

Severus laid there, thinking over everything that needed doing when a tray appeared at his bedside with tea, soup and sandwiches. Lucius’ elves knew better than to bother him when he was convalescing, and that alone made them far superior to the healers at St. Mungos in his estimation. Why was it so hard for them to understand all he required was peace and quiet? He did not want to blather away to idiot healers and their assistants every time he required a potion, he did not WANT visitors, and he certainly did not require the stunningly idiotic observations of the orderlies at meal times. Peace, quiet, and his own potions were all he needed.
Theo rubbed his temple. “The easiest way to tackle this is visit the properties gradually. If you try and do it all at once you’ll just get overwhelmed.” He stood and left the table where he and Potter had been sorting through the massive pile of deeds and paperwork the Goblins had given the other boy. He poured them both a drink and sat back down. He smirked wickedly as Potter looked at the fire whiskey dubiously. “Don’t tell me you’ve never gotten properly pissed, Potter.”

Harry coloured a little. “Can’t say that I have.” He muttered and tried a sip, nearly choking at the burn of it.

Theo laughed. “And here I thought that the Gryffindors knew how to have a good time.” He teased. “It gets smoother the more you drink,” he said and finished sorting his pile. “Ideally you should start with main estate, get it sorted out before you worry about anything else. You’ll need to get the wards renewed, after they’ve been dormant this long, and you’ll probably need a few house elves to maintain it.”

Harry nodded. “You realize most of this is still Greek to me right?”

“Yeah…I’d suggest having your girlfriend help you, but I don’t know how much Miss Weasley would know about old estate wards,” Theo said carefully.

“I’ll have to talk to her about it,” Harry said, not taking offense. He knew that most of the Slytherins looked down on the Weasley family…but at least Theo was trying to be polite.

“Have you spoken to Arthur yet about a betrothal contract?” Theo asked and then immediately groaned at the clueless expression that crossed his face. “So that’s a no.” He downed his whiskey and poured himself another. “Ok Potter, time for your primer on pureblood marriages.” He started off. “You’re the head of your family now, your Lordship’s been confirmed. Continuing to see Ginny, without arranging a formal contract with her father could be seen a slight against her. You’re basically telling everyone that she’s good enough to screw around with, but not marry,” he put it bluntly. Over the last few weeks he’d come to realize that subtlety was not Potter’s forte.

Harry paled a bit. “Shit…”

“Yeah…shit.” Theo chuckled. “You need to sit down with Arthur and come to an agreement. It doesn’t need to be anything too complicated, but there needs to be something formal. I can refer
you to a good barrister to have the betrothal agreement and marriage contacts drawn up.”

“Why didn’t Ginny say anything?” Harry asked, taking another long sip of the whiskey, grimacing at the taste.

“Because it’s extremely bad manners for the girl, or her family to bring it up. It falls to the boy, or his parents to broach the issue.” Theo explained. “She’ll need an engagement ring too Potter. There should be something in your family vaults that will be appropriate. That is of course assuming you want to marry her.” He added, realizing he’d just jumped right to the conclusion that Harry did.

“I…I don’t know,” Harry said quietly, it was a BIG decision.

“You could do a lot worse Potter. The Weasleys are Sacred Twenty-eight, purest of the pure,” he said. “Wizards tend to marry young, especially when a line’s in danger of dying out. You wouldn’t be able to marry her before next summer, but I think it’s the smartest move for you. After all, there’s no guarantee you’ll find another well-bred witch that will want to put up with you.” He grinned.

Harry snorted. “I love her…I just worry that it’s going to last, you know?”

Theo nodded. “Well…the upside is that there’s no such thing as divorce in our world, unless the terms of the marriage contract are broken. So if she says ‘I do’, she’s stuck with you,” Theo said a bit more seriously. “So take a little time and think it over, but don’t wait too long. The only reason she’s not already promised to someone is because the Weasley’s are out of favour. Most pureblood girls are contracted to someone by the time they’re fifteen or sixteen years old.”

“Are you engaged, or contracted…whatever you want to call it?” He asked Theo.

“No.” Theo said quietly. “Once my affairs are more in order, I’ll start looking for the right witch.” His previously relaxed expression gone in an instant. “Luckily your friend, Miss Granger, has agreed to a little public theatre to keep everyone off my case.”

“I saw the new edition of Witch Weekly, it was quite the article about you two. If I didn’t know better, I’d have believed it.” Harry said.

Theo nodded. The photographs had been…suggestive. They’d managed to get pictures of him
when he’d been calming her down after Lady Goyle had verbally assaulted her. The one they’d featured was him leaning in, looking for all the world like a hidden romantic moment. His hand had been smoothing down her arm while he whispered to her. “I don’t know if she’s seen it yet.”

“I’m not going to bring it up.” Harry said and chuckled.

“Neither am I.” Theo agreed. “I know better than to upset a witch that is capable of hexing off parts of my body.”

“She’s scary when she gets angry.” Harry agreed. “Professor Snape finally escaped the hospital.” He shifted the subject a bit.

“I’m shocked they kept him that long,” Theo said. “I imagine he’ll have fled to Malfoy Manor, Draco said he stayed there most summers.”

Harry nodded. “Any word about Draco?” He asked.

“I try and visit a couple of times a week, but there doesn’t seem to be any change.” Theo frowned. “Lucius must be beside himself.”

Harry nodded. “Especially since he can’t leave the manor to visit him. They wouldn’t even let Lucius attend his own wife’s funeral. I may not agree with him being free…but that’s not right either.” He said quietly.

Theo nodded. He and Potter did not discuss Lucius and his freedom, it was an unspoken agreement between the two. “I wouldn’t want to be Kingsley Shacklebolt once Lucius’ house arrest is up, that’s all I’ll say.”

“You think he’ll go after him?” Harry’s eyebrows rose.

“Not in the way you’re thinking. Politically though? He’ll run the man out on a rail, and blow the tracks up behind him.” Theo was certain of that. “The Malfoy’s have always been the power behind the throne when it comes to the Ministry, going all the way back to the beginning. They never sit in the chair, but nine times out of ten, they pick the ones that do. Generally they are extremely good strategists, and know just how to arrange things so all the pieces fall into place at the right moment,” he explained. “Your friend wants to get into the Ministry, and I have a feeling
that Lucius will arrange for her to rise quickly once she does.” Theo saw the beginnings of the strategy, he just wasn’t sure about the end game yet.

“Hermione would get far all on her own, I don’t see her needing help from him.” Harry said, shaking his head.

“Don’t be naïve, it really doesn’t suit you.” Theo said disdainfully. “Granger’s a muggleborn, she’d get slotted into some dead-end research or administrative position after about five years, without a helping hand from someone highly influential. No one gets very far on their own Potter, not without knowing all the unwritten rules and unspoken protocols. He’s teaching her, and when he’s done…no one will know what hit them.” He looked forward to seeing it.

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“Is Severus not joining us?” Hermione asked as she sat down for dinner, surprised to find Lucius there on his own and only two place settings on the table. She’d gone to get cleaned up after they had finished bottling up his potions and getting another batch on to simmer overnight.

“No, he asks for your pardon, but he is quiet simply too exhausted. The elves took him dinner in his rooms.” Lucius said gently. “I hope he wasn’t too abrasive while you were brewing for him.”

“No more than he normally is.” She laughed a little. “It was actually interesting to brew his own creations for him. The process moves much smoother than the potions we brewed in classes.”

“Severus was always improving on the standard recipes, never satisfied until he’d torn a potion apart and improved every single part of it. It used to drive old Slughorn spare.” He remembered hearing Horace rant about the young Slytherin to his father at Christmas dinners. “He could never quite get over that Severus was innately more talented than he was.”

She smiled. “I can’t even imagine Severus as a student.” Hermione sipped her glass of wine and helped herself to the lovely dinner that had been laid out for them. “I have a very hard time picturing him as anything but what he is.”

“He was a surly thing, even as a first year. I was Head Boy, and I remember this scrawny little boy with a nose too big for his face, just glaring up at me, daring me to say anything when I found him locked out of his dorm one night.” He chuckled. “His year-mates were not terribly kind to him, but with some help he learned to fend for himself. By the time I left school at the end of the year, he’d
made quite an impression so I kept tabs on him. I’d send letters a few times year, just because I had a feeling that he’d end up someone I’d want on my side.”

“I remember feeling alone as a first year…I didn’t quite fit anywhere,” Hermione said quietly. “If not for the troll incident at Halloween I sometimes wonder if Harry, Ron, and I would ever have been friends at all.” She said quietly.

“Troll?” Lucius’ eyebrows lifted.

“Professor Quirrell had let a Mountain Troll into the school as a diversion on the night of the Halloween feast, so that he could attempt to steal the Philosopher’s Stone. Ron had said something beastly to me that morning and I’d locked myself in the bathroom, crying. When all the students were being sent back to their common rooms, Harry and Ron realized that I didn’t know and went looking for me. They got to the bathroom just in time to see the troll wander in.” She made a face. “I was twelve years old, and I was face to face with a fully grown Mountain troll. Harry and Ron somehow managed to knock it out, and when Minerva and Severus found us, I lied to keep them out of trouble. I said that I’d gone looking for the troll and the boys had rescued me.”

“I imagine that would have been quite the…bonding activity.” He looked utterly stunned.

“Every year with Harry tended to involve risk to life and limb.” She shook her head. “I swear that half of the books I read were simply for self-preservation, knowing that at some point that year we were going to be facing some great danger.”

“So, in your first year it was the Philosopher’s Stone, and in your second year it was the Basilisk.” Lucius recalled. “I do apologize for my part in that.”

“Well, I spent part of that year petrified in the hospital wing…thankfully I’d been using a mirror to look around corridors once I figured out what it was.” She repressed a shudder. “Then third year was the Dementors and Sirius Black. Fourth Year was the triwizard tournament when we spent a whole year being taught defence by a Death Eater, including in-class demonstrations of the Unforgivables.” She swallowed remembering that, and also remembering her short lived romance with Viktor. “Fifth year we knew Voldemort was back, and had to train ourselves because Umbridge had determined that we didn’t need to know any defensive magic at all. We ended up battling you and others in the Department of Mysteries.” She paused and had some more wine. “I nearly died…”

“But you survived.” Lucius said and reached across the table, taking her hand. “I knew about the last few years, I didn’t realize you were nearly killed every year you were at school.” He shook his
head, unable to believe that she had survived all that to end up sitting at his table. “You truly are a remarkable witch,” he said softly.

She smiled at him. “Just books and cleverness,” she protested, remembering saying much the same to Harry, and gasped a little as he squeezed her hand hard.

“Don’t ever dismiss yourself like that,” Lucius said fiercely, eyes narrowed a little. “You are remarkable. Harry Potter would have been dead long before he had a chance to defeat the Dark Lord, were it not for you. People will try and dismiss you because of your heritage, don’t ever do it for them.”

Hermione nodded, meeting his gaze and understanding what he was telling her. “I’ll try not to.” She said.

He nodded and released her hand. “I will simply need to remind you, often.” He gave her a charming smile.

Hermione blinked a bit at the swift turn in his affect, but dismissed it as the rest of the meal passed without incident.

As they finished dessert, he stood and came over to her chair, offering her a hand. “Would you care to dance, Miss Granger?” he asked.

Hermione repressed a laugh and slipped her hand into his. “I’d be delighted, Lord Malfoy.” She said, her tone a little playful as she stood, letting him lead her out of the breakfast room and down the hall. They passed through a set of heavy gold doors and inside was an honest to goodness ballroom. The chandelier glittered with thousands of crystals, and gilded mirrors covered the walls, making the space look never ending. The space soared two stories high, with a second level that wrapped around the edges of the room, open below so people could observe the dancers. “It’s beautiful,” she said.

“You should see it once it’s been decorated.” Lucius smiled and left her to stand in the middle of the room, going to start the record player. “I thought we’d begin with a waltz, see what I’m working with.” He returned to her as the music began to fill the room.

Hermione nodded, unable to help sucking in a breath as he pulled her closer. His right hand rested on her back, his left held her hand firmly but not too tight. She looked up at him through her eye
lashes, unable to help the butterflies that started fluttering around in her stomach. The music started softly, delicate piano cords starting as he began, effortlessly leading her across the floor. Sweet vocals mixed with the piano and violin, lulling her into a little private world with just him and the music. They started off slow, keeping it very standard and as she relaxed he introduced spins, guiding her with subtle shifted of his hand…making her feel so much more graceful than she was.

Dark eyes watched them from an alcove, taking in the sight of the older aristocrat dancing with the young witch. He was unable to help the small smile that crept across his thin lips. She looked utterly enchanted. His friend had always had a natural charm, a magnetism that had drawn people to him. In a world without Tom Riddle, Lucius would have been the one with sycophants hanging off his every word and gesture. He’d been the undisputed prince of Slytherin during his school years. He was certain in a handful of years all memory of his disgrace would be erased, forgotten in a swirl of society dinners and balls. Miss Granger would be his proof to the world that he was tolerant, evolving with the times. The fact that his friend seemed equally enraptured with the young woman was a happy accident. He would keep an eye, but the moment Lucius’ interest was quite innocent, playing the consummate gentleman to his young companion. He doubted that his friend would remain content with these tame diversions long, he only hoped that Miss Granger was prepared for the shift when it came.

As the music came to an end, Severus watched as Lucius shifted closer, catching the young woman’s lips in a kiss. He felt vaguely uncomfortable observing such a moment, but was unable to pull himself away. Lucius’ hand tangled in the girl’s hair as he deepened the kiss. It was the girl that broke the kiss, drawing back and shaking her head slightly. Lucius rested his forehead against hers, a muscle in his jaw working as he wrestled some control back. He watched as Lucius stroked his thumb against her cheek, soothing her quietly. He wondered how hard it was for Lucius to wait for what he clearly wanted.

“Forgive me, I forgot myself,” Lucius whispered, attempting to sound apologetic.

Hermione shook her head. “There’s nothing to forgive…I just…”

Lucius nodded and moved back a bit. “It’s getting late, and we can continue this another night.” He gestured at the record player, shutting it off. “Let me walk you back to your rooms.” The charming, concerned smile was back on his lips.

Hermione nodded, slipping an arm through his and allowing him to escort her out of the ballroom. She felt a little shaky on her heels and just concentrated on walking steadily as they climbed the stairs. As they reached her door, Lucius tipped her chin up and brushed another soft kiss over her lips. He kept it very reserved and drew back.

“Goodnight, Hermione,” he said softly.
“Goodnight, Lucius,” she replied in kind, reaching behind her to open the door to her suite and escaping inside before she did something ill advised. The feelings coursing through her thought that kissing him again was a fantastic idea, one they highly approved of. She knew however that she wasn’t ready for more, and moving forward and claiming another kiss would lead to much, much more.
Hermione had dressed very conservatively for today. She was wearing dark grey robes, with black piping and mother of pearl buttons. When she’d seen it she’d been reminded of Professor Snape’s teaching robes, only much more feminine. She pulled her hair back into a loose chignon, and a few wisps escaped to frame her face. She was accompanying Lucius to the Ministry for the first of the Death Eater Trials, as they were being called. Pius Thickness was being charged with complicity, supporting the Dark Lord, and a whole host of other crimes. Lucius had confided in her that the man had indeed been under Imperius, and had been very difficult to keep subdued.

She was waiting in the front hall when Lucius joined her. When she was younger she’d thought the purple robes of the Wizengamot a bit ridiculous, but she instantly took it back watching Lucius descend the stairs and walk towards her. The purple robes were cut to his figure, hints of the black under robes showed as he walked. He looked impressive and powerful as they caught the air and billowed behind him. He had his signature cane with him and he nodded to her.

“Are you ready to go, Miss Granger?” he asked. They had another hour and a bit before the start of session, but he always preferred to arrive early. When she nodded, he gestured for her to precede him. “Ladies First.”

She laughed a little and took some floo powder and went through to the Atrium. She moved aside and spelled the tiny bits of ash off her robes and did the same for Lucius when he came through behind her.

“This way, Miss Granger,” he said and escorted her through the hallways.

“This place always feels like a maze.” She remarked as they took yet another turn and a lift down.

“I believe it’s by design.” He chuckled. “You’ll need to sit in the Gallery for the proceedings, given the high profile of the trial I imagine it will be a large crowd.” He explained.

“Ah Lucius, and Miss Granger! How nice to see you again.” Lord Travers joined them from one of
the many side corridors they had passed.

“Marcus,” Lucius said politely.

“It’s nice to see you again Lord Travers.” Hermione smiled.

“Lucius, would mind terribly if I borrowed Miss Granger for a moment once we get inside? I’m sure you have some people you need to speak with, and I have an exciting proposal for your young friend.” Marcus asked as they approached the doors to the main chamber.

“That would be up to Miss Granger.” Lucius said smoothly, not speaking for her this time.

“I don’t mind at all.” Hermione said with a smile.

“Excellent.” Lord Travers smiled and held the door for her and Lucius as they entered the main courtroom of the Wizengamot.

“Once the session is called to order, you’ll need to take a seat there.” Lucius nodded to the empty benches to the right of the entrance. “If you’ll excuse me then, I see a few people I need to speak with.” He locked eyes on Lord Goyle and headed across the room with purpose.

Lord Travers led her off to the side. “I’m very glad to have been able to catch you before things got started. The conversation we had at the Greengrass party has been quite foremost in my mind, and I was wondered if you would be willing to consider working for my Department as an independent consultant? There are some exciting things in the works, and I would greatly value the input of such a talented, articulate, young witch. You have such a fresh view of things and I’ll shamelessly admit to wanting to take full advantage before someone else snaps you up.” He chuckled.

“A consultant? What would you be having me consult on?” She asked, quite flattered.

“We’re currently working on a few bills to modernize the curriculum at Hogwarts. As my consultant you would read over the bills and give me your thoughts, propose amendments where you feel they might be warranted, and from time to time work as a Liaison between my office and the Headmistress.” He said. “I’m drafting an official offer for you, as I insist on compensating you for your time and effort. For now the demands on your time would be limited, I understand you are self-studying for your Newts and you have responsibilities to Kingsley. Once those commitments
end, we could look at getting you a permanent position with my Department.” He gave her a
winning smile.

“I’d be very happy to look over your offer once it’s ready.” She smiled. “Perhaps once it’s
prepared, you could owl me and we can arrange to meet over lunch and discuss it and the bills in
full?”

“I’ll be certain to have it to you by week’s end. Can’t have someone else poaching you from out
under my nose.” He winked.

“I don’t think there’s much risk of that.” She laughed a little.

“Don’t sell yourself short, my dear. You’re going to do big things, mark my words. Lucius never
puts his clout behind anyone that’s not slotted for greatness,” he said.

She merely nodded. “I’ll try not to disappoint everyone then.” She smiled.

“I doubt you could. You’d best find a seat before all the good ones have gone.” Marcus said,
offering her a hand to help her up the rickety steps in her heels.

“Thank you Lord Travers, I look forward to your owl.” She said politely and settled down in the
front row. Her eyes drifted over to the far side of the room where Lucius was engaged in
conversation, a large number of other Lords gathering to him. She could see clearly that even
though he was by his own description, in disgrace, it hardly seemed to have turned him into a
political leper. She saw Kingsley come in and he nodded politely to her, but the smile on his face
crumbled as he saw Lucius surrounded by his old allies talking animatedly about something. She
shivered a little at the dark look that crossed Kingsley’s face as he headed to take his seat, nodding
to Tiberius Ogden to start calling things to order.

“If everyone would please take their seats, we’ll have the courtroom opened for the public and get
this underway.” Tiberius said.

Lucius nodded to the men he’d been talking to and they all went up and sat together on the left side
of the Courtroom. She spotted Harry and Theo sitting near them as well, and surprisingly enough
Arthur Weasley was with them too. Hermione heard the doors of the courtroom open and there
was a sudden flood of people coming up and settling all around her. It made her very
uncomfortable having that many strangers pressed in around her, but she kept her composure.
“Miss Granger? Do you mind terribly if I sit with you?” A man’s voice came from her left side.

Hermione smiled, recognizing the reporter. “Please do Mr. Arnebolt, it’s nice to see someone I recognize.” She shifted over a bit to make room for him.

“Escorting Lord Malfoy today?” He asked.

“Yes, the Wizengamot voted that he could attend sessions if I was with him. I admit it’s actually quite interesting to see how our government works,” Hermione confided in him.

“Well, you’re certainly getting a bird’s eye view of it all.” He chuckled, getting his parchment and a self-inking quill out.

She was about to say something else when Tiberius Ogden called the room to order. “Bring Forth the Prisoner.” He commanded the Aurors.

Pius Thicknesse was dragged into the courtroom and thrown onto the chair. The man was pale, gaunt, but still held himself with dignity.

“Pius Thicknesse, you are charged with complicity in the murder of Rufus Scrimgeour, collaboration with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and fighting for him at the Battle of Hogwarts. How do you plead?” Tiberius’ voice reverberated through the room.

“I plead not guilty, due to the influence of the Imperius Curse.” He said loudly, staring the other wizard boldly in the eye. “I am willing to submit to Veritaserum, and to offer up my memories to viewing by this esteemed body. The things I was forced to do while under the influence of Lord Voldemort were vile, despicable, and unbefitting a member of the Ministry. When my curse was broken I surrendered my wand and submitted to arrest without struggle or complaint.” He said.

There were murmurs throughout the room as people talked about his claims.

“Do you have any witnesses to call upon your behalf?” The Supreme Mugwump asked.
“I would call the wizard that cursed me, but from what I have been told the Death Eater Yaxley is still in the wind.” He replied. “I can only offer my own testimony, and my own memories to corroborate them.”

“Very well.” The man agreed and had the Auror’s administer the Veritaserum, and they began to question the former Minister of Magic.

Hermione listened as he detailed everything, not leaving out a single aspect of the way he was manipulated into handing control of the Ministry over to the Death Eaters. It was hard enough to hear that she couldn’t imagine having had to live through it. He ended with the battle of Hogwarts, and thanking Arthur and Percy for stunning him and keeping him from hurting anyone else. She raised a hand to wipe away a few tears when she saw the reporter beside her was offering her a handkerchief.

“Thank you, Mr. Arnebolt.” She said softly.

“It’s nothing Miss Granger. Truly horrible isn’t it? So many lives destroyed because of one man’s desire.”

“It’s not the first time, and I doubt it’ll be the last.” She said quietly. “All we can do is try and make sure it’s a long time before it happens again.”

“Can I quote you on that?” he asked.

“No…not this time.” Hermione gave him a small smile. “Nice try though.”

“Can’t blame a wizard for trying.” He said, speaking softly while the Wizengamot spoke quietly amongst themselves.

“We will propose a vote. All those in favour of Conviction make your stance known.” Tiberius said. There were some hands.

“All those in favour of clearing the accused of all charges?” He asked, and the bulk of the hands were raised.
“By clear Majority, Pius Thicknesse you are hereby cleared of all charges and free to go.” Tiberius proclaimed.

“Are all trials so condensed?” She asked Mr. Arnebolt.

“No, his willingness to take Veritaserum really moves things along. Many of the members of the Wizengamot know him, and likely are familiar with his beliefs before he was placed under the curse.” Henry explained. “The really drawn out trials will come when the Aurors finally bring in the higher level Death Eaters that are still at large.”

Hermione nodded quietly. “Yeah.”

The wizard just nodded kindly. “It was nice seeing you again, Miss Granger. Hopefully it won’t be the last time.”

“I’m sure that it won’t be. I look forward to reading your article.” She said and nodded politely to him as he headed out. The Gallery was emptying and she watched as little groups gathered up in the benches while the Lords and Ladies discussed something.

Hermione stayed in her seat, watching to see who was associating with whom. Lord Travers was in the group speaking with Kingsley in hushed tones. The interim minister finally excused himself and stopped by the gallery, flashing Hermione his wide, winning smile.

“Hello Hermione.” He said.

“Hello Kingsley.” She went and came down.

“How have you been managing?” He asked.

“Fairly well, I’m still dealing with a lot of what happened, but I’m getting better.” She said.

“Good.” He smiled. “I’m needed in a meeting, but we should catch up sometime soon.” He said warmly.
“Of course, just let me know when you have the time.” Hermione said, watching him hurry off. She headed over to join Harry, Theo, and Lucius.

“Ah Miss Granger, I was just inviting Lord Potter and Lord Nott to join us for dinner back at the Manor.” Lucius said as she reached them. “I trust that’s agreeable to you?”

“Very agreeable.” She smiled. Things had been so busy lately that she hadn’t had a lot of time to see Harry and talk about things with them.

“Then if you’ll allow me the pleasure?” Theo smiled and offered her his arm with a gallant gesture.

Hermione laughed a little bit slipped her arm through his. She and Theo walked behind Lucius and Harry. It was strange to see them talking so politely. She gave Theo a little questioning look. He grinned and leaned down, as if whispering something salacious in her ear.

“They’re talking about Professor Snape’s new Lordship.” He said softly.

“Oh.” She blinked, realizing that was actually some fairly common ground for them both.

“After dinner...I was wondering if I could talk with you a little. There’s something that’s come up with Potter, and I need the advice of someone that knows him a little better than I do.” He asked her. He ignored the odd flash of a camera as they walked.

“Of course.” She frowned a bit, wondering what could be wrong. “I’ll help however I can.” She said.

“Good.” He nodded and straightened as they all walked through the Atrium to take a floo to Malfoy Manor. Lucius went through first, followed by Harry, herself, and Theo brought up the rear.

Hermione let out a breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding as soon as she was standing in the Entrance hall of Malfoy Manor. It was good to be home. “I’m just going to get freshened up before dinner.” She said to the three wizards.
“Of course, Miss Granger.” Lucius said with a smile. “Bilby, Lord Potter and Lord Nott will be staying for dinner.” He said, informing the little creature as he popped in. “Gentlemen, will you join me for a drink in the study?” He asked, watching Hermione head upstairs out of the corner of his eye.

Theo nodded and together the three Lords headed to the Study to relax over brandy while they waited for Hermione to rejoin them. Theo had always been an observant wizard, his father had always told him that to get anywhere in life it was important to learn to read people. If you knew what motivated someone, you could anticipate their moves and alter your course accordingly. Potter was an open book, the poor boy had absolutely no notion of guile. Watching him try and play the game was rather like watching a guppy fence with sharks. Teaching him the rules was almost an act of pity.

In direct contrast was Lucius himself. The wizard was a study in control. He only displayed emotion when he chose, and even then only when he felt it would benefit him to make a show of it. So many people were taken in by his charming smile and impeccable manners, that they forgot that the man had been the Dark Lord’s most brutally effective lieutenant in the first war. When he’d turned fifteen his father had sat him down and told him things, stories about Lucius Malfoy and the things he’d done. He’d wanted his son prepared and that meant arming him with knowledge. He knew things about all the players in the Dark Lord’s inner circle, he was aware of their strengths and weaknesses. The only weakness Lucius had ever revealed had been his love for his family. It had been what the Dark Lord had exploited to destroy him after his rebirth. Short sighted, since the Dark Lord might not have fallen at all if he’d not gone to war with the Malfoys. If Narcissa had only told the truth in the clearing that night, so many things would now be different. Not that Theo was in any way disappointed, not in the slightest, he simply found it amusing to think how the smallest things could tip fate one direction or the other.

“Mind if I join you?” Severus appeared in the doorway. He was still paler than usual, but he was much improved from when he’d staggered out of the floo days ago.

“Certainly Severus.” Lucius said and gestured for him to sit and he went to pour the man a fire whiskey. He was not the greatest lover of brandy.

Severus chose to sit beside Harry. “Good evening.”

“Professor.” Harry smiled. “You’re looking much better Sir.” He said.

“It’s just Severus now, Lord Potter.” He said. “I have no intention of returning to Hogwarts to ever teach again.”
“Then I insist you call me Harry.” The young man responded smoothly.

Severus nodded. “I take it the trial went well?” He asked.

“Yes, much smoother than the trials did after the last war. Pius has been cleared of all charges, though he has tendered a formal resignation from the Ministry.” Lucius said.

“Unsurprising. Even exonerated there will be many who seek to lay blame.” Severus said, having intimate experience with that himself after the last war.

“He will rebound in time, keeping out of the public eye for a time is the smartest strategy.” Lucius said dismissively.

Theo nodded, thinking to himself that Lucius knew all about strategy. “His son is starting Hogwarts in two years, they’ll likely take the time to let things settle down for now so that the boy doesn’t have to worry about any prejudice or discrimination.”

Lucius nodded, pleased that Theo was keeping tabs on things that closely. He allowed a smile to cross his lips as Hermione joined them. She’d changed into one of her new dresses, this one a soft lilac. “Would you care for a drink, Miss Granger?” He asked, taking care not to let his eyes linger too long.

“Some wine please, Lord Malfoy.” She said and sat down next to Theo. “I hope you had a pleasant day Severus?”

“I did indeed, Miss Granger.” He said, inclining his head politely. “I was working on refining one of my healing draughts.”

“Did you try shredding the Hellebore this time?” Hermione asked, recalling their conversation over dinner the other night.

“The result was less than satisfactory.” He said and shrugged. “I combined some powdered Hellebore with the crushed beetle eyes and it integrated quite smoothly.” He told her.
Lucius just chuckled. He could well imagine Miss Granger pursuing her Potions mastery when she was finished her Newts, he’d rarely seen anyone manage to converse with Severus about the finer details without arousing his ire.

“Master, dinner is ready.” Bilby appeared, informing them that the meal was prepared.

“Wonderful, shall we all move to the dining room?” Lucius asked, enjoying playing host this evening.

“How are you making out with all of the paperwork relating to your Lordship?” Harry asked Severus as they all walked together.

“I am making progress.” Severus said. “Lucius has been kind enough to assist me in making sense of it. I assume you’ve been facing similar challenges?” He asked the young wizard he owed his life and freedom to.

“Yes, though Theo has been helping me with the details.” Harry said. “I’d still be fumbling along without his assistance.”

“You are still fumbling along, just not dangerously.” Theo snorted from behind them. He’d offered Hermione his arm, quite enjoying playing the role of the doting beau for Severus and Harry’s benefit. He wasn’t entirely certain that his former Professor and Head of House bought the little act, but until he was certain he’d maintain the illusion.

Harry rolled his eyes a little.

Lucius chuckled as he led the way into the formal dining room that Hermione had most recently used to host her dinner party. As they were seated, a starter of soup appeared at everyone’s place. “So, Miss Granger, have you come to a decision about hosting a ball this summer?” He asked, shifting the conversation to something appropriate for the dinner table.

Hermione’s eyebrows lifted a little but she nodded. “I think that I’d like to, it would be a good way for everyone to reconnect before we all go our separate ways.” She said.
“Who were you planning to invite?” Theo asked, rather looking forward to the prospect. There had been precious few formal balls since the return of the Dark Lord.

“All of the students from our year, the year below, and the one above.” Hermione said.

“You’d do well to also invite select members of the Wizengamot, Ministry, and a handful of others.” Theo said. “If the goal is networking and better relations, you should be more varied in your audience.”

“Won’t that make the guest list terribly large?” She gave Lucius a dubious look.

“Hardly Miss Granger, Malfoy Manor is used to hosting excessively large social events.” He reassured her. “We can begin on the guest lists tomorrow then, just a rough draft.”

“You’ll all attend, won’t you?” Hermione looked at the men around the table.

“Of course ‘Mione, I wouldn’t miss it.” Harry promised.

“As your official escort I could hardly abandon you at your very first Ball.” Theo chuckled.

“Severus and I will be there, for moral support.” Lucius assured her, pinning his friend with a look.

“I know when I am out flanked,” Severus muttered. “I will of course be pleased to attend.” He said graciously.

Hermione smiled. As dinner progressed, the conversation shifted between the prospective guests for the ball and Harry’s decision to return to Hogwarts to complete his Newts. Hermione was very proud of him for that, especially when the Auror’s office and Ron had been so desperately trying to get him to forgo it and just join the Ministry. They were chatting over dessert when Bilby popped in, saying something quietly to Lucius. She sipped her wine and frowned seeing him stand in a hurry.

“If you will all forgive me, I need to take a fire call from St. Mungo’s.” He nodded to them all and swept out of the room.
“It must be about Draco.” Theo said, watching the man stride purposefully from the room.

Hermione nodded. “Shall we all move to the sitting room for coffee?” She suggested, noting that everyone seemed more or less done their dessert.

Theo nodded and stood, coming over and offering her a hand to stand. “Coffee sounds lovely.”

“I regret I must decline, I have to attend to something in my lab.” Severus smiled and nodded deferentially to Hermione.

“Can I assist you?” Harry offered, having wanted to catch up with his former Professor for a while now.

“You may accompany me, but you will not touch anything.” Severus said firmly. “Do excuse us, Miss Granger, Theodore.” He said and together he and Potter left the dining room together.

“I suppose it makes it easier for us to have that conversation.” Theo chuckled, walking with her to the sitting room where the house elves had left a tray of coffee and tea waiting. They settled down together on the small sofa in front of the fire. It was strange to him how comfortable he was around her. She was taking to her new position like a duck to water. She was playing the part of Lady of the house seamlessly, and he wondered if it was just play acting or if Lucius had designs in that area. It would certainly explain the protectiveness the man displayed.

“Much easier.” Hermione laughed and fixed her coffee the way she liked it. “What did you want to ask me?”

“Potter needs to start thinking about getting married and…I’m not entirely sure that he’s as in love with Miss Weasley as he’s convinced himself he is,” he said delicately. “I obviously don’t know him as well as you do, so I thought I should make sure I’m not mistaken before I advise him to break it off with her.”

Hermione’s eyebrows rose as she realized just what he was asking. She let out a breath and considered what he was asking her. “Harry…he’s never really been in love,” she said quietly. “I mean, every year we were dodging some convoluted plot to kill him. I think he’s with Ginny because it’s easy. She’s been obsessed with him since she was a child, and he loves the Weasleys since they were the only ones to show him any warmth and affection.” She’d never been entirely comfortable with Ginny’s laser focus on her best friend.
Theo nodded. “Potter needs a wife who understands how politics work in our world. His father
didn’t take care of the estate the way he should have, and Potter will need to do a lot of work to
rebuild the fortune and manage the estates. From what I can tell Miss Weasley plans on playing
Professional Quidditch after school, and has had no real exposure to the realities of being the lady
of an ancient and noble house.”

“Harry won’t break up with her simply because she’s not ideal.” Hermione said.

“I’m not about to give him an ultimatum, that would just push in deeper into her arms.” Theo
laughed. “I just wanted to be sure I wasn’t imagining things before I put a few little plans into
play.”

“If you hurt him…you and I will have a serious problem.” Hermione said, a hard edge sneaking
into her voice.

“I have no wish to hurt him.” Theo said, seeing a darkness in her normally unreserved eyes. A little
shiver passed through him and he wondered if Lucius was aware that his new pet had claws. “But I
consider myself duly warned.” He took her hand and pressed a kiss to her knuckles.

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Hermione had said goodnight to Theo and Harry, when she went to find Lucius. She knocked at
the door of his study before opening it. He was sitting in his favourite chair, staring at the flames.
”Lucius?” She called softly.

“Hermione…please come in.” He said, shaking himself a little and straightening in his seat.
“Forgive me for abandoning you and our guests.”

“Is everything all right?” She asked and came to sit in the other armchair. She ignored his phrasing,
and how good it made her feel. Dangerous thoughts.

“Draco’s awake.” He said with a small smile. “He’ll be able to come home in a few days.”

Hermione smiled. “That’s wonderful news.”
“It is.” He said, not looking like he was entirely sure how wonderful it was.

“What’s wrong?” She asked, tilting her head to the side.

“He doesn’t know that his mother’s dead…and I don’t know how to tell him.” He whispered.

Hermione reached over and placed her hand over his. “You’ll find the words…when the time comes.” She said. “The important thing is that he’s finally awake.”

Lucius turned her hand, taking her smaller one in his and squeezing it gently. It worried him sometimes, just how seamlessly she had fit into his life. He had no trouble imagining sitting in this room ten years from now with her, talking about any number of subjects. In truth, he’d been spending far too much time lately imagine things revolving around her. “Yes it is. I should speak to Severus, and ask if he’d be willing to go and see Draco tomorrow. The news should come from someone he trusts.” He said reluctantly and stood.

Hermione stood as well, meaning to just say goodnight and excuse herself when she felt him step into her personal space. She shivered a little as she met his eyes, words forgotten for the moment. “Lucius…”

“Thank you, Hermione.” He said and leaned down, brushing his lips against hers. He slipped a hand against the small of her back and pulled her against him. He was ever aware of her reactions, ready to release her at the first sign of discomfort. He deepened the kiss, feeling her yield to him. As soon as she softened against his body, he broke the kiss and smiled. “I should say goodnight.” He moved back, taking one of her hands and pressing a chaste kiss over her knuckles.

“Goodnight.” Hermione managed to say as he left the study. She pressed the back of her hand to her cheek, feeling the heat pouring off her skin. This was going to be a problem, particularly with Draco coming home soon. She sat down in the chair again, wondering when her life had gotten so bloody complicated.
The entrance hall of Malfoy Manor was exactly as Draco remembered it, as though the occupation of their home by the Dark Lord had never happened. The marble floors gleamed brightly, and the light streamed in and made the wooden railings of the stair case almost glow. Everything felt so perfect that he almost expected to see his mother walking out of her sitting room to greet him. Just thinking about it made tears well up in his eyes. He still felt weaker than a newborn kitten, but Healer Keena had told him that he was well enough to go home. He’d been awake for three days now, and his Godfather had been at his bedside each day. Severus had broken the news of his mother’s death as gently as he could but there was a deep, gaping hole in his heart. Too distraught to care about appearances, he’d cried like a child, sobbing until he had no more tears left. These last few years, his mother had been the only thing holding him together, she had been his everything and now she was gone.

“Draco.” His father’s voice drew his attention.

“Father,” Draco said stiffly, having a hard time even looking at him. How was he alive, and free while his mother was dead?

“Welcome home, son,” he said and crossed the entrance hall, and placed a hand on Draco’s shoulder. “How are you feeling?” Lucius asked as Severus stepped through the floo behind his son.

“Tired mostly. I think I’ll go and rest,” he said simply, pulling away from his father and heading for the stairs. He didn’t look back, past caring if he’d offended him. His mother was dead because of HIM, and right now he didn’t think he could ever forgive him.

Lucius watched him go and closed his eyes a moment. He felt Severus place a hand on his shoulder and squeeze gently. “He blames me,” he said very softly.

“It’s only natural. He’ll come around, Lucius.” Severus wasn’t entirely sure that Draco would, but it was what his friend needed to hear right now. “Come and join me for some lunch.” He coaxed him away from the entryway and into the breakfast room. “Where is Miss Granger today?”
“She said she’d be in the Library, to give Draco and I some space today,” he said, lacking much of an appetite. “She’ll be joining me this evening to finalize some more details for the ball.”

“It’s going to be quite the event.” Severus smirked, trying to draw Lucius into a more enjoyable topic.

“I believe it will, it’s important that it’s bigger and more impressive than anything the Ministry has in the works,” Lucius said, pouring himself some tea. “It will be a way to introduce her as a major player in the years to come, and do some networking without Kingsley getting too suspicious.” He had two years to lay low, but he would not be idle. For now he’d let Theo and Lord Potter set the tone in the Wizengamot. They were young fresh voices and would be the most effective at bringing about change and progress without anyone fighting it. Theo was very much in touch with the needs and wants of the old families, but he was guiding Potter that way as well and it could only be good for them. Arthur Weasley was seeming to follow where Potter led, and that would sway the moderates and old Dumbledore supporters over time if the trend continued.

“Just take care with your games for now, you know that he’ll be watching you,” Severus cautioned him.

“It’s more my interactions with Miss Granger that I will need to take care with,” he admitted with a sigh. It would be far too easy to take liberties that night, and forget that the eyes of all would be on them. He would need to keep his distance, let her shine all on her own.

“Make sure she knows the reasons for your distance on the night.” Severus had serious misgivings about his friend’s interest in his former student, but he couldn’t deny that the attraction seemed quite mutual.

“I will, she understands the need for discretion,” Lucius said.

“See that she does,” Severus said simply.

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Draco’s feet took him to the Library, and he was confronted with the girl he’d tormented so thoughtlessly. For years he’d used her blood status like a weapon, trying to wound her without a care like it had been some sick sport. Now, he understood just what damage words could do and he was deeply ashamed. He walked in and politely cleared his throat.
“Granger,” he said formally.

“Draco, it’s good to see you up on your feet again.” Hermione smiled and sat up a little straighter in her chair. “How are you feeling?”

Draco gaped at her. “Why do you care? After all we did to you, why are you even here?” he asked, needing to try and understand what kind of insanity had possessed her to fight for his father. Professor Snape had simply told him that it was her own business, and he had no intention of discussing it. Draco had no such compunction.

Hermione set her book aside and took a shaky breath. “Your father saved my life,” she said quietly, meeting his stormy grey eyes. She was struck by how different they were from Lucius’, so much more open and expressive. After weeks here with his father, she found that reading Draco was remarkably simple. While Lucius’ irises were streaked with true silver, Draco’s were the colour of a storm cloud. “Dolohov had me again, he was going to…” she paused and swallowed, “your father killed him for me. All he asked in return was for me to help get you to safety.”

Draco sat down, frowning. It didn’t make any sense to him.

“I was in bad shape after the battle, and still suffering lingering effects from what Bellatrix and Antonin had done to me here. Once the healers had taken you to be stabilized, he demanded that I be seen to before he let the Aurors take him away. After all of that, I felt like I had to do something in return. He’d saved my life, the least I could do was try and get his sentence reduced. I didn’t really think it would work, to be perfectly honest. Having me stay here and monitor him was Kingsley’s idea,” she said.

“Has he…I mean are you ok here, really?” Draco asked, clearly uncomfortable hearing about his father’s selfless actions.

“I didn’t think I would be, at first, but I am.” Hermione said. “He’s been a gracious host, all things considered. I mean the library alone is enough to occupy me for the next two years.” She laughed a little, trying to make light of things.

Draco snorted a little. “You and books Granger…” He took a cue from her, sliding back into familiar patterns.
“There is nothing wrong with a young Lady expanding her base of knowledge,” Lucius’ smooth voice cut through the room, coming from the open doorway.

Draco stiffened, sitting up straight the moment he heard his voice. “I never said that there was.” He narrowed his eyes a little, uncertain how much of their conversation had been overheard and hating that he’d been so oblivious to his surroundings.

“You certainly inferred it,” Lucius said. “Miss Granger, this arrived for you.” He handed her a letter. “I believe it is from young Theo.”

Hermione smiled. “Thank you for bringing it up to me.” She opened the seal and scanned it. “He’ll be able to join us this evening.” She told him.

“Wonderful, I’m sure my son will enjoy seeing his friend.” Lucius said. “I was wondering if I could interest you in a turn around the garden? There are few details for your ball we should discuss.”

“A ball?” Draco asked.

Hermione nodded. “Your father was kind enough to extend the use of the Manor to hold a small ball before everyone heads off to either school, or work.”

“Has he?” Draco’s jaw tightened. The bastard had the gall to host a bloody ball when his mother was dead, as if there was nothing wrong at all.

Lucius gave his son a warning look. “You should rest before dinner, you look tired Draco. Healer Keena was quite clear that you are to take it easy for a few weeks.”

Draco stood and nodded curtly to them both, before storming from the Library.

“Did I say something wrong?” Hermione asked Lucius, standing and looking somewhat confused.

“No, he’s still very angry about his mother’s death.” Lucius moved closer and stroked his hand down her arm. “Severus assures me he will come around,” he said. It was natural that Draco would
take issue with the ball, such things had always been his mother’s realm.

Hermione nodded. “If this is going to cause issues…”

“Hermione, this is my home and it was my choice to allow you to host this ball. It serves my own interests, and most importantly it pleases me to do this for you.” He tipped her chin up and met her eyes. This close he could see her pulse fluttering under her skin, and the slight dilation of her pupils. At least he wasn’t the only one affected by their closeness. “Do you understand?”

Hermione nodded. “I do,” she whispered, shivering a little at the intensity in his eyes. Her skin tingled as he traced her bottom lip with his thumb. Merlin, she wanted to kiss him. “You said you wanted to go for a walk?” It took profound effort to find the words.

“I did…” He said, dragging his thumb down her lip, and over her chin before releasing her. “Though remaining in here has its appeal.” A wicked grin crossed his lips as she swallowed nervously. A chuckle escaped his lips and he decided to behave, and escort her outside. He knew Severus was reading on the terrace, enjoying the warm afternoon sunshine. A more fitting chaperon he couldn’t ask for.

Together they headed outside, Lucius using the short trip through the house to compose himself. Sadly the political situation at the moment would prevent him from being her official consort at her first ball, but he hoped that one day that would change. He had arranged for Hermione, and two friends to spend a weekend in Paris to have their gowns seen to at Madam Fillieux’s salon, from what he understood she was taking Miss Lovegood and Miss Bones. With Severus and Draco here, Kingsley had agreed to allow her to leave the Manor for the two days, though he had threatened to pop in unexpectedly to be certain Lucius was still adhering to his conditions.

“So, what did you want to discuss about the Ball?” Hermione asked, enjoying the sunshine as they headed out into the rose garden.

“Firstly, I wanted to let you know that we’ve already received confirmations from more than half the guest list…quite impressive considering the climate and the fact that this is your first social event. I expect the balance will trickle in over the next few days.” He grinned. The guest list had been expanded, well beyond her initial thoughts. It wasn’t quite as large as the Yule balls that Narcissa had once hosted here, but it was not far off it. “And I wished to discuss the selection of an opening dance with you. While Theo is your official escort for the evening, as the Lord of the Manor it is my responsibility to open the dancing with you, as the hostess. For appearance sake, that should be the only dance we have together that night,” he said carefully.
“Kingsley might suspect something,” Hermione said, unable to hide her disappointment.

“Perhaps once the guests have left for the night, we could share a dance or two together.” He offered as a small consolation, heartened by the small smile that curved over her lips. “Be prepared to spend the majority of your night on the dance floor, your dance card is likely to be full.” He chuckled. Most of the young men in attendance, or at least those of any breeding, would expect to be granted a dance with her as the hostess of the ball.

“Theo’s warned me.” She laughed. “I feel sorry for him though, he’s trying to teach Harry to dance. For someone so talented on a broom, he’s ridiculously uncoordinated.” No one wanted a repeat of the Yule Ball fiasco, and Theo had pledged to turn him into at least a competent dance partner. She’d already heard four rants about her best friend’s supernatural clumsiness.

“We’ll have to wish Theo good luck, and I have a more traditional dance to start teaching you tonight.” He’d wanted to avoid opening the ball with anything she was too familiar with, to help hide how comfortable they were with one another.

“What is it?” She asked.

“It’s based on an old folk dance, but it’s been hybridized over the years with a waltz. The closest translation for the name is the Dueling Dance. It’s quite beautiful, and unique to the wizarding community. It will sit well with some of the older…more traditional attendees.” He smiled.

“You mean it will surprise them that I know it.” She countered smoothly, starting to understand his game.

Laughter filled the garden as he walked with her. “I think you enjoy surprising people Miss Granger, which in this situation is a very good thing. The more surprised they are, the more they will talk about you, and that is how we increase your circle of influence from that of fleeting celebrity to a political power player. Right now you are a celebrated war hero, but how long before trolls like Rita Skeeter try to twist your fame into something scandalous and shameful? Before that happens, you need to garner powerful friends.”

“I *have* powerful friends.” Hermione’s voice held an edge.

“You mean Mr. Potter, and Minister Shacklebolt I presume?” He guessed. “Mr. Potter, while powerful, is young and quite ignorant of how to wield his influence. He would lament your
vilification in the press, but he would have no idea how to stop it. Minister Shacklebolt may think fondly of you, but at the moment you’ve weakened his position with your stance about me. Kingsley plays the gallant, but he did not become the Minister in the aftermath of the war by being everyone’s friend. He’s more dangerous than you think, and at the ball he will be looking for any excuse to lock me back up. He is not your friend Hermione, and you should not count on him to protect you if things go poorly.” There was an intensity in Lucius’ silver eyes.

“I actually meant you.” She stopped walking and lifted her chin, meeting his eyes fully.

“At the moment I’m not powerful enough to protect you, and you have no idea how much that irks me.” He said, lifting his free hand to touch her cheek. “Once this blasted sentence is finished, I will…but right now everything is far too precarious for my tastes. We must convince Kingsley that there is nothing untoward going on between us.”

“I know.” She whispered, leaning into the soft touch.

Reluctantly, Lucius dropped his hand and started walking again. With Draco home he needed to be far more careful. While Severus was more than capable of holding his tongue, Draco’s temper would allow their secret to become public knowledge far too easily. His son had never been terribly good about tolerating his father’s affairs, far more offended by them than Narcissa had ever been. Honestly, his late wife had just been grateful that he had an outlet for his needs, so long as it wasn’t her. This attraction to Hermione was different than his brief dalliances, and he would hate to see her hurt by the rumors that would fly.

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The pervasive, damp cold seemed to seep into Corban Yaxley’s bones, causing him to huddle deeper in his cloak as he stole his way inside. This old castle had been an emergency safehouse of his, a rally point in case the worst should happen. In the chaos of the Dark Lord’s fall, he had grabbed those that he could reach and they had fled here. They were a sad, sorry looking group… but for the moment they were safe. Survival was the order of the day, and that fucking Lestrange bitch was risking all of it with these damned reconnaissance missions back into Britain.

Of course he understood the desire for revenge, but her obsession with that girl confounded him. Hopefully once they killed the mudblood they could refocus on the important things, rebuilding their strength and then striking out at the ones that had destroyed them. He entered the main hall, the only room with a decent roof. A fire was going, chasing the chill of the rainy day away.

“What did you discover?” Bellatrix demanded.
“Lucius is hosting a ball for the mudblood bitch, it will be child’s play to abduct her from there.” He said, tossing a duplicated invitation onto the table. “We can imperius someone that will be able to get close enough to her to apply a sticking charm to the port key. Once it touches her, it will engage and she’ll be in your hands,” Yaxley said, sitting down and looking almost bored. “Where is Rowle?”

“Gathering supplies.” She said dismissively, and smile curving over her lips as she anticipated having that filthy little whore in her hands again. “Have you managed to make contact with Rookwood yet?”

He shook his head, “But I’ve left messages in the usual places. If he’s still alive, we’ll find him.” So far they’d managed to bring in half a dozen death eaters, including Rabastan and Thorfinn. Rodolphus had been taken and was imprisoned in Azkaban again, along with Walden, Amycus, Alecto, and a good number of the others. Dolohov had been killed in the fighting, by Lucius of all people, bloody traitorous bastard. The man had always been as slippery as an eel, but killing one of his brothers to indebt the mudblood to him was a low point, even for him. “He always was a cagey bastard, so he’ll lay low until he’s certain we’re not Aurors trying to draw him out. Hadrian Selwyn is still an unknown, he’s not amongst the list of deceased from the battle…or those imprisoned. He could be dead, or in the wind.”

Bella nodded. “Dumping the mudblood’s body in the middle of Diagon Alley once we’re finished with her will signal to everyone that we’re still around. They will flock back to us…” She grinned madly.

“And bring the Aurors down around our bloody ears.” Corban growled. “Take your revenge on the girl…but then let it lie. Her disappearance will be public enough to announce our return, leaving her body in public will just anger them to action. We are not strong enough yet to survive open war. You may have been the Dark Lord’s Favourite…but you are here on MY sufferance, witch.” He stood and fixed her with a hard stare. “Do not try me on this.”

There was a flurry of motion as they both drew their wands. “You filthy COWARD!” Bellatrix screamed.

“Whoa whoa whoa….easy there, sister dear.” Rabastan’s voice came from behind Bella. “Corban’s just looking out for our safety, as he always does.” He placed his hand on her shoulder. “Best not to be rude to our host.”

Bellatrix all but hissed at them both and stormed out.
“I swear she gets crazier every day…” Rabastan said quietly. “Rod’s the only one that’s ever been able to control her.”

“If she can’t be controlled…you know what needs to be done.” Corban took a shaky breath. Bellatrix might be certifiably insane, but she was dangerous as a wounded, nesting Horntail.

“I do.” Rabastan nodded. “Hopefully killing that little bitch will calm her a little, some creative bloodletting always soothes her madness.”

“One can hope.” Yaxley muttered and sat down. There were a lot of variables at play here, and he had never liked playing blind. The Dark Lord had kept him around because he was a planner, he was good at seeing what pieces needed to move to a given area to give them an advantage. Lucius was dangerous at the best of times, and they’d be taking something from him. Hopefully the girl was just a means to an end, if she was truly valuable…this could get messy.

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Theo stepped through the floo into the foyer of a London townhouse that he’d visited often in the past. He found a genuine smile cross his face as Blaise moved forward to draw him into a hug. “How was Italy?” He asked.

“Good, mother was asking after you, I told her that you were romancing a war heroine.” He laughed. “She found it utterly romantic, and asked me to wish you luck.”

Theo snorted at that. “Give her my love when you see her again. I’m hardly romancing anyone, you know full well she’s not exactly my type.” He arched an eyebrow at his friend.

“Still, you’ve made it very convincing,” Blaise said and took him through to the front room. “So, what brings you here?” he asked as they settled down on the comfortable sofas.

“I need help with something, and I remembered that you had that thing with Weaslette last year,” Theo said.

“Had implies it’s not still going on.” Blaise smirked. “She’s fun.”
Theo’s eyebrows jumped up. “You’re still seeing her?”

“She was here last night. Thank you, by the way, for keeping Potter so busy lately.” Blaise winked.

“Blaise are you fucking crazy…Potter’s girl?” He swore and stood, pacing for a moment. “Willing to make it public?” His mind was whirling a mile a minute.

Blaise was quiet, his usual humorous expression slipping off his face. “Yeah, I am. She won’t agree to it though.”

“So we don’t give her the option,” Theo said, sitting down. “Why don’t we have a night out at Shimmer? Draco could use the break from his father, and I’m sure the girls would love to join us. Get there a bit early with Ginny, and I’ll bring Hermione. With a few calls we can have the press on hand, as though they were planning to photograph us…but seeing Potter’s girlfriend with someone else will certainly be a scoop they can’t resist. It lets Potter move on without anyone blaming him, though you know you may end up needing to get engaged to the girl. Arthur Weasley’s new position on the Wizengamot means he won’t be able to let it stand.” Theo warned him.

“Granger will cut your balls off if she finds out you were involved, you know that right?” Blaise said quietly.

“Then we make sure no one finds out.” He said, eyes glittering. “Better a little heartbreak now, than an epic scandal later.” Theo knew it was cold, but it needed to be done. Blaise was rich, handsome, and charming. Those were all things that would win over the Weasleys in short order. Potter didn’t appear to be madly in love with the girl, and would move on in time. He had a few thoughts about a suitable match for him, but he would take the time to really sit and reason it out. In the end it would be for the best.

TBC
Theo arrived at the Manor to collect Hermione and Draco for their evening out at Shimmer. A grin quirked the corner of his mouth as Draco sauntered across the marble foyer to join him, a bit of his old swagger back in his step. He was dressed all in black, but he wore it well and the cut of his robes only enhanced the impression of casual elegance that the Malfoys were so well known for. “You’re looking worlds better Draco.”

Draco snorted. “Be hard to look worse. Is there some reason we’re taking little Miss Goody-two-shoes to Shimmer tonight?” He gave Theo a bit of a pout. It was unofficially a Slytherin thing, and something felt quite wrong bringing a Gryffindor along. Especially that Gryffindor.

“I’m her escort for the summer, I could hardly go out to the club with some other witch.” Theo chuckled. “And last I checked, you weren’t interested so… I take what I can get.” He drawled.

“I suppose…” Draco sighed.

Theo chuckled, smirking as he saw Hermione coming down the stairs beside Tracey Davis. He’d asked the other Slytherin girl to come over and help Hermione find something appropriate for tonight, and as a thank-you she’d be Draco’s date for the evening. He knew the pretty half-blood had a thing for Draco, had since fourth year, and her blood-status would be a little bit of rebellion for his friend against his father without it being too terribly scandalous. Tracey had certainly kept up her end of the bargain. Hermione was wearing a deep purple, sheath dress that stopped just above her knees, and stylish black heels. Tracey had done her make-up, giving her smoky eyes and contouring the blush to emphasize her cheekbones. She looked like a darker, edgier version of the girl he’d escorted to the garden party, and for where they were going tonight that was just right.

Tracey was a little more daring, wearing a shorter, tighter, and lower-cut black dress that certainly had Draco’s full attention. Her long lean legs were shown off with her edgy stilettos, and liquid liner had given her already pretty blue eyes added drama. Both girl’s hair was long and free, Tracey’s strawberry blonde locks hanging straight and fine with Hermione’s curls only slightly tamed. Theo went over to the bottom of the stairs and offered Hermione his hand, aware that his friend was mirroring his actions with Tracey.

“You look stunning,” Theo said.
“I feel a little ridiculous,” Hermione admitted, having had a hard time letting Tracey dress her up like this.

“You’re going to give the male contingent at Shimmer heart failure, Granger. And you’re welcome.” Tracey rolled her eyes a little. “Live a little.”

Draco chuckled and escorted his date for the night over to the floo. “Ladies first,” he said gallantly. His gaze however was focused firmly on her ass.

Theo was trying hard not to dissolve into laughter watching Draco fight to not drool over the beautiful witch. They quickly flooed through to the entrance of Shimmer. To Hermione’s eyes it looked like it had been a warehouse at one point, but there were five massive fireplaces that served as entry points to the club. Music thrummed through the building making the floors shudder and vibrate, and showers of sparks fell down around them as they walked towards a silver archway that served as the entrance to the main part of the club.

Hermione’s eyes widened as they were waved through, and the atmosphere of Shimmer began to wrap around her. Magic seemed to pulse and throb through her veins, heady and thick as it coaxed her inhibitions to relax. Whoever had designed this place had employed powerful enchantments and she couldn’t help but admire the complexity of them as they played against her skin. They coaxed but didn’t force, it was a whisper, a suggestion…an invitation. They were heading over to a raised seating section when Hermione stopped dead, eyes fixated on a flash of colour in the dark club.

“Ginny?” she whispered, not wanting to believe her eyes.

“What?” Theo said, turning from his talk with Draco.

“Ginny’s here…and not with Harry,” she said, wanting to look away but not able to. Ginny was practically wrapped around the lean, handsome figure of Blaise Zabini.

“Shit…Draco, get them the hell out of here,” Theo said harshly, hand closing around Hermione’s arm to keep her from following the blonde as he hurried through the writhing throngs.

“Let go of me, Theo,” Hermione hissed at him.
“No, you can’t make a scene. Not here,” he whispered urgently. “The press are here to photograph us.” He leaned down, whispering in her ear. “If you go storming over, they’ll see her with Blaise and then Harry’s heartache will be splashed all over every major publication in our world.”

Hermione paled, but allowed him to walk her up to the VIP section. She sank into the purple velvet settee, trying hard to hide the shock in her expression. She had no idea how she was going to tell Harry what she’d seen, how she could possibly soften the news. “Did you know?” She asked Theo as he handed her a glass of wine.

“I knew they were seeing each other on the sly last year, I caught them in the Fourth floor alcove once. I didn’t know it was still going on,” he said quietly, dark eyes guarded. “I wouldn’t have kept quiet, I’m rather fond of Potter these days and I would have been obligated to tell him.”

Hermione nodded and sipped her drink. “This will destroy him, he’s never taken rejection well.”

“He’ll be fine, Hermione. It will hurt, certainly, but far less than if it had continued to go on for months.” He sighed. “I’m sorry, this isn’t what I wanted for your night out.” He ran a hand through his hair, a rare show of emotion from the normally controlled Slytherin.

“What did you want?” She asked, trying to relax. There was nothing she could do about Ginny tonight, and she needed to at least pretend to have a good time.

“Just for us all to relax a little. We play politics so much that it’s easy to forget that we’re still young.” He gave her a small smile. It was moments like this that Theo was grateful that Hermione was a Gryffindor and not a Slytherin. Someone from his own house would have picked up on the subtle manoeuverings of the night, but the lion’s house was more likely to believe in coincidence and the stupidity of others.

“Sometimes I feel like I’ve lived through enough to last two lifetimes.” Hermione nodded, sipping her wine. “I never knew a place like this existed.” She gestured at the room. It was like a muggle night club, and yet there was a feel of something that made it distinctly…magical.

“Yeah, it’s owned by a witch named Clara Hart.” He nodded towards a different VIP section where an attractive witch was lounging with a large group of friends. She looked to be about ten years older than they were, and her glossy black hair fell in soft waves around her shoulders. “She was one of the few muggleborns to be sorted into Slytherin in this last century.” He said. “This place isn’t just a club, it’s the center of her information network. If you ever need dirt on someone, she’s
a good place to start looking...as long as you understand that there’s always a price.” Theo told her, leaning back into the seat and resting his arm along the back.

“A muggleborn in Slytherin?” She looked at him.

“They do happen...usually two or three a century. Pure-bloods don’t have a monopoly on ambition after all.” He winked at her.

Hermione just chuckled, and felt a sudden wave of respect wash over her for the other witch. She couldn’t imagine trying to be in Slytherin House as a muggleborn, at least not in her year. They’d have eaten her alive by the end of the first week.

“Don’t sell yourself short Granger, I think you’d have been a superlative Slytherin.” Theo said. “I always figured there had to be more than a little ambition in you to push you that hard in class.”

“The hat did consider Slytherin.” She owned. “I nearly was a hatstall...but not between Ravenclaw and Gryffindor like everyone thinks.”

“How did you end up in Gryffindor then?”

“Since it couldn’t decide between Slytherin and Ravenclaw...I told it to put me in Gryffindor.” She smirked. “I thought that Gryffindor would lead me on my path to being the greatest witch of the age, like it had done to Dumbledore. I never really fit there.” She said softly. “I realized my mistake by Halloween...and if not for the Troll incident, I probably would have petitioned for a resorting by Christmas.” She told him quietly.

Theo looked honestly surprised. “Clever and ambitious,” He shook his head and lifted his glass to her. “To secret Slytherins...”

She laughed and touched her glass to his, drinking just as Draco and Tracey rejoined them.

“I hustled them out, but I think the press still saw them.” Draco said and sat down beside Theo, pulling Tracey onto his lap. “Someone will need to give Potter a heads up.”
“I’ll do it,” Theo said, immediately. “The night out was my idea, I’ll handle the fall out.”

Hermione nodded quietly. “Poor Harry…”

“All right, enough wallowing.” Theo tipped his glass back and finished his wine. “I believe you owe me a dance or two, Miss Granger.” He stood and offered her a hand.

Hermione set her glass down and accepted his hand, letting him draw her up to her feet and out to the dance floor. As he pulled her close, she realized how odd it felt. Theo was an attractive wizard, all sharp features and lean lines. He was charming and attentive…but there was absolutely nothing when he held her against him. Even stranger was that she was fairly sure the lack of attraction was entirely mutual. It made it easy to relax and just have some fun, knowing that he wouldn’t get the wrong idea. Knowing he didn’t think of her that way made him safe.

As the music picked up, he guided her effortless across the floor. A subtle touch on her hip, or a brush against the small of her back directed her to where he wanted her. Hermione laughed as he dipped her, and she was pleased to see he looked like he was having just as much fun.

“Someone’s been practicing.” He teased as they finally headed back up to their seats, noting that Tracey and Draco were long gone.

“I wanted to make sure I didn’t embarrass myself at my first ball.” She said and all but collapsed down onto the plush cushions. One or two dances had somehow turned into nearly an hour down amongst the other dancers. A waitress came over with fresh drinks for them.

“Who’s been teaching you?” Theo asked, having his suspicions.

“Who do you think?” She asked in kind, arching an eyebrow at him.

Theo chuckled. “I imagine you’ll be opening the first dance with him? Have you decided what you’ll be doing?”

“He suggested something called the Duelling Dance.” She said. “He said it’s quite complicated though.”
Theo’s eyebrows rose. “It is, I’d suggest starting practicing soon.” It was a complicated dance, and when well performed it was exquisite. He could understand Lucius’ choice of the dance, both from an aesthetic level and because it would allow the other wizard to touch her freely without anyone batting an eye.

“That hard?” She looked worried.

“You’ll be fine,” He reassured her. “It’s going to be your crowning moment, and neither I nor Lord Malfoy will let you falter. I do however claim your first waltz now, before someone else can beat me to it.” He grinned.

“You’re my official escort, you may have the pleasure of dancing with me as much as you choose.” She said, the wine and atmosphere of the club letting her set her worries aside and be a little playful. Her eyes drifted out across the club seeing Draco dancing with Tracey and another witch she didn’t recognize. “At least Draco seems to be having fun.”

Theo snorted. “He’s not exactly difficult to please.” He said. “A pretty witch in a short skirt and he’s happy enough.” It had been that way ever since their fourth year, and Draco had gone through an insane amount of witches.

“Why does that not surprise me.” She snorted. She’d been a little apprehensive about coming here tonight, and the issue with Ginny and Blaise had obviously not helped…but she was actually having a nice time. “Thanks for bringing me here tonight, Theo.” She said after a moment.

Aware that they were being watched he reached over and took her hand, kissing her knuckles. “It was my pleasure, Hermione.” He allowed a tiny smirk to cross his lips as he met her eyes, letting her know he was playing for the camera. It was refreshing to play the game with someone who seemed to grasp the rules. She knew he wasn’t interested in her, but was playing the adoring girlfriend effortlessly. He hadn’t needed to tell her, she’d simply deduced it on her own. Thank Merlin she really was as clever as everyone said.

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Harry hadn’t slept after Theo had delivered his news last night. He honestly didn’t know what to feel, and that very fact bothered him more than the discovery that Ginny had been unfaithful. He was standing just outside the Burrow’s ward line, trying to gather the nerve to go in. Theo had warned him that it was possible that Ginny had been photographed with Blaise, but regardless of that he needed to confront her about it. Harry took a deep breath and crossed through the gate and headed up the path towards the place that had been like his home during his years at Hogwarts. He knocked at the door, and was unable to help smiling as Molly answered the door in her favourite patchwork house coat. It made his throat tighten up, realizing that after today things would change
between him and the Weasleys.

“Harry dear, come in come in…would you like a little spot of breakfast?” She smiled and hustled him inside.

“I umm…actually I need to talk to Ginny, if she’s up.” Harry said, looking uncomfortable.

“She’s just helping in the kitchen, I’ll send her right out.” Molly frowned, unsure what had happened. She hurried off to the kitchen and a few minutes later, Ginny came out and gave Harry a bright smile.

“Harry!” She headed over and was pulled up short by his hand.

“What were you doing at Shimmer last night with Zabini?” He said, his voice cold. He couldn’t believe she was coming up to hug him as if nothing was wrong. Theo had told him that he’d send Malfoy over to hustle them out, she’d been CAUGHT and was acting like it hadn’t happened.

“How…” She paled dramatically then. “Harry it was nothing…I…”

“How long has it been going on?” he asked.

“I…” Ginny felt tears rising in her eyes. “Since last September,” she admitted quietly, head hanging down.

Harry felt a wave of fury hit him. “So while I was on the run, living in a tent and trying to stay alive long enough to kill Voldemort, you were screwing around with Blaise Zabini!” he shouted, unable to help himself.

“It wasn’t like that…Harry please…I love you.” Ginny reached out for him, just as her Mother came into the room having heard the raised voices.

“No Ginny…we’re done. You don’t screw around on someone you love.” He turned away and stormed out of the Burrow, not able to look at her for a moment more. He apparated away as soon as he cleared the wards, appearing in front of his home. He went inside and immediately adjust the
wards and closed off the floor. He just wanted to be alone...needed to process this horrible gut wrenching sense of betrayal.

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Ginny had fallen to her knees in the living room, sobbing as Harry left. She was aware of her mother gathering her up and helping her over to the sofa, stroking her hair gently and whispering soft platitudes. Oh Merlin, she had messed up so badly. What had she been thinking? Eventually she stopped crying and sat up a little, feeling a deep sense of shame when she saw the disappointment written all over her mother’s face.

“Ginevra...what have you done?” Molly said sadly.

“It was just a night out...it didn’t mean anything,” she tried to say.

“Then why lie about it?” Molly gave her a look at all of her children knew extremely well. “How serious is it with this other boy?”

“It’s not!” She protested. “Blaise...he’s just so much fun, and it’s fun because it’s not serious.”

“If this ends up in the papers...you know it will get serious very quickly. Your father has just finally managed to start rebuilding our family’s reputation. He can’t allow you to behave like this. I am very, very disappointed in you. I think you’d best go to your room and think about what you’ve done.” Molly said quietly, heartbroken both for her daughter and the young man she’d hoped to have as her son in law. She couldn’t blame poor Harry for ending it with Ginny, given his own position as Lord Potter...he couldn’t risk the scandal any more than they could. She watched her daughter leave the living room quietly and she stood and headed straight for her husband’s workshop...needing to tell him what had happened. There was only one way to possibly salvage this, and that was to quietly and quickly arrange a betrothal between Ginny and the Zabini boy.

Arthur looked up from an old muggle radio he was tinkering with and smile. “Am I late for breakfast again Mollywobbles?” He grinned.

“No...we need to talk about our daughter.” She sighed and shook her head. “Harry’s ended their relationship, and it appears she was not out with Luna and Hermione last night...she was out with a boy, and someone informed Harry.”
Arthur frowned and set the radio down. “Which boy? Surely it was just a misunderstanding?” He grasped instantly just how serious this was. He and Harry had just started talking about a formal betrothal contract.

“Blaise Zabini, a Slytherin that was in Harry’s year. Apparently it’s been going on since the start of last school year.” Molly shook her head. “She admitted it to Harry, and he broke things off. Poor boy looked gutted, and I can’t even find it in my heart to blame him at all.” She ran a hand through her wild hair. “We have to deal with this, and quickly.”

“I am aware, dear.” He went over and kissed her cheek. “Go and finish breakfast while I get dressed…I’ll be paying a visit to young Mr. Zabini.” He had sworn to his wife many years ago that he would not ever force any of their children into an arranged marriage, but he had little other choice now. Ginny was their only daughter, and he could not allow her reputation to get dragged through the mud.

Molly nodded quietly. “Do what you must Arthur…do what you must.” She squeezed his arm, trying to let him know wordlessly that she understood what he had to do. She walked back up to the house with him, glad when he wrapped an arm around her waist and pressed a kiss to her temple. They’d been through a lot over the years, this was just another challenge that they would meet as a family. There were worst things in life than an arranged marriage, particularly when it was clear Ginny was at least somewhat partial to the boy. It would be alright. It had to be.

TBC
“Just admit it, I’m hopeless.” Harry sighed, sitting down in one of the chairs in Theo’s drawing room. He’d been coming to Nott Manor for weeks now, and Theo had arranged for a whole host of partners for him to try and learn to dance better than he had at the Yule ball. Tracey had been nice enough, but he knew her feet had to be killing her after the number of times he’d stepped on her.

Theo came back in after walking Tracey to the floo. “You’re not hopeless, just extremely challenged,” he teased and poured them both a drink. “You just need to figure out a sense of rhythm. Once we get that settled, you’ll be fine.”

“I feel like I have four left feet,” he muttered.

“You don’t. Try not to get discouraged,” Theo said, clearly mulling something over.

“We have less than a week before Hermione’s ball, and I don’t even have a date.” He raked a hand through his already messy black hair. “I should just skip it.”

“Hermione would hunt you down, and have your hide if you tried.” Theo smirked wickedly. “Drink this.” He offered him some fire whiskey. “There is something we can try, but I swear if you tell anyone Potter, I will eviscerate you.”

“You say such nice things, Theo.” Harry chuckled. “Seriously though, I’ll try anything,” he said, taking a deep sip of his drink.

“Ok.” Theo leaned against the fireplace and savoured his own drink. He hadn’t had this much trouble with someone since the entire fourth year had tried to teach Vince to dance. Between him, Draco, Blaise, Professor Snape, and all the girls, they’d at least managed to teach him a basic waltz, but it had been painful. At one point they had seriously considered the Imperius curse as an acceptable training method.

“Do you think she’ll be there with him?” Harry asked quietly.
Theo nodded. “They need to put in an appearance. The engagement was announced and unless they’re willing to admit that they were screwing around on you, they need to be out in public. It sucks, but you’ll have to at least wish them well that night.” Theo knew it was a lot to ask of the Gryffindor.

Harry nodded. “I want to hex him into oblivion,” he admitted.

“Blaise isn’t a bad guy. He just doesn’t always think about what he does,” Theo said. “There’s no excuse for what they did, but it does no good to dwell on it. Better to just accept it, and move on.”

“You sound like you have some experience with that,” Harry said.

“I do and trust me, it’s better to figure it out sooner than later.” Theo sighed. “I fell for someone that was expressly not interested in me. It hurt, but at least I knew upfront that it wasn’t ever going to happen and we managed to stay friends.”

“Who was it? Tracey?” Harry asked.

“That’s none of your business, Potter.” Theo chuckled. “But no, not Tracey.” He finished his drink and went over to the record player and looked through the selection of music, trying to find just the right thing. He put on an old record and walked over. “Ok, come and stand here in front of me,” Theo said, a little nervous about this but he really couldn’t think of anything else to try. He just wished it didn’t feel like stepping out onto a very precarious cliff.

Harry set his empty glass aside and went over, standing directly in front of the taller wizard.

“Close your eyes,” Theo said and reached over, taking Potter’s right hand and resting it on his chest. “Dancing is just moving to a set of steps, timed to a rhythm. The most basic rhythm we all know, is a heartbeat,” Theo said, tapping two of his fingers against the back of Potter’s hand in time with his pulse. “Do you feel it?” he asked.

Harry nodded, frowning a little as he concentrated.

“Now, focus on that beat, and one, two, three, one, two, three.” Theo started to move him through the basic waltz step. Harry stumbled a little, but started to relax, letting Theo lead him. “Good, just listen to the music, feel the beat.” He coached him, watching with fascination as a blush crawled
up Harry’s neck. Now, that was intriguing. He shifted, taking Harry’s hands in a dance hold now, moving him through the room. “You can open your eyes now.” He smiled.

Harry was still blushing as they danced around the room.

“Now, you lead.” Theo switched their hands, and let Harry take over. Again there were a few stumbles, but he started finding his rhythm again. As the song finally ended, he was moving much better.

“That was…thank you,” Harry said, eyes dropping down as he let go of Theo.

“You’re very welcome.” Theo stepped closer, mentally he prepared to get hexed, but he moved smoothly and caught Harry’s lips in a kiss. He took advantage of his shock and walked him backwards until the shorter teen’s back hit the wall, deepening the kiss. The fact that Harry was returning the kiss, enthusiastically, stunned Theo. He tasted like fire whiskey and cinnamon. Only when he felt Harry’s hands press against his chest did he moved back. His hazel eyes took in the bewildered expression on Harry’s face with a fair bit of satisfaction.

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“Merlin…” He shuddered and shook his head. “No, it didn’t.” He answered.

Theo moved back. “I meant it, there’s nothing wrong with fancying other blokes, but I won’t kiss you again unless you want me to.” A little bit of insecurity showed on his face, it was literally painful to display it but Harry was a Gryffindor and he could sense he needed to see it.

Harry reached out and took his hand. “I do want you to. I just…can we take this slow?” he asked quietly.

“Of course.” He smiled and squeezed Harry’s hand. “Stay for dinner?”

Harry nodded. “I’d like that.”

Theo smiled and stole one last soft kiss, before leading Harry out of the drawing room and towards the study where they could relax until dinner. Theo had always been intensely private about his preferences, and only a few of his closest friends knew. Opening up to Harry had been a calculated risk, but he was relieved that it had worked out. He enjoyed spending time with the young Lord Potter, and more often than not they’d spend the night in his study sipping fire whiskey and talking about the state of the Wizengamot. Harry was going back to Hogwarts in September to finish his schooling, and was looking forward to focusing on his studies, but Theo bemoaned the fact that he’d see significantly less of him.

“Professor McGonagall offered me the position of Head Boy.” Harry said as they sat down together in the matching leather armchairs.

“You’d mentioned that you thought she might. What did you tell her?” Theo asked, his gut told him that Harry had refused.

“I declined,” he said. “I don’t deserve it, and even *if* I did, I just want to be a normal student for one year.” Harry said quietly. “I won’t have Hermione there to keep me on track, so I’m going to have to rely on myself for once.”

Theo nodded. “Hermione and I will be doing our own studying, so we can both send you reminders.”
Harry chuckled. “I think you’d have to tie her up to keep her from nagging me about homework actually.” He ran a hand through his hair. “So, since I can’t take you to Hermione’s ball…have any ideas?” He looked over at Theo.

Theo grinned. “I know someone that would be willing to go with you, but she’s a Slytherin.” His grin turned a little wicked. “Willing to trust me?”

“I do trust you, Theo,” Harry said and nodded. “Who is it?”

“Daphne, she’s a good friend and she told me that if I could manage to turn you into a passable dancer, she would agree to appear in public with you,” he quoted his friend with a chuckle. “I think we can call you passable.”

Harry snorted. “What did you mean when you said the wizarding world was more…liberal than the muggle world?” He swallowed and asked.

“Part of the stigma in the muggle world comes from the simple fact that two men engaged in a sexual relationship cannot reproduce, the same is true for two women. Add some religious guilt in there, and you have the muggle attitude against homosexual relationships. Magic makes it possible for a same-sex couples to have children. For two witches it’s the simple matter of a potion, for two wizards…they need to find a surrogate to carry the child, but with the aid of potions the child is the blood heir of both men,” he explained. His father had…educated him about that when it had been clear he had no interest in witches. While his father had expressed a desire for him to marry some nice witch for appearances sake, he hadn’t outright forbidden him from seeking a male partner. “Of course it causes some talk, but that only matters if you let it.”

Harry nodded, watching the fire burning in the grate.

“To be honest, a lot of us in Slytherin were wondering if the reason you and Draco butted heads so much was because there was something going on between you two.” Theo grinned.

Harry blushed crimson. “No! Not with that ferrety git.” He made a face.

Theo laughed, inwardly relieved that Harry wasn’t secretly attracted to the Malfoy heir. He’d been down that road and it had not ended well. If he was going to get involved with Harry, he had no intention of sharing him with anyone. The laughter dispelled the awkward atmosphere and Theo allowed himself to imagine what a relationship with Harry might end up looking like.
Having Draco home was a mixed blessing, in Lucius’ estimation. While it was a relief to know his son was safe and healing, it had understandably put quite a damper on his time with Hermione. Thankfully, she seemed to understand that they needed to be extremely discreet around his son, and hadn’t taken offence at his necessary distance. However, he missed spending time with her and all the afternoons spent alone in his study would have greatly improved with her company.

Tonight he had given up on the proposed legislation that was currently up for consideration, and decided to turn in early. He was curled up with a novel when a light knock sounded at his chamber door. He stood and crossed the room, opening it and feeling a smile curve over his lips. “Miss Granger, please come in.” He moved back to allow her entry.

Hermione smiled and breezed past him. She was wearing one of her new dresses, this one a pale blue. “I hope I’m not interrupting you,” she said as he closed the door behind her.

“How was your meeting with Lord Travers today?” he asked, and settled down in the chair opposite her. He had promised to take his time with her, and he refused to let her feel pressured. He was not some green boy, unable to control his baser urges.

“It went well. I’d like for you to look over the employment contract he gave me, just to be sure I didn’t miss anything. Overall though, I’m excited to begin working with him. He has a lot of intriguing ideas that I think could do a lot of good.” Hermione smiled and sipped the wine.

“I’d be happy to read it over for you tomorrow,” Lucius said, watching her eyes light up with anticipation of working for positive changes in their world. “I think you’ll do quite well working with Marcus, he’s got a good head on his shoulders and he is very protective of his people. When you’re ready to really get into the Ministry, he’ll be a valuable ally.”

She smiled and nodded. “His wife just had a baby, I was wondering if it would be appropriate to send a small gift?”

Lucius nodded. “It would. As you are merely an acquaintance, something small like booties or a baby blanket would be acceptable.” He smiled, his own gift had been sent yesterday after seeing the birth announcement in the Prophet.
“Thank you,” she said.

“How is young Mr. Potter handling the loss of Miss Weasley?” he remembered to ask. It had been nearly two weeks since the minor scandal had hit the papers, and he applauded both Mr. Potter and the Weasleys for their efficient handling of the crisis. The story had been spun in a way that left little to ruin anyone’s standing, and the girl had been quickly and quietly engaged to Mr. Zabini to avoid any further whispers about the girl’s reputation.

“He’s not as upset as he thinks he should be, and I think he’s more bothered by that than anything else.” Hermione admitted.

Lucius nodded. “It’s for the best then.” He savoured his wine, understanding what Hermione meant. It was hard to lose something, only to realize that you didn’t really miss it at all. “I’m sure he’ll find his feet again.”

“I hope so,” She said. “I just can’t believe Ginny would do something like that to him, it makes me want to throttle her.”

“You care very much for Mr. Potter, to your credit.” He smiled softly. “The heart heals, and in time he’ll find someone else to make him happy. All you can do is be there for him in the meantime.”

“I’ve missed our talks,” Hermione said softly.

“As have I, and I regret that I’ve had to keep my distance outside of your dance instruction.” He stood and moved over to sit with her, unable to resist the pull of her presence any longer. “It’s so soon after his mother’s death, and I fear what Draco might do if he suspected the truth of my attachment to you.” He reached over and took her hand, lifting it and brushing his lips against her knuckles.

“I understand, and I wouldn’t want to hurt him,” Hermione said, eyes drawn to Lucius’ lips.

“He’ll be back at Hogwarts in less than a month, and we can return to our usual breakfasts together,” he promised, slipping his fingers through hers. He’d had many affairs over the years, but none had felt like this. They’d been purely sexual, driven by physical need and quickly sated. This was softer, and purer than anything he’d experienced in his life. He desired the young witch, of course he did, but more pressing was the need to protect her, to take care of her. She presented such
a valiant front to the world, but he’d seen glimpses of her vulnerability, and he knew just how fragile she truly was. He didn’t want to see the world break her down, shatter her façade, and lay her pain bare for all to see.

“Severus knows, doesn’t he?” Hermione asked, noticing that Draco was being stated as the only obstacle to their continued closeness.

“He knew that first night, and threatened to hold me to account if I should ever hurt you.” Lucius chuckled a little at the remembrance. “I assured him that I would never willingly cause you pain, and I meant it.” His silver eyes grew serious.

“I know.” She squeezed his hand softly. “You make me feel safe, Lucius.”

Lucius lifted her hand up to his lips again, turning her hand over and pressing a kiss to her palm. “I will do everything I can to ensure that you always feel that way here. That much I can promise.”

Hermione sat her glass down and bit her bottom lip, as she shifted closer, gathering her courage and kissing him tentatively.

Lucius reached down, setting his wine glass on the floor and bringing his hand up to thread through her hair. He returned the kiss, lips teasing hers and gradually deepening it. He slid his other hand down her back, pulling her up to sit across his lap, and rest against the arm of the little loveseat. He nipped at her bottom lip, loving the little sounds she made in her throat as he deepened the kiss. He felt her hand steal up his chest, sliding up his neck and into his hair. Her touches were delicate, unsure, and so very innocent. Merlin, he wanted her.

He broke the kiss and stroked his thumb along her cheekbone. “Are you all right?” he asked softly, searching her eyes for any indication that he should stop.

She managed to nod, “Better than alright.” Hermione said, her fingers stroking the nape of his neck.

“I do aim to please.” He smirked at her before leaning back down and teasing his lips against hers. It would be so easy to seduce her into his bed, her body was rising to meet his every touch and her lips answering every kiss. Deep down he knew it was too soon, that pressing her before she was truly ready would send her away from him forever, and Lucius was a jealous creature. Now that he had her here in his arms, warm and willing, he would not ever be able to let her go. He broke their
kisses when he felt a soft moan slip past her lips and he rested his forehead against hers.

“Don’t stop…” she whispered, her voice ragged.

“I don’t want to, but I should,” he whispered and carefully shifted their position so he was cradling her against his chest, her head tucked under his chin. “You deserve so much more than rushed fumblings, and desperate caresses,” he whispered. “I told you that you were worth the wait, and I meant that. I hope that you feel the same about me.”

Hermione nodded against his neck, her heart slowly starting to slow and some reason crept back into her brain. Lucius was right, of course, and it made warmth wrap around her that he clearly cared enough to be the voice of reason when her own was on vacation. “You are, Lucius,” she whispered against his skin. She’d never felt such instant need before, and always laughed when her dorm mates had talked about sex and making-out. The ache low in her stomach was easing but still undeniably there. She flushed with embarrassment realizing her panties were wet, and hoped to Merlin he didn’t know.

“You should return to your rooms,” Lucius’ said with clear regret.

“I don’t want to, but I probably should.” She echoed his earlier words with a bit of a smile, moving back out of his arms. A slightly trembling hand tucked a few loose curls back behind her ear. She was glad to see an easy smile on his lips.

“One night we won’t have to part, but for now,” he picked up her hand and kissed it softly, “I wish you pleasant dreams.”

Hermione couldn’t help but melt a little, but she made herself get up off the couch. She took a moment to smooth her dress back down where it belonged and then she beat a hasty retreat before she said or did something to embarrass herself. She made it back to her room and she went through to her bedroom, falling back onto the bed and closing her eyes as she relived the heated exchange with Lucius. He knew just how to steal her breath away, always careful not to go too far, but making her wish desperately that he would. She rubbed her thighs together, relishing the delicious sensations it created and she imagined him slipping a hand down her thigh, dragging the edge of her skirt up and ghosting his touch along the edge of her panties.

Guiltily she moved her hand away and sat up. She’d just have a nice hot bath, and curl up in bed with a good book. Maybe that would help settle her mind back down into safer areas.
Blaise reached out and tucked a strand of Ginny’s hair behind her ear. They were sitting in the orchard behind her parent’s home, taking a breather before the dreaded family dinner. His mother was currently having drinks with Arthur and Molly, and he was eternally grateful that she approved of both the match, and his cunning in arranging everything so neatly. His only regret was that it had caused Ginny pain. He truly hated to see her cry, and silently promised that he would do everything he could to keep from ever being the cause of her tears again.

“It will be alright, amore,” he said softly.

Ginny didn’t respond, she simply curled closer and rested her head on his shoulder, cuddling in close.

“I know this isn’t what you wanted, but you know that I care about you…very much,” he kept speaking, wrapping his arms around her slender form and resting his lips against her temple. They were a study in light and dark, the two of them. She burned as bright as the sun, and he was the shadow that obscured even the moon. Fire and ice. It had been her passion and defiance that had drawn him to her. He’d spent his whole life learning to hide his feelings, and control every single expression. She was open about everything: her love, her hate, and even her fears. Her warm brown eyes snapped with fury as easily as they did with passion and he loved igniting them. It didn’t matter if it was with an argument or sweet kisses designed to make her lose all sense.

“I know Blaise, I know,” she whispered in return. “I just never wanted to hurt him, and I know that I have. It’s my fault.”

“There is enough blame to go around, but it does no good to dwell on it. Done is done,” he said firmly. “You’re mine now, and I want the whole world to know just how happy that makes me.”

“I think the whole world *does* know now,” she said a little bitterly. The howlers had been arriving non-stop, until Blaise had shown her father a handy spell designed to destroy them as they attempted to pass through the wards.

“Good. In time they’ll forget the details, and all that will matter is that you are Mrs. Zabini, the most beautiful, talented Seeker in the world,” he promised her. “I won’t ever let you regret it, I swear.”
Ginny moved back and gave him a small but genuine smile. “I do love you, Blaise,” she said softly. “I know I’ve never said it…but I do.”

He smiled and picked up her right hand, placing a soft kiss on her palm. “Quando il buio della sera maschera il mio viso, solo allora potrei dirti certe cose,” Blaise’s full lips caressed the words, the sinful tone more sensual than any touch possibly could be.

“I really need to learn Italian.” She blushed. “What does that mean?”

“It means ‘When the darkness of the evening obscures my face, only then can I tell you such things.’ In essence, truths are easier to speak in the dark,” he said and pressed her hand over his heart. “I love you, Ginevra Molly Weasley, more than I think you know.” His dark eyes were intense in the dimming light of the orchard. The shadows played off his exotic high cheekbones, and the darkness of his skin. The warmth of his tone spoke to the truth of his words though.

“We’ll be ok then?” she said, hearing her mother calling for them in the distance.

“No, better than ok,” he promised and then stood, offering her his hand. “I intend to make you the happiest witch in all of the world.” Blaise meant every word. He’d make her forget all about Harry Potter, and replace him as the center of her heart. He really did owe Theo a massive thank you for removing his rival.
Hermione had excused herself after lunch to begin her preparations for the ball. She knew from experience that wrestling her hair into submission was usually a multi-hour affair. She entered her suite and went to the bedroom, smiling at the sight of the lavish ball gown hanging in front of her wardrobe. It was a deep crimson, and while she’d protested that red wasn’t really her colour Madame Filleux had simply unwound this bolt of acromantula silk and all her protests had ceased. The corseted, strapless dress nipped in at the waist and then flared out into a dramatic full skirt. There were long black gloves to match the delicate black embroidery, a subtle rose and vine motif along the hem of the skirt, and at the waist of the gown.

She was walking through the bedroom when something on her dressing table caught her eye. There was a black box topped with a white bow, on the vanity and a folded piece of parchment tucked under the ribbon. She unfolded it and smiled, seeing Lucius’ now familiar script.

*While I have every confidence that you will be utterly breathtaking tonight, it would please me very greatly if you would both accept and wear this with your gown. A beautiful witch should never be unadorned on a night such as this. Before you can think to ask, or worry, these were not Narcissa’s, and no one in attendance tonight will recognize them.*

-L

Hermione set the letter aside and untied the ribbon, opening the box. Inside was a small jewelry box, carved from rosewood with mother of pearl inlaid into the lid in an elegant floral motif. She opened the silver latch and her breath stilled in her chest. Inside the little chest was an exquisite necklace, matching earrings, and delicate hairpins. The metal seemed to be platinum and was set with glittering diamonds. She’d never seen anything so expensive in her life, and the thought of wearing it was intimidating. It wasn’t ostentatious, just a subtle display of wealth and taste. The hairpins were topped with diamond encrusted roses, and by far her favourite thing in the box.

She closed the jewelry box reluctantly and headed for the bathroom, another smile crossing her lips. A bath had been prepared for her, but the water was a milky white and there were rose petals
floating across the surface. The soothing scent of vanilla filled the air and a glass of wine was sitting on the little table beside the tub. Lucius’ touch was everywhere and she was utterly overwhelmed by it. She’d always considered herself something of a romantic, deep under her sensible exterior, but in this moment she realized that her juvenile thoughts of romance were woefully inadequate.

The warmth of the water surrounded her, cradling her in a soothing cocoon of scent and sensation. She rested her head back against the edge of the tub and just savoured the feeling of the special bath he’d prepared for her. Lucius was nothing like she’d been expecting, he could be cool and collected one moment, and his eyes could burn with passion the next. He radiated control and it made her want to melt whenever they were alone. They’d been so very careful since Draco’s return to the Manor, but tonight worried her. She had no doubt that Lucius could pretend to be indifferent to her, he was a consummate actor, but her own reactions would be a struggle to police. Saying goodnight to him after the heated exchange in his room had been maddening. Getting to sleep after that had been a highly frustrating affair.

After a long soak, she reluctantly washed her hair, smoothing a fair bit of hair potion through it to allow her to dry and style it without it exploding into an uncontrollable curly disaster. She got out of the bath and dried off, the special bath had left her skin so smooth, any rough patches disappearing and leaving only silky skin behind. A spell dried her hair into tousled waves, and she wrapped a robe around her body before heading into the bedroom to finish getting ready.

Itsy appeared and the little elf offered to help with her hair and make-up. Hermione agreed, seeing that the little elf felt at a loss without her former Mistress to prepare. Hermione was left nearly speechless with the results. Her wild hair had been coaxed into an elaborately braided crown, the little jeweled pins adding a touch of sparkle here and there. Little wispy curls had been allowed to escape at strategic points to soften the look. Her make-up was utterly flawless, but understated except for the dark red of her lips. It was dramatic and as she put in the simple diamond studs and settled the necklace around her throat, everything seemed to come together seamlessly.

“Now for the gown, Miss,” The little elf said, floating it over for her.

Hermione stepped into it and smiled as Itsy floated it up into place, and magically tightened the laces. She gasped a little as the dress snugged right up.

“Miss looks beautiful.” Itsy smiled sadly.

“Thank you Itsy, I’d never have managed on my own,” she said and stared at herself in the full length mirror. She didn’t look like Hermione Granger, she looked like someone that belonged on the front page of a fashion magazine. Lastly, she slipped her feet into the satin dancing slippers, the low heel comfortable and it had a cushioning spell to help combat sore feet over the evening. The
final touch was the long black gloves that magically tightened to fit her like a second skin, and yet felt as though she wasn’t wearing anything.

“What’s the time, Itsy?” she asked.

“Nearly six, Miss,” Itsy said.

Hermione took a shaky breath and headed for the door, unable to help feeling a little like a Princess in a fairy tale. The gown’s tight boning made certain that her posture had to be perfect, and she kept her head high as she descended the main staircase, hearing Lucius, Draco, Theo and Severus talking in the Entrance hall. Hermione felt a small smile cross her lips as the conversation died off, all four wizards falling silent as she walked down the final steps.

As busy as she’d been transforming herself, it was clear Lucius and the Elves had not lost any time transforming the entrance hall and she would assume the ballroom into something purely magical for the night. Lucius was dressed in formal black robes, edged with silver, as was Draco. She knew logically that it was because they were formally in mourning for Narcissa. She felt a momentary pang of guilt as she remembered kissing him only a few nights ago, whilst his wife had only been gone for a few months. Merlin, she was a horrible person. Her mental recriminations stopped as Theo moved forward and offered her a hand.

“You look utterly stunning,” Theo said, unable to help himself.

“Your escort is correct, Hermione. You look quite lovely,” Severus said with a polite nod.

“I should go and pick up Tracey,” Draco said. “You look good, Granger,” he added, looking vaguely uncomfortable as he headed to the Floo.

As he disappeared in a rush of green flames, Lucius came over and took her free hand, brushing a kiss across her gloved knuckles. “You look exquisite. I have no doubt you’ll be the envy of all tonight.” His silver eyes met hers, holding all the things he didn’t dare say.

Hermione blushed, looking down. “You’re all horrible liars.” She laughed. “But thank you.”

“A gentleman never lies to a beautiful witch, Miss Granger,” Lucius said and moved back. “Come and see the ballroom. Guests should begin arriving in about an hour, and we’ll need to receive
them properly. There’s time for you to have something light to eat, and gather yourself.”

Hermione let Theo escort her into the ballroom and she just smiled. It really was like something out a fantasy. The chandeliers glittered with light, and there were discreet seating areas tucked into the alcoves, as well as scattered around the upper level. The doors to the terrace were open and the scent of roses wafted in on the breeze. The orchestra had arranged themselves in the corner and were getting set up, while the servants were getting the tables laden with elegant canapes and light finger foods.

Severus came over and offered her a vial of honey-coloured potion, as Theo stepped away to look at the display of decadent desserts. “I suggest you drink this, it will prevent you from becoming too intoxicated over the course of the evening.”

She accepted it and drank it back. A subtle warmth spread through her system. “Thank you, Severus.”

“You’re welcome. The champagne will be flowing quite liberally tonight, it’s always best to find a way to keep your head as others lose theirs.” He grinned.

Hermione laughed a little, having a feeling her former Potions Professor had often delighted in the drunken antics of others. “I think I’ll need my wits about me tonight,” she agreed, watching Lucius out of the corner of her eye as he spoke to the orchestra.

“Guard your feelings, Miss Granger,” Severus said very quietly. “This is not the Hogwarts Yule Ball. Important and influential people will be here tonight and you’ll be under close scrutiny. No can suspect that you care for him.” He met her eyes.

“I know.” Hermione took a deep breath, trying to school her features. “I’ve never been that great of an actress.”

“Miss Granger, I have known you since you were a first-year student. You have always been able to do whatever you put your mind to, without fail.” He took her hand and kissed it. “Channel you inner Slytherin tonight, and remember everything Theo and Lucius have taught you.”

Hermione nodded. “I’ll try my best,” she promised, trying to find her inner Pure-Blood Princess to make it through the night.
Hermione was certain that her own personal version of hell would involve standing in a never ending receiving line, smiling until her face hurt, and being sickeningly sweet to people she’d love to knee in the balls. She was standing in between Theo and Lucius, and was inwardly relieved when the end of the line was finally in sight. Blaise and Ginny were the very last pair through, and Hermione gave Ginny a hug, not really caring much how it might look.

“I’m sorry about everything,” Ginny whispered.

“I know, it’s ok,” Hermione said softly. “I hope you have a wonderful time tonight,” she said sincerely.

Ginny nodded and looked very uncomfortable as Lucius took her hand and gave her a little half-bow.

“Welcome to Malfoy Manor, Miss Weasley,” Lucius said formally.

Hermione’s attention was stole by Blaise, who kissed her hand with a devilish smile. “It’s nice to see you Mr. Zabini,” she said.

“Please, call me Blaise,” he insisted. “Thank you for the invitation, in light of everything.”

“You have a lot to do to make it right with Harry, but I know you can’t always control what the heart wants,” she said. “But, if you ever hurt Ginny, they’ll never find the body.” She winked at him. “Have a lovely evening.”

He chuckled and nodded, before moving on to trade pleasantries with Lucius.

Theo offered her his arm, and smirked. “Beautifully done.” He leaned over and whispered into her ear.

“If you’ll forgive me, Lord Nott, but I must borrow your exquisite companion to open the ball. I promise to return her promptly afterwards,” Lucius interjected, before Theo could walk off with
“Of course, I completely forgot.” Theo graciously handed Hermione off. “I’ll see you both inside.”

“Are you ready, Miss Granger?” Lucius asked, raising an eyebrow in question.

“As ready as I’m ever going to be,” she said and laid her hand over his.

“You can do this, Hermione.” Once she seemed ready, Lucius headed towards the Ballroom.

Hermione heard the music start as they stepped out into the open center of the ball room. She smiled at familiar faces in the crowd as he led her to stand opposite him. Hermione blinked as the music took on a slightly different variation to the one they had practiced with. She fell into an elegant curtsey as he bowed to her. As they both rose in perfect harmony, he raised his wand hand and she mirrored him, crossing their wrists and they circled each other. His steely eyes were locked on hers, but there was no hint of any emotion on his face. Her heart pounded in her chest at that barest touch. She struggled to look impassive and composed, just as he did.

They switched wrists and completed a second circle. Lucius caught her free hand and spun her demandingly into a modified waltz hold. She was vaguely aware of someone singing, but in that moment everything melted away except for Lucius. Again, she was spun elegantly and he caught her, this time his hand gripped just at the edge of the corseted bodice and lifted her effortlessly, just as the music swelled dramatically. She could hear the polite applause as she touched back down and they stepped seamlessly into the waltz. The pattern repeated, a dynamic back and forth between the old Tudor Volta, and modern waltz, with neither partner seeming to truly take command of the dance.

As the song progressed, other couples that were familiar with the intricate dance filtered onto the floor. The swirl of capes and ball gowns filled her peripheral vision, but she let herself fall into Lucius’ silvery gaze for a few stolen moments while they were lost in a sea of dancers. Allowing herself only the smallest moment of softness for him. She hated that she had to hide what she felt, but it was sadly necessary tonight.

All too soon their dance came to an end, and Hermione regretfully took his hand, as he led her over to where Theo was waiting. Merlin, she hadn’t wanted it to end.

“I leave Miss Granger in your capable hands, Lord Nott,” Lucius said formally, and headed off.
without a backwards glance.

Theo smiled. “You looked incredible out there, Hermione.”

“I was so nervous I was going to mess up.” She gratefully accepted a glass of champagne from him, and took a long swallow to soothe her nerves.

“It didn’t show,” Theo reassured her. “Let’s go and make the rounds.” He could see she needed a minute before going back onto the dance floor. He headed straight for the grouping where Kingsley was talking with Harry, Ron, the Twins and their requisite dates. He actually owed Blaise fifty galleons, he’d laid down money that Ron Weasley wouldn’t dare show his face. He felt Hermione’s hand tighten on his forearm as she saw just who her former boyfriend had brought along as his date, Lavender Brown.

“Hermione!” Kingsley smiled brightly.

“I’m glad you could make it Kings.” Hermione smiled warmly in return.

“I wouldn’t have missed it for anything,” he said sincerely.


“Thank you, Ronald,” Hermione said icily, before turning to Lavender. “I love your dress, Lavender,” Hermione complimented the other girl, and soon the witches were gathered together talking about their gowns.

Theo chuckled. “You should ask Daphne to dance Potter, they’re just starting an easy waltz.” He suggested, ignoring the glares that Ron was giving him.

“Yeah, shame to waste all that practice.” Harry took a deep breath, clearly gathering his nerves. “Wish me luck,” he said to the guys.

“Just remember,” Fred started.
“If you step on her foot,” George chimed in.

“We’ll be happy to take her off your hands.” The two finished in unison and waggled their eyebrows at him.

“You two are bloody horrible.” Ron rolled his eyes.

Kingsley chuckled. “I should go and hang out with the other old people and leave you youngsters to it. Have fun gentlemen.” He patted Harry on the shoulder and headed off through the bustling ball room.

“You just keep your filthy, Slytherin hands off my Hermione,” Ron all but growled at Theo, as soon as Kingsley was gone.

Theo just smirked. “Last time I checked, Weasley, Hermione wasn’t promised to anyone. She’s a big girl and I’m certain if she didn’t like my hands on her, she could handle it all on her own,” he said. “You are going to behave yourself tonight, because if you ruin this for her, you’ll regret you were ever born.” That was the only warning he was ever going to give the prat, and only because he was Harry and Hermione’s friend.

“Are you just going to let him say that, Harry?” Ron looked at his best friend incredulously, cheeks turning an interesting shade of red.

“Actually, yes,” Harry said and sighed. “Remember the Yule Ball?” He gave Ron a look. “Just let her have a nice time Ron, please.”

He frowned, but didn’t keep arguing. “Fine...”

Theo shared a look with Harry, but wisely didn’t say anything else. “So, who do you like for British Championship this year?” He moved to a safer topic.

“The Cannons of course.” Ron said, forgetting about his upset as he started arguing the merits of his favourite team, and why they were infinitely superior to the Falcons.
“You still know how to throw a beautiful party, Lord Malfoy.”

A smooth, female voice startled Lucius from where he was watching the dancers below. Well, watching one particular dancer. Lucius turned and felt himself smiling at the beautiful witch walking towards him. Clara Hart was resplendent in a silver gown, the low back nearly scandalous in cut, but on her it was undeniably elegant. ‘Given how close you were to my late wife, Miss Hart, you’ve always had leave to call me Lucius.” He gave a polite half-bow to her.

“I was very sorry to hear of her death. I regret that I wasn’t here for the funeral,” she said sincerely.

“She was laid to rest at Black Moore, by her request. I’m certain if you wished to pay your respects, young Lord Potter would happily open the cemetery for you,” he said.

“I may do just that,” Clara whispered, dark blue eyes holding true sorrow. She sipped her flute of champagne sparingly. “I do appreciate the invitation. It’s a relief to be able to walk freely in public again. Though how that toad managed to escape Azkaban eludes me,” she sneered.

“Dolores might be a detestable creature, but she’s always been a well-connected, detestable creature.” Lucius shook his head. “Though Kingsley had best hope that neither Lord Potter, nor Miss Granger discover that she’s still in the employ of the Ministry. The public fallout would be… tragic for him, I imagine.” A dark look passed through his eyes.

“Mmm, it would be a shame if someone happened to let such a tidbit slip in casual conversation.” Clara grinned. “I wonder if you might be able to introduce me to your little protégé, I find myself quite intrigued by her, and I imagine I could be a helpful ear as she steps deeper into this arena.” She gestured vaguely at the lavish ballroom.

Lucius offered her his arm. “How about you convince Severus to show off those excellent dancing skills of his, and I will ensure that you are a guest for dinner at some point next week?” He suggested in trade.

“So eager to fix your friend up?” She arched an eyebrow at him.
“He needs some social diversion, and he’s always had a weakness for muggle-born witches,” Lucius said reasonably.

“You forget two things, Lucius. I have committed the unforgiveable sin of being his student for two years, as well as having been very much in love with someone else.” She sighed.

“You’d best forget Thorfinn, Clara.” Lucius paused and moved to look directly in her eyes. “You can’t afford to indulge that attachment any longer. When he’s finally found and arrested, he’ll be bound for Azkaban. You know that.”

Clara nodded quietly. “I know, but the heart rarely listens to reason.” She gave him a sad smile. “He’s not a bad man, just…prone to excessively horrible choices.” Together they headed towards Severus where he was talking with Draco and few recently graduated Slytherin Students.

“Severus, you remember Miss Hart?” Lucius said smoothly.

“Of course,” Severus said and nodded politely. “I’m glad to see you survived the war relatively unscathed, Miss Hart.”

“Please, call me Clara.” She insisted. “Miss Hart makes me feel like one of your students again.” She gave a dramatic shudder.

“Too true.” Severus said, clearly getting Lucius’ not to subtle hint. “Could I possibly beg a dance, Clara?”

“I’d like that very much, Master Snape.” She accepted her former Professor’s hand and together they headed down to the dance floor.

“If I am to call you Clara, then please call me Severus,” he countered and settled his hand against the dip of her waist, before leading her into the swirl of dancers enjoying a spirited waltz. “I take it Lucius is match-making this evening?” He chuckled.

“Attempting to, though I think we’re both just humouring him.” She laughed.
“I can think of worse people to pretend with, Clara.” Severus could admit that she had matured into a beautiful witch. She was an oddity, a muggle-born who had been sorted into Slytherin amidst the chaos of the first wizarding war. While she was only six years his junior, she’d been a student of his during his first two years as Hogwart’s resident Potion’s Master. She had befriended marked Death Eater, Thorfinn Rowle and been Narcissa Malfoy’s pet project in the years following the Dark Lord’s first fall. An acceptable, token mudblood for the old families to hold up as proof of their modern attitudes and ambitions. She’d survived the second wizarding war by being neutral ground and knowing better than to leave the safety of Shimmer’s intricate, runic blood wards. Inside that building not even the Dark Lord himself could have harmed her. She’d passed information to both sides, and smuggled what few muggle-borns she could out of Britain.

“As can I.” She grinned. “I’m glad to see you looking so well recovered. I’d read about the severity of your injuries.”

“I got very lucky, and let’s face it, I’m too mean to die.” He chuckled.

“Too stubborn perhaps.” Clara agreed.

“I’m sorry about Rowle,” Severus offered.

“He made his choices, and there’s little anyone could do about that.” She shook her head. “We all have our regrets, though I will admit to hoping that he manages to disappear…and have something of a life somewhere.”

“I can hardly blame you for that,” Severus said. He knew very well what it was to love someone completely unsuitable, and the pain when such love was unrequited. It was likely why Lucius was attempting to pair them together, and neatly tie two loose ends together. Unfortunately for Lucius, they were two Slytherins with innumerable attachment issues, and not some tattered pieces of string.

“Many would.” Her eyes drifted across the ballroom to Kingsley where he was talking with some of the more liberal-minded members of the Wizengamot in attendance. “They see monsters and heroes…not broken people and frightened children. They sit in judgement of those that fought the war for them, and haven’t the slightest inkling of the realities of what we all lived through.” A haunted tone stole into her voice.

“And that is why we don’t share such sentiments with those that can never begin to comprehend them.” Severus turned her so that she couldn’t see Kingsley any longer. “You still have friends, Clara…don’t forget them in your grief. It’s a failing of mine too.”
“I’ll try not to, but I admit that I’ll likely fail horribly.” She laughed.

“We’ll just have to keep reminding you then,” Severus said, feeling…lighter than he had in a very long time. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d attended a ball and actually allowed himself to find a little enjoyment. One dance quickly turned into several, as Severus allowed himself to be drawn into an enthusiastic debate on magical theory, all the while navigating the other couple around them.

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“Granger, mind if I cut in?” Draco’s voice caught Hermione’s attention.

“Draco, of course not.” Hermione smiled as Theo graciously bowed out. She’d lost count of the people she’d danced with, faces starting to blur together along with the music.

Draco’s grip was firm, but polite as they settled into another waltz. “Stay away from my father,” he said after a rather awkward silence.

Hermione frowned. “What are you talking about?” She felt a tiny burst of panic. He couldn’t possibly know, they’d been so careful.

“He’s dangerous, Granger. You don’t know…you have no idea what he really is. He’s just using you,” Draco’s expression was one of honest concern.

Hermione considered how to answer him, taking a moment to formulate an appropriate response. “I’ll be careful Draco, and…thank you, for caring enough to warn me,” She said, hoping that would placate him.

“You’ve been hurt enough by my family, I don’t want to see it happen again,” Draco said.

Hermione nodded and took a shaky breath. “You and Tracey look really good together.” She changed the subject to something a little less potentially explosive.
Draco smiled warmly. “She’s really great you know…” he admitted. “Father doesn’t approve, of course, but she lets me forget for a while.”

“If she makes you happy, I’m sure your father will come around eventually,” Hermione said, laughing a little as Draco spun her effortlessly.

“And that is why I worry about you, Granger. You’re so bloody naïve.” Draco rolled his eyes and gave a polite bow as the music ended, shifting to something much slower. “I’ll walk you back to Theo. You do know that Theo…” He started to say something and then paused.

“I’m well aware, we’re just friends and I’m happy for it to stay that way.” Hermione caught his meaning.

“Ah…good, well-spotted then.” Draco cleared his throat. “Theo, thank you for letting me borrow your date.”

Theo chuckled. “At this rate, I’ll be lucky to get two dances with my own date before the night is over. Popular little thing.” He winked at Hermione playfully.

“Only because it’s my ball, and people are being polite.” Hermione rolled her eyes. “Theo…is that Clara Hart, dancing with Professor Snape?” She frowned, a little unsettled seeing her former Professor smiling and clearly bantering with the pretty witch.

“Merlin’s balls, it is. Who’d have thought, right?” Theo chuckled.

“Good for him.” Draco laughed a little too.

Hermione was jostled a little from behind, as a group of people passed by them to head out onto the terrace for some air. “Were they ever…”

“Not to my knowledge, sometimes I swear my godfather lives like a monk.” Draco said, and then frowned. “Granger, are you…”

Hermione’s eyes widened as she felt a sharp hook behind her navel. A portkey. “NO!” She
screamed just as she was yanked from the ballroom.

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Lucius had been on the upper level when he saw it happen, and he began racing for the open doors of the terrace. Shouts echoed around him, but his attention was focused purely on the feeling of a massive impact against the western edge of the wards. People were panicking, but they were inconsequential in Lucius’ mind as he raced through the formal gardens, finely crushed gravel crunching under foot. He could see a puddle of red silk spilled against the freshly mown lawn, looking all too much like actual blood in the moonlight for his tastes. Falling to his knees beside her, Lucius pressed his fingers to her neck. The steady flutter of her pulse calmed the fear that had been gripping his chest. Thank Merlin, she was alive.

“Malfoy! What’s happened?!” Kingsley called, and he and a whole host of guests raced towards them.

Lucius scooped up Hermione’s unconscious form, and stood. “Someone has attempted to abduct Miss Granger from her own ball. Luckily, the wards protected her.” As the panic finished receding, calmed by the solid weight of her in his arms, a cold rage flooded into the empty space. “I do wonder, who might have attempted such a thing?” He looked at Kingsley intently, and saw a flicker of guilt in the man’s eyes. “I would hope that if threats had been made, you would have at least informed her of them?”

A long silence stretched between the two men, when finally the Minister broke it. “Bellatrix was spotted in Dublin, three days ago.” Kingsley admitted quietly.

Lucius’ jaw tightened and he merely walked past the Minister, carrying Hermione back towards the House. “I would suggest calling the Aurors to question the guests. Someone had to plant the Portkey on her. Severus,” he nodded to his friend as the man appeared at the edge of the crowd. “Could you please floo St. Mungo’s and have Healer Keena come through, he may attend to Miss Granger in her chambers.” He took charge, not caring for the moment the optics of him carrying her unconscious body through the crowds.

“Of course.” Severus headed off towards Lucius’ study to use the floo there.

The Auror’s Office had used Miss Granger as bait to try and lure Bellatrix out into the open. While clever…the risks to her were unforgiveable in Lucius’ eyes. At the very least, the Minister should have informed him of the dangers so that he could tighten the wards as much as necessary to prevent such objects from coming through with the guests. He’d been careless and only his
foresight in adding her to the blood wards had prevented her from being stolen from right under his nose. The only solace in Lucius’ mind was that they now knew that Bellatrix was alive, and clearly that she had help. The crazy witch’s damaged mind wasn’t capable of such a seamless plan. No, someone from the ranks with half a brain was helping her. Someone capable of caution, and subtlety. Someone who had signed their death warrant tonight.
Lucius laid his precious cargo down on her bed, relieved as he saw her eyelids start to flutter. He stroked her cheek gently, hoping the Kingsley would not be so bold as to follow him up here. She’d nearly been taken from him tonight, stolen from right under his nose. An unfamiliar thread of panic gripped him at the mere thought of what had been waiting for her at the other end of that port key. He had to prevent them from ever getting another chance at his witch.

“Lucius…” she whispered his name, eyes open but unfocused.

“I’m right here,” he said gently, smoothing a few loose curls off her forehead. “Try to lie still, you had quite a shock to the system.” Being dragged out of transportation by Port Key was dangerous, but given what fate would have awaited her at the other end, it was an acceptable risk.

“There was a port key…” She closed her eyes and frowned. “My head hurts.”

“I know, sweet. Healer Keena will be here soon and he’ll make you feel better,” he promised, stroking her hair. He leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to her temple, reassuring himself through touch that she was actually here. The soft scent of roses clung to her hair, even after the long night on the dance floor, a scent that was purely hers. Reluctantly, he dropped his hand as the sound of footsteps came the outer room.

“Hermione!” Harry called.

“In here, Lord Potter,” Lucius said and stood. “If you’d be kind enough to stay with her until the Healer arrives, I would appreciate it.”

“Of course.” Harry rushed over and sat down next to her on the bed. “What happened?”

“Someone tried to use a port key to abduct her, luckily the wards sensed the ill intent and stopped her from leaving the grounds,” Lucius explained. He allowed himself a small smile as he watched the clear affection Potter had for Hermione. So much concern ad love, but it was clearly platonic… almost familial. “I need to see what progress Kingsley and the Aurors are making downstairs.”
“Draco and Theo are keeping anyone from trying to sneak upstairs after you and Hermione. They let me through in case you needed help with her,” Harry said, face tight with worry.

“I appreciate the offer of assistance Mr. Potter,” Lucius said. “Just try and keep her calm and still.” He said, forcing himself to leave her bedroom. He closed the door behind him and clenched his hand into a tight fist, trying to wrestle his emotions back behind the walls that he’d built so painstakingly over the years. The urge to rend and destroy was pulsing and hot, but right now it lacked focus.

His long strides took him downstairs where he could see the guests lining up in cues to be questioned, and Theo and Draco were indeed preventing anyone from passing them. Including Kingsley himself. There were many times when he’d admitted to being disappointed in his son, tonight…thankfully, was not one of those times.

“You may very well be the Minister for Magic, but this is my father’s home and you do not have free license to wander around in the family wing,” Draco sneered smoothly, giving the Minister an imperious look.

“Now you listen here, I need…” Kingsley started.

“To let Miss Granger rest quietly while she waits for her Healer to arrive,” Lucius interrupt Kingsley’s diatribe. “She was pulled out of a port key transportation and impacted quite hard with the wards. There’s nothing she can tell you that will help at this point.”

“She’s the victim of a crime and you have no right to prevent me from seeing her…” Kingsley’s face darkened.

“I have every right to look out for her best interests.” Lucius stepped forward, almost toe to toe with the man. “Your utter negligence put her life at risk. You knew full well that if I had been informed of the threat to her safety, I could have prevented what happened tonight. Merlin help you if the Healer discovers a tracking spell on her, because if you truly meant to offer her up as bait in some poorly conceived trap…there might not be any possible way for you to survive that blunder.” His voice dropped low enough that no one nearby would be able to make out his words. They were a blade crafted specifically for Shacklebolt. The slight panicked look on the Minister’s face only confirmed his suspicions.

“You wouldn’t..”
“I think you know I would.” Lucius smiled cruelly, letting a shred of his darkness out to play. Then with a blink of the eye, it was gone again. “Perhaps we should take this conversation somewhere more private, my study perhaps?” he offered, the picture of politeness.

Kingsley swallowed hard and nodded curtly, turning and walking with Lucius through the crowd towards the study. Lucius closed the doors behind them and went over to the side table to pour them both a tumbler of very expensive fire-whiskey. He used the simple courtesy as a way to calm his rage, channeling it into a more useful place. While beating the Minister within an inch of his worthless life would be undoubtedly enjoyable, there were better ways to injure the man that wouldn’t leave a mark.

“We had a team of fifteen Aurors on standby; she would have been perfectly safe.” Kingsley began, though the hesitancy in his voice betrayed the confidence of his words.

“Providing the port key did not take her to any place unplottable, heavily warded, or protected by Fidelius.” Lucius said and turned, offering the man a drink. “You had no right to risk her life without her knowledge or consent. I have no doubt that if you had come to her with this plan that she would have aided you quite willingly. She is a Gryffindor, after all.”

“The Auror’s department was concerned that if she knew, the person would pick up on her anxiousness and betray the trap, but I will concede your point.” He sighed and sipped the drink.

“It was not their decision to make,” Lucius reiterated. “I will not tell Miss Granger about this, if you are willing to make some concessions.”

“What concessions?”

“You will allow me to carry a wand, and use it if required to keep her safe. This plot was far too well laid out for Bellatrix, so she clearly has help and from someone with superior reasoning skills. This is only the first attack, there will be others.” He had no doubt.

“What else?”

“You will keep me fully informed of the situation. I cannot keep her safe if I am working blind.” Lucius kept things reasonable. He had the new Minister over a barrel, and they both knew it. Hermione was a war hero, second only to Mr. Potter in the eyes of many, and learning that the
Minister had nearly gotten her killed would not sit well with her adoring public.

Kingsley nodded, looking somewhat defeated. “Will she be alright?”

“For your sake, I hope so. Your actions caused harm to come to her under my roof, a place I gave her my word that she would be safe,” Lucius said quietly. “I want our agreement in writing Shacklebolt, by morning.” He threw back his drink. He had the man where he wanted him now, and he would wring every ounce of usefulness out of him before he’d let him back up for air. “I suggest you check on your Aurors, and be certain they are not abusing their powers.” He dismissed him casually.

“You don’t need to tell me my job, Malfoy.” A bit of heat returned to the former Auror’s voice.

“Apparently I do, else we would not be dealing with your epic screw up currently.” His bored reply was meant to wound and as the interim Minister for Magic stormed out of the room, he felt a great deal of satisfaction flood through him at the direct hit.

Severus headed back downstairs, having left the Healer with Miss Granger. Seeing her awake, and mostly unscathed had eased some of his worries. Mostly he was concerned for his friend, knowing that the attack would have likely roused some very dark instincts to protect what was his. He almost felt something akin to pity for their former compatriots; they really had no idea what they had done. Lucius had staked a claim on the young witch, and he’d protect her like a dragon guarding his horde.

As he reached the entrance hall, there was a bit of a commotion and his dark eyes narrowed as he watched a large Auror manhandling Miss Hart out the doors. He walked over to one of the men he recognized, John Dawlish and raised an eyebrow at him in question.

“What ever was that about?”

“She’s being taken in for further interrogation. She wasn’t being co-operative with Proudfoot’s questions,” John said, but the tightness in his expression spoke volumes. Severus could see that he did not like how his co-worker was behaving.
“I see.” He nodded. “Has anyone else been taken in for further questioning?”

“No,” John said. “In the confusion with Miss Granger’s attempted abduction there was some panic, and more than a few people fled…clearly afraid of a Death Eater attack. We’re trying to track everyone down, but it’s likely the culprit escaped before we arrived to secure the floos.”

“Thank you, Dawlish,” he said and headed off to find Lucius, finding him in his study. “Thomas is with Miss Granger now, and I fear I must take my leave for the evening.”

Lucius looked over, a question clear on his face.

“One of the Aurors has dragged Miss Hart off, and I fear that she might need some assistance.” If he were completely honest with himself, he had to admit some very real concern for her. Unlike many of the guests tonight, she had no lofty name to protect her, and her association with Rowle had been well known despite its short lived nature.

“Of course, I can keep things in hand here,” Lucius said.

Severus nodded and slipped out, for the first time grateful for his Lordship. It would give him some pull inside the Ministry and hopefully allow him to get Clara released. She’d had nothing to do with the events of this evening, of that he had no doubt. Given her long association with Narcissa, there was little chance that she’d have been foolish enough to act against Lucius in his own home. He flooed directly to the Ministry Atrium, and made his way to the floor that housed the Auror Division. He recognized the man sitting at the front desk.

“P..p…Professor Snape.” The man sputtered.

“I am no longer a Professor, Mr. Dawes.” Severus gave him a look. “Auror Proudfoot just returned with a Miss Clara Hart, correct?”

“Yes sir, he took her to the interrogation room for questioning. He said she was involved in the attempted kidnapping,” he said, as though sharing a piece of particularly juicy gossip.

“She most certainly was not. Take me through to see her, and call for the shift supervisor. Now!” Severus snapped, eternally grateful that the young man was so completely conditioned to do as he was told as he instantly snapped into action.
Soon, Severus was walking back to the interrogation rooms with a sour-faced female Auror beside him. She was manning the station tonight, and had not been happy with his inferences that Auror Proudfoot might be abusing his authority. She opened the door and Severus’ jaw tightened. Clara’s lip was split and puffy and her posture was extremely defensive. That son of a bitch had hit her.

“Auror Proudfoot, what in the name of Nimue’s tits is going on!” The supervisor barked, and Proudfoot paled.

“This little Death Eater whore is involved, Marie! I know she is.” he protested.

“We do not EVER lay hands on suspects, and you know the new protocols for interviews. You’ll be lucky if you don’t get busted down to clerk. And it’s Auror Carlise or Ma’am, Proudfoot. Now get out, and start typing out the incident report before I turn you into a tea cozy!”

Severus watched Clara pull herself back together, emotions draining away behind a very Slytherin mask. It was an instinct he knew well, the one most of them used to hide emotional wounds. He went over and visually surveyed the damage. There was a dark bruise already coming up on her upper arm where he’d dragged her out of the Manor, and there was a suspicious swelling on her jaw.

“Miss Hart, you have my most sincere apologies for Auror Proudfoot’s behaviour. If you could just answer a few questions, we’ll have you on your way,” the female Auror said.

“As I told you colleague, repeatedly, I had absolutely nothing to do with the attack on Miss Granger. I do not know where Thorfinn Rowle is, nor do I have any secret way to contact him. I have not spoken to the man in private for more than five years, for merlin sake. And I most certainly am not his, or any other death eater’s whore. Will that about cover it?” Clara’s tone could have frozen fiendfyre. She lifted her chin, giving a credible impersonation of a pureblood princess sneer.

The woman swallowed and nodded. “Will you be wanting to file a formal complaint against Proudfoot?” she asked timidly.

“Honestly, I just want out of here. Though if he ever comes within a hundred yards of me again, I will have no choice but to make a very formal and public complaint. I do hope you understand my meaning.” Clara stood.
Severus offered her his arm. “Miss Hart, would you allow me to escort you home?”

“Thank you, Lord Prince. I would appreciate that,” she replied formally, slipping her arm into his.

“I’ll get your wand for you.” Auror Carlise left the room quickly.

Severus didn’t waste any words as Clara retrieved her wand and was allowed to sign out of the office. Together, they quickly made their way back to the atrium. He could feel the tension radiating off of her and he knew this was unlikely the first time she’d been dragged in here to answer pointless questions about Rowle and others. After the first wizarding war, the wives of known Death Eaters had been dragged in for ‘questioning’ and he could only imagine what had happened after the Battle of Hogwarts, while he was recuperating in St. Mungos. Women like Clara would have been in a precarious position.

They reached the floos and he saw her let out a shaky breath.

“I’ll go through first. The address you need is Shimmer Back Room,” she told him.

Severus nodded politely and let her go through first. He waited a moment to allow her to release the floo for him and then followed. He stepped out into a neat office, and saw Clara waiting. He could feel the steady thrum of wards that were…clearly impressive. He hadn’t felt anything quite like it before and it distracted him for a moment. There was something in them that tickled the back of his mind, something familiar and yet foreign.

“My flat is above the club,” she explained and opened a door against the back wall of her office, and let him up a private staircase.

The flat was modest, but everything in it was of good quality and well maintained. It was what most muggles would refer to as open concept, with the living area and dining room sharing space, and the kitchen separated by a breakfast bar. There was some art on the walls and photographs in silver frames over the fireplace. It was not the splendor of Malfoy Manor, but it was more comfortable surroundings for Severus’ taste. He could play the cultured aristocrat, but this was closer to how he’d grown up.

“Make yourself comfortable,” she said and slipped off her heels as she walked into the kitchen. “I’ll put some tea on, and get changed.”
Severus simply nodded, removing his outer robes and hanging them on the coat rack by the door. He walked over to the fireplace and let himself take in the photographs she displayed so prominently. There were many of her and Narcissa, clearly on various day trips and short vacations. They were an unlikely pair, but Severus couldn’t honestly recall ever having seen Narcissa look this happy in all the years he’d known her. It was clear that she’d had a very special friendship with the younger witch. There was a picture with her graduating year of Slytherins, all of them sitting on the central couch of the Common Room, smiling and waving at the camera. It was something of a tradition to take this picture on the last morning there.

Her mastery certificate was hung with pride, and he realized that he’d never known that she’d pursued any higher education. She’d been named a Master of Ancient Runes, dated two years after her graduation from Hogwarts. The name of her sponsor was something of a shock and he frowned a little at seeing Abraxas Malfoy’s name listed as the Master that had presided over her apprenticeship. He remembered vaguely that she’d turned down Bathsheba Babbling’s offer towards the end of her seventh year, but no one had ever mentioned that it was because she’d accepted another position.

Abraxas had loathed muggleborns, and he couldn’t even begin to imagine what could have enticed him to accept Clara as an apprentice. Nor had Lucius ever mentioned that Clara had been in residence at the Manor. It was…strange, and he imagined it had to be quite the story.

“I can hear you frowning from over here,” Clara chuckled, coming over with the tea service. She’d changed into a black tank top and matching drawstring pants. Her elegant coiffure had been released, leaving black curls tumbling around her shoulders. She looked very ordinary, but in that moment Severus felt his breath catch in his throat.

“I didn’t realize you’d apprenticed under Abraxas.” He managed to say.

“I imagine there’s a great deal you don’t know about me, Severus,” she said simply and placed the tea service down. “How do you like yours?” Clara asked, ever the proper hostess.

“Just milk please,” he requested, watching as she made his cup for him.

“Thank you, for coming after me.” Her eyes were trained on her cup as she fixed it that way she wanted.

“I didn’t care for the manner with which he was taking you away,” Severus explained, reaching over and touching her hand. “What happened?”
“Bill Proudfoot was the Auror that Corban Yaxley used to try and come after me for his sister’s death.” She lifted her eyes and looked at him. “Corban never believed that Adelaide’s death was an accident, and he was convinced that I’d had something to do with it. Understandable I suppose, when you consider the history. I did say she’d never live long enough to enjoy her victory over me. Prophetic words I guess.”

Severus nodded. Adelaide Rowle’s death had been very public and very tragic. Barely a year after her marriage to Thorfinn, she’d tripped on the staircase in front of dozens of witnesses and broken her neck. It had been rumored that she’d been pregnant with their first child when it happened. “Were you involved?”

“I was nowhere near Rowle Manor when she died. I’m not sorry she’s dead, and I never will be.” She met his eyes, and he could see a bit of steel in them. “That’s all I will ever say about the matter.”

Severus inclined his head, noting that she had not denied involvement. “So the Auror is convinced of your guilt and seeks to try and find a way to get you incarcerated for something.”

“Indeed. I’m an easy target, and while I have more connections now than I did at eighteen, they are business relationships only and lack the clout of an old family name.” She leaned back against her chair.

“I’m surprised you never married.” It wasn’t really his place to pry into her life, but sitting here with her like this invited a kind of intimacy.

“After Finn, I didn’t want to risk having my heart broken again and I needed to stand on my own two feet. I didn’t want to be obligated to someone else and eventually, being alone just became habit…I guess.” She shrugged.

Severus could well understand that. “Solitude can be habit forming.” His lips quirked into a little smile, then his eyes slid to the bruises on her skin. “Do you have bruise paste?”

Clara nodded. “I can see to it later, please don’t worry about it. I’ve had worse over the years.” She dismissed his concerns.

“Please, allow me.” He insisted and summoned the bruise paste, the container sailing smoothly
“Very well.” She set her tea aside and sat up in the chair as he came over.

“I’m sorry that people feel they have some right to pass judgement on you. You did what you had to, in order to survive our world on your own.” Severus unscrewed the lid, and dipped his fingers into the blue paste, tracing it over the dark marks marring her skin.

“How do you know what I did?” She tilted her head to the side.

“Finn told me that you’d declared Shimmer neutral ground, and in return for information you’d been allowed to remain here.” Severus said, frowning a little at the grimace that crossed her face.

“Ah,” she said simply. “I don’t know where he is, I didn’t lie about that.” She said after a moment, letting him trace the paste over the mark on her jaw.

“But you did lie about something,” Severus pressed a bit.

“I may have a way to contact him. Possibly.” She closed her eyes.

“I give you my word, I won’t harm him Clara, but I need to talk to him,” Severus said and closed the little jar. “He needs to get as far away from Bellatrix and the British Isles as possible, or he will get caught.” He tipped her chin up, making her meet his eyes. “You know that.”

“We haven’t been together in a long time, but I can’t stand the thought of him locked away in that place.” Tears gleamed in the corners of her eyes.

“I promise I won’t turn him in, but I must speak to him. Please.” He could understand the torment plaguing her, and could see how deeply the other wizard had wounded her. Perhaps Lucius had seen more than just two Slytherins at loose ends. He stroked his thumb across her bottom lip. “I’m asking you to trust me.”

She closed her eyes again and shook her head. “I don’t trust anyone, life is safer that way.”
“But lonelier.” He let his hand drop, not pushing too hard. He recognized more than a few of his own defence mechanisms at play here, and was aware just how carefully he’d need to proceed. She could be the key to capturing Bellatrix, if he was able to earn her trust.

“I’ll think about it, that’s all I can promise tonight,” she whispered. “Tell Lucius I regret not taking my leave properly tonight. It really was a beautiful ball.”

Severus moved back and nodded politely, recognizing the dismissal. “Goodnight, Clara. I hope you feel better in the morning.”

“Thank you again, Severus. I hope you won’t mind showing yourself out.”

“Not at all.” He grabbed his cloak on the way out. She had walls as high and thick as his own, and finding his way inside would be a formidable challenge. He used the floo in her office to leave, resisting the urge to linger and snoop; he had a feeling she’d know if he did.

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Severus stepped out of the floo, seeing the place much emptier than it had been when he’d left. He headed over to where Draco, Theo, and Harry were standing by the staircase.

“How is Miss Granger?” he asked.

“The Healer’s still upstairs,” Harry said, looking worried.

Theo reached over and gripped his shoulder. “She’ll be alright, try not to worry.” The taller wizard’s body inclined slightly towards Potter, subtle but unmistakable.

“I take it the Aurors have gone?” Severus asked Draco.

“Es, they just finished clearing out.” Draco ran a hand through his hair. “Father’s still in his study.”
“Thank you, Draco. Please let us know once Healer Keena has finished.” Severus nodded to the young wizards, his speculative gaze resting for a moment on Theo’s hand where it still rested on Potter’s shoulder, rubbing gently. Mentally he chuckled and headed off to find Lucius, wondering when exactly those two had found their way into a relationship.

Lucius was sitting in his favourite chair, staring into the cold fireplace. He could see the lines of stress on his face and knew it was killing him to be down here, waiting for news. Words were unnecessary and woefully inaccurate right now, so he just placed a hand on Lucius shoulder in quiet solidarity. Lucius reached up and covered it with his own, accepting the offered comfort. It wasn’t much, but it was all he could do right now. The girl would be alright, she simply had to be.
“There, that should help with the pain.” Healer Keena helped Hermione sit up, so she could drink the potions he handed her. “I’d like you to stay in bed tomorrow and just try to rest. I’m not detecting anything that should cause you any lasting damage, but I’d rather err on the side of caution.”

“Thank you, Healer Keena. I appreciate you coming here this late.” Hermione gave him a small smile as the pain potion eased the persistent ache out of her muscles.

“After I’ve healed someone for the second time, they have permission to call me Thomas.” He chuckled. “Try not to require my services again anytime soon mmm?” He winked and placed another vial of pain reliever on her nightstand. “You can take that tomorrow if you need to, but for now just try and get some rest.”

“I will,” Hermione promised to do as she was told, a small part screaming that she fully intended to hide away in these rooms for a very long time. She wanted to ask him to let Lucius know she wanted to see him, but resisted the urge. He packed his things away efficiently and closed her bedroom door behind him.

She slipped back down into the softness of her bed and tried to calm the fear and panic circling around and around in her mind. When the sharp hook had caught behind her navel, she’d known who was taking her and she’d been terrified. A few tears welled up in her eyes and slipped down her cheeks, the realization of what she’d escaped by an accident of pure chance, hit her like a runaway hippogriff. Only Lucius’ act of adding her to the blood wards that first night had protected her and if not for him, she’d be in Bellatrix’s company right now.

A phantom memory of pain hit her and she wasn’t able to help the sobs that clawed their way out of her throat. It was like she was back in that room, pinned under the dark witch as she bit and clawed at her skin, screaming and cursing at her. She curled into a ball and just tried to force the memories to leave her alone, rocking softly.
It felt like an eternity that she was caught in that horrible memory, when a pair of arms wrapped around her and she was suddenly being cradled against a warm chest. The momentary panic faded as she was surrounded by a familiar scent, something purely Lucius. He was whispering soft things into her hair and stroking his hand comfortingly up and down her back. She slipped her arm around his side and clung tightly to him, needing the safety he offered tonight.

“Stay with me?” Hermione whispered.

“Of course,” he replied quietly.

“This wasn’t how I thought tonight would end.” She managed a small smile, hidden against his dress shirt.

“No, it was not how I pictured things coming to a close either.” He stroked her hair, fingers deftly separating out her tangled curls.

“Harry was here for a while, or at least I think he was…everything is so hazy.” She frowned trying to remember.

“He sat with you until the Healer arrived. I had to deal with Kingsley and the Aurors. He said he’d come by tomorrow to check on you, Theo just finally managed to convince him to head home.” He caught her up on the pertinent facts.

“Did they catch the person who did it?” She asked, not really holding out hope though.

“No, but we’ll be taking precautions to keep you safer now.” He pressed his lips to her temple. “No one is going to take you away from me, I swear it.”

The fiercely whispered promise made Hermione feel warm inside, and his arms tightened around her slightly. Hermione closed her eyes and stroked her hand along his side, reassuring herself that he was real. A part of her had almost been hoping the tonight would find them up here in her room…though not under these exact circumstances. She shifted a little and leaned up to brush a soft kiss against the corner of his mouth. She felt his hand thread through her hair, and suddenly his mouth was on hers.
This kiss was so different from any other they’d shared, and she could taste a bit of desperation in it. She could feel the same need in the face of tonight’s near miss. Her lips parted under his and the kiss deepened, teeth and tongues dancing against each other. She was aware of him rolling them a bit, placing him over her. Blankets tangled around her, an annoying barrier between their bodies, but Lucius made no move to shift them away.

When he broke the kiss she made a sound of frustration, then gasped as he began to nip and kiss along her jaw to her ear.

“You are mine, beautiful witch…every single inch of you,” he breathed the words against her skin, pressing a kiss to the dip in her collar bone. “You have no idea what you did to me all night, watching you in that dress and having to let all those wizards enjoy your smiles and company, while I had to remain at a distance.”

Hermione shivered at the pure possession in his voice, and she ran her hands through his hair. “I wanted to be dancing with you, none of them could even come close.” She closed her eyes and sucked in a sharp breath as he flicked open the top button of the pajamas that Thomas had swapped her into. He pressed a delicate kiss to the newly exposed skin.

“Do you want me to stop?” He looked up at her.

Hermione felt trapped in his eyes and shook her head. She wanted him, so much it frightened her a little, but she did know that she didn’t want him to stop. This was probably a horrible idea and she would likely kick herself later, but right now her Gryffindor side was kicking in full force.

“Don’t stop.”

Lucius’ smile softened and he shifted up and kissed her softly, reassuring her. While they kissed, his fingers slowly unbuttoned her pajama top, and then teased over the skin gently. The feather light touch of his fingertip tracing up and down her sternum was maddening, and made writhe under him. He started kissing down her neck again, pressing the material out of his way as he explored her collar bone. She nearly jumped out of her skin when his hand gently cupped her breast, his touches so careful and restrained.

“Lucius,” she gasped his name and bit her bottom lip. Merlin, it felt like her skin was on fire.

“I’ve got you, just feel,” he whispered, then flicked his tongue over a nipple.
Hermione squeezed her eyes shut, the sensations so good. Her hands gripped the blankets as he teased her breasts with his lips and incredibly talented fingers. One of his hands found hers, and coaxed it off the blanket. He guided it to her stomach and slid it under the waist band of her pajama pants. Her cheeks flamed red as he used her own fingers to stroke her. He set a demanding rhythm, the tip of his finger teasing her opening on each down stroke.

“Please…” she gasped out, needing just a little more. Merlin, she was so close.

Lucius shifted up, kissing her deeply as he pressed his fingers inside her, going slowly and teasing her clit as he did so. He swallowed her soft cry as he coaxed her over the edge. As he felt her coming down, he eased his fingers out of her and whispered a soft wandless cleansing charm.

“Are you ok?” he asked softly, aware they’d gone further than ever before.

“Mmmhmmm.” Hermione nodded, still floating a little. “Very ok.”

He grinned softly. “Still want me to stay?” He shifted them a little so he could lie down and cradle her in his arms.

“Yes.” She wanted him to never leave, if she was honest. “Can you stay all night?” Hermione looked up at him, not seeing any regret on his face.

“I can,” he promised and kissed her temple. “I’ll be here when you wake up, I promise.”

“Don’t you need…” Her eyes flicked down, able to feel just how hard he still was.

“No. Tonight’s not about me, just you.” He caught her hand where it was sliding down his chest and guided back up to safer territory. “Just get some rest, or Thomas will skin me alive for interfering with one of his patients.” His eyes fairly twinkled with mischief.

“Well…we can’t have that,” she said and tried to just surrender to the drowsiness creeping up on the edges of her mind. The steady beat on his heart under her ear helped, and soon she was out like a light, against his chest.
“I thought this was all over…” Harry whispered. He was sitting on Theo’s couch, elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. Watching Hermione being carried through the Manor like a limp rag doll had reminded him too strongly of the night they’d escaped Bellatrix. There had been nothing he could do, and admittedly he never handled being helpless well. Theo’s hand was stroking his back, trying to offer some comfort. Thank Merlin for him. Without Theo’s insistence that he come back here, he’d probably have splinched himself into bloody bits trying to apparate that upset.

“She’s going to be all right, that is the most important thing.” Theo’s voice was calm.

“We could have lost her! After everything we survived…they nearly grabbed her from right under our noses.” Harry’s jaw clenched.

“We’ll find them, and make them pay.” Theo lifted a hand to turn Harry’s face towards him. “You’re not fighting alone anymore. You have friends, people who care and will stand beside you. I won’t let you fight them alone.”

Harry closed his eyes and leaned into the touch, feeling the warmth of Theo’s hand against his skin. “She was always there for me, even when everyone else walked away. She’s the only one who knew how horrible things were that year; she carried so much for me. I have to do this for her, Theo.”

“Let me help you, Harry.” Theo leaned closer, resting his forehead against Harry’s.

“I will.” He said and stole a soft kiss.

Lucius woke early, the soft light of early dawn spilling over the edge of the bed. Hermione was still in his arms, held protectively against his chest. It had been an age since he’d woken up feeling this much at peace. Eventually, he’d need to wake her and take his leave…lest someone come looking for him, but for these quiet moments before anyone else was awake he could savour how this felt. The charms and potions she’d used to straighten her curls last night had worn off, and he admitted that he much preferred seeing her hair like this. As beautiful as she’d been, seeing her
wild and untamed was truer to her nature.

One day he wouldn’t need to steal out of her rooms like a criminal, perhaps one day he might even be able to convince her to be his in every way. It was a dangerous, desperate thought…but once entertained it wouldn’t go away. She was far too good for him, and her future was incredibly bright. Being his might dim her brilliance, but the thought of losing her…or worse seeing her with someone else was too terrible to allow.

It had taken all of his control to pretend indifference while dancing with her, to restrain himself to the barest brush of his wrist against hers. He’d longed to trail his lips against her neck, press her body flush to his, and let every person in that room understand that Hermione belonged to him. She’d worn the diamonds he’d gifted her with, pieces of old Malfoy jewelry that had not seen the light of day since his mother’s death. He’d never given them to Narcissa, never even been tempted.

Hermione had commanded the ball without any visible effort, looking as if she’d been born into their world. It only made his choice clearer. A soft yawn against his chest interrupted further musings. He smiled and stroked her hair off her cheek.

“Good morning,” Lucius said softly.

“Mmmm, morning.” She blinked sleepily.

“How do you feel?” There was a line of tension across her forehead that he didn’t much care for.

“My head hurts a little.” She frowned a bit.

“I’ll close the drapes.” He kissed her temple and slipped out of bed, stretching a little. He was still wearing his dress shirt and pants from the night before, and needed a good shower before getting ready to face the day.

Hermione sat up in the bed, giving him a grateful smile at the dimmer light. She plucked up a potions vial from her nightstand and took a sip. Clearly, Thomas had anticipated some lingering discomfort and left it for her. He would need to keep an eye on her.

“Better?” he asked and sat down on the bed beside her. “Thomas wants you to rest today, so I’ll have Itsy bring your meals up. I imagine Mr. Potter and others will be streaming in to visit during
the day, so if you need me, just send one of the elves to find me.”

Hermione nodded and reached over to take his hand. “I wish you could stay.”

Lucius lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her palm. “One day I won’t need to leave, but for now…we must maintain appearances. Do you want me to stay with you tonight?”

“I’d like that, very much.” She met his eyes unwaveringly, and he was astounded by the honesty in them. She wore her emotions so plainly, and he could see just how much she wanted him here. It never failed to astound him.

“How can I deny such a beautiful witch?” He teased and gave her hand a final kiss before pulling away.

“I’ll try and rest.” She promised, sinking back into the pillows.

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“How is she?” Severus asked as Lucius came into the breakfast room.

“Better. She has a headache, but all things considered that’s not all that unexpected,” Lucius said and sat down, noting that his son was not yet there. “I was loathe to leave her, but for now I must.” He poured himself some coffee and shook off the emotions playing briefly over his face. “I take it you managed to retrieve Miss Hart without too much trouble?”

“Thankfully, yes.” He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I didn’t realize your father had mentored her.”

Lucius shook his head. “To be honest at the time I took it as a sign of impending senility, but he saw something in her. Neither one of them ever discussed that period of time once it passed, so whatever came of it, I assume they agreed to keep it confidential. I was quite busy with the Ministry in those days, and with Narcissa and Draco. She was Narcissa’s friend, not mine.” He shrugged.
“Thank you for pushing her in my direction last night, I don’t think I’ve had such a pleasant evening in some time,” Severus admitted.

“I thought you two might just hit it off.” He grinned. “You could do much worse.”

Severus snorted. “She could do much better.” He countered.

“Oh? Better than celebrated war hero and newly minted, Lord Prince?” Lucius laughed at the sour expression that crossed his friend’s face. “Hardly.”

“I am no hero,” Severus denied quietly. “I’m just very good at surviving the things that life keep throwing at me. It seems she has a similar talent for that as well.”

“She’s a Slytherin, more so than many, and more powerful than she lets on. I always forget that you weren’t there the night she ended things with Thorfinn.” Lucius’s gaze drifted, seeming to be remembering.

“What exactly happened?” He asked, remembering hearing bits and pieces about it. It had been quite the scandal at the time, though somehow Clara had been absolved of blame.

“Yaxley caught her alone and told her about the engagement between Thorfinn and his sister. He felt that Thorfinn’s appearance here with her was a direct insult to his family. I don’t think he quite comprehended just what he’d be unleashing by doing that.” Lucius chuckled a little. “She came storming across the ballroom like a thundercloud, wild magic snapping in the air. It was so quiet you could have heard a pin drop. He started walking towards her, when her hand flashed out, cutting his cheek to the bone. She threw the copy of the betrothal contract at him, and publicly sent him away. She swore never to see him again, and declared herself done with him forever. He stormed out and everyone just…stared at her, as if they’d never seen her before. In that moment, she was terrifying, Severus. I honestly believed that she would have killed him if he hadn’t left right then and there.” Lucius shook himself a little. “I don’t think she’s ever let anyone that close again. Narcissa had her stay the rest of the holiday with us, and she was different by the time she left.”

Severus nodded, remembering the unrest in his seventh year Slytherins after that Yule season. He’d been too lost in his own pain that year to really notice, but in hindsight it had been plain. “He broke her heart.”
Lucius nodded. “Something I think you understand very well.”

“Better than I would like to,” Severus sighed, looking up as Draco entered the room. “Good morning, Draco.”

“Godfather…father.” He nodded to Lucius.

“Miss Davis got home unmolested I hope?” Lucius asked, picking up a copy of the Prophet, and sipping his coffee.

“Yes, I made sure to take her home once she was cleared to leave. She’s a little shaken up from the night, but otherwise fine,” Draco shook his head a bit, looking worried for her. “I plan on seeing her again,” he said firmly.

“Do you?” Lucius was focused on the story about last night.

“Yes, I enjoy her company and I won’t stop seeing her on your account.” Draco’s jaw was tightly.

“I don’t recall telling you I disapproved.” Lucius looked up then.

“She’s a half-blood…you told me that they were fine for ‘a little fun’, but I needed to look for a more suitable witch.” Draco looked stunned.

“Those were your mother’s words, not my own. I only expressed concerns about Miss Parkinson’s motivations in seeking your attention,” Lucius said, a hint of a smirk on his lips. “If Miss Davis makes you happy, you have my blessing…of course.”

Severus stayed cautiously silent, watching the storm brewing between father and son. He understood why Lucius was taking this approach, aware that when his entanglement with Miss Granger came to light, it would be akin to throwing stones while living in a glass house, but that didn’t mean that Draco wouldn’t be just as incensed.

“You might be fooling Granger with this act, but you don’t fool me. I know what you are, and what you really think!” Draco sneered, eyes narrowed angrily.
“Miss Granger is an intelligent witch, perfectly capable of judging someone’s character. You might find Draco, you know less than you think about me and my thoughts. Take care with your tone, I am still your father and this is still my home. While you are under my roof, you will address me with a civil tone or not at all.” Lucius’ jaw tightened.

Draco’s eyes glittered angrily, but he didn’t say anything else.

Severus knew things would come to a head sooner, or later. “What does the Prophet have to say about last night?” he asked, trying to break the tension.

“Their usual tripe, sadly.” Lucius let his tension go with a simple roll of his shoulders. “To read their story, you’d like Bellatrix Lestrange had apparated to the middle of the ballroom and started firing hexes.” He snorted.

“Unsurprising. The Ministry is confirming her involvement then?” Severus asked.

“They had little choice. They confirmed that there had been ‘unsubstantiated’ sightings of her in Ireland, but that their investigations had not found anything concrete. They’re working hard to cover their asses, and try not to piss anyone else off.” He tossed the paper down, clearly disgusted with it.

“You’d know all about covering your ass…” Draco muttered.

“That is quite enough,” Lucius snapped, his temper on a short fuse today. “I have made allowances because of your mother’s death, but this sullen attitude is quickly growing old.”

“I seem to have lost my appetite,” Draco said and stalked out of the breakfast room.

“You two need to sit down and have a long talk. Soon,” Severus said quietly.

“I don’t know what to say to him. There are no words that will convince him that I was not to blame for his mother’s death, and I certainly can’t deny that I was a horrible husband to her over the years. My son is practically a stranger to me, Severus. I wouldn’t even know where to begin.” He sighed in frustration.
“I find an apology is often the best place to begin,” he suggested and left it at that. Lucius and 
Draco would need to work through this on their own, it was not his place to get into the middle.
The White Queen

When Lucius had guessed that she’d have a steady stream of visitors by lunch, he had not been wrong. Hermione was sitting up in bed, when some of the Weasley clan arrived by floo. While she loved the Weasleys, she’d never imagined in a hundred years that they’d come to visit her here. There were some things that were just accepted truths in the wizarding world, and one of those was that Malfoys and Weasleys did not mix. Ever.

“Oh you poor dear.” Molly was at her side in an instant, sitting down on the bed and pulling her into a gentle hug. “When everyone got home and told us what had happened, I was just beside myself. Are you all right?” She pulled back, warm brown eyes scanning every inch of her that she could see.

“I’m fine, just tired. The healer got me fixed right up, but I’m supposed to rest for today,” she explained and looked over to Arthur who looked vaguely uncomfortable, but she imagined it was a combination of being at Malfoy Manor and in her bedroom as well. Ginny, Blaise, and the twins were standing just behind him.

“Glad you’re doing all right, Hermione,” he said warmly. “I’ve got to head into the office, but I’m sure they’ll catch whoever’s behind this soon.”

“I’m sure they will. Thank you for coming, Arthur,” she said, giving him a warm smile in return.

“You’ll be all right here then, Mollywobbles?” he asked his wife, kissing her cheek.

“Of course, I’ll see you at home tonight.” Molly patted his hand and he left. Ginny came forward and hugged her.

“We were so worried, watching you get carried off through the ballroom,” she said softly. “We were freaking out….and then no one would tell us anything.” Blaise placed a hand on his fiancée’s shoulder and squeezed gently.

“Glad to see you’re feeling better, Granger,” Blaise said. “I’ll leave you all to visit and go see if I can find Draco.” He gave a polite half-bow.
“Thanks for coming, Zabini.” Hermione nodded, releasing him.

“So, this is where you’ve been keeping yourself then, Granger?” Fred said, coming to sit on the other side of the bed.

“Pretty nice digs, considering Ronnikins was sure you were living in the dungeons.” George winked at her.

Hermione laughed a little. “Ronald’s just a little overly dramatic. Mister Malfoy’s been a good host, considering Kingsley made me his jailer.” She rolled her eyes. “Professor Snape’s been here for weeks too, and you know he wouldn’t let anything happen to me either.”

“We know.” Fred winked. “Mum spent half the night baking...”

“So we brought some along.” George brandished a basket full of blueberry muffins and scones. “Just in case they aren’t feeding you right.” He grinned.

Hermione smiled. “They smell delicious. Would you all like some tea to go with them?” she asked, and at everyone’s nod she called for Itsy to bring tea. A tray appeared over her lap and a full tea service was set out. “Thank you Itsy,” she said, knowing the little elf wouldn’t appear while she had company. Everyone helped themselves, and enjoyed Molly’s treats before conversation started up again.

“Until everything went crazy, the ball was really nice,” Ginny said. “I loved your dress.”

“Yeah, it was a good time. Angelina’s going to expect me to take her to more fancy dos now, thanks for that.” Fred chuckled and sipped his tea.

“Happy to help.” Hermione smirked at him. There was a knock at her door and she blinked. “George could you get that?”

“Anything for you, milady.” He gave a teasing curtsey and headed off to the outer room. A few minutes later, Blaise and Draco followed him back in.
“Feeling better then, Granger?” Draco asked, keen eyes searching around the room.

“Much. Did you want to join us for tea?” Hermione offered, not sure what Draco’s strange mood was about.

“No, I actually wanted to see if anyone wanted to join Blaise and me for a game of pick-up Quidditch,” he offered, clearly not really wanting to invite them, but Hermione suspected Blaise was behind it. It made her instantly think better of the wizard.

“Do you mind if we eat,” Fred began.

“And run?” George finished, eyes sparkling with mischief.

“Go, have fun.” Hermione said.

“You coming Gin?” Fred asked.

“I….” Ginny bit her bottom lip and looked at Hermione.

“Go,” Hermione said, making a shooing motion. The other girl was nearly as Quidditch crazy as Harry, she knew better than to get in the middle of that.

Molly huffed little as her children scampered off after Draco and Blaise. “I swear sometimes they’ve taken too many bludgers to the head,” she muttered.

Hermione laughed a bit. “It’s fine, really. I’m glad they came, but its good to see them trying to get along with Blaise and his friends. He and Draco are pretty tight from what I’ve heard from Theo this summer.” She sipped her tea.

“I suppose.” Molly said, frowning a little. She seemed to shake it off and let her eyes wander the room. “How have you been doing, honestly?” She asked, motherly concern radiating off her.
“I’m doing all right, it took some getting used to, but the Manor’s not all bad. Theo’s going to be self-studying for his NEWTs too, so we’ll be meeting a couple times a week to work on course material, and Severus has been letting me help with some of the brewing for his healing potions. Honestly, I’ve been so busy that there hasn’t been a lot of time to sit and dwell on things.” Hermione ran a hand through her hair. “I miss my parents…but at least I know they’re safe,” she said quietly.

Molly nodded and reached over, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear. “I wish there was something I could do to help,” she admitted. “You gave up so much for this war…”

“Sacrifices were necessary; we had to make hard calls to win,” Hermione whispered. “Everyone lost something.” She met Molly’s eyes.

“Some more than others.” Molly sighed. “What are you planning to do once this is over, and you don’t need to be here anymore? I know it’s a long ways off, but it’s never too early to start planning.”

“Actually, I may have a spot waiting for me in the Department of Magical Education,” She said. “I met Marcus Travers at the Greengrass party, and he’s offered me a consulting position for the time being, until I’m free to come and work at the Ministry full-time. He has some really exciting ideas for helping to foster understanding between people raised in the muggle world and those that grow up here.” She smiled. “I guess I just really want to make a difference, and it’s a good place to start.”

“That’s wonderful news, I should have known you’d have a plan already. Merlin, I wish my other children were so organized.” She chuckled.

Hermione felt tears sting her eyes by Molly’s wording that she was like one of her children. “I’m sure they’ll get there,” she said, glad that despite her decision to be here, Molly hadn’t written her off. When everyone learned about her feelings for Lucius, that would likely change, but for now… she’d hold onto the feeling of family for a little while longer.

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Death Eater Attack at Malfoy Manor!!!

This morning, the Ministry confirmed reports that the fugitive Death Eaters were likely
behind the attempt to kidnap war heroine Hermione Granger from her own ball, held last night at Malfoy Manor. The Ministry released a statement that Bellatrix Lestrange was spotted in Ireland, just outside Dublin four days ago and that all resources have been put behind a search for her and the others that escaped the Battle of Hogwarts. Witnesses shared their accounts of seeing Miss Granger carried through the ballroom by none other than Lucius Malfoy! We will keep our readers informed about her condition as more information is available. For a full list of all at large Death Eaters and their known crimes, see page 4…

Corban threw the copy of the Daily Prophet angrily into the table and glared hatefully at it. They had failed, thwarted by Lucius and his bloody foresight. The image on the front page was of him carrying the unconscious mudblood through a crowd of panicked onlookers. The expression on Lucius’ face was enough to cause his blood to run cold, very aware that they’d made a grave miscalculation. He looked across the room to where Rabastan was standing by the fireplace, and knew they needed to talk. Bellatrix was currently unconscious, her vicious rage tempered by a well-placed stunner. Rowle would be days healing the damage from her wild temper tantrum.

Rabastan headed over and picked up the paper, looking at the headline. “Well, they know we’re in Ireland. How good is the warding on this place?” he asked.

“It’s unplottable, but we’ll need to be careful.” Corban ran a hand through his short blonde hair. “Too many apparition signatures will draw them this way, and Bellatrix is going to be even more unstable after this little plan failed.”

“It’s hardly our fault we couldn’t foresee Lucius adding her to the Manor’s wards, is it?” Rabastan frowned, his eyes lingering on the photograph on the front page. “I just can’t puzzle out why he did it.”

“Can’t you?” Corban sighed and sat down. Not for the first time, he wished that Rodolphus had escaped with them. Rabastan was a good enough wizard, but he lacked his brother’s razor sharp reasoning skills. He pulled the chess board over, picking up a pawn and twirling it through his fingers. “Your brother used to play chess with you, surely?”

“Of course, but what does that have to do with Lucius and the mudblood?” He frowned, taking the seat across from the older man.

“How many times did Rodolphus sneak a pawn across the board on you?” Corban asked. “And then beat you senseless with his new Queen?”
“He’s grooming her?” Rabastan looked stunned and picked up the white queen from the board and set it down beside the black king.

“It’s the smart play.” He used his finger to line up three pawns in the center of the board. “There were three pieces open for claiming, once the war was over. One he wouldn’t touch on principal, there’s too much bad blood between their families.” He knocked one down and flicked it aside. “That left two on the board, and while Potter’s the most attractive piece, he’s far less pliable. The girl is the easier prize to claim, and holding her exerts power over Potter.”

“But to what end?” Rabastan frowned hard.

“That end.” He nodded at where Rabastan had originally placed the white queen. “Narcissa’s dead, and because he already has his heir, what does it matter if he pollutes the family tree a little? The political gains of marrying her are too attractive to pass up. He’ll have her wrapped up before she even realizes what’s happening, if I know him at all.” Corban shook his head and wondering just how long the clever bastard had been planning it. “She’s too dangerous to go after now, Bellatrix will need to give up on it. We have more important issues, like finding somewhere beyond the reach of the Aurors to start rebuilding strength.”

“She’s not going to like that,” Rabastan said, eyes going across the room to where his sister in law was slumped unconscious.

“Too fucking bad. We’ve indulged her this far, but we need to focus on survival now. They’ll be hunting for us, and worse he’ll be hunting now too.” Corban’s pale eyes remained fixed on the black king...knowing that Lucius was far more dangerous than the Aurors.

Lucius knocked lightly on Hermione’s chambers, before entering. Bilby had told him that the last of her visitors had finally left the Manor, and he was eager to check on her after spending the whole day pretending to be indifferent. He was unsurprised to find her out of bed, curled up on her settee with a cup of tea and a book.

“You’re supposed to be in bed.” Lucius chided her with a smile.

“I’m supposed to be ‘resting’,” she countered a little saucily.
“Ah, I stand corrected.” He chuckled and sat down beside her. “How was your afternoon?”

“It was good. I had a nice visit with Molly and I think everyone else had fun on the pitch with Draco and Blaise. Mostly, I think they just needed to reassure themselves that I was really in one piece. Thank you, for letting them come and visit me here.” She reached over and squeezed his forearm.

“The Weasleys and the Malfoys have been at odds for nearly a hundred and fifty years. It’s an old feud that gets reinforced by each generation that follows. However, I do know how important they are to you, so for that reason I will do my best to tolerate them,” Lucius said and lifted her hand to his lips, pressing a kiss to her palm. “Only for you.”

“I appreciate that, more than you can know.” She stifled a yawn.

“And now, I think perhaps you should let me take you to bed.” Lucius chuckled and plucked her book off her lap and stood. “Thomas will be by in the morning to check you over again, and I warn you that he can be an absolute bear if he finds his patients are not following healer’s directives.” Sliding his arms under her legs and around her back, Lucius scooped her up gently and carried her into the bedroom. She was such a little thing, and carrying her like this only reinforced his desire to protect her. He set her down on the bed, and carefully tucked her under the blankets.

“Will you stay with me again tonight?” she asked softly.

“Of course.” He stroked her cheek, unable to refuse her. It was beyond foolish, but he just wanted to be beside her so that he knew without a doubt that she was safe. Moving over to her dressing table, he took off his outer robes and laid them over the back of her chair. His cravat, and waistcoat followed with a glance over his shoulder to confirm that she was indeed watching him. Even his ego needed a little reassurance now and then. He took off his cufflinks and sat them on the vanity, before slipping off his shoes and heading over to the other side of the bed. As much as he wanted to undress fully, it was a very bad idea to risk getting caught unclothed in her bed. At least like this, there was the chance to give an innocent explanation, despite his less than pure intentions. As soon as he was in bed, his arms were full of warm, welcoming witch. Lucius buried his face in her curls and wrapped his arms around her.

“Sweet dreams, Hermione,” he whispered to her.

“Mmmm, g’nite,” she muttered, already nearly asleep.
Clearly, she had been exhausted from even the limited excitement of today. He filed that away to
discuss with Thomas tomorrow and let himself start to drift off. The soft sounds of her breathing
and the warmth of her body pressed against his calmed his mind and let him surrender to sleep,
certain that everything was well.

In a darkened corner of the bedroom there was a slight shimmer in the air, as someone exited on
soundless feet, having seen all they needed to.
Broken Bonds

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thank you for your patience over November. It was my first time participating in Nanowrimo and it was an incredible experience. If you are a writer, I highly recommend giving it a try next year. Without further ado, here is the newest installment of WWAL. Enjoy.

o.o.O.o.o

Lucius left Hermione sleeping soundly in her bed, as he gathered his clothes and headed back to his rooms to get dressed for the day. The small smile just wouldn’t leave his face this morning. It had been seemingly forever since he’d woken feeling so…hopeful. The other Death Eaters were still out there, but for at least a little while he could catch his breath. He had his written agreement for Kingsley, and there was now a wand safely secreted in his cane again. It was hard to explain how utterly naked he had felt without it. He’d have Bilby bring Hermione’s breakfast up to her again today, and see if he couldn’t convince her to spend at least one more day at rest. Her lingering fatigue worried him, and he was glad that Thomas would be here today to check on her again.

The manor was still this morning, and he was surprised to find Draco already up and dressed when he entered the breakfast room. Perhaps he should have Thomas check on his son as well, he looked overly pale this morning.

“Draco.” He said and sat down, pouring himself some coffee.

“Father.” Draco said, his features pinched as if he’d swallowed something foul.

Lucius didn’t press him, knowing how thin the ice was between them these days. Perhaps having Clara over for dinner would have a soothing effect on his son. Before things had gone sideways with the Dark Lord, Clara had been a frequent guest at the Manor, and Draco might open up more to his mother’s friend than to him. He’d have Severus extend the invitation today or tomorrow. Have the lovely witch around would likely bring his friend a certain amount of enjoyment as well. It would be nice to see them together.

“How long have you been fucking her?” Draco finally said into the silence, his eyes were full of barely leashed rage.
“Excuse me?” Lucius merely lifted a single eyebrow, refusing to react to the vicious accusation. He couldn’t *know* anything. At best he suspected, and suspicions could be challenged. His earlier good mood melted away as he summoned his wits for this conversation.

“I saw you with her last night. Were you fucking her before or after mother died?” Draco smacked his hand off the table, the plates and utensils clattering.

“I assume you are referencing Miss Granger?” Lucius took a measured sip of his coffee, watching his son’s cheeks flush with anger. He’d been careless the last few days. He should have anticipated this. “Let me be perfectly clear, while it is none of your business whom I take to my bed, I have not ever ‘fucked’, Miss Granger. Not last night, or any night before it. Frankly, the inference that I have taken advantage of her, is disgusting. And trust me, the state she was in after the war and after her most recent misadventure; that is exactly what it would have been.” His tone was cool and unflinching. He had to play this just right or everything could fall apart around him. Worse, Draco could destroy Hermione’s reputation before it ever had a chance to be established. “I admire and respect her, but that is as far as it has ever gone.”

“Liar!” Draco stood, the word hissed through his teeth. “You were in her bed! I watched you. I saw EVERYTHING. I know you’re fucking that mudblood whore.” He stalked around the table.

Lucius stood as well, anger rising at hearing that slur come from his son’s lips. “Do not ever call her that again.” He would warn his son only once.

“Why? Fucking her doesn’t change what she is. She’s just a filthy, grasping, little whore who thinks she can take my mother’s place.” Draco raged at him, shoving him back hard. Emotions that had been kept tightly controlled for so long finally shaking loose. Wild magic crackled through the air.

Lucius didn’t intend to strike him, he just reacted. The words too similar to ones hurled at him decades ago by his own father, about another woman he had loved. In that moment, he was lashing out not at Draco, but his father…in a way he’d never had the courage to do then. The blow echoed in the stillness of the room, a line of crimson appearing across Draco’s face where Lucius’ signet ring had cut into his son’s cheek. Draco staggered back, bracing himself against the wall.

“Keep your whore, but you’re no father of mine.” Draco’s words were so cold they could have extinguished the sun. He pulled off his heir ring and threw it angrily away. “I renounce you. Your house, your blood…all of it. I am my mother’s son, true heir to the House of Black. I reject you and will see you no more.”
“Draco…” Lucius felt it, the moment the wards heard his son’s renouncement and pulled away from him. Draco said nothing, but turned on his heel and left the room. There was the sound of the floo flashing over, and then he was gone. Lucius fell to his knees, feeling like he had been gutted. Nothing had ever wounded him so deeply, not Narcissa’s death or the destruction of his wand, or the loss of Melusine. This was so much worse.

He had no idea how long he stayed there, on his knees, but eventually he felt Severus’ hands pulled him up and guided him to a chair.

“He’s gone, Sev,” Lucius said, meeting his friend’s dark eyes. “He’s renounced his place in the family…I don’t even know where he’s gone.”

“Tell me what happened.” Severus was silent as Lucius explained the short, violent confrontation and when Lucius admitted to striking Draco, his eyes fell closed. “Is there no way to undo what he invoked?”

Lucius shook his head. “No. Such magics cannot be undone, because only when the intention is utterly clear do they work at all. The original root of be careful what you wish for.” Lucius closed his eyes, not wanting to surrender to tears. “I lost my son…”

“I’m sorry, my friend.” Severus just placed a hand on his shoulder and squeezed softly.

o.o.O.o.o

Hermione came downstairs after Healer Keena had left. He’d given her permission to leave her rooms, as long as she promised not to overdo it. There was a strange feel in the air as she reached the main floor. The Manor was eerily quiet and something had her feeling very much on edge. She spotted Severus coming out of Lucius’ study and he headed straight for her. Something was wrong.

“What’s happened, is it Lucius?” she asked, seeing the grave set of face.

“Go to him, he needs you,” Severus said quietly. “Draco’s gone. He and Lucius fought this morning and Draco’s renounced the Malfoy name. As far as the wizarding world is now concerned, Lucius has no son and heir now.”
“How is he?” She felt a hard twist in her gut, knowing that part of this had to be her fault.

“He needs you.” He touched her shoulder. “I’ll make sure you’re not interrupted.”

Hermione nodded and headed for the study. Lucius was sitting in his chair by the fire, staring despondently into the flames, even after Narcissa’s funeral he hadn’t looked this broken. She flicked a heavy ward at the door, and approached slowly. She reached out and stroked his cheek with just the tips of her fingers, grazing his skin.

“Lucius?” she said, trying to get him to react to her presence.

“I swore to myself when he was born that I’d never hit him…” He reached up and took her hand in his. “That I’d never be my father.” His voice was thick with emotion.

“You’re not your father, Lucius,” she said quietly. What little she knew about Abraxas Malfoy told her that, but it was clear there were demons in Lucius’ past that haunted him.

“Today I was.” He closed his eyes and shook his head sharply. Self-loathing was rolling off of him in waves.

Hermione came around the front of his chair and bumped his knees with her own, urging him to open them a bit more. She leaned down and kissed him, tasting the salt of bitter tears on his skin. Later, he could tell her about the fight and what had happened, but right now he didn’t need questions. He pulled her closer, kissing her desperately and she yielded to him. For all the forcefulness of his actions, he didn’t frighten her.

When she was pulled down into his lap, she broke the kiss to stare into his wild eyes. There was a need there, and a question. She stroked her hand down his chest, feeling his heart beating madly under her touch. His hands had settled on her lips, rocking her against him intimately. The air in the room felt like it had been sucked out, and she was having a hard time focusing on even breathing.

“I need you,” he said quietly into that charged stillness. “Please.”

“If that’s what you really need,” she said. There was no going back from this, whatever choice she made. Saying no didn’t even cross her mind.
He rested his forehead against hers, trying to get control of himself back. He pressed soft kisses against her jaw, and wrapped his arms around her securely. There was a squeezing sensation as he apparated them from the study up to his bedroom. They tumbled back against the soft grey duvet, and she just looked into his eyes, stroking her thumb along his jaw.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“It’s not your fault.” He shook his head, the strange sexual tension from the study seeming to ease for the moment. He pressed a kiss to her forehead and let out a long breath. “He saw us last night.”

“Shit,” Hermione swore. Lucius might be saying it wasn’t her fault, but clearly the fight had been about her. “I should talk to him, explain…”

“No. You don’t owe him an explanation, you don’t owe him anything.” His voice was suddenly hard. “He made his choice, and there is no going back.”

“He’s your son, Lucius.” She shifted back and looked at his face, trying to understand the coldness that was suddenly overtaking him.

“Not anymore, and that was his choice,” he said and looked down at her. “He was never going to forgive me for his mother’s death, you were just a convenient excuse.” He cupped her cheek in his hand. “I love you, Hermione. I need you to believe that.” There was a reserve in his eyes, afraid she’d reject him too.

“I do believe you, and I’m not going anywhere.” She leaned in and brushed her lips against his. Sensing he needed closeness more than anything else right now, she curled up against his chest and let him hold her tightly. There had to be a way to resolve this mess, but right now Lucius needed her support, not her interference.

o.o.O.o.o

Theo woke as the sun spilled between the curtains on his bedroom, and he rolled up onto his side. Harry was still sleeping. He leaned over and stole a kiss, brushing his lips over Harry’s. He was rapidly becoming addicted to having the other wizard here with him, and keeping things slow was a challenge. Last night he’d convinced Harry to stay the night, and they just curled up together. After everything they’d fought through over the past few years, it was hard to let their guard down.
For Harry though, he’d try.

“Mmmmm.” Harry moaned softly, and returned the languid kiss, slipping a hand into Theo’s hair.

“Morning,” Theo said as their lips parted. He playfully nipped Harry’s bottom lip.

“It’s too early,” Harry said.

Theo chuckled. “My night owl.” He nipped his jaw, sliding his hand down Harry’s chest. He stopped with a curse when his elf popped in.

“Master, Draco be here, calling for you.” The little elf was wringing his hands and not looking at the bed.

“Take him to the study, I’ll be down shortly.” Theo said and rolled away from Harry. “I’d better go and see what’s wrong.” He raked his hands through his hair and tried not to be furious with his friend.

Harry chuckled. “I’m not going anywhere. Go and see what the ferret’s problem is.” He rolled onto his stomach and buried his face in the pillows.

Theo smacked him. “Watch it, he *is* my friend.” He chuckled and got up, grabbing his robe and heading downstairs. If Draco was here before nine, then something was up and he probably shouldn’t waste time getting dressed. The trip through the house let him get a handle on his body, and find his composure.

Opening the door to his study, his annoyance melted away. His friend’s jaw was rapidly swelling and there was a bloody cut across his cheekbone.

“Fuck Draco.” He went over and checked to make sure that he hadn’t cracked any of the bones in his face. “Sit down, and tell me what happened.” He grabbed a box out of his desk, and opened the jar of dittany first.

“My father and I fought,” He said and hissed as the dittany stung the cut, healing it.
“About?” Theo prompted him, setting the dittany aside and dipping his fingers into a jaw of bruise salve. Never, in all the years he’d known Draco had the older Malfoy laid a hand on his son. It must have been one hell of an argument.

“He’s fucking Granger, can you believe it?” He said, lip curling in disgust.

“Are you sure he’s sleeping with her?” Theo blinked. He hadn’t thought things had progressed to that point yet. It was clear that he had designs on her, but surely it hadn’t gotten that far so quickly.

“I hid myself in her room last night, and I saw him. He slept there with her all night. Of course, he’s fucking her,” Draco said. “I’ve renounced him.”

Theo went very still, looking down and seeing that Draco’s heir ring was gone. There were rumours of people renouncing their bloodlines over the years, but he’d never seen it firsthand. “Draco…” Something like this couldn’t be undone, and it spoke to a much deeper hatred than just a disagreement over some dalliance.


“You’re welcome to stay here for as long as you need,” Theo said, not pressing him. “Just…be aware Harry stays over most nights.” He did warn.

Draco blinked, but just nodded. “Thanks Theo, you’re a good friend.”

“I’ll make sure he knows to call you Black now.” He touched Draco’s shoulder. “Maybe hold off on telling anyone else that your father’s screwing Granger mmm?” Harry would lose his shit. As good as things had been between Harry and the former death eaters, this would be a step too far… at least right now. He really needed to talk to Granger and see what the hell was going on at the manor. For now though, his friend needed him and his boyfriend needed to be warned that things were…complicated.

o.o.O.o.o

Lucius was lying on his bed, Hermione sleeping against his chest. Thank Merlin for her. If not for
her sweet acceptance, he didn’t know what hole he’d currently be lying in right now. He pressed a kiss to her curls and knew that now he wouldn’t be able to let her go. Draco had not just been his son, but his only heir…the continuation of a bloodline that had existed since the days of the Norman Conquest. His son had broken that bloodline in a moment of anger and spite. A line he would now need to ensure the survival of.

Hermione was an incredible witch, both for her mind, ability, and her prominent role during the war. She was muggle-born, but in the current climate that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, and perhaps the family would benefit from an infusion of fresh blood. He felt guilty for lying here and thinking about her suitability for carrying his children, but it was a reality that he had to accept as Lord Malfoy. His first responsibility was to the continuation of the family, and for that he would need a suitable wife. The more he thought about it, the more he was convinced that Hermione should be that wife. Honestly, trying to imagine anyone else in that role was impossible. For once in his life, he just wanted to be happy.

“What are you thinking about?” Hermione asked, her hand stroking down his side.

“Just thinking about how different things are now, and how I wouldn’t change any of it,” he said honestly.

She raised up on her elbow and looked down at him. “Even what happened today?”

“That I would, but it would have happened even if you weren’t here.” He stroked her cheek. “At least I have you, even though you’ve been ordered to be here.” One day he’d have to thank Kingsley for that. Maybe at his wedding, or after he’d successfully run the man out of the Ministry for daring to use his beautiful witch as bait for Bellatrix. Yes, a kind thank you note to rub salt in his wounds would do nicely.

“Yes, I suffer so much.” She smirked and leaned down, kissing him softly.

He chuckled and rolled them, putting her under him. He took his time and traced his thumb over her cheekbone, in awe that someone like her would want to be here with him. She deserved so much more, but he was hardly going to try and convince her of that. He wasn’t that altruistic.

“Stay here with me tonight?” he asked, not wanting to let her out of his sight. With Draco gone, there was no more need for pretence. Severus might grumble and give him a side-eye, but he wouldn’t interfere.
“Of course.”

He smiled, glad that at least he had her.
The inside of the bar was dark and full of muggles. It had taken a fair bit of creative explanation to slip away from Yaxley’s home after a ghostly patronus had appeared. The elegant serpent had wound around him, beautiful and deadly all at once. It had whispered softly to him, telling him to come to her. He had told them that it was a contact of his, with information for them. The caster’s identity was no mystery to him, she was the only person he’d ever met with a patronus that indeed a serpent. Besides, Finn would know her voice anywhere this side of the veil.

He spotted her at the far end of the bar, looking down into a glass of dark amber whiskey. Jeans clung to her hips, a worn leather jacket hanging off the back of her bar stool. He wove his way through the crowd, people instinctively moving out of his way. He leaned against the bar beside her, and felt a swell of emotions that were hard to describe. So much had passed between them, love, hate, contempt…but he could never be completely rid of her, like a stain under his skin.

“Clara,” he said.

“You came.” She turned her head to look at him, dark blue eyes carefully blank.

“You’d never have called me unless it was dire.” He gave her a small smile, and reached out to run the backs of his fingers down her bare arm. She was wearing a black tank top, silver necklaces layered around her throat. Even like this, stripped of the pretense of the wizarding world…she was magical in her own way.

“Let’s find a booth. We need to talk about some things,” she said and grabbed her drink, motioning for the bartender to bring them another. She paid and they took their drinks to a back booth. She used her wand under the table to case privacy spells and a basic repelling ward to make sure they weren’t disturbed.

Finn settled back against the padded seat and watched her. She had changed over the years, and not just in getting older. There was a hardness in her eyes that he mourned, he knew that he was responsible for a good portion of it. She’d always been good at masking her emotions, but the years had changed that mask from pleasant indifference to an icy disdain.

“Why did you ask me here?” he finally said.
“Because no matter what happened between us, we were close once. If you stay with them, you’re going to end up dead or in Azkaban. I can’t stomach the thought of that happening to you,” she said honestly. “Lucius is going to be out for blood, and he won’t stop until he has Bellatrix and Yaxley. He won’t care if you weren’t involved, and I hope to Merlin you weren’t.”

“Lucius, now is it?” Finn sneered, a familiar flare of jealous raging through him. “What, sleeping with his father wasn’t enough, have you moved on to him now?” He knew it was cruel, but it had hurt immeasurably to know that she’d gone to Abraxas Malfoy’s bed after they’d parted company. A bigger bigot had never existed, and yet she’d given herself to him.

“You have no right to comment on who I take to my bed.” Her eyes narrowed dangerously, magic crackling in the air. “Say anything that stupid again, and I’ll save the Aurors the trouble and kill you myself.”

He swallowed and looked down at his drink. “We were always good at hurting each other, weren’t we?”

“You started it.” Clara sighed and sipped her drink. “I’m not here to talk about the past, Finn. I need to know where they are, and then I need you to get out of Britain. Hell, leave this side of the world all together. The farther away you go, the safer you’ll be.” She pulled something out of her jacket and tossed it on the table.

“What the hell is this?” It was a leather money pouch, from Gringotts. He picked it, and frowned at the heft of it.

“ Enough money for you to get out of the country and start over,” she said softly.

“I can’t take this, Clara.” He tossed it back down on the table.

“It’s just what I owe you. You said to pay you back when I could, and I can spare it now.” Clara pushed it back over to him. “Please.”

Finn searched her face for a long time and nodded, taking the pouch and tucking it into his jacket. “Why do you care about the feud between Malfoy and the others?”
“Once they’ve killed the Granger girl and Lucius…who do you think Yaxley will come after next?” She shook her head. “As long as he’s out there, my life will be at risk. One on one, I could probably kill him, but he won’t come at me straight on. He’s too smart for that. He’ll wait, bide his time, and if he gets his hands on me, it will take a very long time to die.”

“I would never let him touch you.” Finn reached over and took her hand. “Adelaide’s death was as much my fault as yours.” He stroked his thumb over her knuckles. It would have been easier if he could hate her. Even in the aftermath of his wife’s death and the pain of losing his unborn son, he hadn’t truly hated her. Of course, he knew she’d done it. He even knew why, it was just the how that had always been unclear. Sometimes, he wondered if pure hatred could cause magic to simply work its will, without any conscious design.

“You wouldn’t be able to stop him.” She shook her head, giving him a sad smile. “I killed his sister. There was always going be a price for that.”

“They’re holed up in Yaxley’s old family home, in Ireland.” Finn squeezed her hand tightly. “It’s unplottable, but not secret kept. The wards are nasty, so whoever tries going in might need a good curse breaker.”

“Thank you.” She tried to pull her hand away.

“Just tell me one thing, why Abraxas?” he asked.

“Do you think he gave me a choice?” She shook her head, tears in her eyes. “I was eighteen and I’d just had my heart torn out of my chest, in front of the whole world. Suddenly, I had nothing and no one. He’d been waiting for his chance to claim me, and the state I was in…there was no other answer than yes. He’d have taken what he wanted anyway.” She angrily wiped away a tear that escaped. “He protected me after you cast me aside, helped me carve out my own place in the world. At least, when I asked him to, he let me go. You can curse him all you like, but he was there for me. By choosing Addie, you’d told the whole world I was nothing, that I was worthless. Without him, what do you think would have happened to me?” She yanked her hand back.

“Clara, it wasn’t that simple. I didn’t have a choice,” he said.

“You had every choice. You were Lord of your own house, beholden to no one. You didn’t love me enough to fight for me. Don’t lie to yourself that it was anything else.” She cut him off.
“I’m sorry.” Finn closed his eyes and looked away. Her words were like a blade, and she always knew just where to twist it. He’d been afraid to defy his mother, sure that it would be better for them both if he married Addie and had a nice respectable, pureblood wife. Lots of men had mistresses, women they loved, but couldn’t marry. He’d forgotten who Clara was, and that she’d never be content to be his shameful secret. She wanted so much more. She had deserved more.

“The girl you loved died that night. I haven’t been her in a very long time.” She took a shaky breath and finished her drink. “Goodbye Finn. I really do wish you luck. You deserve to be happy.”

“So do you, Clara.” He looked at her as she stood. Somehow, he knew he’d never see her again. “Goodbye.”

She turned and walked out of the bar, her spells dissipating like smoke in her wake. He threw back the drink and felt it burn his throat the whole way down. He’d need more than that to burn the stain of her off his soul. He signalled a server over, and ordered a whole bottle. Tomorrow, he’d figure everything out. Tonight, he needed to wallow in his sorrows and face the many regrets of his life. Strange, how so many were because of her.

\[\text{o.o.O.o.o}\]

Severus had gotten a note from Clara that she had information for him. It asked him to visit her at Shimmer tonight. Lucius was still locked away with Hermione, and he figured his friend was in good hands there. He wanted to disapprove, but more than that he wanted his friend to be happy. Lucius had spent most of his adult life living up to other people’s expectations. Perhaps, Miss Granger was what he needed to start living for himself.

Lucius wasn’t the only one finally in control of their life for the first time. The sheer vastness of his own options was honestly intimidating. Telling himself that he was staying here to chaperone his friend and his young jailer was becoming less true as the days wore on. He was here because the thought of leaving honestly frightened him. He’d have to go and open the old Prince estates, and start making decisions about what he wanted to do with himself, beyond sitting in the Wizengamot.

He took his time getting ready to go out, dressing much more casually than he generally allowed himself. He doubted that Potion Masters’ chic was the dress code at Shimmer. He chose a nice black dress shirt to go with his pants and his nicest black jacket. It was still depressingly monochromatic, but it was the best he could muster on short notice. Hopefully Clara had discovered a way to contact Thorfinn and he’d be able to glean some information from the man.

Stepping out of the floo at the Club, he was struck by the silence and stillness. The doors stood
open, but there wasn’t a soul in sight. He paused a smell reached his nose and made him draw his wand. It was blood, and a frightening amount of it. It was a cloying, metallic sweetness that caught at the back of your throat, and one he was too intimately familiar with. He ghosted through the doors, prepared to find Clara’s body, only to see her standing at the far wall. There was blood smeared across her skin, staining the white t-shirt she wore. Her fingers were tracing symbols along the wall.

“Clara?” he called, dropping his hand down to rest his wand against his thigh.

“Sorry, just renewing wards. The club is closed to the public in general for the next few nights.” She motioned for him to have a seat.

Severus’ dark eyes took in the bottles of potions that littered the tables, assuming they had to be blood replenishing draughts. “How often do you renew those runes?” He asked and sat down at one of the tables, watching her. She was pale, but there wasn’t any discernible tremor in her hands as she worked. Few people were that comfortable with spilling their own blood, even for ritual means.

“Twice a year,” she said, laughing a little at the look on his face. “They’re the only reason I’m still breathing, and wards based off of a single person are inherently needier than ones that have exited for centuries. They were my mastery work actually.” She finished the last symbol and then suddenly the wards flared back to life, hot and heavy around them.

Severus gasped as the magic snapped closed around him. He could feel the hunger, like a starving beast prowling around them. He’d never felt anything quite like it, and he could understand why she took several days to renew them. Any less and the wards could likely compel her to drain herself to death. Magic, especially magic like this, could be addictively dangerous.

“They’ve only ever been breached once, and that was my own oversight.” She shrugged elegantly. “After that night, I started making new adjustments and perfecting them.”

“Who broke through this?” he asked, watching her drink back one last bottle of potion before collapsing down into the chair across from him.

“Voldemort,” she said, meeting his eyes. “He walked through them like they weren’t even there.” She shuddered at the memory.
Severus nodded quietly. “I’m glad you survived the experience.” He didn’t understand how or why, but felt that it might be a little too personal to dig into. There was a tension to her shoulders, bracing for the question hanging in the air. “You wanted to see me?” he changed the subject smoothly.

“I got in contact with Finn.” She ran a hand through her hair, wincing as it abraded the healing cut on her palm.

“Let me?” Severus offered, taking her hand and passing his thumb over the cut, speaking a soft incantation. It was a smaller version of his counter to Sectumsempra, meant for small wounds. His magic coaxed her flesh back together, and left only smooth skin in its wake.

“Thank you.” She gave him a soft smile. “He told me where they’re hiding.”

Severus looked surprised. “Where?”

“First, I need your word that my name won’t be attached to this information. I don’t want to be involved. You tell Lucius, but my name goes no further.” Once he nodded, she continued. “They’re in Ireland. Yaxley’s family owned an old castle, North of Dublin. It’s unplottable, but thankfully not secret kept. There are however powerful wards protecting it, and I’ve been told they are malicious in nature. A professional curse breaker may be needed.”

“What did you have to give up for this information?” Severus asked.

“Nothing important. He doesn’t owe them anything and I think he just was looking for an excuse to betray them. With luck, Finn will be out of the country by now.” She closed her eyes and massaged her temple.

“Come, you need to eat and get some rest. What night of the rebuilding is this?” he asked her.

“The third,” she said. “It’s done for another six months.”

“Good.” Severus got up and slipped an arm around her, helping her stand. She leaned against him as he helped her up through her office, and all the way up to her flat. He’d always enjoyed puzzles and Clara was an intriguing one. Slytherin. Muggleborn, but Abraxas’ apprentice. Yaxley’s enemy, and yet still alive after facing down the Dark Lord. It made no sense, the pieces not quite lining up
for him. The more he examined them, he became convinced there was a great deal missing.

“This is becoming a pattern,” Clara said, letting him lead her into the bathroom.

“I’ll leave if you want me to,” Severus said, finding that he didn’t really want to go.

“We both know that I don’t.” She hopped up on the bathroom counter, letting him wet a face cloth and start cleaning the blood from her skin. “How is Miss Granger?” she asked, filling the charged silence.

“Better than Lucius, at the moment. Draco renounced his father’s blood, and he’s staying with his friend, Theodore Nott, right now.” He shook his head a little. It had been two days since the blow up, and things were incredibly tense. Lucius hadn’t come out of his rooms, and Miss Granger had been practically glued to his side. He’d lied to Kingsley face yesterday, saying that Hermione had taken a relapse and would not be able to entertain visitors for another few days. That was as much time as he could buy Lucius, and then the man would need to pull himself together.

“Poor Lucius.” Clara looked stunned and shook her head. “Draco always had a temper, it worried Cissy constantly.” She leaned her head back against the wall. “She was all that was holding that family together.”

“Sad, but true,” Severus said and traced the damp cloth down the elegant line of her throat. “I should let you get changed, and I’ll see if I can make you something to eat.” He swallowed thickly and made himself set the cloth aside. It had been an embarrassingly long time since he’d been this physically attracted to a woman.

“That’s probably a good idea.” She opened her eyes and looked at him, nodding. Her fingertips were soft, barely there as they traced along his jaw. The shimmering tension in the room jumped by several degrees. She leaned forward and brushed a soft kiss against his lips. “There are things we should talk about, before this goes anywhere.” She pulled back, regret in her eyes.

“Things you think will make me walk away?” Severus guessed.

“Anyone with sense would.” She dropped her hand. “I’ll be out in a few minutes.”

Severus frowned, but moved back. He shut the bathroom door behind him, and headed to her
kitchen. Searching through her cupboards and icebox were a good distraction from the knowledge that Clara was stripping off her clothes in the next room. Lucius would be laughing his ass off at him, crowing that he’d been right all along about the two being good together. He got some water boiling and put some pasta on, then started whipping up a sauce. Cooking wasn’t so very different from potions, and he’d been living mostly on his own since he’d been seventeen and lost his parents.

“That smells wonderful,” Clara said, coming out in a pair of black jeans and a loose blue shirt.

“Just a simple meat sauce, nothing too complicated,” he said, watching her approach and lean against the counter beside him.

“At least some things can be simple,” she said.

“I suppose the most obvious question is, do you want things to go further?” Severus asked. He wasn’t a teenager anymore, and the thought of chasing after a witch that didn’t want him as much as he wanted her was…unappealing.

“I would, but there are complications.” She sighed.

“Is it Rowle?” There was no judgement in his tone, because he did understand. He imagined if Lily were still alive, it would make moving on nearly impossible for him too.

“No. Rowle and I were over when I was eighteen. A hundred years could pass, and I’d never be able to forgive him for what happened. He’ll always be important to me, and I think I’ll always care about him, but I don’t love him. Not anymore.”

“What then?” He pressed a little more.

“I’m not who people think I am, Severus.” She moved away from the counter and went to her wine rack, pulling a bottle down. “I’ve done horrible things, and I don’t regret them. Sometimes, I don’t even recognize myself anymore.”

“You did what you had to, to survive. There’s no shame in that,” Severus said.
“What I did wasn’t for survival, it was for revenge.” She turned and looked at him. “There’s a taint in my blood that will never go away. If you were smart, you’d run. One day, I will lose the fight with my own darkness. It’s inevitable and that frightens me.”

“Nothing is inevitable.” Severus moved the pans off the heat and went over, running his hand down her arm, and taking her hand. “I have my own darkness Clara, and it only wins when you give in to it.”

“It’s not the same thing.” She shook her head.

“I can only help you, if you let me.” Severus moved closer and used his free hand to cup her cheek. “I want to help you.” He met her eyes and leaned in for kiss. The strength of his urge to protect her was surprising, but Merlin…he wanted her. “Just let me in,” he asked when their lips parted. Her deep blue eyes searched his for a long moment, before she gave the barest nod and initiated a kiss of her own. It was deep and searching, and the salt of her tears tinged it. He cast a stasis charm over at the stove, and turned his full attention to Clara. He didn’t know what awful secret she was hiding, but he didn’t care. He had enough secrets of his own, that it didn’t matter.
Hermione walked into the sitting room, and nodded to Kingsley. She was almost fooled by his instant warm smile, as he got up and walked towards her. She summoned a small smile in return, but made no move to walk closer to him.

“Hermione, I’m so glad to see you up on your feet again. Severus told me you had a bit of a relapse. I’ve been wanting to talk to you about what happened at the ball.” He stopped short looking a little confused.

“You knew she was alive, Kingsley. How could you not tell me?” Hermione said and walked past him to sit down in the chair nearest the fireplace.

“The Auror’s department thought it best until we had a verifiable sighting…” he sighed and came to sit down across from her. “I’m sorry, Hermione. You’re right, I should have told you.”

“I don’t think you should be here, Kingsley. I’m not going to hide away,” Hermione said, shaking her head hard. “I am not going to let fear run my life.”

“Hermione…”
“No. It’s my life, Kingsley. I’m not going to take any stupid risks, but I will not hide and that’s final.” She held her hand up.

“Did you see the person that put the port key on you?” Kingsley asked.

“No. There were so many people, and I was busy talking with everyone when it happened. I have no idea who did it.” She shook her head. She’d run over that moment a hundred times in the last few days and she just couldn’t pinpoint the moment it had happened.

“Well, it was worth asking. Are you really doing ok? No one would tell me much of anything,” he said.

“I’m still pretty tired, but feeling better. I don’t recommend slamming into wards at port key speed, it’s really not that fun.” She gave him a wry smile. “Promise me you’ll tell me when you find her.”

“I promise.” He reached over and patted her hands. “I will be assigning you Auror escorts within the Ministry on the days you visit for the Wizengamot sessions, and I’d like you to request one if you’re venturing out on your own.”

“I’ll think about it,” Hermione said, having no intention of taking him up on that.

“Ok, I’ll let you get some more rest.” He stood. “Call me if you need anything at all.”

“Thank you for visiting, Kingsley.” Hermione said, still struggling with her anger. Lucius had been tight-lipped about the whole situation, but she knew that the Ministry had used her as bait. She couldn’t trust them, not right now…maybe not ever. She escorted him to the floo, and let out a sigh of relief once he was gone.

“I do hope you didn’t smite the man in the sitting room, the house elves loath getting bloodstains out of that rug.” Lucius smiled from the door of his study. He seemed his usual self, at least until you looked closer and saw the concerned lines around his eyes and the pallor that hinted that he wasn’t really sleeping all that well.

“The Minister has left alive and well, though I made sure he knew that I wasn’t happy with him. Please tell me no one was tortured in that room?” Hermione winced a little, not wanting that mental image dancing around her brain.
“No. When I was about ten, I went running into the room to tell my mother about something, caught my foot on the edge of the rug, and split my chin open on the coffee table.” He explained. “Head wounds, as you may know, tend to bleed somewhat prodigiously.”

“What was your mother like?” Hermione asked as she drew closer. He pulled her against his side and they continued through the foyer towards the breakfast room where a nice lunch was being laid out.

“She was exceptionally kind, but her health was always fragile. At least, as far as I can remember. She died when I was eleven. Father didn’t like speaking about her, I think it was painful for him,” Lucius said. “Her name was Mirabelle, and she grew up in France. I have a home in Burgundy that I inherited from her. Perhaps once my house arrest is over, I’ll take you there for a visit. I think you’d enjoy the atmosphere.”

“I’ve never been to that part of France before. My parents took me to Paris a couple of times and we spent one summer on the French Riviera.” It had been an amazing summer, and there was a pang of sadness realizing that there would never be another vacation with her parents again.

“You sacrificed much to protect them,” Lucius said. He moved in close and cupped her cheek in his hand. “Celebrate those happy memories, don’t darken them with grief.”

“I just miss them so much,” she said and rested her hands on his waist.

“I know.” He leaned down and pressed a kiss against her temple. “I wish there was something I could do to bring them back to you.”

Hermione leaned against him, resting her head on his chest and just soaking in his silent strength. She wished there was some way to undo her memory charms, but the charms had been too extensive and her inexperience had worked against her. Her parents were lost to her forever and the only consolation was that they were alive.

“Even though they’re muggles?” She couldn’t help but tease.

“They are important to you; that’s all that matters.” Lucius stroked his hand along her back.
“I do hope I’m not interrupting?” Severus said, clearing his throat from the doorway.

“You clearly are, but we should sit down and have some lunch before it gets cold.” Lucius snorted a little and moved back, leading Hermione over to her usual seat.

“How did your meeting with the Minister go?” Severus sat down.

“About how I expected it to,” Hermione said and ladled some of the soup into her bowl. “Kingsley used me as bait, and worse didn’t think I was clever enough to know it.” Her former Professor’s lips quirked at that. Obviously he could understand how that was more insulting than being staked out as bait in the first place.

“If there are no objections, I thought I might invite Clara for dinner.” Severus looked over at Lucius.

“Well, I did promise her a more personal introduction to Hermione at some point.” Lucius looked somewhat reserved.

“Good, I’ll extend the invitation then,” Severus said.

“I look forward to getting to know her better,” Hermione said. She had to admit a certain amount of curiosity about the other witch. Surviving as a muggle-born in Slytherin was something she couldn’t quite fathom, and then there was also the hints that she was involved romantically with Severus. That was just a whole new level of interesting.

“Be careful what you wish for, Miss Granger.” Severus chuckled a little.

O.O.O.O

Clara stepped out of the floo into the foyer of Malfoy Manor. It had been a while since she’d been here as a casual guest, and it felt quite different from the night of the ball. She heard footsteps behind her and turned, inclining her head respectfully.

“Lucius,” she said.
“Clara, you’re early.” He came over to stand in front of her.

“Well, someone once told me it was always preferable to be early than late.” She smiled a bit.

“Yes, my father hated tardiness…didn’t he?” He shook his head. “I believe Severus is down in the potions lab, I think you remember the way.”

“I do.” She smiled. “You’re sure that you’re ok with me being here?” It was natural for there to be a certain awkwardness. She’d been his dead wife’s friend and there had been that time he’d walked in on her and his in the library. It had taken years for her to be able to look straight at Lucius after that.

“I am and I did promise to introduce you to Miss Granger. You’ve been a good friend to this family Clara, and these days good friends are in short supply. You’re always welcome here, at any time.” Lucius gave her a sad smile.

“Severus told me about Draco, I’m very sorry. If there’s anything I can do, please let me know.” Clara offered before heading off to find Severus. She trailed her fingers along the wall as she descended down into the potion lab. The earthy scent of myrrh wrapped around her and tugged a smile onto her lips, it was a smell that she associated with Severus. It was always clinging to his robes.

She leaned against the doorway and just watched as Severus stalked between the cauldrons on the bench, the air full of shimmering fumes. There was an elegance in how he moved, every motion controlled and precise. As he extinguished the flames under one of the cauldrons, his head turned and he met her eyes.

“Have I lost track of time?” he asked.

“Not at all, I’m a little early. Lucius said you were down here.” She pushed away from the wall and walked over. “What are you working on?” She peered into the closest cauldron, seeing a silvery liquid inside.

“I’m trying to refine a better version of wolfsbane.” He put the other two into stasis. “Results are…mixed. I’ve been working on the problem in theory for years, but I haven’t had the time to dedicate to the practical research.”
“Is that what you want to do now that the war is over? A life of research and development?” she asked. It seemed fitting somehow that this is what he’d dedicate himself too, now that he was free of other obligations.

“It’s what I always wanted, before the wars and everything else that happened. Teaching was most assuredly not my life’s ambition.” He snorted.

“Really? I had no idea.” She laughed a little, not minding the clinging scent of potions as he wrapped an arm around her, and walked with her back up the stairs.

“I forget sometimes that you had the unenviable joy of having me during my first two years of teaching. What little I remember from then was…not terribly positive.” He winced a little.

“You were not the most encouraging Professor I ever had, but I did learn a great deal in those two years. If only to spare myself falling victim to your slightly acid tongue,” she owned. “It was never my best subject, but I do tend to take the time to do my own brewing when I can.”

“At least I passed some positive things along. Will you be horribly put out if I take a few minutes to grab a shower and get changed?” he asked.

“Not at all. I can fend for myself for a little bit.” She chuckled. “Go and shower, I should go up to the Gallery and pay my respects to Abraxas.” She’d been avoiding it ever since his death, but it was time to face him. Even more so because she finally had the answers to so many questions, and she needed to know how long he’d kept those truths concealed from her.

“Alright.” He moved back and kissed her hand. “I’ll come and find you in a little bit.”

Clara watched him disappear off towards the guest wing and she took a deep breath and started back towards the main staircase. Her stomach was in knots as she climbed the steps, a hundred memories hitting her as she moved through the Manor’s empty hallways. The formal Gallery was quite the sight, Malfoys from ages past looked down on her, considering her beneath their notice. The days of open insults had come and gone, ending with harsh words from Abraxas on the night of her twentieth birthday.

She came to stand in front of a life-sized oil painting, the wizard in question looking down at her from the heavy gilded frame. He was dressed in silver, edged in a green so dark it looked nearly
black in the late afternoon sun.

“Miss Hart, it is still Miss Hart?” Abraxas asked, breaking the silence that seemed to stretch.

“When did you know?” Clara finally asked, meeting his cool grey eyes boldly. She completely ignored his question, since they both knew it was completely rhetorical. His son might have managed to bind him to this one painting, but he had ways of garnering information throughout the Manor.

“So, you finally know the truth. When did I know, or suspect?” He sighed, and sat down in the chair that he had been standing in front of.

“Both, I have a right to know.” She lifted an eyebrow expectantly.

“I suspected the night I first met you,” he admitted. “I was aware that he’d fathered a child, just not who they were. You were the correct age and I have only ever seen eyes that shade once before. It seemed a reasonable assumption that you had inherited them from your father. You had his boldness, certainly.” He chuckled in remembrance. “But I didn’t know for certain until you ended things with Rowle. I never told you because I feared that the knowledge would put you in harm’s way. I wanted to protect you. Now that you know the truth, can you tell me I was wrong?”

“You weren’t wrong.” She looked away. “I’d rather be the daughter of a muggle, than ever admit I share his blood.”

“I can’t blame you for that. In the end, he wasn’t the man I’d once called friend. He lost his way a very long time ago, well before you were born.” Abraxas shook his head. “For what little it may be worth, I’m sorry you had to find out this way.”

“Thank you for that. Please, just promise me that you’ll keep my secret,” Clara asked.

“I will keep your confidence, as you kept mine over the years. I will say that I doubt your new paramour would think less of you for the truth. He is a fine choice for you.”

“I hardly know what he is, in truth.” She sighed.
“You deserve to be happy,” Abraxas said. “I would very much like to see you smile again. You’ve tortured yourself long enough, Clara.”

“I’ll try.” She did give him a very small smile. The sound of footsteps caught her attention, and she paused in her conversation to turn. It was the young woman from the ball, Hermione Granger.

“I’m sorry to intrude, I heard voice and thought Mr. Malfoy was down here,” she apologized with a bright smile.

“I was just paying my respects. Lucius’ father was my mentor during my apprenticeship, after Hogwarts,” Clara explained. “It’s nice to meet you in less formal surroundings, Miss Granger.”

“Please, call me Hermione,” she insisted.

“Then I insist that you call me Clara.” Clara flicked her eyes to Abraxas as he cleared his throat expectantly. “Lord Abraxas Malfoy, may I introduce Miss Hermione Granger. She is the reason your son was not condemned to Azkaban, and he has been introducing her to proper society in return.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Granger,” Abraxas said, eyes narrowing as he looked at her critically.

“And yours, sir.” She replied, tone instantly more guarded.

“Thank you for coming to see me, Miss Hart. I do hope it will not be our last conversation.” Abraxas turned his gaze back to Clara.

“I will try to visit more often,” she promised. “Perhaps we should go and find Lucius and Severus.” She said to Hermione and the two of them headed out of the Gallery. “Don’t mind Abraxas, he takes some getting used to.”

“How did you end up apprenticing with him? I thought he…”

“Hated muggleborns? He was not the most tolerant of men, but he did appreciate talent when he
“Stumbled across it.” She shrugged a little. “Truthfully, I got lucky. The man had a rare gift when it came to old magic, and I learned a great deal from him. Are you fond of Ancient Runes, Hermione?” she asked as they reached the staircase.

“Yes, it’s one of my favourite courses at Hogwarts actually,” Hermione said.

“There is a fantastic section of the library here devoted to runic magic. Perhaps after dinner, I can show it to you. I spent many days losing myself in those books.” Clara smiled fondly.

“That would be wonderful. I’ve been reading some of the histories, but I’d love to dig into that branch of magic.”

“Lucius will be able to help you there as well. He didn’t pursue a Mastery, but he had his father’s talents in the area.” Clara smiled and they descended down to the main level together.

“No one had quite my father’s talent for old magic, Miss Hart. Though, I thank you for the compliment,” Lucius said as he approached them, offering Hermione a hand as she reached the landing. “I see you ladies don’t require my assistance to broach introductions.”

“We ran into one another in the Gallery, I was paying my respects to your father.” Clara explained.

“Would you both care for some wine while we wait on Severus?” Lucius asked, patently ignoring the reference to his father.

“That sounds nice,” Hermione said.

“This way then,” Lucius said and escorted the two witches to the sitting room. He poured them both some wine, before helping himself to a glass of something stronger.

Clara settled back into her favourite chair, falling into old patterns with startling ease. Her dark blue eyes took in the interactions between Lucius and the young witch with rabid curiosity. There was something there, and she found it very interesting. Abraxas would have kittens if he knew that his son was enamoured of a muggleborn witch.
“What other subjects do you enjoy, Hermione?” Clara asked, taking them back to their academic conversation. It was much safer than asking the girl if she was sleeping with Lucius. Yes, manners needed to be observed.

“I like arithmancy and charms too,” Hermione said. “I’ll be studying for my NEWTs independently this year, but the Professors have offered as much help as they can give me.”

“An ambitious undertaking, but I wish you luck. I’m certain you’ll do well. Your reputation certainly preceeds you.” Clara smiled. She was saved from much more as Severus came into the room.

“Sorry to have kept everyone waiting,” Severus said to the room in general, but his eyes drifted to Clara.

“We’ve hardly been waiting at all,” Clara reassured him.

“Hermione and Clara were just getting to know one another. We’re at the trading of compliments phase of the evening.” Lucius rolled his eyes a little.

“And we’ve neatly segued into the sarcastic comments phase.” Clara couldn’t help but laugh. “Will we get to open insults before or after dessert do you think?”

Severus looked a little wide-eyed but Lucius just burst into laughter.

“I think we’ll save that for next time, or we may scandalize poor Severus and Hermione,” Lucius said and went over to offer Hermione a hand to stand up with. “Narcissa used to divide an evening spent among friends into various phases,” he began to explain.

“If there were new faces, there was the obligatory compliments phase. Then playful banter, sarcastic comments, good-natured debates, and descending into open insults. She said the trick was to delay the very last phase until the new faces had gone home for the evening.” Clara grinned as Severus helped her up. “We weren’t always entirely successful there.”

“Must have made for some interesting dinner parties.” Hermione laughed a little trying to imagine it.
“That’s one word for them,” Lucius said drily.

“Hopefully we can avoid the insults tonight,” Severus said.

“We can try.” Clara gave him a wink and leaned up to whisper in his ear. “Or if it’s getting too much, you can always just carry me off and have your wicked way with me.” She kept her voice low so Lucius and Hermione wouldn’t hear her from there they were walking just ahead.

“I may do just that,” Severus whispered back into her ear, his tone promising very wicked things indeed.
“So, you and Harry mmm?” Hermione smirked as she and Theo walked through the gardens of Malfoy Manor. He’d come by today ostensibly to set up their study schedule. The returning students would be heading back to Hogwarts in a few days and both of them were obsessive planners. They’d spent an hour in the library setting up a rough schedule and agreeing on where they might need to consult with the Professors at the school for check ins and feedback on their NEWT prep.

“It was…unexpected.” Theo’s cheeks got a little pink as he smiled. “You’re not shocked at all?”

“Not really.” Hermione laughed a little. “Harry could use someone with a little Slytherin sensibility to keep him out of trouble.” She winked.

“Speaking of Slytherin sensibilities,” Theo said and took a breath, seeming to steel himself for an unpleasant topic. “You know that Draco’s been staying at my home since his falling out with his father?”

“Harry mentioned it the other night. He said Draco looks like hell.” Hermione felt a twist of guilt in her gut. No matter what Lucius said, this was partly her fault.

“He told me that you were fucking Lucius.” Theo just came out and said it.

“He what?” Hermione froze, eyes wide. “Who else did he tell?”

“No one, at least not that I know of. I told him that it was best to keep it to himself. It’s not true, is
“No, it’s not,” Hermione said, gritting her teeth. “What Draco saw and what he thinks he saw are two very different things. Lucius did spend the night in my rooms, but it’s because I’d been having screaming nightmares after the night Bellatrix tried to take me. He was fully clothed and just stayed to keep me company. I won’t say it was completely innocent, but I am not having sex with Lucius.” She sighed and walked over to a stone bench and sat down.

“I’ll manage Draco, at least as much as I can.” Theo sat down beside her. “Just be careful, Hermione. Lucius is a powerful wizard who is very used to getting his own way. You’re quickly becoming a friend, and I would hate to see you get hurt.”

“I don’t think that he wants to hurt me, Theo.” Hermione ran a hand through her hair. “I do like him, more than I should. If he wanted to take advantage of me, he’s had more than ample opportunity to do it. He hasn’t.”

“Ok, I’ve done my duty to warn you as a friend, so I’ll leave it alone now. Unless you need to talk about things. Unlike your other friends, I might actually understand you.” He winked, lightening the mood.

“There’s not really much to tell,” she laughed a little. “I mean its hard wrapping my head around it sometimes. I do know what he was and probably still is…but he doesn’t treat me like I expected him to. When I agreed to this, I thought it was going to be horrible. Two years of being treated like shit to repay this life debt.”

“Whatever his beliefs, Lucius has always been frighteningly intelligent. He knows that once this term as a prisoner in his own home is over, he needs to repair his reputation. You’re already part of that. Treating you well and showing you respect means that everyone else is expected to do the same. Disgraced or not, he’s a Malfoy and they’ve always set the tone for the wizarding elite. He’s practically come out and said that you’re a peer, an equal. That’s significant.” Theo met her eyes then. “Even if his affection for you is real, don’t think that he’s not already making plans for the future. Slytherins always do. That’s how we keep three steps ahead of everyone else.”

“You make it sounds so…manipulative.” She frowned.

“Slytherin remember?” he said. “We’re not ones to leap without looking, not in politics and absolutely not in love. We like to know where we’re going to land and that means being certain that the person we have our sights set on feels the same. Before we commit. It’s not because we don’t respect the other person, it’s because we’re protecting ourselves.”
Hermione listened to him and while it was calculating as hell, she could understand it. It also explained a lot about things she’d seen since coming to stay here. She ran a hand through her hair and frowned a bit more.

“Do you think I’m an idiot for getting involved with him?” she asked Theo then, hating that she was so uncertain.

“No, I just want you to be careful. If this goes badly, you’re the one that’s going to take the hardest hits. It’s not right, but that’s life.” He shrugged. “Find your inner Slytherin and just try to remember to protect yourself while you’re falling into those silver eyes of his mmm?”

“I’ll try,” she promised and took a deep breath. “You know if you hurt Harry, they’ll never find the pieces right?” She looked over at him and raised an eyebrow.

“I assumed as much.” Theo chuckled, the smile lighting up his whole face. “I’ve never felt like this before, he just fits so perfectly in my life. And those bloody green eyes of his…” He shook his head.

“I know. It lets him get away with too much.” Hermione grinned. She was eternally grateful that Harry was completely oblivious to how they effected people, because if he ever figured it out the world was in big trouble. It was part of what she loved about Harry, he was so open and honest. “Are you going to miss him?”

“Yeah, he stays over most nights now. It’s going to be strange waking up without him.” He frowned a bit.

Hermione bumped his shoulder with his, giving him a little wordless support. A year ago, if someone had told her that she’d end up being friends with Theodore Nott, she’d have called them certifiably insane. The world was a strange place, but he had just somehow become that friend that she could actually discuss relationship things with, and not worry about any kind of judgement. She’d never been able to have those kinds of discussions with Harry and Ron, or even Ginny. She’d always been holding back, instinctively hiding her real feelings. With him, she could actually just be herself and that was a wonderful feeling.

“Well, if you get lonely, you can always come here.” She smirked.
"I’ll make sure I owl first. There are certain things I don’t think I could survive walking in on.” He winked at her and they laughed together, letting go of more serious topics for the afternoon.

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Draco wiped the condensation off the mirror, staring at his reflection. The last thing he wanted to do was go back to Hogwarts, but he didn’t really have anywhere else to go at the moment. It was likely that he’d be a pariah, even among most of the Slytherins. The only bright spot was that Tracey was going back too; if nothing else he’d have her. He ran a hand through his wet hair and sighed, trying to pull himself back together. Being here at Theo’s meant that he was having to share space with Potter, of all people. He certainly hadn’t seen that coming, not in a million years.

He’d always known Theo was gay, there had even been a slightly curious kiss when they’d been in 3rd year that had cleared things up for Draco. He most assuredly did not fancy other blokes, despite a lot of good-natured ribbing about his antagonistic relationship with Potter over the years. Seeing Theo with Potter was taking a lot of getting used to, but he supposed there were stranger things than that. Like his father and Granger. He scowled instantly at the mere thought.

The thought of it turned his stomach, she was his age for Merlin’s sake! His mother was barely cold in her grave and he’d already replaced her, with a girl young enough to be his own daughter. All those lectures about the importance of protecting the bloodline, of needing to make the right match, and in the blink of an eye it was as if none of it had mattered at all. He’d always known his father was an opportunist, but seeing it first-hand sickened him. Granger was supposed to be smart, how could she be so completely taken in by him? Any idiot could see that his father was just using her.

He pushed away from the sink and finished getting dressed. He was heading to Diagon Alley today, intending to go and see the Goblins. While he had rejected his father, as his mother’s son there should be some provisions for him to have inherited something after her death. Hopefully it would be enough for him to make a start on his own, until he could finish school and find some manner of employment. His stomach churned uncomfortably at the realization that he was in effect destitute. He knew Theo would help him out if he really needed it, but having to rely on someone, even a friend, made him feel very uneasy.

Finally dressed, Draco headed downstairs for breakfast. Theo was there, reading the morning paper, and Draco was relieved to see that Potter had yet to get up.

“Morning.” Draco said and sat down, a piping hot plate of breakfast appearing before him.
“Off to Gringotts today?” Theo asked, setting the Prophet down.

“Yeah, they have a copy of my mother’s will. I’ll have a better idea of what I have to work with once the meeting’s over,” Draco said, shifting a little in his seat.

“You’re my friend Draco, but you’ve always been a stubborn git. Harry’s been trying to corner you for days. You really should talk with him,” Theo said.

“There’s nothing to say.” Draco’s jaw tightened.

“There’s a lot to say and most of what he wants to discuss would surprise you. If you’re worried he’s hanging onto all the shit from the war and before, don’t. He wants to move on,” Theo said. “We all deserve the chance to move on now. We earned that, every one of us.”

“What, like my father?” his tone fairly dripped in venom.

“I thought he wasn’t your father anymore?” Theo lifted an eyebrow.

“You’re a right bastard sometimes, you know that Nott?” Draco muttered and stabbed his fork into a sausage.

“Sometimes you need me to be.” Theo shrugged a little and picked up his paper. “When you get home from the bank, talk to Harry. You can’t avoid him forever.”

Draco didn’t retort, but couldn’t help but think that he could definitely try.

             o.o.O.o.o

Hermione apparated to the gates of Hogwarts and smiled brightly as she saw the Headmistress waiting for her. Though she would never have admitted it to Lucius, she had been nervous to leave the safety of the Manor. This was her first official day working for the Ministry as their liaison to Hogwarts, and she was both anxious and excited to get to work. She knew that this was going to be difficult, simply because Hogwarts had never truly allowed Ministry interference before, but she could completely understand why there needed to be some kind of co-operation now.
“How are you feeling? I heard all about that nasty business at your ball.” Minerva opened the gates and welcomed her in.

“I’m feeling much better, thankfully the worst I had was a bit of headache.” She dodged around the truth a little.

“Good. Now, why don’t you tell me what the Ministry is trying to ram through that they’ve recruited one of my favourite students to try and convince me to agree?” Minerva snorted a little.

“Lord Travers did think that I might be the best one to discuss things with you.” Hermione laughed. It had been rather transparent, but the point wasn’t subterfuge here.

“He was always a clever man,” Minerva admitted. “So what do they want?”

“Nothing too horrible. I had a look at his proposals and really most of them make a lot of sense. I know they would have made things easier for me when I was just coming into the wizarding world.” She eased into the conversation. “They want to host an orientation meeting for muggle parents, to give them a better idea of the world their children are coming into. They’d like to discuss adding a course for first years that covers both wizarding and muggle culture, just to help both groups of children understand one another better and have a careers fairs every year. It would expose the students to the different mastery guilds, Ministry departments, and other trades within our world. It would make career counselling a little easier for the Heads of House too.” Hermione smiled. “Mostly they just want to be more present, since a lot of problems stemmed from the disconnect between Hogwarts and the Ministry.”

There was also the reality that the Ministry subsidized the school to allow all magical children born within the British Isle to attend, regardless of their monetary realities. While Marcus hadn’t explicitly said that they were considering withdrawing funding if Minerva refused to work with them, Hermione knew that it was a threat they certainly had in their power. Dumbledore’s reputation as the man who’d defeated Grindewald had cowed the Ministry over the years, no matter how blatantly he’d fought them. Professor McGonagall didn’t have that same level of threat. She really didn’t want to see the Ministry go there, and hopefully she’d be able to convince her former teacher to at least bend a little.

“Those don’t sound like horrible ideas.” Minerva frowned and considered as they walked towards the castle.
Hermione paused as they reached the front steps. It was almost surreal to be back here, especially with everything looking completely restored. It was almost like the Final Battle had never taken place. She felt a strange swell of emotion, but she couldn’t really put a name to it. She wiped away a few tears that slipped down her cheeks.

Minerva came back to her side and just pulled her into a hug.

“My poor girl,” she whispered and stroked the younger witch’s back. “You all went through so much. I wish we could have protected you better.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what’s gotten into me.” Hermione pulled back and blinked rapidly as she fought back the sudden outburst.

“The last time you were here, everything was in ruins. I was rather teary eyed after we finished the reconstruction myself,” Minerva said and they continued inside the castle. “I wish you were coming back this year, but I imagine that even without your obligations…returning would have been difficult.”

“I think it’s going to be difficult for a lot of people. I’m not the same person I was.” A part of her mourned that and at the same time celebrated that she’d passed through the fire. She’d been altered, but not destroyed. The war hadn’t consumed her. It had hardened her though and hopefully the changes would be for the better.

“None of us are,” Minerva said.

Hermione simply nodded as they walked silently through the castle. Hermione was grateful for the silence to just process being back here after everything that happened. Some portraits were still missing, and certain areas gleamed with a newness that seemed wrong inside a thousand year old magical castle. Overall everything looked just as she remembered it from the day of Dumbledore’s funeral, like everything has just been a bad dream.

They reached the Gargoyle and Minerva smiled.

“Invictus,” she said clearly and the statue moved to reveal the spiral staircase. The Headmaster’s Tower had been changed greatly from Dumbledore’s days, reminding Hermione of Professor McGonagall’s old office. There were comfortable places to sit, and a full tea was waiting for them.
“Well, have you brought along anything outlining the proposals from the Ministry?” Minerva finally asked as they were settled in slightly overstuffed armchairs, sipping their tea.

“I have.” She opened her bag and handed a folder to the Headmistress.

“Thank you.” Minerva took it and began to peruse the pages.

Hermione simply sat quietly and drank her tea. She had a feeling that Minerva would be inclined to accept the offered changes, but as a token protest might reject one or request conditions. Lord Travers was honestly expecting her to dismiss everything straight out of hand.

“How have things been going at the Manor?” Minerva asked, looking up at Hermione over the top of her glasses.

“Very well,” she said. “Professor Snape is staying there too and he’s been letting me help with some of his brewing. Theo and I have hammered out a study schedule for the year so we should be able to keep each other track.”

“I admit to being a little relieved to hear that you’re not there alone with him. I’ve been concerned for you. Especially after what happened at the ball,” Minerva said.

“I know everyone’s worried, but I wish they wouldn’t.” Hermione shook her head. “After everything that’s happened, I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself. It’s strangely peaceful there and right now that’s what I need. Also with Bellatrix hunting me, it’s probably the safest place for me to be.” Hermione repressed a shudder just from saying the witch’s name. She could finally understand why some people couldn’t bring themselves to say Voldemort’s name.

“We only worry because we care.” The older witch’s face expressed genuine concern.

“I know.” She sighed. It worried her a lot, knowing that the people who cared about her wouldn’t take kindly to the knowledge that she was considering a relationship with the former Death Eater. It was something she’d need to come to terms with eventually. She only hoped that the people she really cared about, would eventually understand.

o.o.O.o.o
Hermione returned to the Manor after a long afternoon with Minerva. It was strange to think of her former teacher as a friend, but really...so much had changed that it was as if old rules no longer applied. Who she was today was so far removed from the student she’d once been, that it was hard to even really remember that part of her. Severus and Minerva were now firmly part of this new life, not as teachers or mentors...but friends. She walked up the crushed stone walkway and felt a smile creep over her lips, just thinking about the expression on Severus’ face if she were ever to tell him that she considered him a friend. Yes, that would probably not go terribly well. She laughed a little to herself as she headed inside.

Bilby appeared with a little pop.

“Miss, you is to go and see your surprise in your rooms. Master said you were to do it as soon as you returned,” he said.

“Surprise?” Hermione smiled. “Where is Lord Malfoy?”

“He said you is to see your surprise, nothing else,” Bilby said firmly and disappeared.

Hermione just shook her head and decided to head up to her rooms. In all honesty, she hadn’t been spending much time in them since Draco had left. Most nights she fell asleep in Lucius’ arms in his rooms. He’d kept everything quite tame, restricting them both to kisses and a few stolen caresses, but she was frankly growing impatient with that. She knew why he was trying to be so careful with her, but it frustrated her. She wasn’t afraid of Lucius, not like that.

She opened the door to her suite and picked up a little folded note off the table just inside the room.

"Severus will be gone until tomorrow. Since I was robbed of the chance to enjoy your ball with you, I thought you might enjoy a kind of do-over. There is a relaxing bath waiting for you, and a gown across the bed. I will be waiting for you on the terrace. ~ L"

Hermione smiled to herself and continued through to her bedroom, starting to undress as she approached the bathroom. There was a steaming hot bath waiting for her and the scent of vanilla filled the air. There was a flute of champagne on the side with a pair of silver hair clips. She finished undressing and twisted her hair up off her neck, securing them in the clips. They were just perfect, taking care of her thick curls without any issue. The hot water was divine perfection after her long day, and let all the stress from going back to the school just melt away.
She wanted to linger in the water, but her need to see Lucius quickly drove her from the bath. The
dress that was waiting for her was far removed from the lavish ball gown she’d worn that night.
This was sleeker, a dark blue and made of the softest silk imaginable. Hermione put on the lacy
lingerie and then slipped the dress on. The back was scandalously low, and it hugged her body like
a second skin. Looking in the mirror, Hermione was stunned at the picture there. She looked…
sensual. Her hands came up to take the combs out of her hair and she left her curls loose and wild
tonight. She kept her make-up light, but chose a deep wine for her lipstick.

Her feet led her down to the terrace, and she smiled at the hundreds of enchanted candles that
floated in the air, creating a simply gorgeous space. Lucius’ robes were a dark pewter, and his hair
was held back with a simple tie at the nape of his neck. He looked perfect, and Hermione felt a
now familiar swell of lust that hit her hard. She could see an answering heat in his eyes as he
looked at her.

“You look beautiful,” he said and moved forward to offer her his arm.

“Thank you.” She smiled and walked with him down the steps to the dinner table that had been set
up for them in the middle of the rose garden. “Lucius this is…”

“What you deserve.” He gently cut her off. “Since I can’t whisk you away to an expensive
restaurant in Paris, I’ll have to content myself with doing the best I can here.”

“If this is you just making do, I don’t think I could survive you in Paris.” Hermione laughed a little,
a nervous flutter in her stomach.

“Oh, I think we’d find a way to muddle through.” He held her chair for her as she sat down, and
poured her some wine, as their meal appeared on the table. “How was your meeting with the
Headmistress?” he asked and took his seat across from her.

“It went very well, she accepted most of Marcus’ proposals and is open to considering the others.”
Hermione smiled.

“Marcus will be overjoyed, and I wouldn’t be surprised if you found yourself being rewarded with
a handsome bonus.” Lucius grinned. “To your first political success, the first of many.” He lifted
his glass.
“I’ll take it, even though I don’t think it was really all my doing. They were very sensible proposals,” Hermione said.

“Still, hearing them from a beloved student as opposed from a Ministry official likely went a long way to softening her to them.” Lucius said. “It’s not always the message, Hermione. At times it is the messenger.”

Hermione nodded and smiled, willing to accept the praise. “Is Severus off with Miss Hart?” She couldn’t help the smirk on her lips.

“I believe so.” Lucius chuckled and shook his head. “It’s good to see him happy.”

“She’s…interesting.” Hermione settled on that word.

“She is that.” Lucius agreed. “How is your duck?”


“They like you, it makes them go to extra effort.” Lucius smiled warmly at her. “You’ve brought light back to this place, and they aren’t the only ones happy to have it here.”

Hermione melted a little and sipped her wine. Sometimes the things he said rendered her speechless. She could tell that he meant them too. He had a way with words that she envied. There were so many things she wanted to say to him, but had no idea how to voice them.

“You say the most incredible things,” Hermione said after a moment.

“You inspire them.” He grinned.

“Lucius, I’m suddenly not that hungry. Will you dance with me?” she asked, setting her fork down. She needed to be in his arms and with everything that had been happening, she was done waiting for the things she wanted.
“You only ever have to ask,” Lucius said and waved a hand at their meal. “It’ll keep.” He stood and came around the table and offered her a hand.

Hermione stood and only barely registered the sound of music starting somewhere nearby. She was too focused on his eyes and the warmth of his hand in hers to focus on where it was coming from. He led her a short distance from the table pulled her into his arms, much closer than he’d have dared in public. His fingers trailed down her bare spine, teasing her skin and taking full advantage of every part of her that was on display in this dress.

Hermione let him lead, sweeping them around the garden beds in graceful turns. All the while, she was completely lost in his eyes. Subtle shifts of his hand on her back guided her as she surrendered completely to the moment and to him. He lifted her up, and on the way down she wrapped her arms around his neck and caught his lips in kiss. Weeks of pent up desire poured into that kiss, and she whimpered a little as he responded just as desperately. He tried to pull back, but she didn’t let him.

“No more stopping,” Hermione said as their lips parted. Her heart was pounding wildly in her chest. “I want you.” She needed to be clear with him and knew that he’d been waiting for her to say it.

“And I want you.” Lucius leaned down and kissed her again, this kiss less wild. He took his time in this kiss and pulled her closer. His hand slipped down, cupping her ass briefly before smoothing up her back. He broke their kiss and looked long into her eyes. “Are you sure?”

“I’ve never been more sure about anything.” Hermione felt the rightness of this decision. The world might judge her for it, but she’d given up so much for this world that she deserved to have something just for herself. Something that made her happy.

Lucius nodded and then swept her up into his arms. “Then I think we should take this somewhere more comfortable than the rose garden.” He smirked a little, and carried her back into the Manor, leaving the roses and glittering candlelight behind them.

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