The Gloriana Set

by ThebeMoon

Summary

The War is won, and Hermione Granger is back at Hogwarts as an “Eighth Year”, feeling reckless and determined to shed her prim bookworm persona. She will do as she pleases, and anyone who doesn’t like it will see the business end of her wand. Also returning is Draco Malfoy, universally hated but determined to restore his family’s name. Hermione’s hopes for a quiet school year are quickly dashed as she contends with mischievous First Years, killer plants, enchanted hair accessories, a totally inappropriate Moaning Myrtle, renegade Death Eaters, a nice vampire, a poorly named study group, a depraved party, and mysterious, threatening blood messages on the castle walls. We have redemption, partial redemption and (sadly or hilariously) no redemption at all. Throw in a snarky, disturbingly attractive Draco with his own secret agenda, and we have a very slow-burn Dramione with a side of who-dun-it. COMPLETE!

Notes

I do not own Harry Potter.
The station was empty—a small stretch of wooden platform and a stone, peaked-roof building and a creaking sign: HOGSMEADE. Hermione landed with a thunk of her heels against wood, her trunk in one hand and a cat carrier in the other.

She had never really noticed the station before, the platform, the tracks, the creaking sign, the wooden benches painted in alternating colors of red, green, blue and yellow. She had always arrived by train, too busy frantically rechecking her bag and robes, gathering stray candy, quills and cards that Ron had dropped or forgotten. Then she’d be pushed into a swirling swarm of teenagers, borne helplessly toward the carriages and driven away. Not once had she ever looked back at the station, her eyes were always fastened ahead, heart pounding with excitement.

Not this time. She had chosen to apparate to the station instead, avoiding the train and the crowds. She was here to finish her education and sit for her NEWTs, not relive her Hogwarts days. She didn’t feel like a student anymore, not even an “Eighth Year,” the special class the new Headmistress had created for returning Seventh Years. She envied Harry, who’d chosen to enter Auror training instead of returning. Ron tried to do the same, but his grades weren’t high enough—he needed NEWTs to qualify. He’d sulked for days over that letter from the Ministry. Hermione herself had no desire to become an Auror, although she’d received a personal letter from Shacklebolt inviting her into the training program.

She sat on the nearest bench, trunk and cat carrier settling obediently beside her, and tilted her head backwards to catch the warm sun. Odd, how clear and warm the weather was. Quite unlike Scotland. Odd to be at Hogwarts Station, sitting alone in a too-heavy uniform and robe, bathed in warm sunshine and silence …

A loud crack shattered the stillness, and Hermione leaped to her feet, wand out, eyes wide. Another student, also in uniform, also holding one handle of a trunk. His back to her, he stood facing the tracks, head drooping, fists clenched. She knew that profile, that shock of blond hair, that long, thin frame. For a moment, the only sound was the creaking sign and the boy’s—man’s, really—ragged breaths.

She gasped, and now it was his turn to leap to attention, wild-eyed, wand out. Grey eyes fastened on her instantly, then rolled dramatically, and Hermione knew his thoughts as clearly as if he’d spoken out loud: Of course it was her, of course she’d be here, of course he wouldn’t get two seconds alone to steel himself. … She almost sympathized, since she felt the same. She hadn’t purposely apparated herself here early so she could stand on the Hogsmeade Station platform with Draco Malfoy.

The light breeze from the mountains suddenly strengthened, carrying the faint call of a train whistle, and Hermione turned her head to see the scarlet engine burst out of a far-off tunnel and shoot toward the station with impossible speed. A fainter beating of wings from the opposite direction shifted her gaze back toward Malfoy, and the two silently watched a black line of skeletal thestrals wind down from the heights in single file, each pulling a black, low-slung carriage.

Another blast from the train whistle, this one almost deafening, and Hermione felt a strong urge to avoid the mob that would soon swarm the station. She walked down the platform, brushing past Malfoy, Crookshanks’ carrier floating behind. Her trunk she left to be brought with the baggage. The thestral carriages were now lined up alongside the tracks, and she had her eye on the last and smallest one. Hopefully it would fill up quickly and whisk her to the castle with the least fuss.
Again, she wasn’t the only one with such thoughts. Malfoy’s long legs quickly outpaced hers, and he leaped inside the last carriage in one fluid motion. Then he leaned back, arm slung over the back of the seat, insufferably smug, looking at her over the carriage’s folded-down top. *Mine*, his eyes said darkly, a familiar look for him. *Mine*, his eyes seemed to say, *everything I want is mine, even after the war, after the failure and defeat, the destruction and the hatred, you are still a Mudblood, I am still a Malfoy, I am still free, and anything I want is still mine.*

Hermione froze, her hyperactive sense of justice instantly kindled. She was here first! He purposely cut in front of her to take that carriage! Suddenly everything the man had done, the horror and tragedy he personally caused, paled in comparison to this one bold action. She was here first! Now she’d have to be the better person and huff away to a larger carriage, red-faced with righteous indignation, because that was what Hermione Granger did, not lower herself to his level …

Then she blinked slowly. Remembering. Remembering a trapped beetle, a scarred girl, an innocent couple obliterated and exiled for the crime of loving her. *Malfoy, you have no idea what levels I’ve descended to.*

Her face must have changed, because Malfoy’s eyes widened slightly. Hermione awkwardly hopped into the small carriage, sitting opposite him, and his staggered expression swelled her heart with satisfaction. Crookshank’s carrier dropped beside her on the seat; she could hear her familiar’s low growl. Smart cat. She zipped open the carrier and a fluffy orange head popped out hissing.

“Manners, Crooky,” Hermione crooned, petting his fur. “There’s nothing to fear here, Snoogy Woogums.”

“Get out,” Malfoy said, his growl matching the cat’s.

“Did you hear something, Crooky?” Hermione asked, basking in the heat of Malfoy’s glare. “Did anyone of importance say something? No, I didn’t think so, my Boo-Boo-Kitty.”

The train had stopped in an explosion of steam and squealing brakes, and the first wave of students rushed the carriages. Hermione’s back was the station platform, but she could clearly hear the gasps and shouts behind her: “It’s Granger! And Malfoy! In the last carriage! Look! Look!” The news shot through the crowd and their names, coupled in disbelief, rang repeatedly in their ears. Hermione grimaced, keeping her eyes on the cat. Maybe she hadn’t thought this through.

Then another name rippled through the crowd: “There’s Weasley! Ron Weasley! Weasley!” Hermione refused to turn around—why should she, just so she could watch him stride down the path, beaming from the acclaim of being one of the Golden Trio who saved the Wizarding World? She risked a look at Malfoy, who looked smug again.

“Hermione!” Ron was so tall that he could look straight into the carriage from the ground. “Are you mental? What are you doing there with him! It’s not safe!”

“Nonsense, Ronald, it’s perfectly safe,” she said.

“Are you sure, Granger?” Malfoy shifted to the center of his seat and stretched his legs slightly, one foot against hers.

Ron flushed. “Get away from her! Hermione, get out of there!”

“Did you hear something, Granger?” Malfoy asked. “Did somebody of importance say anything?”

Hermione suppressed a snort of amusement. “I’m not getting out, Ronald.”
“Well, I’m not sitting with him!” Ron snapped. “Nobody is going to sit with a Death Eater! Hermione!”

Malfoy’s eyes glittered and his fists clenched. Hermione tried very hard not to sigh. Ron had actually stumbled onto something resembling a point. Malfoy was a Death Eater to most of the students and a blood traitor the rest. The curse of the last-minute defector, reviled by both sides. She had no sympathy, but now they were just wasting time.

“You’re right, Ronald,” she said. “This carriage may be considered full.” Her voice rang out the last sentence, the tone of command, and the carriage’s thestral immediately leaped into the air, thrusting Hermione back into her seat and drawing an outraged yowl from Crookshanks. Malfoy braced himself with his legs to keep from falling on top of her, and Hermione looked down at a rapidly shrinking Ron, his dumfounded face upturned, as the carriage sailed beyond a line of trees and over the lake.

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“Hermione!”

“Oh, Hermione!”

“You’re all right!”

“Of course I’m all right,” Hermione huffed at the Gryffindor table. “Have we met? I can handle a carriage ride with Draco Malfoy.”

“But why would you want to?” Ron asked, as she dropped into a seat opposite him. “It’s Malfoy!”

“Who?” Hermione asked.

“Mal—” Ron stopped himself and glared. “Why weren’t you on the train?”

Hermione shrugged. “I overslept.” She had stayed with her parents in the months following Voldemort’s defeat, helping them readjust to life in England again. While she had mostly reversed the memory charms she had placed on them in Australia, there were still gaps and fuzziness in her parents’ minds, mostly regarding anything related to magic. Which was probably for the best—they had picked up their dental practice again well enough, and didn’t object to her returning to Hogwarts.

Another ripple shuddered through the Gryffindor table. Hermione overslept? On the first day at Hogwarts? Our Hermione? Her friends’ looks practically bordered on betrayal. Missing classmates and still-shattered castle walls they took in stride, but Hermione Granger was never tardy.

Hermione put her napkin on her lap and tried not to sigh. Again. She understood, really she did. They just wanted security and peace and a feeling of normality, whatever that was. Would it kill her to give it to them?

“I was up too late reading my Potions textbook,” she lied. “The Salt of the Earth powder can temporarily nullify all magic within …”

Relieved murmurs all around. Ron smiled and shook his head. That was our Hermione. Staying up
all night in needless study. All was well. The chattering and squabbling resumed, and Hermione stared into her goblet. She really hated pumpkin juice.

“Ron,” breathed Romilda Vane, shifting close to his side with a sweep of long black hair. “That was a wonderful interview you gave The Prophet.” With Harry’s absence, Vane was happy to move on to another war hero. “Everyone needs to know the truth.”

Hermione snorted softly. That interview revealed only a passing resemblance to the truth, dwelling on Ron’s exploits and minimizing Hermione’s and even Harry’s roles and failing to mention Neville at all. She met Neville’s eyes, expecting to see hurt at the snub, but he was talking softly to Ginny, flashing his newly sexy smile. Somebody had certainly grown up over the past year, she realized with a shock. A long way from her first journey to Hogwarts, when Hermione had roamed the compartments looking for Neville’s toad. She felt an almost maternal pride. The day she met Harry, and Ron doing some rubbish magic … and met Malfoy, too, she realized suddenly, remembering his sneer when she burst innocently into the Slytherins’ compartment and met only ridicule.

She looked over at Malfoy now, sitting a bit apart at the Slytherin table, expecting to see that same sneer but he just lounged on his bench, ignored by his housemates. It would take more than total ostracization to humble that man. A dragon with a meat cleaver couldn’t humble that man. Hermione was actually glad to see it—a chastened Malfoy would be almost as horrific as an irresponsible Granger. Perhaps her fellow Gryffindors weren’t the only ones eager for normalcy.

The entire Great Hall clapped as a seemingly endless line of first years—this year’s class plus all the muggle-borns banned from attending the year before—followed Hagrid up the center aisle. The Sorting Hat sang a long song about Peace and Friendship and House Unity, then divided all the children up. The Gryffindors groaned each time a student was placed into Slytherin, Ron loudest of all, which irritated Hermione.

“Stop it, Ronald!” she hissed. “They’re just children!”

“They’re Slytherins!” Ron cried.

“They’re 11 years old—now they think the whole school hates them!” Hermione’s voice cut through the babble of voices. “They need our support!”

Ron’s eyes narrowed. “You seem mighty fond of Slytherins all of the sudden. Have you forgotten —”

“I haven’t forgotten anything, but what do you want to do? Create a new generation of vicious snakes?”

“They killed Colin.” Dennis Creevey’s voice was harsh, and Hermione turned to look more closely at the dark-haired Fifth Year. He was still small, and spindly, with his bangs falling into his eyes, but those dark eyes were narrowed and burned with an almost fanatical hate.

“Those children,” Hermione said, pointing to a group of youngsters now nervously seated in the empty spaces around a bored Malfoy, “didn’t kill anybody. But if you treat them like criminals—”

“Hermione!” Ron cried, obviously convinced that if he repeated her name often enough, she would suddenly adopt whatever misguided opinion he held at that moment.

“She’s right,” Neville put in. “They’re just kids.”

Dennis and Ron glared, but blessedly shut up, and the groaning at the next Slytherin Sorting was a
bit more subdued. Hermione risked another glance at Malfoy, who was now amusing himself by floating juice pitchers just out of the First Years’ reach and ignoring her completely.

Headmistress McGonagall stood to give the welcome speech, drawing Hermione’s eyes to the teacher’s table. Slughorn’s face was hidden by his enormous silver goblet. Beside him was an empty chair, undoubtedly for the next Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. Madame Hooch, the new head of Gryffindor House, sat on McGonagall’s right, an arresting figure with white-blonde spiky hair, a multicolored Quidditch jersey clearly revealed by open black robes, and a bright red eyepatch. She had lost an eye during the Final Battle, Hermione remembered, flying above the melee casting curses until she was brought down by a curse from the ground. Hooch wasn’t the only one; Professor Sprout bore a burn scar on her forehead and McGonagall herself was still limping. Hermione thought of the faint silver lines on her own neck and the raised red letters on her arm, of Lavender, who had miraculously lived through Fenrir’s attack, and even of Malfoy and his Dark Mark. They were all scarred, teachers and students alike.

McGonagall’s welcome speech expanded on the topic of house unity. When Hogwarts got hold of an idea, she knew from experience, the teachers pushed it hard. Many students, especially Ron and Dennis, were shifting in their seats, flushing with anger, but the appearance of the feast on their plates cooled everyone down.

She managed to dodge Ron in the chaotic race to the House dorms, but he captured her hand in the Gryffindor common room and pulled her to a large windowsill.

“Hermione,” he said huskily, his other hand tangled in her curls. “Haven’t seen you in weeks. Missed me?”

She looked up at him levelly. Sleeping with Ron in the days after the last battle, when they were racked with grief and guilt, had been a truly impulsive move. They had cheated death, and old rules and morals simply didn’t seem to apply. Sex was a way to feel better, and had certainly worked spectacularly for Ron. His tears for Fred and the other victims had vanished as if she’d waved a wand (which perhaps she had in a way) only to reappear when a little extra wheedling was required. She’d finally broken it all off, saying she was too sad and overwhelmed with worry over her parents for a serious relationship, but now he believed returning to Hogwarts meant everything was back to normal.

Hermione knew what Ron was thinking: They (he) had won the war, and it was time for the spoils —heroes would bask in women and adoration while the defeated Slytherins lay crumbled and broken. Ron was in for a rude awakening, and she didn’t look forward to dishing it out. (Honestly, was there truly no one else around to deliver unpleasant truths to the masses?) She knew what was ahead for Ron, though. The public adulation would inevitably die down, even a Merlin Second Class medal couldn’t change a bad NEWT score, and none of the Slytherins she saw tonight looked particularly broken.

“No, Ronald,” she said, drawing back. “We talked about this.”

“I know you want it,” he breathed. “I remember …” He pressed her against the edge of the windowsill. “Remember Dad’s muggle shack? Hermione?”

Well, yes. He’d taken her on the splintered wooden floor, surrounded by broken clocks and blenders, her head pressed against a Shop-Vac. She remembered the heat and excitement and her blood singing —and for a few seconds, Ron’s touch brought it all back, that wanton need—and her hand around his wrist tightened. But then it all fizzled out somehow, and she saw only Ron’s shocked face at the thestral carriage, demanding that she leave the big, bad man and his big, bad shoe and return to Ron’s protective arms.
“No, Ronald,” she repeated. Honestly, they didn’t even need to argue anymore; the two of them could simply repeat each other’s names back and forth.

“I’m going to bed,” she announced loudly, stepping away with a less-than-graceful swerve as Ron’s arm shot out to block her. The man was so fucking physical whenever he was thwarted. Harry in such a situation would look probably look reproachful but try to understand, and Neville would likely just crumple with hurt. Well, maybe not anymore, he’d changed considerably, but Neville certainly wouldn’t be grabbing at a girl trying to get away. She couldn’t even imagine Malfoy doing that; such an action would be beneath his dignity, No, Malfoy would probably just arch an eyebrow: *Such a timid, sad girl, denying herself such unparalleled pleasure.*

Hermione chuckled at that last thought as she hurried toward the girls’ stairs, dismissing the rest of the common room with a wave. Ron would recover soon enough—plenty of girls were eager to sleep with a War Hero. They could have him.

Tucked into bed in her pajamas printed with dancing penguins, with Crookshanks curled up on her bed, Hermione watched the moonlight peeping through the curtains long after her roommates came to bed. Wind rattled the windows. Finally, she pulled her wand from under her pillow and set wards around her bed, repelling any intruders. Old habits died hard. Perhaps Eighth Year wouldn’t be so bad—it would be nice to be responsible only for herself. She had already turned down McGonagall’s invitation to be Head Girl—Padma Patil would do a fine job. Hermione didn’t even want to be a prefect. She’d done her bit for the Wizarding World, and for now, anyway, Hermione was the only cause she was interested in.
It was still dark when Hermione woke the next morning. She felt for her wand and pointed it at the watch she’d attached to the bedpost with a sticking charm. 6 a.m. Excellent. Thirty minutes to record her thoughts and plan her day. It was important to keep a disciplined mind. She pulled out a muggle notebook and held the lit wand over the cover’s black letters spelling out “LOOP” for Life Organization Optimization Plan.

How quiet it was, only the faintest sighing of trees outside, the rattle of casements. She breathed slowly, five seconds in, count five seconds out. *I am an unruffled pond.* A relaxation technique. Hermione blinked. Why did she need a relaxation technique? She’d just woken up, for Merlin’s sake. She looked at the watch again: 6:10. What happened to that 10 minutes? Now she was behind.

She cracked open her LOOP journal, writing the date and time. Alright, now. Five things to look forward to today. 1) A Hogwarts breakfast, with sausage and fried tomatoes. 2) Advanced Ancient Runes, a new 30-minute seminar taught by McGonagall before first period each morning. An excellent way to start the day. 3) Lunch? No, not lunch, she’d already written breakfast. A walk around the lake. Yes, she would walk around the lake. 4) A visit to Hagrid with Ron. Or maybe without Ron. But Hagrid would expect Ron, too. Well, he’d just have to deal with it. It wasn’t her job to make Ron do things anymore.

Hermione gnawed on her muggle pen cap. What would it be like, to be with someone she didn’t feel responsible for? Who sometimes felt responsible for *her*? She could hardly imagine it. She turned her attention back to the journal, trying to think of a fifth thing to look forward to. She couldn’t just leave it blank. Ah, yes. 5) The library’s Forbidden Section. She had a list of dark topics she wanted to research: blood potions, mind labyrinths, screaming rain. ...

It was a pretty sparse list, bleak even. Breakfast, class, a walk, a visit, the library. She sighed, wishing she could just take her NEWTs now and be done with it. Well, she had to do more than study for NEWTs. She couldn’t just drift along this year muttering about screaming rain. Just because she didn’t want to be Hogwart’s Official Bossy Know-It-All anymore didn’t mean she wanted be the Creepy Shadow That Sighed All the Damn Time. She needed to find a way to make this year count.

Energized, Hermione pulled herself out of bed and prepared for the day. Her hair took some extra time to get right, but she wanted to make the effort. Fleur had found some magical potion that smoothed her dark curls into soft ringlets if she applied it evenly enough. A swipe of lipstick. A quick pressing charm to her uniform shirt. Appearances were important. She’d had enough of sloppiness, running around disheveled, to busy studying to eat properly. She was finished with that. Nobody was going to take her seriously if she didn’t take herself seriously. She used to believe if she just worked harder than anyone else, was more stubborn than anyone else, people would recognize her merit. She knew better now; a string of Outstandings wouldn’t make her blood any less muddy to some people. Fuck them. She was finished driving herself for others’ approval. That wasn’t how she’d get what she wanted. Not that she knew what she wanted — she had no idea, really. Well, she’d figure it out eventually. She envied Ron and Ginny, actually. Weasleys always knew exactly what they wanted, where they belonged. There was no ambivalence. Even Harry knew what he wanted—to be an Auror, to capture the evil and protect the weak, and perhaps then justify the fact that he had lived. As if defeating Voldemort wasn’t enough.

Even after all her primping it was only 7:30, and Hermione knew from experience that Lavender...
and Ginny, her two roommates, would shoot out of bed at 8 a.m. in a panic, dashing from bathroom to trunk. She fed Crookshanks, then drifted to the window overlooking the Quidditch pitch, its broad green lawn shining with dew, the sun peeking over the mountains beyond. She put her elbows on the sill, holding her chin in her hands, watching the trees sway …

What was that? A small black form shot out from behind a tower, a figure in a black cloak, its hood up, on a broom. Hermione had her wand out without realizing it, bracing herself for attack, but the figure merely looped and swirled in the air, apparently randomly. Ah, of course. A Quidditch player. Probably getting some last-minute practice before the trials this first week. Ginny had talked of nothing else—she was the Gryffindor Quidditch Captain this year, another letter that had irritated Ron, who felt he deserved the position. Hermione smiled at the very thought of Ron leading a Quidditch team, red-faced and shouting, “Are you mental? Hit the ball, I said! …”

Her eyes continued to follow the flyer’s graceful patterns. Quidditch bored her stupid, but even she could tell this was no slouch. The flyer reminded her of Harry and Ginny, those complicated loops and sudden descents. She saw no pattern to it, what was the flyer chasing?

She had her answer. A silver snitch suddenly appeared, hitting the window and bouncing off, then hovering just inches from the glass. Hermione ducked behind her curtain, not wanting to be seen.

“Wha-was that?” asked a sleepy voice. Ginny’s head stuck out of her bed curtains.

“Nothing,” Hermione said, slipping her wand into her skirt pocket and picking up her black robe.

“Whatimeizit?”

“8 o’clock.”

“SHIT!” Ginny leaped out of bed, wearing one of Harry's Quidditch jerseys. “Lavender! It’s eight! Shit!” She grabbed her toiletries bag and towel and ran out of the room.

“Eeeek!” Lavender cried, leaping out of bed and frantically digging in her trunk.

Hermione kissed Crookshanks on the head, picked up her book bag and headed downstairs. Her shoes tapped a steady rhythm on the curving stone staircase to the common room, where only Neville stood, rooting through his own bag.

“Hey, Hermione—lend me a quill?” he asked, offering up that new slow smile. Not a bad way to start the morning.

“I can’t, I only have two,” she said. She’d made a conscious effort that morning not to pack a dozen extra quills for forgetful friends. “I’ll wait here for you,” she said with a smile. “Or …” she pulled out a wand and transfigured a crumpled ball of parchment into a quill.

“Why didn’t I think of that? Thanks, Hermione!” Neville slung an arm around her shoulder (since when was he tall enough to do that?) and she smiled up at him.

“What are you looking forward to today?” she as they walked toward the Great Hall. Maybe she’d get some ideas for tomorrow’s list.

“I dunno … breakfast?”

“Me too,” she grinned.
“I know, Double Advanced Herbology this afternoon,” he said. “We’re going to grow poison pansies and fire-breathing snapdragons. They’re both pretty tricky, the pansy seeds can’t be touched and when they bloom you can’t breathe the pollen …”

Hermione felt better—he wasn’t the only one with a lame list.

The Great Hall was fairly quiet as usual, filled with heavy-eyed students spooning porridge and munching toast. Hermione had nearly finished when Ron, Ginny and Lavender appeared, and Ron was too busy eating to give her more than one baleful look. She smiled brightly, which drew his pale red eyebrows down further, but he said nothing. She slowly peeled an orange, her legs crossed at the ankles and swinging under the table, looking around the Great Hall, eyes traveling over the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables. A tall, dark Slytherin—Blaise Zabini—walked past with a fluid grace. Her gaze turned upwards at the hall’s yellow and orange-streaked magical sky.

“You’re not reading, Hermione,” said Ginny beside her.

“Hmmm?”

“You always read at breakfast, preparing for morning classes.”

Hermione shrugged. “I’m perfectly prepared.” She popped an orange slice into her mouth.

Ron’s jaw sagged, revealing half-chewed sausage. Ginny’s eyes narrowed. “Are you feeling all right?”

“Perfectly all right,” Hermione said, her attention suddenly drawn by a tussle at the door. Malfoy had apparently finished eating and now stood facing the tables with his back to the Great Hall’s open doorway, finickily straightening his left cuff. A crowd of First Years peered through the doorway beyond him, wanting to enter but too afraid to pass the dreaded Death Eater. Malfoy looked around the hall with hooded eyes and noticed Hermione watching. He winked at her, then began straightening the other cuff as the crowd behind him grew. Hermione looked at the teachers’ table, but even McGonagall was absorbed by her porridge and didn’t look inclined to get involved.

“Malfoy,” Ginny hissed, eyes still narrowed.

“Somebody should do something,” Neville said.

Head Boy Ernie McMillan stomped over to the door and began remonstrating with Malfoy: “Time to get a move on, old chap … no need to be contrary … you’re quite fortunate to be here, you know …” Malfoy made no move to leave and his responses appeared anything but conciliatory. Hermione left the table, slinging her bag over her shoulder.

“I simply don’t see the difficulty here,” Malfoy was saying as she approached the door. “There’s plenty of room for students to pass.” He glanced back at the restive crowd outside the door.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Excuse me.” She stepped between Ernie and Malfoy and out of the Great Hall, brushing against Malfoy’s shoulder.

“See?” she heard Malfoy say.

She glared at the students huddled in the Entrance Hall. “Honestly, you all are going to let him keep you from breakfast?” This wall of terror surrounding Malfoy was beginning to try her already. “Ten House points from each student still out here when I’ve counted to three!”

Hermione had no authority to dock House points, but that didn't stop a mob of panicked students
from stampeding through the doors, knocking both Malfoy and Ernie aside and emptying the Entrance Hall in seconds.

“You, Granger, are no fun,” Malfoy said, stepping into the Entrance Hall to join her.

“I am extremely fun,” Hermione said, looking up at him. “Wait until you read my Ancient Runes essay.”

“How can you have an Ancient Runes essay? We haven’t even had class yet.”

“I wrote it for fun.”

Malfoy’s upper lip quirked. “You haven’t changed at all.”

Hermione rubbed a thumb over the ridges on her left arm that she refused to glamour. “I’ve changed enough.”

His amused look faded, and she turned away, feeling strangely guilty as she mounted the staircase on the way to Ancient Runes. Malfoy wasn’t evil, no matter what a pack of idiot students thought; his mother had saved Harry’s life, and Harry had spoken for the defense at Narcissa’s and Draco’s trials. Hermione herself written a confidential letter to the judge in support of Draco. Both Narcissa and Draco had received probation and a year of house arrest, and Draco had the option to serve his year at Hogwarts. She thought suddenly of Narcissa, now alone at the Manor since Lucius was in Azkaban for life.

The Runes classroom was closed and locked, so she leaned against a tapestry and resisted the urge to review the first chapter of her textbook.

“Let me see it,” Malfoy said.

Hermione blinked at the tall blond leaning against the wall opposite her. “This fun Ancient Runes essay,” Malfoy explained in a too-patient tone. “Let me see it.”

She stared at him a moment, then flipped open her bag, extracted a scroll tied with a blue ribbon (all her scrolls were color-coded) and handed it over. He left the wall to take it, tugging the ribbon free with long fingers and unfurling the scroll.

“It’s written in runes,” he said.

Hermione smiled thinly. “Trust me, it’s funny.”

“It really isn’t,” Malfoy said, looking over the parchment.

Her mouth fell open. “You can read it?”

“If you can write it, Granger, I can read it.”

“I don’t believe you,” she snapped. “It took me a month to translate that essay into runes. The textbook—”

“—is rubbish,” Malfoy said. “My family’s library has a rune manuscript.” He chuckled slightly. “All right, that bit about the frog is a little funny.”

Hermione was staggered. The pompous git actually had taught himself ancient runes, likely from some impossibly rare book at that Godric-damned manor. She could hardly believe it, but there it was, he obviously knew runes, or at least the rune for frog.
She eyed Malfoy thoughtfully as he leaned against the wall again, an impeccable figure in new robes, right down to his silver cufflinks and polished black shoes. A far cry from the haunted figure from his trial. Dark lashes veiled grey eyes as he scanned the pages. He wore his attractiveness like polished armor on a murmuring battlefield.

Hermione frowned and looked away. Get a hold of yourself, for Merlin’s sake.

Malfoy straightened and rolled up the sheaf of parchments. “You got some shades of meaning wrong,” he said, retying the ribbon. “I could mark it up for you, if you like.”

“Nonsense, it’s perfectly correct.”

Malfoy stepped closer, opening her right hand with his and placing the scroll inside. He wrapped her hand around the scroll, covering it in warm fingers before stepping back. “It’s not,” he said. “Look at it again.”

Hermione glared. If her runes were incorrect, which she didn’t entertain for a minute, it was the fault of that stupid textbook, which was maddeningly vague and so badly printed that what looked like a dot was often just an ink blot. Not everyone had ancient rune manuscripts lying around.

“I brought it to Hogwarts, you know,” he went on, sounding bored.

“The manuscript?”

“Of course.”

She tossed her head. “I don’t care.”

Malfoy smiled mockingly and returned to his own wall as chattering voices echoed through the corridor. McGonagall was sailing toward them, black pointed hat bobbing, trailed by a handful of older students, mostly Ravenclaws and a few Hufflepuffs. If the Headmistress was surprised to see the two of them standing there, she didn’t show it.

“Miss Granger, Mr. Malfoy,” was all she said, opening the door with a wave of her wand. Another wave vanished half the desks in the classroom, leaving the rest for the 10 students taking Advanced Ancient Runes.

“The runic alphabet, as you all know,” she began, “is an ancient branch of linguistics, once used by Muggles as well, but in our world bearing magical properties …”

Hermione scratched a few notes, only half listening. Errors in her essay? Impossible, he was just toying with her. Perhaps McGonagall had some texts she could look at—she’d ask after class. Anything to avoid asking Malfoy. He was seated across the aisle from her, folded into the laughably small desk, writing on his own bit of parchment, and she could see the writing was in runes. Malfoy was taking notes in runes? That might be a good way to practice. She leaned closer to see better, but then he turned his head and raised an eyebrow. Hermione flushed and straightened. Fine. She didn’t care what he was writing.

She approached McGonagall at the end of class, waving her textbook indignantly, and the Headmistress sympathized with Hermione’s plight.

“It’s a new advanced subject, Miss Granger, subsequent volumes will be more precise, I’m sure,” McGonagall said. “Perhaps you would like to help revise the textbook after your NEWTs.”

“Really?” Hermione’s pulse jumped. “I’ve already marked portions of the textbook—”
“Yes, yes,” McGonagall said absently. “You had better run along now, Miss Granger. Your next class is in the dungeons, is it not?”

“Advanced Potions, yes,” Hermione said. “But I wanted to show you this essay—”

“Another time, Miss Granger—you wouldn’t want to be late now, would you?”

Hermione would have been perfectly fine with being late to Advanced Potions; Slughorn wasn’t going to dock House points from one of his best students (likely his top student now that Harry was no longer around with his cheating textbook). But McGonagall’s tone brooked no argument, and she walked briskly out of the classroom and down the stairs, ignoring the constant warnings from paintings for her tardiness.

She was the last one in the classroom, with all the stools taken except, of course, for a single one beside Malfoy at a two-person table. Apparently, his splendid isolation extended to Seventh and Eighth Years, people old enough to know better. She pulled the stool further from him with a loud scrape of metal against stone and sat down, slamming her books on the table.

And just to make a party of it, Ron was staring at them, shocked, from his own table with Lavender. What did Ron have to be shocked about? That she was late to Potions? That she was sitting with Malfoy? That she continued to resist Ron’s alluring seduction techniques? Maybe all three. Malfoy gave every appearance of ignoring her, but when Hermione’s eyes flickered to their tabletop she saw a small scroll beside her books, tied with a green ribbon and marked with the rune for “H”.

Slughorn droned about potion safety, and Hermione dutifully scribbled down the rules. She had no intention of reading notes in class, certainly not notes from Draco Malfoy, and she ignored both scroll and student as long as she could, at least until they had to clear the table for the potion making. The scroll swept itself into her open bookbag, earning Malfoy a small glare from Hermione.

“This won’t do,” Slughorn was saying, looking around the room. “We will need four to a table, class.” He waved his wand, and students leaped off their stools as tables spun and slammed together. Hermione watched in horror as her and Malfoy’s table connected solidly with Ron’s and Lavender’s. “Very good,” Slughorn went on. “We’ll keep those tables for the term.”

“But Professor!” Ron choked.

Slughorn raised his bushy gray eyebrows. “Yes, my boy?”

“It’s … it’s … him!” Ron pointed at Malfoy. “Him!”


“Surely you brave Gryffindors are not afraid to work with someone from my House,” Slughorn said, the faintest hint of steel creeping into his jovial voice.

Ron flushed a deep red. “No, Professor.” His glare at Malfoy could burn through stone.

Hermione rolled her eyes. There were endless reasons to dislike the Slytherin, but he wasn’t doing anything objectionable at the moment, just looking smug again. A month in Azkaban would have done Malfoy a world of good. Just on general principles. Maybe two months.

To make things worse, Hermione had to sit opposite Malfoy, so they could cover both sides of their cauldron, which meant she sat next to Ron and Lavender was beside Malfoy. Lavender’s hands shook so bad she could hardly slice her gurdyroots. Hermione couldn’t blame her; the girl’s face still bore the scars from Fenris. You didn’t have to be an evil person to commit deeds with evil consequences. Hermione gave Malfoy a stern look, tilting her head slightly toward Lavender.

“Let me help you with that, Lavender,” Malfoy said softly. “Those roots can be tricky.”

“Stay away from her!” Ron snapped, slamming his knife perilously close to his own finger.

“He’s just trying to help, Ronald,” Hermione said. “Would you like to sit next to him?”

Lavender took a deep breath and nodded, pushing the board of roots closer to Malfoy. The Slytherin sliced them quickly and precisely.

“There,” he said in that same soft voice, sliding the board back to her. “All done.”

“I-I’m sorry,” she stammered to Malfoy, quailing under Ron’s glare.

“No,” Malfoy murmured. “I’m sorry.”

Silence reigned at the table after that, and only the sound of chopping and plopping and bubbling was heard. Ron’s shrivelfigs looked like they’d been pounded with a mallet instead of sliced, but he dumped him into the cauldron anyway. Hermione opened her mouth to object, then thought better.
of it. She knew what the class was concocting, although Slughorn hadn’t revealed the potion’s name, and a few mushed shrivelfigs made little difference.

Ron and Lavender’s potion didn’t look too bad, in the end. It didn’t have the same pearly silver sheen of Hermione and Malfoy’s, but the slow, counter-clockwise swirls were correct and the pale color was almost right. Wise of Slughorn to start with a relatively easy potion; everyone could use a little encouragement.

“Well done, well done,” Slughorn boomed. The lazy curls of steam from the cauldrons were gathered on the ceiling like soft storm clouds. “Can anybody tell me what potion we just created?”

Hermione raised her hand immediately, but Malfoy called out, “Auramatis!”

She spun to glare at him—he hadn’t raised his hand!—but he just curled his lip at her.

“Excellent,” Slughorn said. “Ten points to Slytherin. And can anyone give me this potion’s other name?”

“The Mood Mix,” Hermione said loudly. If Slughorn wanted to ignore hands and encourage recital chaos, that was his prerogative.

“Ah … very good, Miss Granger.” Slughorn’s eyebrows had practically climbed into his hairline. “And what does the Mood Mix do?”

“It reflects your mood, sir. The potion changes color according to the mood of the person stirring it.”

“Yes, yes, 10 points to Gryffindor.” Slughorn waved his wand at the chalkboard and a list appeared in various colors: red for anger, yellow for happiness, black for fear, purple for sadness, green for confusion and silver for desire. There was some sniggering at the last color, which Slughorn ignored and asked: “And can anyone tell me what the shade of the potion’s color signifies?”

“Intensity!” Hermione and Malfoy called out as one. This, Hermione thought, is why we raise our hands.

“Yes, quite,” Slughorn sighed. “The brighter the color, the more intense the mood. Now each of you will stir your potion. Well, go on now.”

“This is ridiculous,” Hermione muttered. “A person’s emotions can’t be summed up with a single color.” She stirred the cauldron before her and the Mood Mix turned pale pink. She glared at it, stirred again, the mixture turned redder. Lovely.

“Oooh, let me try,” Lavender said. She stirred her potion and giggled at the pale yellow steam swirling toward the ceiling. “We did it!” She stirred again and the steam grew a brighter yellow.

Malfoy actually smiled at her. “Well done.”

Lavender beamed, while Ron snatched the spoon from her and stirred. The mixture instantly turned black and he dropped the spoon with a clatter. Hermione couldn’t believe her eyes. Fear? Why would Ron feel fear?

“Bottles,” Ron snapped, and left the table. Hermione looked back at his potion, noticing faint swirls of silver in its inky depths before the liquid returned to its original pearly sheen. Huh.
She then turned to Malfoy, who hesitated before reluctantly taking the spoon. His face frowned in concentration. Of course, Hermione thought, no Slytherin would want to broadcast his or her emotions for all to see. Malfoy gave the potion the most cursory of stirs and the liquid in the cauldron turned green. Confusion. Malfoy looked quite satisfied with that, recording the color on parchment, his right hand still lightly holding the spoon.

“You’re not playing fair,” she told him.

“Oh yes, if I only was in better touch with my emotions,” he said mockingly. “Am I angry? Am I sad? Am I …” his voice dropped, “… aroused?”

He drew out the last word like a challenge, and without thinking, Hermione grabbed his wrist, moving his arm in a circle. The potion flashed green again, this time with strong streaks of silver, and Malfoy wrenched his arm from Hermione’s grip and stepped back. The potion returned to its original pearly white, and Hermione also stepped back, flushing.

“What’s wrong, Hermione?” asked Lavender, who’d been excitedly comparing her color with the next table over. “Malfoy, what color was your potion?”

“Green,” Malfoy said through gritted teeth. Lavender started at his tone. “Green,” he repeated more gently.

A large clatter broke the tension; Ron had returned with two large glass jars and slammed them on the desk. The two men glared at their tabletops, leaving Hermione and Lavender to tip their cauldrons’ contents into jars and then label them.

“Class dismissed!” Slughorn boomed. “Just leave your jars and cauldrons on the table!”

Hermione slung her book bag over her shoulder and looked at her potions partner. “Really Malfoy,” she teased, “you shouldn’t be ashamed of your feelings.”

His eyes glittered. “Oh, I’m not. Remember, Granger, I didn’t stir up that last color by myself.” He walked out of the classroom, leaving her standing with her smile sliding off her face.

***

Hermione’s next class—Advanced Arithmancy—was blessedly free of either Malfoy or Ron. Her first morning of school and she felt like she could sleep for a week. Ron kept to himself during lunch, eating silently and then stomping out of the Great Hall, not even pausing to chat up his war hero groupies. Malfoy sat a bit apart from his housemates at the Slytherin table and managed to make it look like he wanted it that way. Ginny rattled on about Quidditch, Neville about the new special Advanced Herbology greenhouse and Luna joined their table to chase wrackspurts off their plates with a fan made of palm fronds.

“So much negative energy,” she said dreamily. “I can scatter them a bit, but they’ll be back.”

Hermione left lunch early, determined to have her walk by the lake (No. 3). Defense Against the Dark Arts didn’t start until tomorrow, so she was free until Double Herbology. She made an entire circuit, then sat on the warm grass and pulled out Malfoy’s scroll. She took out her wand, intending to incendio it, but found herself tugging at the green ribbon instead and letting it slither to the ground.
The parchment held only a few lines of elegant runes, each marking a small work of art:

Granger,

Yes, I have the manuscript here. And a rune stone. 8 p.m. at the old Charms classroom.

DLM

Below his name he had sketched a small stone with tiny markings, enchanted so they changed repeatedly. *A nice little charm, that, who knew he could draw …*

Hermione suddenly dropped the parchment. A rune stone? How did those Malfoy gits get their hands on a rune stone? Stole it, likely. Probably murdered for it. A priceless artifact like that—if Malfoy really had a rune stone, it should be in a museum. She should report him …

*But then you couldn’t use it,* whispered a voice. *Imagine it, a year of Ancient Runes with a real rune stone.*

Maybe he would let her copy the stone’s markings. He might, but ye gods, he would be insufferable. Oh well, the man was insufferable anyway, stirring that potion, and …

“Hermione?”

A shadow had fallen over her, and she looked up to see Ron looming above, black robes billowing. He didn’t look angry, though, he looked … anxious?

Hermione snatched up Malfoy’s scroll and stuffed it away. Silly, really—it wasn’t like Ron could even read it.

“Can I sit down?” he asked.

She nodded, and he fell beside her. They looked at the lake in silence.

“You know, Hermione, Seventh and Eighth Years can go to Hogsmeade any weekend.” His voice quavered slightly. “I thought maybe we … we could go to dinner. Just the two of us. At the Three Broomsticks.”

“Dinner? You want to take me to dinner?”

He dragged a hand through his hair. “I want to make it up to you. For yelling at you and telling you … telling you what to do. I trust you, I really do, but that Malfoy …” his fists clenched.

She frowned. “You trust me? Trust me to do what?”

“Not to do anything stupid.”

“Define stupid.”
Ron let out a gusty sigh. “I don’t know—like something stupid with Malfoy.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I don’t either, really.” He sighed. “I don’t like him near you, and it seems every time I turn around, he’s there … being Malfoy. And you don’t seem to mind.”

“Of course I mind. He’s a git. But unlike some people, I don’t throw obnoxious tantrums and yell and slam things when I don’t like something.”

He sighed again. “I know. I want to make it up to you. Let’s go to dinner Saturday.”

Hermione tilted her head, just looking at him. He must have gotten some good advice and was actually taking it.

“I don’t know, Ron,” she said finally. “This is my worry: We will go to dinner and everything will be fine.” He would probably try to kiss her, she knew, and she would probably let him. “Then I’ll do something else you don’t approve of—I don’t know, dare to have a different reaction or opinion from yours, and you’ll flip out again. I can’t live like that. It’s been a hard year and I’m not looking for drama.”

“Then you’d better stay away from Malfoy,” he said. “He’s nothing but drama.”

He was right about that, yet also wrong. Drama surrounded the Slytherin like a cloud, ripples extending from his very presence. And he subtly stoked that drama for his own amusement. But ever since he’d arrived at Hogwarts, the man had been insulted, shunned and watched like a hawk for signs of renegade evil and he hadn’t cracked yet. Well, look at that, she thought, *Draco Malfoy as a role model. What a new world this is.*

“Maybe,” she said. “But this isn’t about him. It’s about you and me. I want to be friends, but—”

“Just friends?” Ron asked, edging closer.

“Just friends,” she said firmly.

“For now?” he asked, a flash of his old, mischievous smile.

“For now,” she answered, smiling back. She couldn’t help it. “Come here.” She gave him quick hug, pulling back from his arms and standing. He stood too, smiling. Hermione’s heart swelled; this was what she wanted: friends and maybe more. That summer passion had faded away, likely never to return, but what did she know? Anything could happen. Maybe something new.

“Walk me to the new greenhouse,” she said. “I have Advanced Herbology.”

***

Time flew by in Advanced Herbology; the snapdragon seeds bounced and spat tiny sparks before planting, the poison pansy seeds required a laborious 15-step process to safely embed them in the dirt. Best of all, Malfoy was on the other side of the greenhouse, partnered with Luna, who was talking animatedly. Hermione overheard her friend while dropping off her own trays, reminiscing about her stay in the Malfoy dungeons: “The torture techniques were quite interesting, Draco,”
Luna was saying, “you might consider next time …”

Ron and Hermione’s reconciliation made dinner more relaxed for everyone, with much chattering and teasing at the Gryffindor table. “We should have a party,” Ginny said, waving her goblet. “Saturday night, common room. Ron, you can get the butterbeer.”

He shook his head. “I can’t, Gin. Got plans.”

“Ooooh!” Ginny cried, looking from him to Hermione. “A date?”

“No date,” she said. “Just dinner. We can come afterward.”

“No date,” Ron repeated, but he winked at Ginny and Neville, taking Hermione’s hand.

Hermione stiffened. *He wasn’t listening … again.* She pulled her hand away and tried to look anywhere else. The Hufflepuffs were celebrating as well—their House was ahead in points, thanks to some volunteer work repairing the castle over lunch. The Slytherins, she noted, were quieter than usual, still split into various factions. Malfoy ate alone, as usual, writing or sketching on parchment. His eyes met hers for an instant, then he returned to his work.

“I’m going to the library,” she said, standing. Maybe there were some books on runes in the library. Then she wouldn’t need that damn stone.

“Come out to the Quidditch pitch,” Ron said. “Gryffyndor trials are tonight.” He was a lock to be Keeper, even if he couldn’t be captain. Ginny nodded, her eyes bright.

Hermione tried to look regretful that she couldn’t spend hours shivering in the cold while Ron showed off. “Too much to do.”

Ron frowned slightly. “It would be a great way to support m—your House.”

“I’ll support you all at the games,” she said, turning away from Ron’s frown. Then she stopped and walked back to him. “We talked about this, Ronald,” she whispered. “Trust my choices, right?”

Ron sighed. “Yeah.”

*Maybe this will work,* Hermione told herself as she climbed the staircase to the library. *Maybe things will change.* People did change.

There was, of course, nothing useful on runes in the library, although she had yet to check the Restricted Section. That would have to wait for another evening, when she could return with the Marauders Map Harry lent her. She read through her Ancient Runes essay twice without spotting a single error. *It’s probably fine. Malfoy was just winding me up.*

Speaking of Malfoy … it was 10 minutes to 8. She’d decided to meet the man after all, and it was crucial to leave the library before friends came looking for her.

Flitwick’s old charms classroom was an inspired place to meet, she had to admit. That part of the castle had taken horrific damage during the Battle of Hogwarts, and no paintings or armor remained to keep watch. She picked carefully through the rubble, her lit wand held high, and reached a giant, cracked stone arch that nearly blocked the classroom door. She skirted the arch’s edge and pushed on the door, which gave way easily. Quickly she slipped in.

Then she stopped and gasped. The classroom itself was nearly untouched—even the books and knick-knacks lining the shelves appeared undisturbed. It wasn’t even dusty. Flitwick had cast a
powerful protection charm on the space. The room’s lamps shone brightly, giving the room a warm and comforting feel.

Malfoy sat cross-legged on Flitwick’s old desk, flipping through a charms book. He looked up, utterly unsurprised to see her there.

“Granger,” he said.
Hermione didn’t say anything, just stood looking at him. When she’d made her List of Things to Look Forward To that morning, No. 6 certainly wasn’t “secretly meeting up with Draco Malfoy in an abandoned classroom.” Could the man even behave like a human being for more than five minutes?

He was ignoring her now, his attention back on the charms book, the only sound in the room the rattling of the windows and the turning of Malfoy’s pages. His hair shone like another lamp in the room.

She walked over to the desk to face him. “Well?”

Grey eyes flickered up from the page. Sitting on a desk he was still taller than she. “Patience, Granger.”

“I don’t have all night. There’s a curfew, you know.”

Malfoy snickered and turned another page.

She looked around the room. She couldn’t simply take a table in front of him—too much like he was the teacher and she the pupil—so she found a table on the other side of the room and spread out her Arithmancy homework. Two could play at that game.

A full half-hour passed that way, with Hermione pretending to do Arithmancy and Malfoy pretending to read about charms, until Malfoy finally put his book down and uncrossed his legs.

“This is ridiculous, Granger. For Merlin’s sake, get over here.”

“This is a very nice table. There’s no reason to move.”

“No?” Malfoy pulled a square bundle out of his bag, wrapped in white cloth. He placed it on the desk, then lay beside it another bundle of the same size, but more rounded. “I think you have two reasons to come here, Granger.”

Nuts. He had her. Hermione gave a long-suffering sigh and stood, picking up her runes essay and a muggle notebook and pen. Malfoy watched her walk toward him, eyes raking her up and down, a small smile on his lips. She felt herself flush.

Reaching the desk, she touched the square bundle, glancing at him for permission. These artifacts were his, after all, no matter how ill-gotten. He nodded, and she set down her things and unwrapped the white cloth.

She let out a breath she didn’t know she was holding as the manuscript emerged. It was illuminated, with moving figures and shifting runes. “The Codex Runicus,” she breathed. “From the 1300s.”

“The magical Codex Runicus,” Malfoy corrected. “One of five copies in existence.”

“How did you ever get this?”

He shrugged. “Nobody knows. Passed down over the centuries.”

He probably wouldn’t tell her anyway, Hermione thought, running a hand over the vellum. How
amazing to be part of magical history in such a way. What would it be like to born into such a family, practically magical royalty, and then …

“What is it? What are you thinking?” Malfoy asked suddenly.

“You Malfoys,” she answered absently, her eyes devouring the manuscript on the desk. “So much magical history, riches, ancient artifacts. And yet you hoard your legacies like dragons, breathing flames, seeing nothing but enemies around you, destroying your reputation and your souls. Such a waste.”

Malfoy’s face turned white, his hands curled into fists, but Hermione didn’t notice. Her eyes were on the Codex as she followed her train of thought.

“Go on,” he said in a ragged whisper. “What are you thinking now?”

“The future, Draco. What you could do with such a legacy.”

“My legacy is nothing but evil,” he said. “Our hands are bloody, our very name is black.”

She looked up at him now, caught by something in his voice. “It doesn’t have to be,” she said simply.

Malfoy stared at her for a moment, then leaped off the desk in a fluid motion. With a wave of his wand he wrapped up the manuscript and both bundles flew into his bag. “Curfew,” he said curtly. He slung his bag over his shoulder and walked quickly out of the room.

Hermione sighed and picked up her own things. She left the classroom, once again lighting her way with her wand. Look what you’ve done—you have all the sensitivity of a hungry Ron Weasley. She wasn’t sure what she was more upset about: Malfoy’s departure, or the fact he took the manuscript and rune stone with him.

***

At 6 a.m. the following morning, Hermione was up again, trying to write in her journal. Five Things to Look Forward To: 1) Again, breakfast. 2) Visiting Hagrid, since she hadn’t the day before. 3) Meeting the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. 4) Walking around the lake. And 5, well that was the tricky one. Finally, she wrote “5) Malfoy—runes?”

She thought about No. 5 all the way through showering and preparing for the day, smoothing down her hair and twisting it into a thick braid. Would he talk to her again? She had cut his whole family to ribbons in a few sentences, then laid on him an almost impossible task. Her, the mudblood Hermione Granger, after six years of enmity and exactly one day of limited civil discourse. A voice whispered in her head: What right do you have to speak of such things? What, you think you belong in this world?

Hermione sniffed. She refused to think that way. She wasn’t about to start censoring herself for some prickly pureblood. If he couldn’t take it, that was just too bad. This whole cautious circling was ridiculous anyway—they weren’t friends or even study pals.

Sighing, she leaned her forehead against the cold window pane, looking down at the Quidditch pitch below. Her heart leapt—there it was, that flying shadow, sailing against the rising sun.
Almost impossibly graceful. Who was that? It was too long and lanky to be Ginny and she never flew in such intricate patterns. If Hermione didn’t know better, she’d think it was Harry.

She stayed by the window, watching the figure chase the tiny silver snitch until Ginny’s wand began sounding an alarm, then grabbed her bag and left.

***

“What’s the matter, Hermione?” Ginny asked at breakfast. Hermione gave her friend a weak smile and used her fork to nudge her tomato closer to her sausage. Malfoy hadn’t shown up to breakfast, not that she cared.

“Nothing—how was Quidditch practice?” Hermione asked. Perhaps she should apologize to him. For what? For speaking her mind?

“Brilliant!” Ron cried. “We have some hot new talent coming up!”

“The Lundy twins are amazing beaters,” Ginny said.

Hermione nudged her sausage closer to her toast. Would Malfoy even accept an apology?

“Brother and sister—they’ll be almost as good as Fred and George!” Ginny choked suddenly and looked at her plate.

Hermione looked up at the mention of the Weasley twins and put a hand over Ginny’s. “That’s great, Ginny,” she said softly.

“Slytherin tryouts are tomorrow night,” Ginny said, “and the first match will be Gryffindor vs. Slytherin. You’ll be at the match, right?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Hermione said, smiling at Ginny and Ron as she stood. She’d try to talk to Malfoy—not to apologize, he did ask her what she was thinking—but to reassure him he wasn’t some kind of pet charity project.

She spent the walk to the Ancient Runes classroom pondering what she would say, but it was all wasted anyway because Malfoy wasn’t outside the door. He arrived to class at the very last second, sliding into his seat across the aisle and ignoring her.

He ignored her in Potions as well, and they worked in silence, adding ingredients to their Draught of Peace. Slughorn, obviously, was looking for a quiet day. It almost worked. Lavender chattered happily, drawing a few polite responses from Malfoy, and the whole period would have passed without incident if it hadn’t been for Ron.

Ron had entered the class with his usual frown, but as it became increasingly clear that Hermione and Malfoy weren’t speaking, his face cleared. He looked between them with glee, chopping his valerian root with a jaunty flick of his knife.

“So, Hermione,” he said, putting a hand on her shoulder and drawing her closer. “Looking forward to Hogsmeade? I know I am.”

“Yes, I like visiting the village,” she said coolly, stirring the potion before her and sniffing the
steam to calm her irritation.

“I like visiting the village with you,” Ron murmured into her hair.

She cast him a glare that clearly said “back off,” and Ron moved away, still smiling. This little byplay had distracted him, though, and he’d forgotten his seven stirs. Hermione opened her mouth to tell him, then closed it again.

“You might like to stir your potion now, Lavender,” Malfoy said in a low voice, drawing out the syllables of her name. He used his hand to guide Lavender’s to her spoon, then withdrew it. Lavender’s cheeks turned red at the slight touch.

Ron glared at Malfoy while tossing his roots carelessly into the cauldron, then turning up the fire. A bad move—peace draughts were supposed to simmer, not bubble. Hermione said nothing, however, just poured syrup of hellebore into her and Malfoy’s cauldron.

“Thank you,” Lavender whispered to Malfoy, leaning toward him slightly and blushing.

“My pleasure,” he said with a slow smile. A lock of fair hair fell into his eyes, slightly curled by the silvery vapor between him and Hermione. “We all could use a little peace these days, don’t you?”

Hermione snorted slightly. Like a Malfoy ever brought peace to anyone. Ron was viciously stirring the draught before him, bringing up more bubbles, but Lavender had no eyes for her work, only Malfoy.

“Your draught smells heavenly,” Lavender told the Slytherin.

“I find that additional porcupine quills enhance its potency,” he said.

Lavender blushed at the last word, which Malfoy had of course drawn out in a most suggestive way. Ron dropped his spoon with a clatter, and Hermione edged away from his and Lavender’s draught, which was emitting green sparks. She picked up her wand and the clump of Asian dragon hair she kept on hand for such an event. Misbrewed Draughts of Peace could be dangerous.

“As in everything else, superior potion making requires patience,” Malfoy murmured on, oblivious. “Patience and a sure hand.”

Hermione was torn. Both Ron and his potion looked ready to explode—quite amusing—but Malfoy’s antics now had her clenching her own wand too tightly to be any use. Did nobody else notice the telltale lack of steam? The black ring in the center? She took a deep breath and loosened her grip on her wand.

“Ron, your potion,” she said sharply, and the entire table stepped back as Ron and Lavender’s draught gave an ominous pop. Hermione tossed in the dragon hair and flicked her wand with a string of nonverbal spells as the potion burst out of the cauldron.

Lavender shrieked. The potion shot straight up, swirling into a ball and turning orange, then fell directly on Malfoy’s head. Malfoy clawed at his face, eyes wide, potion dripping from his hair.

“You!” he snarled at Hermione. “You could have killed me! Scarred me for life!”

“Oh, Draco!” Lavender cried, grabbing a towel. “Are you all right?”

“No thanks to her,” Malfoy said, still glaring at Hermione as he wiped his face.
“Stop laughing, Ron,” Hermione snapped. “This is your fault, letting Malfoy get to you like that. We all could have been seriously burned.”

“Are you burned, Draco?” Lavender asked, pulling at his robe.

“Of course he isn’t,” Hermione said. “It’s just a hair potion now.” She was an expert in those, and the difference between a simple hair potion and Ron’s little Frankenstein mess was negligible. Her nonverbal cooling charm was also effective. Malfoy’s hair would sport orange streaks for a few hours, but he’d live.

“Now, now, what’s this?” Slughorn had finally noticed the commotion and come to their table, blinking at a still-dripping Malfoy.

“Weasely’s utter incompetence,” Malfoy said. “May I be excused, sir?”

“Of course, my boy. Ah,” Slughorn said, looking into Ron and Lavender’s empty cauldron, which still smoked slightly. “A bad business here. Could have been disastrous. Mr. Weasley and Miss Brown will need to come after classes and brew this draught again.” He sniffed the cauldron before Hermione. “Well done, Miss Granger. I suggest you all take a sip after such a scare.” With that, the professor drifted away, and the rest of the class returned to their own potions.

“It was worth it,” Ron said. “All of it. The amazing, orange ferret!”

“Shut up, Ron,” Lavender hissed. “He’ll never like me now!”

“Good!” Ron snapped back at her.

“Here, both of you,” Hermione said, passing out small metal tumblers of Peace Draught and taking a sip herself. “Drink up.”

“Class is dismissed!” Slughorn called in the relieved tone that was beginning to characterize the end of Advanced Potions. “Leave your labeled bottles on the tables!”

With a sweep of her wand, Hermione vanished the remainder of her and Draco’s potion and whisked her books into her bag. She felt strangely unsatisfied by her behavior. As she left the classroom, Lavender’s words echoed in her mind: *He’ll never like me now.*
Lunch was a riotous affair at the Gryffindor table as Ron regaled the group with the story of the Potions disaster. To hear Ron tell it, he’d purposely sabotaged his and Lavender’s potion to humiliate Malfoy, a result well worth the extra work. The words “orange ferret” figured prominently in the tale, nobody would listen to Hermione’s words to the contrary, and she had ample time to bitterly regret not letting the damn potion blow up and kill them all.

Lavender spent lunch looking around the Great Hall for Malfoy, who never appeared. Hermione sighed and sipped her wretched pumpkin juice. She almost felt sorry for the man, and she didn’t think that was possible. It had only been two days and she’d already attacked a Malfoy where it really hurt: his heritage and his hair.

Flushed with victory, Ron began lingering beside her between classes, his hand on her back and shoulders. Another dilemma: His behavior had pretty much sapped Hermione’s enthusiasm for their dinner Saturday, but she hesitated to cancel it. Maybe alone and away from Malfoy, she could actually get through to Ron, get their friendship on some honest footing. Yes, she’d be mature and calm until Saturday and then they’d work things out like adults.

“Stop hovering, Ron!” she screeched, as he touched her elbow yet again in the halls. “I’m perfectly capable of walking by myself!” Well, that didn’t last long. Ron’s face looked hurt, then darkened. Would they even make it until the weekend?

She was so irritated, she’d forgotten about the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher until she arrived at the classroom door. McGonagall had created a special DADA seminar for select Seventh and Eighth Year “war veterans,” with its own teacher. Hermione wondered who it was; she wasn’t sure anybody could teach her adequately, except perhaps McGonagall herself, or the ghost of Snape.

“Do we just go in?” Neville asked, shuffling slightly. The rest of the group was silent. Ron and Ginny shrugged, Lavender looked scared, and Luna just peered up at the hallway ceiling, counting blibbering humdingers or something. Even Head Boy Ernie Macmillan didn’t look inclined to act.

*Well, no sense in waiting.* Hermione led the way into the classroom, and everyone stopped and stared. The room had been transformed into a flowery meadow without desks, chalkboards or books. Squashy beanbag chairs formed a tight ring in the center, and giant daisies lined the walls, swaying in a nonexistent wind. In the center of the ring was a small woman.

Their teacher wasn’t any ordinary woman, Hermione realized, but a fairy, if a rather large one. She was about the size of a 4-year-old child, with golden hair, a doll face and pink gossamer wings. She wore a flowing, silvery dress and her only concession to her role was a golden stole around her neck with the Hogwarts crest on each end.

“Welcome!” she squeaked, clapping her hands. Her feet hovered about a foot off the floor and her wings fluttered slightly. “I am Professor Bluebell and welcome to my meadow! Please have a seat!”

Hermione and Ron exchanged looks and found seats side-by-side, temporarily united in shock. The others selected beanbags, with Luna sitting on Hermione’s other side.

“Oh no, dear, please sit here by me!” Bluebell ordered from her own yellow beanbag. “No wrackspurts will distract you here!” Luna eagerly joined her, leaving the bag beside Hermione empty.
“Who are we missing?” the fairy asked. “Ah, here’s a lovely boy! Come in, lovely boy!”

The lovely boy in the doorway was Malfoy, sliding in at the last minute, and Hermione bit her lip. She was really trying to be good here, and Ron was laughing enough for everyone anyway. But Malfoy looked unruffled, if a little hollow-eyed. He dropped gracefully into the orange beanbag on Hermione’s left, acting as if being called “lovely boy” by a 3-foot fairy was only his due. Hermione had to admire it.

“Shut up, Ronald,” she hissed to her right.

“Oh, you are all lovely!” cried Professor Bluebell. She smiled at Ron. “Such a melodious laugh you have, my dear boy, and your hair is a summer sunset!” Ron’s laugh cut off as if he’d been choked.

Hermione settled back into her beanbag, stretching out her legs. The bags were pushed close together and she resisted the urge to pull out her wand and lengthen her pleated uniform skirt. Ron was lazily eyeing her legs with a faint smile, a light flush mottling his face and neck, his hand inches from her thigh. *If he touches me, I’ll hex him.*

“Marigold—Headmistress McGonagall—has been so kind to invite me to teach Advanced Defense Against the Dark Arts this year,” Bluebell continued. “I am so honored! My philosophy of defense is quite simple and can be summed up in a single phrase.”

She waved her hand at the chalkboard and pink letters appeared: *Defense Against the Dark Arts— Fighting Evil Is Fun!*

“I know you all have a bit of experience battling dark magic—well done! Marigold has asked me to—yes dear, you have a question? Already? Dear girl, you don’t have to raise your hand!”

Hermione brought her hand down and tried not to glare. Apparently all her classes this year would be anarchy. “Yes, Professor—”

“Bluebell, please!”

“Yes, Bluebell—um, who is Marigold again?”

“Why Headmistress McGonagall, of course!”

“But the Headmistress’ first name is Minerva,” Ernie said.

“Ah yes,” Bluebell nodded. “But your lovely Headmistress is a Friend of the Fairies, dear boy.”

“Friend of the Fairies?” Hermione repeated.

“Oh yes,” Luna said dreamily. “I could see it in First Year. She has the Ring of Posies over her head.”

Ron’s hand moved closer to Hermione’s thigh, prompting her to move away and bump into Malfoy’s arm on the other side. *Must these beanbags be so close?* She shifted back again, glancing at Malfoy, whose eyes were like chipped ice. *Warm sunshine … expensive cologne …* Hermione cleared her throat and glowered at her teacher.

“Yes, indeed, my Moon Girl,” Bluebell was chirping. “Marigold is a beautiful spirit and sweet as morning dew.” There was a brief silence as the entire class goggled at her. “Now, your first assignment,” the fairy continued. She waved a hand and rolled parchments appeared on everyone’s
“I want you all to think of love,” she went on. “The love of family, of friends, of places and things, and yes, romantic love.” Lavender, seated opposite Hermione, looked down and blushed. “In that spirit, I would like you all to write of love. You each have a name on your scroll—write down three things you love about that person, and he or she, in turn, will write something they love about you. Luna dear, we shall write about each other.”

Hermione opened her scroll and nearly fainted from relief at the name: “Lavender Brown.”

Ron jumped up. “What! You must be mental!” he shouted, waving his parchment, which clearly bore the name “Draco Malfoy.”

Hermione choked, giggles escaping from her throat. Ron looked ready to leap over the nearest daisy and out the window. She stole another glance at Malfoy, whose face was expressionless.

“Now, now, dear,” Bluebell said, coaxing Ron back into his beanbag. “Every person has lovable qualities. Would you like me to help you? Tell me, what of Mr. Malfoy’s smile? I’m sure he has a very nice smile, although I have not yet seen it … Have you two ever had a quiet talk about …”

Hermione literally couldn’t breathe now. She doubted they’d learn anything but rubbish in DADA this year, but it just might become her favorite class. The rest of the class was crying with suppressed laughter, and Neville was sliding off his beanbag, his long legs tangled on the floor. Hermione’s eyes were irresistibly drawn to Malfoy once more, and he seemed to be trying not to smile.

“I’m … I’m fine,” Ron said, horrorstruck. He sank back into his beanbag, red-faced. “Hermione,” he whispered, “help me.”

“His eyes,” Hermione said loudly, “like a stormy sea …”

“Not funny!” he snapped, and turned away from her.

Hermione finished her scroll quickly and closed it with a tap of her wand. Malfoy, surprisingly, finished his nearly as quickly, and lay back on his beanbag like a Roman emperor, looking smug.

“Time’s up!” Bluebell said. “Let’s all read our scrolls aloud! Such fun! I’ll begin …”

The fairy waxed poetic about Luna’s loveliness, sensitivity and free spirit, and Luna responded in kind. Ernie and Ginny exchanged polite compliments, and Lavender merely listed three subjects that Hermione excelled in.

“I love that Lavender is brave,” Hermione read. If one did something, it was always worth doing right. “I love that Lavender always believes the best in people. I love that Lavender doesn’t cling to old resentments.” Unlike some people I know, she thought, looking at Ron significantly.

Bluebell looked pleased. “And Mr. Weasley?”

Ron shook his head, arms crossed. “Nope. Nothing.”

“Surely there’s something in that lovely boy …”

“Nope, not a thing.”

Bluebell looked sad. “Very well, and Mr. Malfoy?”
Malfoy opened his scroll with a flourish. “I love how Weasley finds even the shockingly low standards expected of him impossible to attain. I love how Weasley thinks with every part of his body except his brain. I love how Weasley becomes enraged when he doesn’t understand something, which means he is enraged nearly all the time.”

He looked around the room calmly. “Is that enough? I can always write more.”

Ron leaped to his feet. “YOU BASTARD! You fucking Death-Eater—” Immediately a vine of flowers wound around his body, binding him fast and sending him falling back onto his beanbag.

“Yes, obviously, this relationship is something we’ll all need to work at,” Bluebell said serenely.

“It’s the Nargles,” Luna said. “They’ve been swarming all week.”

“Undoubtedly, dear. Well, we’ll let Mr. Weasley relax for the remainder of class, and then he and Mr. Malfoy can try again to complete the assignment. Due at our next class.”

Ron’s face, barely visible above the flower vines wrapped around his mouth, was pale. Malfoy looked unperturbed.

Hermione raised her hand halfway, then brought it down again. “Bluebell,” she said coolly. “I fail to see how such exercises constitute a valid defense against the dark arts.”

“No?” Bluebell asked. “I expected more from one of Harry Potter’s best friends. What saved The Boy Who Lived when he was a baby, as well as numerous times since? A mother’s love, his friends’ love. Love soaked into his bones. And what of Mr. Malfoy? His mother’s love saved Harry Potter as well, did it not? Mr. Malfoy would not be with us today if it weren’t for his parents’ love.” She waved her hand at the board again and more words appeared, this time in bright yellow: Love Each Other Or Perish.

“Love is the only Defense Against the Dark Arts,” the fairy said softly. “I would think this class would know that better than anyone.”

A short silence. Tears were running down Ginny’s cheeks. Draco was looking down at his feet, his cheeks faintly pink. Even Hermione felt a little ashamed. It was true, of course, unassailable logic. From a fairy. Who knew.

“And that’s it for today!” Bluebell said in a chipper tone. She rose out of her beanbag. “I expect an essay next class—14 inches—discussing the power of love in life-threatening situations. Have a loving day!”

Malfoy stood and walked swiftly out the door. Ron’s flower vines disappeared and he returned to his beanbag, red-faced. Hermione walked over to Ginny and hugged her.

“Come on,” she said, “I’ll take you back to the dorm.”

“My books,” Ginny sobbed.

“I have your books,” Neville said from behind them.

The class streamed out, except for Ron in his beanbag, still stunned. Hermione looked back to see Bluebell hovering before him. Maybe she can help him, she thought. I certainly failed. But did I really try?
Hermione slept in the next morning, not waking until 6:15. She’d been up until nearly midnight working on her Love Warrior scroll and didn’t really like the result. It hadn't helped listening to Lavender rave about Bluebell, or watching Ginny’s silent tears as the redhead tried to write her own essay.

Hermione had planned to write about Harry, how her powerful (but platonic) love for him gave her the strength to fight over the years. But instead, she found herself writing about her parents, how she took a terrible risk to protect them at the risk of losing them forever. She wondered what Malfoy would write about. Would he write about his own parents? According to his testimony at trial, it was Voldemort’s hideous threats to his mother that prompted him to let Death Eaters into the castle, to try to kill Dumbledore. How could love be the best defense in those circumstances? Didn’t Voldemort only turn Malfoy’s love into a weakness?

Dark thoughts for first thing in the morning, and Hermione was in no mood to write her 5 Things to Look Forward To. But again, a disciplined mind was important. 1) Breakfast, 2) She still hadn’t visited Hagrid, 3) another walk by the lake, 4) Arithmancy, where they were studying a particularly knotty, seven-dimensional theorem. She couldn’t think of a 5—not with Ron and Ginny depressed and Malfoy denying her his rune stone and Codex. Git. Finally, she wrote 5) the morning flier. She’d found a sort of peace in watching the mysterious figure and hoped he or she wouldn’t stop practicing once tryouts were over.

With that thought, she rushed through her morning routine and was at the window promptly at 7:30, scanning the sky. Her breath hitched when she saw the flyer, sailing around the North Tower, silhouetted against the rising sun. The rider shot straight up, then down before launching into a series of loops. She followed the figure, searching for a hint to his or her identity. And what was …

Then she saw it. A flash outside her window. Fascinated, she watched the silver ball flit outside her window, tiny wings fluttering. It was so tiny—how could Seekers even see …

A shadow flew by the window, and she nearly screamed aloud. The flier had found the snitch, of course, had missed it by inches, and was returning for another try. The snitch continued to hover outside Hermione’s window, teasing and sparkling in the growing light. Hermione was reaching to close the curtain when she saw the figure approach at high speed, hood thrown back, platinum hair shining.

Hermione didn’t hesitate. She grabbed her wand and pointed it at the window, vanishing a single pane of glass. A gust of cold wind whipped the room’s bed curtains and she heard Ginny mutter irritably. The snitch shot through the open pane and zipped around the room, reminding Hermione of Pig, Ron’s wee owl.

She suddenly leaped backward, choking back another scream, for there was Malfoy on the other side of the window and he looked furious. She shivered, remembering that constant snarl from earlier years, but she had a plan, and it didn’t involve releasing the snitch at that time. Instead, she waved her wand and restored the glass pane. Another wave, and the window curtains snapped shut, hiding the outraged Slytherin from view. Not even Malfoy would break into a girl’s dorm before breakfast. He’d get a bat bogey hex from Ginny if he even tried.

“Whassup?” asked Lavender’s sleepy voice.
“Nothing,” Hermione said. She pointed her wand at the snitch: “Accio snitch,” she whispered, and the bauble fluttered into her hand. It was beautiful, really: shining silver with “DLM” engraved in Old English letters. A gift, probably. Yes, this would do nicely. Holding the snitch with one hand, Hermione dug through her trunk with the other and emerged with the box her watch came in. A back-to-school gift from her parents, and the perfect size. She placed the snitch inside the box, tucked it into her robe pocket and left the bedroom. A few minutes before breakfast was all she needed. Then she just had to wait.

She didn’t have to wait long. Malfoy stalked her all the way to Ancient Runes after glaring at her through breakfast.

“Give me my snitch,” he snarled, backing her slowly against the corridor wall.

“Oh, was that yours?” she asked coolly. Her hand touched the wand inside her robe pocket.

He noticed the movement, but didn’t back off an inch. “Don’t play with me, Granger. You’ve seen me practice with it. You’ve been watching me.”

“Yes,” she admitted readily. “That move this morning—was that the Wonky Faint?”

Malfoy ground his teeth. “Wronski Feint, you daft—”

“I think you’ll make a brilliant Finder—”

“Seeker!” he snapped.

Hermione rolled her eyes. Too easy. A fairy calls him a lovely boy in front of the class and he handles it with aplomb. Hermione takes his little ball and purposely garbles a few words and the man completely unravels.

“Now you listen to me, Granger—”

“Mr. Malfoy, Miss Granger, would you care to join us?” Headmistress McGonagall stood in the classroom doorway, looking like she’d never seen a Ring of Posies in her life.

“Of course, Headmistress,” Hermione chirped, flouncing into the classroom and sitting down. Malfoy followed more slowly, his face like stone.

Hermione pulled out a fresh sheet of parchment and wrote the following in runes:

Malfy,

8 p.m. at the abandoned charms classroom. Bring the Codex and rune stone and we’ll make a deal.

HJG

P.S. Wacky Faint

She rolled it up with a tap of her wand and bound it in a bright red-and-gold ribbon, then rendered the scroll invisible and floated it over to Malfoy’s desk. The scroll reappeared in his hands and he read it swiftly, then turned to her and nodded, his face grim.
Hermione smiled. Maybe Ancient Runes would be fun after all.

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Her Potions table was quiet that morning: Ron was still subdued after the last DADA seminar, and Malfoy and Hermione worked together silently, so Lavender was the only conversationalist.

“You slice those bat spleens so well, Draco,” she cooed. “I like a man who’s good with his hands.”

Ron groaned. “Honestly, Lavender, give it a rest. I’d rather not lose my breakfast.”

Hermione could only agree, but Malfoy’s eyes were now glittering dangerously. “I think it’s lovely,” she said loudly. “A Slytherin prince, tamed by a gentle Gryffindor sweetheart …”

Malfoy froze in the act of preparing the spleens, looking revolted. Romilda Vane at the next table nearly fell off her stool in the effort to hear better.

“I think Brown knows better than that,” Malfoy said quietly as he set aside the spleens and started on a pile of leeches.

“It’s sometimes hard to admit one’s feelings,” Hermione told Ron.

“Granger,” Malfoy growled.

“Now what have we here?” boomed Slughorn, who had given up his usual M.O. of dozing at his desk to frequently check on their table. “Very nice, very nice! Mr. Malfoy, remember to press the leeches gently with your knife, don’t smash them so.” He moved away to check on Romilda and her partner’s potion, which steamed suspiciously.

“Don’t listen to him, Draco,” Lavender said. “I think you’re pressing the leeches wonderfully.”

Malfoy’s left eye twitched, but he refrained from comment. The exchange cheered Ron up, though, at least enough for him to solicit Hermione’s help. An infusion of wormwood was enough to counteract the excessive doxy venom he’d used, and his and Lavender’s potion now looked almost identical to Hermione and Draco’s.

Ron’s good mood was even more improved when Hermione pulled him aside after class and presented him with a parchment. It listed three things to love about Malfoy: His skill in potions, his patience with Lavender and his quiet, reserved manner this year.

“Reserved?” Ron repeated. “Malfoy?”

“Compared to past years, I’d say so,” Hermione answered. “Look, there’s nothing to object to here, the assignment is over, and you look like the better man.”

“All right, Hermione,” he said. “Thanks.” He stuffed the scroll in his pocket. “Are we still on for Saturday?”

“Why wouldn’t we be?” she asked.

“Well, you’ve been sort of tetchy lately.”
“That’s because you keep pushing,” she said. “We’re friends, right? I don’t know about the future, but right now we’re friends.” She hoped repeating the word would help it sink in. “Let me relax around you, Ron.” She took his hand. “Please.”

“OK,” he said, looking down at their twined fingers. “It’s just hard after we …”

“I know,” she said softly. “I’m just not sure we’re good together that way. Do you really want me bossing you around?”

Ron raised his eyebrows and grinned. “That depends on what we’re doing.” She frowned and he raised his hands. “Just a little fun. I’ll behave, really. Friends.”

Hermione linked her arm through his. “Friends.”

***

Ginny looked much better at dinner, chattering happily about the Hufflepuff Quidditch tryouts the night before. Ravenclaw tryouts were that evening, with Slytherin the next day, and Hermione let her compare the House’s likely strengths and weaknesses without interruption. Then Ginny and Ron ran off to watch the Ravenclaws, and Hermione completed her Transfiguration homework in the library before heading to the abandoned charms classroom.

Malfoy was there first, just as before, again sitting cross-legged on the desk. She supposed it was a Slytherin thing to turn up early and take command of the room in such situations. He certainly didn’t bother with punctuality any other time.

“Well, where is it?” he demanded as she entered.

She dropped her bag on the floor. “Where is the Codex? And the rune stone?”

Malfoy crossed his arms. “I didn’t bring them.”

“Too bad. No snitch for you.”

He hopped off the desk and moved closer, forcing Hermione to tilt her head back to keep eye contact.

“I want that snitch, Granger,” he said. “It’s valuable, and I won’t be blackmailed with something that’s rightfully mine.”

“Get used to it.”

“That smart mouth will get—accio snitch!” Malfoy’s wand was in his hand and he cast the spell before she could react. Clever. Good thing she’d surrounded the snitch with a repelling charm.

“Expelliarmus!” she snapped, backing away, her own wand in hand. Malfoy’s wand nearly took off his hand with the force of her spell. Now she held both wands and felt considerably more comfortable.

“Run along now, Malfoy, and get that Codex and stone for me. I don’t have all night.”

Malfoy almost smiled. “No.”
“Don’t make me hex you.”

She half-expected him to lunge at her, and so held her wand up chest-high, back straight. Instead, with whip-quick Seeker reflexes, he drew a vial out of his pocket, uncorked it, and released a cloud of fine grey dust into the air. It scattered down and disappeared, and Hermione felt … strange.

“What … what was that?” she stammered, stepping back.

His smile broke through, his eyes meeting hers again. “Salt of the Earth.”

Hermione blinked. How did he get that? Salt of the Earth was incredibly difficult powder to procure; its creation required, among other things, the blood of a troll and six months of brewing.

“Brought it from home. Just another precious asset from an ancient wizarding house,” he sneered.

She frowned. Salt of the Earth had many uses, but its most obvious effect was to temporarily nullify any use of magic within a limited radius. Hermione tried to remember how long the Salt’s effects lasted, but she knew almost nothing about the substance.

She moved to keep a table between them, but Malfoy wasn’t looking at her. Instead, he picked up her bag and unceremoniously dumped it out on the teacher’s desk. Books, quills and scrolls tumbled out, as well as two lipsticks, her LOOP notebook and a wrapped chocolate tart from dinner. Her color-coded study guides blinked merrily from the floor.

“Where is it, Granger?” he asked, tossing her bag aside. “I know you brought it.”

He stepped closer, and now he was watching her, and it took every ounce of self-control not to step back again. The table between them suddenly looked very flimsy.

“All this, over a little snitch?” she asked lightly.

“It’s mine,” he said, every inch the possessive pureblood. “You stole it, to force me to show you other valuable objects, objects that are also mine, artifacts I showed you out of—” He stopped.

“Out of what?” she asked curiously. “Why did you share the Codex with me?”

They were circling the table now, and his grey eyes were bright. Hermione’s heart was pounding, her wand in a tight fist. She had nothing but delaying tactics now, and the second that powder’s effects expired she was going to—

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “What matters is that I showed you the Codex and you chose to insult me and my—”

“You asked me what I was thinking. What did you expect?”

“A little gratitude, maybe? We Malfoys don’t share lightly. We don’t share anything with—”

“With Mudbloods—I know,” she snapped, still circling. “Forgive me for not falling to my knees to the great Draco Malfoy who deigned to act like a human being to a filthy—”

Damn her tongue, he looked murderous now. “Don’t say that again,” Malfoy snarled. “Don’t even start that shit, Granger. That kind of thinking destroyed my family, destroyed my fucking life.”

He stalked her around the table, never breaking eye contact. Hermione tried a nonverbal spell—nothing. She thought about simply running from the room and hiding until the Salt wore off, but her pride wouldn’t let her, and he would surely beat her to the door.
“Give me back my snitch,” Malfoy growled.

“Tell me why you showed me the Codex.” If she broke eye contact for an instant, he’d be on her like a cobra.

He stopped circling and smiled thinly. “If the snitch isn’t in the bag, it must be on your person, Granger.”

“It isn’t!”

“I don’t believe you.” His tone was mocking, his eyes moving down her body. He was practically licking his lips.

Hermione flushed. So, that was his game. The prim, proper bookworm trapped by the big, bad, sex-god Slytherin. Well, she wasn’t having it. She wasn’t going to quail and whimper, “Oh no, you wouldn’t! Stop, oh stop!” while he queued up some one-size-fits-all seduction technique to search her body. She clutched her wand tighter. Nothing.

“Fine,” Hermione said in a crisp, bossy tone. She slammed her wand on the table between them. “I’ll prove it. And you will apologize for questioning my word.”

She thinned her lips just like McGonagall at her most disapproving and began slowly unbuttoning her white uniform shirt. Oh, if she only had a working wand or a muggle camera to capture the absolutely gobsmacked expression on Malfoy’s face as she stripped off her shirt and waved it at him.

“See? No snitch.” She pulled it back on and fastened two buttons before stepping away from the table and attacking her skirt. Damn it, the zipper was sticking again, she was losing the moment.

Malfoy edged nearer. “Need some help?”

Damn and triple damn. All right then.

Careful to keep her expression McGonagall stern, she grabbed the skirt at the seam and pulled. It was an old skirt and the sharp ripping of cloth echoed in the empty classroom.

Malfoy blinked and froze, staring as the plaid wool fell to the floor.

“Nope, nothing to see, Malfoy,” she said in her snippiest tone.

“I wouldn’t say that.” He gave her a slow smile as his eyes traveled down her stockinged legs, then up to the hem of her shirt.

She’d called his bluff, and now he was calling hers. And he was on the move again, closing the space between them. How long did that damn powder last? Time to roll the dice.

Hermione lunged for her wand, almost crying in relief when she felt the familiar warmth rushing up her arm. “Protego!” she shouted, and the strength of her shield charm sent Malfoy crashing backward into another table. “Accio Draco’s wand!” she added, and the wand slapped smartly into her palm. A wordless wave, and her skirt wrapped around her hips and repaired itself. Another wave, and her shirt buttoned right up to her chin.

She pointed her wand at Malfoy, who was just regaining his balance. “Petrificus Totalus,” she said, almost lovingly, and Malfoy dropped to the floor, his body stiff. Hermione waved the wand at her bag, which packed itself up neatly and leaped onto her shoulder, then pointed the wand at the ceiling.
“Finite Incantatem,” she said, ending both the repelling charm and sticking charm, and the box with the snitch fell from its sticking point on the ceiling to land on the stone floor before Malfoy’s prone body. Only his silver eyes moved, mad with rage.

Satisfied, she stepped closer and laid his wand beside his hand. “I’ve changed my mind,” she said, looking down at him coldly. “I don’t want your snitch, or to look at any of your stupid, illegal artifacts. I don’t know why you showed me that Codex or appeared to care what I thought about it, but I’m through. You asked me a question, I gave you an honest answer, you couldn’t take it and then chose to punish me for my candor.”

She walked to the door and turned to face him. “Ye gods, Malfoy, you’re just like Ronald.”

Hermione waved her wand one last time as the door slammed shut behind her. The charmed lamps extinguished themselves, leaving one shocked wizard alone in the dark.

She walked briskly through the halls, heart pounding. She didn’t know how long Malfoy’s paralysis would last since she’d purposely made the spell rather weak. Possibly too weak, but better to hurry now than risk leaving him frozen for a day.

"Vanity puffs," she told the Fat Lady, hopelessly trying to tame her hair and cool her cheeks. She made it halfway across the common room before anyone noticed her presence.

“... Hermione, can you help me with …”

“... Hey, Hermione, what’s the proportion of honeywater with Horklump juice in the …”

“... What’s your hurry? Do you know the answer to question …”

Panting, Hermione ignored them all. Let them look in a fucking book for once. She pounded up the stairs, clutching the banister as she climbed. Once in her room, she changed into her penguin pajamas and warded her bed. She settled under the covers, then got out of bed and warded the windows. Twice.

Back in bed, however, as Hermione’s heart slowed in the quiet peace of the room, she began to chuckle at herself. Why would Malfoy chase after her anyway? He’d gotten what he wanted—he had his artifacts, his beloved snitch and even a little strip show on the side. What did he have to complain about?

Maybe she’d overreacted in the charms classroom. There she was, swanning around the castle telling everyone not to be scared of the big, bad Malfoy and the second the man threw some powder around, she completely lost her mind. Some war heroine she was. What did she think Malfoy was going to do, crucio the snitch out of her?

It was the lack of magic, that was it. To be in a situation like that again, trapped and helpless, unable to stop … yes, that was it.

She closed her eyes, slowing her breathing, and there he was:

“*It must be on your person, Granger.*”

“*It isn’t!*”

“*I don’t believe you.*”

She turned on her side, heart suddenly pounding again. He was looking at her:
“It must be on your person, Granger.”

“It isn’t!”

“I don’t believe you.”

Back in the charms classroom, her every nerve ending had screamed like a klaxon: FLIGHT FLIGHT FLIGHT … she couldn’t let him touch her or ...

“It must be on your person, Granger.”

“It isn’t!”

“I don’t believe you.”

Suddenly they weren’t in the classroom anymore. They were in Arthur Weasley’s muggle shack with the broken appliances and the shop-vac.

Malfoy steps closer, whispering, “it must be on your person, Granger.”

“It isn’t,” she whispers back.

His breath is in her ear, his hand on her hip. “I don’t believe you …”

Hermione opened her eyes.

Damn it.
“Hermione, please!” Ginny was begging at breakfast.

Hermione stared at the redhead, baffled. “Why in Godric’s name would I go to the Slytherin Quidditch tryouts?”

“You’re my only hope,” Ginny said. “I have to scout the talent after dinner, but there’s no way I’m going to the pitch alone. I mean, look at them.”

She tilted her head toward the Slytherin table in the Great Hall. It was the typical scene: The older students looking like a pack of criminal masterminds, the younger students quaking in their seats, and Malfoy eating alone like nothing in this world could ever bother him.

“Take Ron,” Hermione said shortly. “I need to study.”

“Ron has to redo his Draught of Peace for Slughorn with Lavender and the rest of my team is too chicken,” Ginny said. “I need somebody who’s not scared of a couple of Slytherins.”

“Luna,” Hermione suggested.

“Fishing for gulping plimpies in the Black Lake.”

“Neville.”

“Helping Sprout with some special Herbology project for advanced students. Apparently, the seeds hate to be planted.”

Hermione sighed. “Fine, but you owe me. You owe me big.” She glared at Ginny. “I’m serious. I’m giving up serious study time to watch some Wacky Faint—”

“Wronsky Feint!” Ginny and Ron cried out.

“Whatever,” she said, trying not to smile.

Hermione spent the rest of breakfast moodily drawing runes in her Transfiguration textbook as an intense Quidditch discussion raged around her. Then she joined a small pack of Ravenclaws on the way to Ancient Runes. She was just going to have to avoid him. Four days into the school year, and she simply needed to avoid a man who sat across the aisle in Ancient Runes, across the table in potions, and two inches away in Defense Against the Dark Arts. No problems there.

Entering the Ancient Runes classroom, Hermione saw that Malfoy seemed to have adopted the same strategy. He looked as artlessly indifferent as ever, tucked into in his tiny desk, and spared her only the occasional dark glance.

Later that day, at Defense Against the Dark Arts, Hermione couldn’t help but be hyperactively aware of the man to her left, that soft cologne scent drifting nearer. She leaned closer to Ron on her other side to avoid it, and by the end of the period, Ron was stroking a light pattern on her arm. Huffing, she gave Ron a sharp dig with her elbow and reluctantly shifted closer to Malfoy’s beanbag, ignoring Ron’s hurt look. When would this class be over?

After dinner, she and Ginny left the castle to walk to the pitch, with Hermione wrapped snugly in a red and gold scarf and hat. She knew from experience, no matter how beautiful it was when one
headed off to a long, dull Quidditch event, an icy wind would invariably swoop off a mountaintop before the first Quacky hit a hoop.

A fair number of Slytherins cheered from the stands as the aspiring players gathered on the pitch. The Captain of the Quidditch team was a blonde Keeper. Willowy and beautiful, she flitted between the big hoops, effortlessly blocking every hit. If Malfoy hadn’t revealed himself that fatal morning outside her window, she would have thought it was this player practicing before breakfast. She was very tall.

“That’s Astoria Greengrass,” Ginny said, following her gaze. “Daphne’s younger sister. She looks delicate, but she nearly took my head off with a bludger last year.”

“I’ve heard something about her,” Hermione mused.

“Well, she was betrothed to Draco Malfoy—”

“What?”

Ginny looked up from the parchment she was scribbling on. “Not officially, but their families were talking seriously during our Fifth Year. Astoria wouldn’t quit bragging about it, kept showing off some diamonds he gave her. Revolting.”

(Is it on again now?” Hermione asked.

Ginny shrugged. “No idea. I mean, the Malfoy’s name is mud these days—oh, I’m sorry!” She looked at Hermione, her eyes wide and shocked.

“It’s all right,” Hermione said, patting her arm. And it really was. “It’s a muggle term, too.”

Ginny smiled at her. “You’re the best witch I know.”

“You’re just saying that because I came to a Slytherin tryout.”

Ginny just grinned and went back to her parchment, assigning points to the prospective players. Hermione put her chin in her hand and watched the flying below, her curls whipping around her. The wind, as predicted, was picking up already.

After nearly an hour, her butt was frozen and she was sick of doing Arithmancy in her head. Hermione looked enviously at Slughorn, who sat near the pitch wrapped in an enormous blanket and tucked into a comfy armchair. Why hadn’t she brought a book? She was trying to calculate whether she could summon one from her bedroom window when Ginny grabbed her arm.

“Here come the prospective seekers!”

There were only three: two Sixth Year girls … and Malfoy. Hermione’s breath caught, watching those familiar loops. She had been waiting for this, she realized, without knowing she was waiting.

“Wow,” Ginny said. “That git can really fly.” She began jotting numbers, splattering drops of ink in her haste.

Astoria started hitting small balls out over the field, allowing the three contenders to chase them. Malfoy scooped each one up in minutes, easily outflying the Sixth Years. Hermione’s eyes narrowed: Astoria was starting to hit them directly to one Sixth Year student or another, but Malfoy stole them anyway. The stands were deathly silent, although Slughorn did cheer and wave his little snake flag.
“Huh,” Ginny said, looking around. “Not a lot of support for old Draco.”

One ball sailed their way and Malfoy made a tight turn and snatched it before it entered the stands. He hung in the air five feet from them for just an instant, his eyes meeting Hermione’s before he flew away.

Ginny turned to Hermione. “What was that about?”

Hermione shrugged. “Can we go now? I can’t feel my ass.”

“Yeah.” Ginny stood and packed away her quill and parchment. “Hot chocolate in the common room!” She looked back at Malfoy. “Slytherin will be tough to beat with a Seeker like that,” she said.

“Miss Weasley?” Madame Hooch, the Quidditch teacher and Gryffindor’s new Head of House stood by the entrance to the pitch. Her bleached white hair was windblown and her black cape snapped and swirled behind her. Hooch always wore Quidditch gear, even when she wasn’t flying. “A moment, please. Miss Granger, you may come as well.”

They followed her to a grassy spot away from the stands. “Miss Weasley,” Hooch said in a severe tone, “it has come to my attention that the Seventh and Eighth Years are planning a party Saturday in the common room.”

“Er, yes,” Ginny said. Upperclassmen parties were not forbidden after curfew, as long as they didn’t get too out of hand. Nobody had expected Hooch to object.

“Excellent. I would like you to open this party beyond just Gryffindors. Inter-House unity and all that. You will invite Eighth Year Slytherins as well.”

“Slytherins!” Ginny gasped. “We couldn’t!”

Hooch’s face was stern. “You certainly could. Extend the invitation today. Have the Fat Lady issue a temporary password for the evening.”

“Slytherins?” Ginny repeated. Hermione said nothing, but felt the same.

“Today, mind you,” Hooch repeated. Slinging her broomstick over her shoulder (she always carried her broomstick when on the Quidditch pitch), she stalked off.

“I’m not talking to Astoria,” Ginny pronounced, sounding just like Ron.

“She can’t come anyway—Seventh Year, remember? Come on,” Hermione led her back to the pitch. “Look, there’s Blaise Zabini. He’s tolerable.”

“He’s creepy,” Ginny said. “He always tries to touch my hair.”

Hermione peered up at the green-cloaked figure high in the stands. “I’ll talk to him. He won’t touch my hair.” She’d heard enough Slytherin insults over the years about her hair, mostly from Malfoy, but Zabini had always considered muggle-borns unworthy of comment. In the rare times they’d been forced to interact, he’d been distantly courteous.

“Bugger,” Ginny grumbled as they climbed. “They’ll ruin our party.”

Zabini sat on a topmost bench, a slender figure with wind-ruffled black hair, wearing a dark suit and tie under his cloak. He looked down at them like a king from his throne, waiting for them to
“Zabini,” Hermione said. She was damned if he was getting an “excuse me” or even a “hello.”

A regal nod. “Granger. Weasley.”

“I – we,” Hermione began, glancing at Ginny. Gods, she felt stupid. She tried to channel McGonagall again. Better to sound prim and snippy than weak and intimidated. “We Gryffindors are holding a party in our common room Saturday night …” Zabini’s eyebrows rose, but Hermione went on doggedly, “and in the interest of inter-House unity, we would like to invite the Slytherin Eighth Years.”

“All of them?” Zabini asked.

“Of course all of them. There are, what, six of you?”

A slight smile. “I thought perhaps you wouldn’t care to include certain … personalities.”

Ginny frowned, but Hermione knew exactly who Zabini meant. “Everyone in Eighth Year,” she said firmly. “You may be afraid of him, Zabini, but I assure you, we are not.”

Zabini’s mouth turned down. “I believe we are otherwise engaged.”

“All of you?” Hermione asked.

“Well, this has been fun!” Ginny said brightly. “Sorry-you-lot-can’t-make-it-maybe-next-time!” She grabbed Hermione’s arm and began tugging her back down the stands.

“A moment,” Zabini said. “Perhaps our plans can be … rearranged.”

“Oh no!” Ginny said. “Don’t inconvenience yourselves for us! Plans are important! Ta!”

“I will send an owl informing you of our decision,” Zabini said.

“Don’t put yourself out,” snapped Hermione. Zabini’s dark eyes just blinked down at her slowly. Ginny kept a vice grip on her arm and hauled her down the stands.

“What was that?” Ginny hissed. “Did you just insist that Malfoy be invited to our party?”


“Trust me, Malfoy will irritate us a lot more. Ron will go spare.”

“Excellent.” Hermione grinned. “Dinner and a show.”

Ginny stopped at the bottom of the stands and cocked her head slightly. “What is with you this year, Hermione? It’s like you want to cause trouble.”

“I don’t know what you’re so worried about,” Hermione said. “They won’t come anyway.”

She was utterly wrong, of course. Ginny received Zabini’s owl an hour later as they sat around the Gryffindor common room sipping hot chocolate. The note was terse: The Slytherins would be pleased to present themselves at the Gryffindor common room at 8 p.m. Saturday and inquired if the event was black-tie.

“Tell them yes,” Ron suggested. “Let them look like idiots.”
“Tell them business casual,” Hermione said.

“What’s that?” Ginny asked.

“It’s a muggle term.”

“Love it!” Ginny cried. “We need a temporary password.”

“Gryffindors are great,” said Neville.

“Slytherins are stupid,” said Ron.

“Charity and love,” said Luna dreamily.

“Why are you here?” Ron asked her. “Don’t you Ravenclaws have your own common room?”

Luna just smiled and blew him a kiss.

Ginny grinned wickedly. “No, I love it. Imagine all those Slytherins repeating ‘charity and love.’ Genius!” She scribbled a few more lines and sent the message off.

It could work, Hermione thought, moving to sit alone on a sofa by the fire. She gazed into the melted marshmallow swirls in her cocoa. The password alone might repel even Slytherin’s most die-hard partiers.

“Hermione?” Lavender slid onto the couch beside her. “Can I talk to you?”

Hermione nodded shortly. Lavender looked nervous and embarrassed, fidgeting with the sofa cushion.

“You probably think I’m stupid,” Lavender said.

“Well, I wish you hadn’t gone to Madame Hooch.”

“You know?” Lavender stared at her. “Of course you know. I just … wanted him to come.”

“Lavender …” Hermione stopped. What could she say? The more she warned the girl off Malfoy, the more Lavender would defend him. But Hermione had to say something—she was feeling guilty about her comments at Potions. She’d been trying to deter Malfoy from flirting with Lavender, but ended up making everything worse.


“But he’s so handsome …”

“Not when he’s sneering.”

“He doesn’t sneer that much anymore.”

Hermione considered this. She had to admit the man had banked down the sneering and name-calling. His harassing of the First Years had been more mischievous than anything. Still, that didn’t make him boyfriend material.

“You would really snog a person like that just because he’s handsome?” Hermione asked.

Lavender nodded and giggled.
“Well then, best of luck,” Hermione said. “Don’t come crying to me when he breaks your heart.”

Lavender’s eyebrows pinched together. “You’re jealous. He’s much more handsome than Ron.”

“You seemed to think Ron handsome enough in Sixth Year.”

“That’s it! You’re jealous. You’re still mad about Ron and now you want to ruin this for me.”

Hermione sniffed. “I don’t have to ruin it for you. Malfoy will ruin it just fine without my help.”

“Don’t you dare—” Lavender stopped as she and Hermione suddenly realized their voices had gotten a little loud. *Everyone is listening to us cat-fight about Ron and Malfoy. Brilliant.*

Hermione stood. “Do what you want.” She turned to the wide-eyed crowd around her. “I’m going to bed.” If her life kept up like this, she’d be going to bed right after dinner every night.

“Hermione—” Ron said.

“It’s all right,” she said, smiling. “Really.” With a final glare for Lavender, who had tears in her eyes now, the little moron, she headed up the stairs.
“Today,” Slughorn announced, “we will begin brewing the Fiducia potion.”

Hermione’s pulse leaped. *Finally, something interesting.*

“Can anyone tell me the primary effect of Fiducia?” the professor asked.

“Trust,” Malfoy drawled. “When ingested, it makes a person trust everyone they meet.” Hermione glared as she put her hand back down.

“Yes, 10 points to Slytherin,” Slughorn said. “And as such, Fiducia is categorized as an official controlled substance by the Ministry of Magic, along with Veritaserum, the truth-telling concoction. It is also an excellent introduction to time-brewed potions. Can anyone define a time-brewed potion?”

“It is a potion brewed under strict timing schedules,” Hermione recited glibly, resigned to this new world order. “It is not merely enough to add the ingredients in the right order, they must also be added at particular times.”

“Very good, 10 points to Gryffindor.” Slughorn waved his wand and a list of ingredients appeared on the board. “Brewing a successful Fiducia requires practice and exceptional teamwork, so I do not expect anyone to succeed in their first try. Today we will do a few quick runs, just to familiarize ourselves with the recipe, before attempting it throughout the next week.”

The professor’s bushy eyebrows drew down. “I should not have to say this to advanced Potions students, but anyone found in possession of Fiducia outside class will be severely punished. This is very powerful magic. Who can tell—”

“Because the trust isn’t earned,” Hermione cut in. Slughorn looked irritated. *Good,* she thought, *this is why we should use proper recitation procedures.* “This magic creates something that does not exist, because real trust must be earned.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Malfoy objected. “There are plenty of fools who’d trust anybody without the help of a potion.”

Hermione shrugged. “Somebody created that trust, even if he or she isn’t the recipient of it. The trust was still earned.”

“And that trust can be lost,” he said darkly.

“And regained again.”

“That would be even more difficult,” he said.

‘Yes, yes, such a complex topic—and potion!’ Slughorn boomed. “And you can see why its preparation and possession is strictly controlled. Time to begin!”

“What the hell was that?” Ron asked Hermione hoarsely as Malfoy and Lavender left to fetch ingredients.
“I don’t know what you mean,” she answered, taking off her watch and sticking it to the wall beside her. She fished a hair tie out of her robe pocket and pulled her curls into a messy bun out of her way.


“We were debating a class topic, Ronald.” Hermione poured a cup of rainwater into her cauldron and lit the fire under it with her wand. “Lavender chats up Malfoy every day, why don’t you bother her?”

“Hermione,” Ron said, lowering his voice. “Why are you trying to keep her from Malfoy?”

She stared at him. “I really need to explain that? The man’s trouble on wheels. Of course she should stay away from Malfoy! Everyone should stay away from Malfoy!”

*Shit, I didn’t mean that.* She looked back at her cauldron, and of course, there he was, holding a tray of bottles, his eyes cold. “Malfoy, I—”

“Step one, Granger,” was all he said.

“Malfoy, I—”

“Step … one,” he said through clenched teeth.

“What is it?” Lavender asked, stepping up with her own tray. “Draco, you look a bit tense, is she bothering—”

“Step one,” Hermione said crisply. “Three teaspoons of bubotuber pus on my mark, 3-2-1 …”

Malfoy dropped in the pus and nodded. Hermione began counting backward from 30 as he swiftly weighed the doxy eggs and poured them onto a small plate.

“… 4 … 3 … 2 … 1 …. mark,” she said. Malfoy tipped the plate into the cauldron. “Stir three times in 5 … 4 …”

The potion was maddeningly intricate, but its very complexity soothed Hermione and Malfoy’s nerves. This recipe made brewing a polyjuice potion look like mixing lemonade; there was no room for lapses in concentration, and they quickly fell into a rhythm, with each one knowing what the other needed without speaking.

Ron and Lavender, on the other hand, ran into trouble early on. Lavender kept adding the wrong ingredients and dribbling bubotuber pus on herself; Ron constantly messed up the timing, and ended up just yelling random numbers. Three times the pair had to vanish their cauldron’s contents and start over, and their efforts quickly degenerated into squabbling over the recipe and fighting over the spoon.

To stay focused amid the mayhem at the other end of the table, Hermione and Malfoy bent their heads closely together as they worked. They had hit the part of the brewing process requiring simultaneous adding of ingredients, which could get a little tricky. Hermione had to maintain her count and drop her eel eyes and knotgrass leaves at the same time, while Malfoy had his hands full just keeping the ingredients sorted while pouring his lineup of vials into the cauldron at regular intervals. At times, Hermione felt they were even breathing in sync, and her heart began skipping beats. He was very close.

It was a relief when they began the synchronized stirring—it was a little confusing with two
spoons, but still easier. Hermione leaned back and caught Malfoy’s eye with a smile, and his lips curved slightly. Hermione blinked, and almost dropped her spoon. Instead, she clutched it more tightly and tried to say with her eyes: I didn’t mean it. Malfoy’s smile faded, but his face looked less implacable than before.

“Last ingredient,” Hermione said, and Malfoy nodded. He mixed dragon’s blood and flobberworm mucus in a small vial and handed it to Hermione. “Me?” she asked. Almost imperceptibly, he nodded again.

She glanced at the second hand on her watch, chanting “3 … 2 … 1 …” then tipped the vial into the cauldron.

And nothing happened. Hermione and Malfoy stared down at the mixture, then at each other, dumbstruck. Malfoy’s face darkened and Hermione flushed. If they had done all of that for nothing—

“Just wait, you two,” said a quiet voice. Slughorn stood beside the table, holding his huge magic pocket watch, and the whole class was silent and staring. “Just wait.”

The cauldron’s liquid began to swirl, green and pink, like a confused and angry Auramatis potion, then an intricate pattern appeared on the surface, like that of a brocade curtain. The potion’s surface stilled.

“Well done,” Slughorn said. “Now we test it.”

“How?” Malfoy asked.

“Hmm … ah, Mr. Weasley, please point your wand at Mr. Malfoy,” Slughorn said, a rare smirk on his broad face. For the first time, Hermione could see why the man was head of Slytherin house.

Ron nearly fell over in his haste to get his wand out of his pocket, and he pointed it at Malfoy with what Hermione considered a very unattractive smile.

“Professor Slughorn …” she began.

“Now, Mr. Malfoy,” Slughorn said over her, “I need you to please place both hands on the table and let Mr. Weasley here tap you on the nose with his wand.”

Smothered laughter spread throughout the class. Malfoy raised an eyebrow. “That, Professor, is simply not happening.”

Slughorn’s eyebrows rose. “Are you saying you don’t trust Mr. Weasley to tap your face with his wand?”

“If I had my way, I wouldn’t trust Weasley with a wand at all.”

“Professor, let Ron tap my face instead,” Hermione said nervously. Somebody was going to get hexed here.

“Inadequate test. Mr. Weasley is your friend; of course you trust him.”

“Malfoy then,” she said in exasperation.

“All signs indicate that you may trust Mr. Malfoy even more,” Slughorn said.

Murmurs rippled through the class at that, and Ron’s hand on his wand tightened.
“Mr. Malfoy, I insist,” Slughorn said, once again that steel creeping into his voice.

Frowning, Malfoy dipped a vial into the green and pink pattern and took a quick swig. Hermione bit her lip. It was an act of courage, she thought, for Malfoy, who by all appearances trusted no one, to leave himself open this way.

“Ask permission,” Slughorn told Ron quietly.

“Can … can I tap your nose?” stammered Ron, who had picked up on some of the tension.

Malfoy was still frowning. “Yes.”

“Do you trust him to do that?” Slughorn asked.

Malfoy laid his hands on the table. “As incompetent as Weasley is in all other respects, I trust him to carry out this simple task without incident.”

Hermione couldn’t help but smile. Fiducia instilled trust; it didn’t change personalities.

His hand trembling slightly, Ron tapped his wand slightly on Malfoy’s nose and pulled it back. The whole class broke into applause, although it wasn’t clear whether they were clapping for Ron, Malfoy or the potion.

“How long do the effects last?” Hermione asked Slughorn.

“About an hour, most likely,” Slughorn said. He clapped a hand on Malfoy’s shoulder. “Well done. Twenty points to Slytherin. You will remain here with me until I’m convinced the effect has faded.”

He turned to the rest of the class. “Mr. Malfoy and Miss Granger have achieved something remarkable today. I’ve never before seen a Fiducia brewed perfectly on a first attempt. Fifty more points to Slytherin and fifty to Gryffindor.”

Slughorn walked back to his desk and faced the class again. “Now, Fiducia is not only a time-sensitive potion, it is what we call a circumstantial mixture. Its potency depends on the circumstances under which it was brewed. Only under conditions of complete trust between its brewers can this potion be created properly.”

Hermione sighed. The whole class was staring at her and Malfoy now, and Ron scowled. "So I trust Malfoy as a potions partner. Big deal.

“Class is dismissed,” Slughorn said, setting off a scramble to clear tables and vanish failed potions.

“Draco,” Lavender said, moving closer, “would you like me to—”

“Head off to your next class, Miss Brown,” Slughorn called from his desk. “Mr. Malfoy is not himself.” Malfoy looked at him gratefully.

“She has class too,” Lavender said with a venomous look at Hermione.

“Yes,” Hermione said, clearing the table with a wave of her wand. She picked up her books and eyed Malfoy for a moment. He looked straight ahead, hands folded, mouth a thin line.

“Are you leaving or not?” Lavender snapped. Hermione didn’t answer, just swept out of the room and down the corridor toward Arithmancy.
When Ginny joined Ron and Hermione for dinner that evening, she was quivering with excitement.

“Well, she did it,” Ginny said. “She fucking did it. Astoria Greengrass has handed the Quidditch Cup to Gryffindor this year.”

Hermione blinked. “Do you mean—”

“Yes!” Ginny crowed. “Guess who the new Slytherin Seeker is? If you guessed a certain former Death Eater with a deity complex, you’d be wrong. If you guessed a mousy Sixth Year who couldn’t find a snitch with a compass, you’d be right. Yes!” She and Ron gave each other high-fives.

“Serves the git right,” Ron said. “Probably wasn’t that good anyway.”

“Oh, he was brilliant,” Ginny said. “But too tainted for Lady Astoria.” Ginny loathed the younger Greengrass.

Hermione stood. “I have to go to the library.”

“You can’t!” Ron cried. “Ginny wasn’t here at lunch and we haven’t told her what happened in Potions! Gin, I poked Malfoy in the nose with my wand this morning and he couldn’t do a thing about it!”

“No!” Ginny cried.

“I was there,” Neville said. “I saw it. Malfoy and Hermione cooked up this insane potion—”

“And I poked him in the nose!” Ron shouted.

“And he let you?” Ginny asked.

“Well, there was this potion, as I said,” Neville put in. “It’s brewed to inspire—”

“Hey, this is my story!” Ron cried.

“Well, you haven’t said a thing except ‘I poked Malfoy in the nose!’” Ginny complained.

Hermione took advantage of the bickering to leave the Great Hall and run down to the Potions dungeons. “Professor Slughorn?” she asked, sticking her head in.

“Miss Granger!” Slughorn opened his arms wide, then clasped his hands together. “I’m afraid the other half of the magical duo is no longer here! He refused to throw me his wand only an hour ago, saying I was too clumsy to catch it!” He beamed at her. “I must say, I was relieved. I thought we’d be here into the night. Such a strong potion!”

Hermione got straight to the point. “Professor, I saw you at the Slytherin Quidditch tryouts last
night. Have you seen the final roster?”

Slughorn raised his eyebrows and nodded. Hermione almost squirmed under his gaze.

“Didn’t the Captain’s choice of Seeker seem a little … odd?” she asked.

“Not at all, dear,” Slughorn said.

“So you believe her choice of Seeker was … the best one?”

Slughorn frowned. “Seekers are often chosen for reasons beyond simple athletic ability, especially in Slytherin House. A circumstance, I am told, that Mr. Malfoy himself has taken advantage of.”

Hermione nodded, remembering how Malfoy’s father had once bought him a spot on the Slytherin team. She doubted Lucius would be sending any brooms from Azkaban this year.

“I’m surprised a Head of House would allow one of his students to be … ostracized like this,” she pushed on.

Slughorn leaned back in his seat, hands on his round belly, and looked at her, watery blue eyes sympathetic. “I find this touching, Miss Granger, I really do, but I cannot interfere with Captain Greengrass.”

Hermione huffed and crossed her arms. “It isn’t fair, though.”

“Really, Miss Granger? Many would consider it extremely fair.” Slughorn shook his head. “You cannot change facts. Mr. Malfoy has done irreparable harm to this school, albeit for understandable reasons. While he never took a life personally, how many were injured or killed due to his actions? Many students here have lost friends and family during the War, including yourself. Mr. Malfoy is entitled to return here and finish his education safely and without harassment in the hopes that he will become a productive member of the wizarding community. I myself have great hopes for him. But he is not entitled to be a Quidditch Seeker. He himself knows this, and you, my dear girl, know it as well.”

Hermione dropped her eyes and her arms. She fiddled with the sleeve of her robe. Slughorn was right, of course. But he hadn’t seen Malfoy practice every morning …

“You are right, sir,” she said, raising her head again. “I apologize for disturbing you.”

“Quite all right, quite all right,” he said. “Your heart is in the right place, eh?”

Hermione headed toward the door, feeling a strange heaviness in her chest.Honestly, she scolded herself, what are you doing? It’s just a stupid Quidditch spot …

“Oh, Miss Granger …” She turned to see Slughorn beaming at her. “I was quite pleased to hear that Eighth Year Slytherins are invited to the Gryffindor soiree tomorrow night. Stop by my office beforehand, hmmm? I may have a contribution to make.”

Hermione stared at him in shock, then found her manners. “You are welcome to attend as well, sir,” she said.

“Ho ho, no, perhaps another time. Perhaps revive the old Slug Club, eh?” The professor twinkled at her like a demented, beardless Santa Claus in black robes. “See you tomorrow!”
Chapter End Notes

I love making up potions! Horace Slughorn was never one of my favorite characters, but he just keeps popping up. Trust (and the lack thereof) will be a recurring theme in this story.
“No.” Ginny pulled yet another dress out of Hermione’s wardrobe. “No … no … no … definitely no.” She held up the dress from Bill and Fleur’s wedding. “Maybe.”

“No,” Hermione said from her position at the windowsill. Ginny had dragged her straight up to the dorm after breakfast on Saturday to look at suitable party clothes.

Ginny eyed the dress, head tilted. “We could lop off the sleeves, change the color, lower the neckline … nah, you’re right. Wait a minute …” She tossed the dress aside and held up a red skirt. “This will do,” she said, shortening the hem with a wave of her wand. “I have a great top for this … one second.” Ginny pulled out a dull gold halter top. “Perfect.” She looked at Hermione mischievously. “For your date tonight.”

Hermione shook her head. “It’s not a date, and if I show up in that, it will look like a date, and I’m having enough trouble with Ron.”

Ginny laughed. “You could show up in a Weasley sweater and he’d think it’s a date. My brother, he’s a bit thick. And what about the party? You want all those glossy Slytherins outshining you?”

Looking out the window over the Quidditch pitch, Hermione considered this. She really didn’t. “Oh,” Ginny said, pulling out another dress, “and look at what I’ll be wearing.” Hermione blinked. The gauzy material in Ginny’s hand was a shocking green. “We have to be welcoming to our guests, don’t we?” Ginny went on, holding the wisp of cloth to herself in the mirror.

“You are certainly embracing inter-House unity,” Hermione said.

“I’m considering it,” Ginny answered wickedly.

“Ron will hate it.”

“Another plus,” Ginny said, and Hermione couldn’t help but laugh with her.

Hermione spent the rest of the day in the library, not even going to the Great Hall for dinner, since she’d be dining later with Ron. She almost lost track of time reading *Potion Failures and Fatalities Through the Ages*. Fascinating. Who knew that a person could be sucked into a potion like that? Maybe Slughorn would let her develop some ideas after school. The Fiducia had whetted her appetite; she even toyed with the idea of asking Malfoy to assist, but no, that wouldn’t do. He’d just try to take over. Bossy people were so annoying.

Returning to her dormitory, Hermione walked into total chaos. Lavender had spotted Ginny’s dress hanging from the wardrobe door and hit the roof, since she’d planned to wear green herself to entice a certain hard-to-get Slytherin. Ginny refused to change her plans, contending that it would take more than Slytherin colors to bag a Malfoy.

“Face it Lav,” Ginny lectured, pointing an empty hanger at her roommate, “and I say this as a friend: Malfoy has always had a very specific type—slutty, gorgeous, rich, pureblood bitch—and just because none of them will talk to him right now doesn’t mean he’ll take up with a Gryffindor. He might be down, but he’ll come up on top, people like that always do. Give it a year, and Astoria will be begging for an invite to the manor.”
“I don’t want to marry him, Ginny,” Lavender whined. “He’s just so handsome …”

“What, you want to sneak around castle corners with him?” Ginny asked. “Because that’s all you’ll get—at most. Sounds pretty bleak to me.”

It sounded pretty bleak to Hermione, too. She didn’t say a word, just dropped off her books and left to take a shower to avoid hearing any more. Leave it to Ginny to sum up everything unsuitable about Malfoy in a few trenchant sentences. The redhead’s years of pining after Harry had left her with a very cynical view of men.

Still, Malfoy did kind of defy easy analysis. And Lavender knew a little about men, too. Something about Malfoy was reeling her in. Hermione considered this as she combed detangling solution through her hair. He didn’t appear interested, but really, his personality was such a Russian nesting doll. Who knew what the man really thought?

If Hermione had to guess, she’d say Lavender inspired some (very thin) kind streak in the man. Lavender was so needy; she could feed off one short burst of Malfoy-megawatt attention for days. Hermione had seen the man in action and it could be blinding:

“It must be on your person.”

“It isn’t!”

“I don’t believe you.”

Hermione frowned at herself in the bathroom’s steamy mirror. *Stop it. You should be thinking about Ron.* But she was sick of thinking about Ron—like Ginny, she’d spent too much time thinking about a boy with too little result. She was simply tapped out. She had to tell Ron, she had to tell him tonight.

Lavender saw reason at last, and laid out her purple lace dress. Hermione donned her skirt and top, and Ginny helped her tame her hair—well, not tame, but at least contain, twisting the curls up and firmly attaching them with a large gold and ruby clip. *Perfect,* she thought, looking in the mirror, *the very picture of an unsuitable Gryffindor.* She even transformed the beads on her extendible bag into red and gold.

Hermione shook the little bag, listening to the echoes. “Last time I used this bag, it contained a whole library, plus a painting of Phineas Nigellus Black.”

She and Ginny exchanged a grimace. Neither liked to think about those days when Hermione, Harry and Ron had been on the run. Lavender fingered a deep, bite-shaped scar behind her ear and sighed.

Ginny finally pronounced Hermione ready for her grand entrance, sending her down the staircase alone. It was a wasted effort, since Ron wasn’t there, but she attracted a fair number of looks and low whistles. Then she cooled her high heels for a good twenty minutes before Ron clambered down the boys’ stairs, claiming Quidditch practice ran long.

He looked surprisingly spruced-up, actually, his long hair brushing the collar of his dark blue shirt. It was odd seeing Ron is something other than a rumpled uniform, Quidditch jersey or Weasley sweater.

“Ginny should’ve been there,” he told Hermione as she struggled into her cloak unaided. “We developed this new strategy where the chasers …”
Ron wanted to take the Marauders’ passage to Honeydukes’ cellar, but Hermione didn’t fancy wobbling through a tunnel in heels, so they headed down to the castle entrance to catch a carriage to Hogsmeade. Ron kept up the Quidditch chatter as they descended the marble staircase into the Entrance Hall: “It's a variation of the Hawkshead Formation, where ...”

The double doors leading to the Great Hall were tightly shut; the hall itself had emptied after dinner. Malfoy was standing by the doors with a woman draped in green. She was nearly as tall as he, and her blonde hair glittered with diamonds.

Hermione halted, wrapping her dark red cloak more tightly around herself as she recognized the delicate profile. Narcissa Malfoy. The elegant witch laid a black-gloved hand, topped with a square emerald ring, on her son’s shoulder. Malfoy was frowning with concern, and Narcissa placed her other hand over one of his clenched fists.

“Go on, Draco, dear,” Narcissa said. “I'll wait here for you.”

Ron recognized Lady Malfoy as well. “Well look at that,” he said gleefully. “Only a week and Malfoy already needs his mummy!”

His voice carried easily in the hall, and Malfoy looked over at them, his frown replaced with dark fury, then turned away.

“And how many owls have you sent Molly so far, Ronald?” Hermione asked, equally loudly, quoting his last letter to his mother. “‘Dear Mum, can you send over my broom polishing kit and extra underwear?’”

The Malfoys ignored them.

Ron glowered as they left the castle. “You have a right sharp tongue this year, Hermione,” he said.

It wasn’t until they were seated upstairs at the Three Broomsticks, above the noisier pub section, that Ron dialed into Hermione’s general appearance. “You look hot,” he whispered, running one hand up her bare arm while grabbing a breadstick with the other.


Ron waggled his eyebrows, looking much like Fred and George. “For now, right?”

Hermione shook her head. “I don’t see much chance of it changing.”

“But you said —”

“I know. I was wrong.” She shook her head again. “I love you, you know that. But not ...”

“There’s someone else, isn’t there? Who is it?”

“No, Ronald —”

“Then why not me, for now?” Ron put down the breadstick and took her hand. “I know I’m rubbish at this stuff. I know you deserve better, but give me a chance.” He rubbed his thumb over the back of her hand.

She pulled her hand away. “No, we can’t date just because there aren’t other people in our lives. How are we to find anybody else that way?”

“I don’t want anybody else,” Ron said stubbornly. “Since Fourth Year, it’s been you, even if I
didn’t know it. I don’t know how to love anybody else.”

“You can learn,” Hermione said.

“I don’t want to learn.”

Hermione’s patience was starting to fray. “Well, frankly, I’m not too keen on your way of loving me anyway. Your idea of love is to pass judgment on every little thing I do, and Godric help me if you don’t understand it or resent it in some way!”

Ron’s face grew dark. “Well, excuse me for caring! Who else is there? Not one bloke in this school is good enough for you. And maybe I’m not either, but are you really going to throw all this away?”

“What’s the ‘all this’ you speak of?” Hermione asked, waving her hand between them. “We hardly spend any time together!”

“Because you’re always in the sodding library!”

“You’re always on the Quidditch pitch! You’ll never pass your NEWTs if you don’t study!”

“I’ll be fine if you just help me!”

Hermione glared at him over her butterbeer glass. “I don’t have hours to walk you through your assignments, Ronald. I have my own work, and maybe I’d like to do something else with my free time. Like brew some experimental potions. And I want to go on dates—real dates, mind you, not just sit around the Gryffindor common room waiting for you to finally take me to dinner.”

“Practice ran long! Merlin’s balls, I thought I’d lose you to Harry if I lost you to anyone, now you’re going to throw me over to play the field? Hermione Granger going around with just any guy? You’re really going to stoop to that? What will people say?”

“That’s enough, Ronald,” she said, clasping her hands on her lap to stop the trembling. “I’m not some war heroine goddess or genius brain. So what if I’m a little reckless? I deserve a little fun, and I don’t need you looking over my shoulder.”

“What? You’re going to be reckless? With men? One isn’t good enough for you?” Ron’s face was red now and his mouth had a very ugly twist.

She blinked at him, considering the question.

“Well?” he prodded. “Hermione?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe.”

“All right then,” he said, throwing down his napkin and standing. “I’ll leave you to it. You can pick up some right good prospects here, you’re certainly dressed for it.”

Hermione’s hands clenched. “You’re disgusting.”

“Don’t think I’ll take you back after some bloke treats you like shit, either,” he snapped, wagging a finger down at her. “All men aren’t like me, you know.”

“I’m counting on that,” she hissed up at him.

Ron shook his head. “I knew it. My mum was right about you all along.”
Shrugging into his wool cloak, he turned and left the upstairs landing. Hermione turned in her chair to watch his bright red head move through the crowd and out the door. *I won’t cry. This is what I wanted. I won’t cry.*

***

After the row with Ron, and the cold walk back to Hogwarts by herself, the last thing Hermione wanted to do was slog down to the dungeons and collect Slughorn’s “contribution” to the party. But she had given her word, so she wrapped her cloak more tightly around her and headed toward the Potion’s classroom.

Slughorn’s “contribution” turned out to be a bottle of good firewhiskey, and Hermione now considered the time well spent. She was certainly ready for something stronger than butterbeer. She also took the opportunity to chat with Slughorn about experimental potions, and the Potions master was enthusiastic.

“As a professor, of course, I cannot officially condone experimental potions,” he said with a wink. “However, if you would like to brew a bit of something for ‘extra credit’, there’s a splendid little potions lab beyond the storage cupboard.”

Hermione smiled her thanks and left, stuffing the firewhiskey bottle into her beaded bag. On the seventh floor, she ducked into a prefect’s bathroom (password courtesy of Ginny) to survey the damage from hours of hiking along dusty paths, winding stairways and musty corridors.

Her hair had held up surprisingly well, but she took the time to freshen her makeup and place a cool washcloth to the back of her neck. The prospect of facing a common room full of Slytherins and Gryffindors felt overwhelming. Well, she had to make an appearance. People were probably wondering about her, and she wouldn’t let Ron scare her away.

“Charity and love,” she told the Fat Lady with a smile.

“Very good, dear,” the portrait said, and swung open.

The common room was packed with people: nearly all the Gryffindor Seventh and Eighth Years were there, and some suspiciously younger-looking students as well. The scene was spiced with a sprinkling of Eighth-Year Slytherins, the men in suits, the women in sheath dresses with jewels in their smooth tresses. The Gryffindors partied in everything from jeans and T-shirts to dress robes.

“Hermione!” Ginny shouted, charging over. Hermione blinked at her friend as she shed her cloak; Ginny's dress was more than a little short and was that Blaise Zabini lingering behind her? Ron was nowhere to be seen. Seamus Finnegan and Dean Thomas were handing out drinks and Neville was dancing with Romilda Vane, who wore a red dress as short as Ginny’s. Dennis Creevey stood half in shadow, glowering at the Slytherins.

“I brought a contribution from Slughorn,” Hermione said, pulling out the bottle of firewhiskey. Zabini reached out a long arm and plucked it from her hand.
“Hmmm, Ogden’s—very nice.” Zabini placed the bottle on a table and opened it with a tap of his wand. Three fat glasses appeared in his other hand.

“You must forgive Zabini here,” Ginny said to Hermione. “He likes to play the host even when I reserve the common room and you bring the liquor.”

“You two provide the beauty as well,” Zabini said as he handed around drinks. “Cheers.”

“Ron came through earlier like a freight train,” Ginny went on. “Tried to run down Malfoy, but Malfoy wasn’t having it. Malfoy took a surprisingly dim view of Ron leaving you at Hogsmeade to make your way back alone, and Ron took a dim view of being taught manners by a Malfoy.”

“Malfoy was here?” Hermione was surprised.

“He was,” Zabini said. “Brought a lovely bottle of 1952 sirenscotch, but few partook.”

Ginny drained her drink. “Malfoy left after that. Lavender is still moping.”

Zabini refilled Ginny’s glass. “There is something to be said for inter-House unity. Gryffindors bring a certain—energy—to the festivities.”

“And what do Slytherins bring, Zabini?” Hermione asked.

“Decent liquor.”

Hermione nodded. “Help me up there, will you?” she asked. Zabini responded immediately, setting down his glass and helping her stand on the couch. Whistles broke out among the crowd.

“To inter-House unity,” Hermione said loudly, raising her glass. “To new friends and old!”

A sea of hands holding bottles and glasses instantly shot into the air, followed by clinking and cheering. It was a lovely sight, really. Ginny and Zabini were now dancing by the staircase and Neville was talking to Pansy Parkinson, who wore a dress of watery green silk and two jade sticks in her dark hair.

A silver flash caught the edge of Hermione’s eyesight, and she turned to see Draco Malfoy enter through the portrait hole, dressed in a black suit, shirt and tie. He looked haughtily around the room, brushing an invisible speck off his arm, and one eyebrow rose slightly when he saw Hermione standing on the sofa. He tipped the scotch bottle in his hand toward her, a subtle greeting.

Lavender immediately rushed over to meet him. Sipping her drink, Hermione watched the pair, silently adding her own dialogue to the scene:

Lavender: “Oh Draco! You’re here again!”
Malfoy: “Yes, I am completely baffling this year.”
Lavender: “Oh Draco! You’re so funny!”
Malfoy: “I’m really not, and I rarely appreciate real humor in Ancient Runes essays.”
Lavender: “Oh Draco! Tell me what a rune is!”
Malfoy: “I’ll do better than that—I’ll take you to Malfoy Manor, where unpaid house elves paint the entrance in runes spelling out ‘Elves of the World Unite for Better Conditions.’”
“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” Ginny hissed up at her.

“Uh, what?” Hermione looked down from her perch, startled.

“You’re staring at Malfoy and Lavender and cackling dementedly,” Ginny said. Her hair was mussed, her eyes were bright, and Zabini was right behind her.

“I just think it’s funny.” Hermione said, sipping her drink. The firewhiskey seemed to smolder in her veins. “Here comes scene two.”

“What are you—oh.” Ginny turned to see Ron lurching drunkenly down the staircase.

“You Weasleys cannot hold your liquor,” Hermione said, taking a larger sip.

“A common trait of most Gryffindors,” Zabini said.

“We’d better head him off,” Ginny said. “Come on, Blaise.”

“Yes, go on, Blaise,” Hermione said with a grin. The Slytherin raised an eyebrow at her, then trailed Ginny as if he’d planned to go that way all along.

Hermione looked back at the portrait hole, but Malfoy and Lavender were gone. Parvati Patil had dragged Lavender away, and Malfoy, she saw, now leaned against a wall tapestry opposite Hermione’s sofa. He stood alone below a flickering torch, shining in the reflected glow, no one else daring to enter his ring of yellow light. Malfoy had a glass in his hand and his bottle on the table beside him, but the grey eyes holding hers were stone sober.

“Need a little help up there?” asked a voice below her.

Harry? No.

The man below her had similar green eyes, dancing with mischief, and his black hair stuck up on end. But this Harry was immaculately dressed in a black suit with an emerald shirt and tie, his messy hair was an artful arrangement and there were no glasses on his long nose.

“Theodore Nott,” Hermione said faintly. She didn’t know the Slytherin was returning this year.

“Theo, please,” he said with a smile. “Inter-House unity, after all.”

“Hermione, then,” she said absently. The man looked awfully chipper for someone whose family was weaving baskets in Azkaban. Maybe that was why he was chipper; Nott Senior had been recently executed, and Nott’s imprisoned uncles were a pack of rabid dogs. Despite such a background, no whisper of scandal had ever clung to Theo, who claimed ignorance of everything. Hermione doubted that, but you can’t help your family. Theo had managed to avoid the worst of the War, packing himself off to his grandmother in Germany during Seventh Year.

The Slytherin was looking amused now, and Hermione realized she’d been staring down at him while she mentally reviewed his dossier. She blushed. “Welcome back to Hogwarts, Theo,” she said politely. “When did you arrive?”

“This morning.” He looked around the crowded common room. “Perfect timing.” His eyes met hers. “And here I am by this sofa. Again, perfect timing. I was going to look for you, anyway, Hermione.”

“Why?”
He waved a wide hand, studded with a silver-and-onyx signet ring. “Hosts of reasons, most of which I won’t admit to,” he said. “But you’re the Brightest Witch of Your Age. Why would I seek you out?”

“Because you’re a week late to school and need to catch up,” she said. “Why not ask Zabini?”

Theo smirked. “Hopeless.”

“Parkinson?”

“Even more hopeless.”

Hermione grinned. “Malfoy?”


“Welcome to my world.” Hermione hated being short.

“Thank you. I like your world.”

Hermione glanced over at Malfoy again—yes, still there, still alone, still drinking and still staring. *Definitely time to get off this sofa.*

She held out her hand, but Theo set down his drink and grasped her around the waist with both hands instead, setting her down with easy strength. He was broader of frame than Harry, with a deeper chest. His faint 5 o’clock shadow made him look too old to be a student.

Theo kept one hand on her waist and the music and laughter flowed around them. “One dance,” he said, taking her right hand. “For inter-House unity.”

Hermione laughed and suddenly it felt very natural to be dancing with Theodore Nott in Gryffindor’s common room, giggling at his quips and trying not to spill her drink. Maybe this year would be fun after all.

Alas, it couldn’t last. They danced and twirled through a few songs, and then Theo spun her around and they almost crashed into Ron, standing alone and rigid in front of the boys’ staircase. He glared at Theo. “Get away from her,” he said.
“Oh, pardon me,” Theo said with an easy smile for Ron. The Slytherin slid to a halt, his hand still on Hermione’s waist. A ripple ran through the Gryffindor common room as people slowed and turned to watch. Even the bouncy music from the room’s magical phonograph faded away.

“You stop that right now,” Ron growled, ignoring the sudden audience.

“Yes, Theo, stop dancing with me and being polite to my friends,” Hermione said.

Ron’s eyes narrowed. “Oh, Theo, is it?”

“That’s right.” Theo looked him up and down, unimpressed. “And you’re Rick, right? Rob? Roy!” Hermione giggled again (that firewhiskey really was some kind of strong) and Ron pulled out his wand.

“Now, mate, let’s not …” Theo began, his smile a little set.

“You’re leaving, Theo,” Ron said.

Theo released Hermione and moved in front of her, slipping a hand into his suit coat. Hermione rolled her eyes and stepped in front of Theo again. She pulled out her wand and pointed it at her ex-boyfriend.

“He is not leaving and perhaps you’d like to duel me, Ronald,” she said.

“Hermione!”

She didn’t move. “Yes?”

“I … I …” Ron carelessly waved his wand, prompting two Gryffindors to abandon their drunken game of wizarding chess to scuttle out of the way. The room was so silent that Hermione could hear the board’s tiny black Queen shouting at them to return. Ron stepped closer. "Hermione!"

“When will you learn, Ron—repeating a woman’s name won’t make her do what you want,” she snapped.

“It works for me,” said Zabini, who had materialized behind Theo.

“Shut up, Blaise,” she heard Ginny say.

“Well, it does.”

“Well, it does?” Ron asked, glaring at Theo. “That’s what you’re going to start with? A Slytherin? Why don’t you just snog the Death Eater?”

“Inter-House unity, after all,” she heard Malfoy say brightly.

“That’s it,” Ron snarled. He threw aside his wand and lunged sideways at Malfoy, swinging a fist. Malfoy dodged him with a deft movement, only to face Dennis Creevey. The small Gryffindor now stood beside the staircase, his feet planted wide and wand up.

“Stup—!" Dennis’ voice was cut off mid-hex as he was flung off his feet, crashing into the wall
behind him. Hermione ran and knelt beside the Fifth Year as he groggily sat up. Even Ron was frozen in shock.

“Dennis, what were you thinking?” she scolded. “You shouldn’t even be here!”

“That fucking Death Eater threw me!” Dennis gasped, glaring at Malfoy from under his dark bangs.

“Nonsense,” Hermione said. “He didn’t even have his wand out. Can you move your arms?”

“Well, something—”

“All right, everybody, that’s enough!” Ginny shouted, sounding eerily like Molly Weasley. “Ron, Dennis, Malfoy … all three of you will behave or you’ll leave this party now!”

Dennis stood up, pulling his arm from Hermione’s grasp. “Fine,” he spat. “Like I’d want to stay here with a lot of twisted Pureblood bitches and assholes—”

“That’s enough, Dennis,” Hermione said calmly.

Dennis’ sneer reminded her of Malfoy’s at the same age. “Oh yes, you’re having right good time flirting with snakes, aren’t you, Hermione? Easy to forget, is it?”

“I haven’t forgotten anything,” she said. “We’re all just trying to live our lives.”

“Yeah,” he said bitterly. “Well, some people don’t get that chance.” Dennis gave Malfoy a last filthy look and stomped up the stairs toward the boy’s dormitories.

Ron stormed off in the opposite direction, shouting at the Fat Lady about letting in snakes, and Romilda Vane stumbled after him. Hermione stood clutching her wand as someone straightened the table and the music began once more. “I like Gryffindor parties,” she heard Pansy Parkinson say.

Hermione’s eyes met Malfoy’s; he was still standing near the stairs, his mouth twisted slightly. Theo stepped into Hermione’s view, and she blinked and cleared her throat.

“I’m sorry about Ron,” she told Theo, sliding her wand into her skirt’s magically expandable pocket. “He’s—”

“Nothing to apologize for. You defended my honor.” Theo took her hand and swept her back into a dance. The Gryffindors’ magic phonograph was playing a jazzy tune, but Theo led them in a graceful twirl.

“My hero,” he whispered in her ear.

“You talk a lot of nonsense, Theodore Nott,” Hermione said with a smile.

“I do, I do.” Theo moved her away from the staircase, continuing their dance. Without a drink to juggle, Hermione placed a hand on his shoulder, feeling the rich cloth of his suit coat. Up close, she could see his silk tie was studded with tiny emeralds. These Slytherins.

She tried to recapture the light-hearted feeling of their earlier dances, but it proved elusive, and Theo was looking back at the staircase, frowning slightly.

“I’m surprised to see Draco here,” he said.

“At Hogwarts or at the party?”
“Both.” Theo looked into her face. “Has he been bothering you?”

She shrugged. “Define ‘bother.’ Has he annoyed me and needled my friends? Yes. Has he viciously bullied me and called me ‘mudblood’? No. He’s been somewhat well-behaved this year, like a half-trained garden gnome.”

“I can do something about him, if you like.”

Hermione chuckled. “I’d like to see anybody try to do anything about Draco Malfoy.”

Theo’s eyes glittered. “Is that a dare?”

“No. Honestly, it’s not worth it, and if you’re going to be another Ron, then we can’t be friends.”

“Friends.” Theo turned the word over on his tongue. “Is that what we are?”

“I hope so.”

Theo’s hand at her waist moved up to lightly touch the bare skin of her back. “No, I think not.”

Hermione couldn’t help a slight shiver at the unexpected contact, but her voice remained steady. “What are we then?” she asked.

“Acquaintances.”

Hermione eyed him with surprise. “You’d rather be acquaintances than friends with me.”

“Definitely.” The song ended, and Theo stopped dancing and released her. “In fact, I’ve taken too much of your time. Thank you for a brilliant party, and thank Ginny, too.”

“You’re leaving?” she asked. “I hope Ron didn’t—”

He smiled at her. “Certainly not.” He lifted her hand and brushed his lips over her fingers. “It is simply time to go. Good night, Hermione.”

She watched him turn and disappear through the portrait hole. She frowned. That was a tactical retreat if she’d ever seen one. *Very smooth. Very Slytherin.*

Theo didn’t return to the party, so Hermione danced with Neville, then Seamus and Dean, trying to drink the Gryffindors’ awful spiked punch. Ginny and Zabini had slipped out through the portrait hole, still retaining Slughorn’s bottle of firewhiskey.

Neville left early, muttering about watering some seeds the next morning “before they woke up.” Hermione switched to butterbeer and continued dancing with abandon, keeping her distance from Malfoy. She expected him to leave; he certainly wasn’t being social. He just withdrew to a shadowy corner, sipping his sirenscotch with a trace of his old sneer. Lavender kept slinking over to chat, leaning into him and patting his arm before her friends dragged her away again. Parkinson stopped by his corner to exchange a few sharp words, then stalked off, fuming. Everyone else avoided him.

The crowd paired off into couples as the night wore on, and Hermione lost track of Malfoy. Seamus and Dean left through the portrait hole to smoke muggle cigarettes and came back with Ron between them, dragging him off to the boys’ dorms. Lavender followed them soon after with a Seventh-Year Gryffindor boy, giggling loudly and trying to draw as much attention to herself as possible. As midnight drew near, Hermione kicked off her shoes and curled herself into a sofa by
the fireplace to wait for Ginny, who still hadn’t returned. That Zabini bore watching. The lamp above the sofa flickered out, leaving her in shadow.

She must have dozed off because when Hermione opened her eyes, the common room looked dim and empty. The phonograph now played a low, crooning tune. But she wasn’t entirely alone.

Malfoy was seated across from her sofa in an armchair, drink in hand, long legs stretched out toward her, his head turned toward the dying fire. Just staring at the flames. Hermione said nothing, instead watched his profile, the pointed line of his jaw, the slow flutter of thick, dark lashes, firelight splashed across the pale skin.

“You’re still here,” she said finally, propping herself up on an elbow.

Malfoy turned his head to face her, his gaze sweeping over her body stretched out on the sofa. “Obviously.” He raised his wand slightly and the lamp above her sputtered to life, yielding a dim glow.

She blinked sleepily at him. “Are you here to warn me against Theo?”

He shook his head. “I should warn Theo against you. He’ll likely end up Petrified.”

“Oh, only if he threatens me.”

“I wasn’t threatening you.”

Hermione sat up, yawning. Malfoy’s eyes flickered to the wrinkled red skirt riding up her thigh. She tried to smooth it down, then gave up. Her hair was probably a right mess, too.

“I was simply asking for the return of my rightful property,” he continued. Wand still in hand, he began dropping tiny ice cubes into his glass.

Her eyes narrowed. “You were **demanding** your property and walking toward me, Malfoy. Threateningly.”

“And so you took off your shirt and Petrified me.” He set down his wand and splashed more sirenscotch into the glass. “Do I frighten you that much?”

“Certainly not.”

Malfoy set down the bottle and joined her on the sofa, drink still in hand. Hermione gave a huff of irritation.

“What?” she asked, shifting away.

“You, Granger, are a meddling know-it-all.”

“And this surprises you?” she asked, turning to face him. The fire reflecting in his eyes gave them a rather demonic sheen.

His mouth quirked upward. “No.”

The portrait hole creaked open, making them both jump, and a Seventh-Year couple tumbled through, holding hands and giggling. Hermione watched them climb the stairs, parting with a kiss, then turned back to Malfoy. He was lightly swirling his drink, watching the ice melt into the scotch.
“You wrote a letter to the Wizengamot defending me at my trial,” he said softly, not looking at her. Hermione tried not to sigh. Clearly, she had an introspective drunk on her hands tonight. Malfoy had that brooding look she knew well from her months in the tent with Harry and the Horcrux.

“That letter to the Wizengamot was confidential,” she said. “How do you know about it?”

“I have my ways.” His face was all hard angles. “You were quite eloquent, Granger. Especially the bit about how mercy wouldn’t corrupt the wizarding world, but help redeem it.”

She shrugged, uncomfortable. “Maybe.”

Malfoy edged closer. “You wrote that forgiving me would—how did you put it?—‘help turn our common suffering into hope for the future.’” His fingers tightened on his glass. “I can’t imagine how you could say that.”

“I didn’t. Nelson Mandela,” Hermione said. Malfoy raised his eyebrows. “A South African Muggle statesman. Spoke out against prejudice and racism. He wrote: ‘Our human compassion binds us the one to the other—not in pity or patronizingly, but as human beings who have learnt how to turn our common suffering into hope for the future.’ I included that quote in my letter.”

Malfoy shook his head in disbelief, his white-blond fringe falling into his eyes. He swiped the hair back impatiently, and his sharp gaze looked anything but drunk. “So you, a muggle-born, quoted a muggle leader to help keep a pureblood Death Eater out of prison.”

Hermione shrugged again.

“It’s positively mental,” Malfoy snapped, placing his glass on an end table. “How could you do that? Did you not remember the last time we’d met? In my own fucking drawing room, where you were given … this?” He slid his hand up her bare arm, grasping her left elbow and pulling up her forearm where the angry letters spelling “Mudblood” shone red in the firelight. His fingers lightly brushed the raised ridges.

Hermione swallowed—no one but a Healer had ever touched those scars before. “Look at that, the letters match my skirt,” she quipped to cover her discomfort.

“Granger,” he growled, “I’d very much appreciate it if you’d take this conversation seriously. You throw around these righteous quotes with no thought to the consequences. How many dangerous criminals did you set free with your little games?”

Hermione suddenly felt quite serious. “Well, now you sound just like Ron. He said the same thing: ‘What are you doing, defending Malfoy? Why don’t you try to free his father while you’re at it? Or maybe Dolohov, or Lestrange?’”

She tugged her arm away. “As if I am not capable of rational thought! Frankly, I’d say I’m a much better judge of character than either of you. Time and time again I have made unpopular decisions, and time and time again they’ve been proved right on, and yet every time I follow my own judgment I get nothing but grief!”

Hermione pushed herself to her feet and glared down at him, hands on hips. “When the hell is somebody going to trust me?”

Malfoy stared up at her wide-eyed, silent for once.

“And, anyway,” she raved on, “who better to defend you than a muggle-born with the words of a
persecuted muggle? You purebloods are our future—don’t you see it? I was furious when the First Year Slytherins were booed at the Sorting. Everybody thinks you lot should be cut out like a diseased limb, cut out of society and buried out of sight. That’s all wrong—you all don’t need to be cut out—you need to be healed!”

Hermione came to herself suddenly, her cheeks flaming and her vision blurred. She tried to calm down—a pretty thing it would be if she passed out in front of the man. Only Harry had heard these thoughts before and while he’d agreed, and testified for Malfoy and his mother, he had done so with great reluctance, and more likely out of love for her rather than any true conviction.

Malfoy was now standing as well, looking down at Hermione like he’d never seen her before. The only sounds in the room were her panting breaths and the snap and crackle of the fire.

A loud, groaning creak broke the tension, and Hermione looked around Malfoy’s shoulder to see Ginny tiptoe through the portrait hole. Ginny froze and gave her a questioning look. Hermione nodded reassuringly, and Ginny climbed the staircase to their dorm, frequently looking back and stumbling slightly.

Malfoy ignored Ginny’s passage and returned to his bottle, dropping ice cubes into a second glass and pouring sirenscotch.

“Alright then,” he said, dismissing the entire topic with a wave of his hand. He handed the glass to Hermione and resumed his seat, suddenly all relaxed elegance.

“Come here, Granger,” Malfoy said as if he owned the sofa. “We have more to discuss.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, but complied. Apparently, Malfoy was running the agenda tonight. And people called her bossy. She took a sip of scotch, enjoying the rich, tingling taste.

“You talked to Slughorn about me,” he began. “About the Quidditch team.”

“Yes,” she admitted. “Did you snoop that out too?”

“Lucky guess, although Slughorn didn’t deny it. Astoria posted a note in the Slytherin common room tonight, naming me the team’s new Seeker due to ‘higher influences.’”

“Thrilling.”

Malfoy leaned toward her, putting his hand on the sofa’s back. “I don’t like this pattern, Granger,” he said. “I don’t need you working behind the scenes, pitying me, fixing things for me. I’m not one of your dimwitted friends.”

She snickered. “Oh, please. I would never pity you, Malfoy. I pity those who have to deal with you, including myself.”

He grinned at that, and his hand on the sofa found a long, dark curl that had escaped her hair clip. “Speaking of deals, I think we should make another,” he said, eyes on the curl. He twined it around a pale finger and pulled lightly.

Hermione took a gulp of scotch. “Lovely idea. Because the last one worked so well.”

“That was a bad deal,” he murmured, moving closer. “Don’t try to blackmail people, Granger. That’s not where your genius lies.”

Hermione tossed her head, pulling her curl free of his hand, and felt another chunk of hair slip out
of the clip. “Bother,” she said, setting her glass down and trying fruitlessly to tame her curls again. "What I wouldn’t give for a decent hair clip.”

Malfoy leaned back, sipping his drink and watching her with a half-smile. Finally, she gave up wrestling with her hair and faced him again. “Alright, what’s this new deal?”

“I will allow you access to the Codex and rune stone,” he said. “In return, let me work with you on those experimental potions you’re planning.”

“Slughorn,” Hermione breathed. “That fink.” She turned over his proposal in her mind, gears whirring. It was easier to think when he wasn’t touching her hair.

“Very well,” she said crisply. “If you allow me access to the Codex and rune stone, you may assist me in my experimental potions.” She bent to pick up her shoes and began wiggling her feet into them, feeling Malfoy’s eyes on her.

“Deal,” he said.

“Deal.” Hermione stood, which brought Malfoy to his feet once more. She impulsively stuck out her hand, which he briefly shook in a businesslike way. No suggestive looks or brushing of lips. Slytherins did take their deals seriously. His hand was large and warm, the palm surprisingly rough.

She pulled her hand back. “Alright then, off you go, Malfoy. Party’s over.” Hermione walked toward the portrait hole, motioning to him to follow her. Torture, Quidditch, blackmail. She needed to end this conversation before Malfoy thought up another appalling discussion topic, like Divination. Honestly, she was born to suffer.

“Granger,” Malfoy said as he stepped through the open doorway. Nope, not done yet. “Tell me. Why did you try to help me with the Quidditch team?”

He looked at her through the portrait hole, his face lit by the common room lamps. She eyed him warily, this pristine pureblood, now wearing an open expression she’d never seen before. Several sharp responses came to mind, but Hermione decided to be honest.

“I like to watch you fly,” she said.

Malfoy stared, speechless for once, and Hermione shut the portrait hole in his face and headed up the dormitory stairs.
Hermione was on a broomstick, flying higher than she ever had before, over the Black Lake. But she wasn’t scared. The broom soared, and she wasn’t controlling it, she was only a passenger, there was a solid warmth behind her, and she felt safe …

“Hermione!” said a voice, low and urgent. “Hermione!”

“Whaa? …” She opened her eyes. She was spread-eagled on her bed, lying on her stomach, still in her skirt and gold halter top.

Parvati Patil was shaking her. “Hermione!”

She sat up. “What time is it?”

“7 a.m. Hermione, you have to come downstairs now.”

“Why? Is Madame Hooch angry? I know the common room’s a mess …”

“You have to see!” Parvati straightened. “And bring your wand.”

Hermione’s brain snapped to attention at that. Parvati’s face was serious, and she was wearing her jogging shorts and sports bra. Her housemate must have gone downstairs for her morning jog (the Patils were fitness freaks) and seen something. Hermione slid out of her bed, picked up her wand and shoved her feet into fuzzy blue slippers. Ginny lay unmoving in her bed, still in her own party clothes. Lavender’s bed was empty.

“OK,” Hermione said. “Let’s go.”

They descended the staircase to the common room, flooded with morning sunlight that dazzled her bloodshot eyes and glinted off half-empty glasses and bottles.

“There,” Parvati said, pointing to the wall to the right of the portrait hole.

Hermione nearly fell off the last step, her mouth open. On the wall, in letters two feet high were the dripping, rust-colored words: “DIE MUDBLOODS.”

Hermione felt like she had been hexed, but was too shocked to feel anything. She almost dropped her wand, her hands trembled so badly.

“Who did this?” she breathed.

“Slytherins, of course,” Parvati said, her voice dripping with venom.

“We don’t know that.”

“We don’t?” Parvati turned and stared at her. “We invite Slytherins to our common room for the first time in Hogwarts history, give them a password, then the next morning we get that on our common room wall?”

Hermione drew closer to the wall. Dripping, rust-colored letters … “Blood,” she said softly. “These letters are written in blood.”

“No way to tell,” Hermione said. *Or was there?*

“Should we erase it?” Parvati raised her wand.

“No,” Hermione said. “There could be a muggle-born out there … hurt.” She rubbed her forehead and tried to think past the pounding. “Parvati, please go get McGonagall. Then Madam Hooch. We’ll need all the Heads of Houses.”

“Slytherin, too?”

Hermione nodded. “Slytherin especially.”

Parvati gave her a sideways glance, then ran out the portrait hole, glad to have something to do. Looking around to ensure she was alone in the common room, Hermione transfigured an empty butterbeer bottle into a potion vial. She approached the wall, nearly touching the last D in MUDBLOOD with her wand. She waved the wand slightly and the long drip stretching from the bottom of the D to the floor flew off the wall and into her vial, which filled with red blood.

*Now what?* Hermione spotted her beaded bag underneath the sofa she had dozed on last night. Where she lay while Malfoy … no, it wasn’t him. It *wasn’t*.

Shaking her head to clear it, Hermione summoned the bag with her wand and tucked the vial inside. She had just slung the chain strap over her shoulder when McGonagall charged through the portrait hole, wearing a dressing gown and her black hat, wand held high.

“What’s the danger? Are you—” the Headmistress broke off when she saw Hermione, who was suddenly aware of her wrinkled clothes, crazy hair and fluffy blue slippers. Hermione pointed at the wall.

McGonagall gasped. “Is anyone hurt?”

“I don’t know,” Hermione said. “We need all the Heads of Houses to check on their students.”

“Yes,” McGonagall said, stepping closer to the letters. “Blood, of course.”

The portrait hole swung open, revealing Madame Hooch, looking grim, dressed in her usual jersey and leathers. Early morning flight, or did the woman sleep in Quidditch gear?

“What’s all this?” Hooch snapped, stepping in, followed by Parvati. “The state of this …” The Head of House trailed off as her eyes fell on the letters.

“Miss Patil, please stand outside the portrait hole. Let no one but the Heads of Houses in.” Parvati nodded and left. “Madame Hooch,” McGonagall went on, “I need you to account for all your students.” She glanced at the bloody letters. “Especially the muggle-borns. If any student is missing, inform me immediately.”

Madame Hooch nodded and dashed up the boys’ stairs. The portrait hole opened again to admit Slughorn, and behind him Flitwick, the Ravenclaw head, and Professor Sprout. Flitwick and Sprout gave gasps of shock and dismay at seeing the letters, but Slughorn just shook his head sadly, his mustache drooping. His eyes met Hermione’s and they were full of pain.

McGonagall instructed them to count their students, then report back immediately any missing or injured children. “Have prefects keep the students in their dorms and common rooms. Everyone is to stay in their House until further notice.” The three Heads nodded and left, although Sprout and Flitwick each gave Slughorn a quick, sober look.
“Miss Patil, please stand guard by the wall. No one but myself is to touch the letters.” McGonagall turned to Hermione. “Miss Granger, come with me. “Hermione clutched her beaded bag grimly as she followed McGonagall out of the portrait hole.

“Adorlena,” McGonagall said to the portrait outside. Hermione started; she had never heard the Fat Lady’s name. “Tell me. Who was the last person to exit the Gryffindor common room last night?”

The Fat Lady obviously didn’t know what had happened, but she was wide-eyed from watching the activity and shivered at McGonagall’s tone.

“Adorlena,” the Headmistress repeated, “who was the last person to leave the common room?”

“Draco Malfoy,” the Fat Lady said.

“How did he look?” McGonagall asked.

“Very nice,” the Fat Lady said. “Such pretty hair, and his clothes are never mussed …”

“His expression, Adorlena,” the Headmistress snapped. “Any sign of his feelings, general thoughts?”

“He seemed … happy,” the Fat Lady said. “He thanked me very nicely.”

McGonagall and Hermione both stared in astonishment. “You are certain it was Mr. Malfoy?” McGonagall asked.

“Yes, quite sure. Granted, I haven’t seen him often, but occasionally I visit the Snake Charmer portrait in the dungeons …”

“And Mr. Malfoy was happy?” McGonagall said in disbelief. “What kind of happy?”

It took all of Hermione’s self-control not to fidget, and she couldn’t decide which kind of Malfoy happy she preferred to hear about at that moment.

“It was a lovely smile,” the Fat Lady sighed. “So sweet and open …”

“Did anyone enter the common room after Malfoy left?” Hermione asked quickly.

“No, dear,” the portrait said. “Until the Headmistress arrived, of course.”

“Thank you, Adorlena.” McGonagall reentered the common room, closely followed by Hermione. Parvati was shooing a couple of early-rising First Years away from the wall.

“Miss Granger,” the Headmistress said quietly. “Do you know if anyone was with Mr. Malfoy before he left the common room?”

Hermione took a deep breath. Here goes nothing. “I was with him.”

McGonagall didn’t look surprised. “Was there anyone else in the common room?”

“No,” she said. “A few students entered through the portrait hole while we were talking, but they went straight up to bed.”
McGonagall paused a moment, and when she spoke, her voice was … careful. “Please tell me what happened.”

“We were just talking,” Hermione said. Which was true, except for the time she spent napping. He probably could have written twenty blood messages during that time. He also could have hexed her, or hurt her, but he didn’t. What did he do then, just drink sirenscotch and watch me sleep? She shifted uncomfortably.

“… Miss Granger?”

Hermione started; the Headmistress was speaking and she hadn’t heard a word. “Sorry?”

McGonagall’s lips thinned. “I asked, Miss Granger, what you were speaking about with Mr. Malfoy.”

Another deep breath. “We were talking about Quidditch.”

McGonagall’s eyebrows shot up. “Quidditch?”

“He was just named Slytherin seeker, you see. And we talked about … ancient runes.” Which was also true enough.

“Anything else?”

“Potions,” Hermione said calmly, having mastered her nerves finally.

McGonagall nodded. “Yes, I’ve heard about your and Mr. Malfoy’s impressive performance in potions. What then?”

“Then I escorted him out of the portrait hole and went to bed.”

The Headmistress looked at her thoughtfully, a thousand questions behind her spectacle-rimmed eyes. But she only asked: “Is there anything else I should know, Miss Granger?”

Hermione fidgeted with the chain of her bag. She had to tell McGonagall; the woman probably knew already. “There was a confrontation last night between Malfoy and Dennis Creevey.”

McGonagall’s eyes sharpened. “Go on.”

“Ron started it, really. Malfoy made a cheeky comment about—well, it was a cheeky comment, and Ron tried to punch him.”

“A fairly common impulse around Mr. Malfoy, I would wager.”

“You have no idea,” Hermione said.

“Marigold, my darling!” Both McGonagall and Hermione jumped at the lilting voice. Bluebell fluttered a few feet above the carpeted floor, her sweet face wreathed in smiles. She flew over and gave McGonagall a light kiss on both cheeks. Apparently the DADA teacher hadn’t been fibbing about her Friend of the Fairies.

The fairy eyed the giant, blood-soaked message with bright interest. “Is this it? Lovely!”

“Yes, Professor Bluebell,” McGonagall said rather grumpily.

Bluebell waved her thin wand at the words. “This is no simple message.”
“Is it a curse? What kind of curse?” Hermione asked.

The fairy tilted her head to one side, and her intricate wandwork never slowed. “Difficult to tell. Cast on the castle itself, responding to blood, manifesting in blood. Hate, certainly, but also … love.”

“Love?” McGonagall repeated. She cut her eyes at Hermione, who shrugged slightly. You hired her, Marigold.

“You hired her, Marigold.”

“An ancient spell, soaked in blood into the very walls,” Bluebell said cheerfully, as if she was discussing the curtains.

“That hardly sounds like love, Professor,” Hermione said.

Bluebell eyed her mischievously. “Ah, and you are an expert in love, yes, Miss Granger?”

“Can you tell who cast this message?” McGonagall asked.

“No, but it was powerful magic recently cast with powerful blood,” Bluebell said.

“Must we seal the room?” McGonagall asked. “This is the only entrance to Gryffindor Tower.”

The fairy shook her head, golden curls bouncing. “I cannot tell the purpose, Marigold dear, but the letters themselves are not harmful.”

“I don’t much like the younger students seeing this,” McGonagall said. “But I can’t destroy evidence.” She waved her wand and a red velvet curtain appeared, shrouding the wall.

Bluebell was looking around the room. “Some nice daisies would look well in here,” she said. “Healing.”

McGonagall drew Hermione aside as Bluebell chattered about flowers to a startled Parvati. “You were saying, Miss Granger, that there was a confrontation between Mr. Weasley and Mr. Malfoy last night.”

“Yes, Ron threw a punch, Malfoy dodged it, and Dennis aimed a stunning spell straight at Malfoy,” Hermione said. She shook her head. “It should have worked, but instead Dennis was thrown backward into a wall.”

McGonagall drew a sharp breath. “Was the boy injured?” Hermione shook her head. “Is it possible Mr. Malfoy—”

“He didn’t have his wand out,” Hermione said quickly.

The two women stood silent, thinking. Malfoy could have used wandless magic. His time as a Death Eater had doubtless left him with many advanced skills, skills Hermione did not want to know about.

“I don’t think it was Malfoy,” Hermione said finally. “He appeared honestly shocked when Dennis fell.”

McGonagall’s face was expressionless. “Thank you, Miss Granger.” She raised her voice. “Professor Bluebell, would you be so kind to accompany me?” The fairy immediately followed the Headmistress through the portrait hole.

Hermione shared a long look with Parvati and the two young women wearily climbed the stairs.
again. McGonagall would question Malfoy now, of course. She hoped the man had the wit not to mention Hermione’s nap. He probably knew better—if there was one thing Slytherins were good at, it was self-preservation.

***

The library was rather empty for a Sunday afternoon; typically, students packed the tables to catch up on work, even so early in the term. But fear and speculation had swept the castle, and students were too busy spinning Blood Message theories about double-crossing Slytherins and Malfoy in particular. No students had been reported missing or injured, although a few endured painful talks with their Heads of House for being out of their assigned beds.

The Fat Lady had obviously blabbed that Malfoy was the last person to leave the common room, which closed the case for most. Nearly everyone believed that he had written the message during the last hour of the party—the common room was darker then, and any remaining partiers were … preoccupied. A few students remembered seeing Hermione talking to Malfoy as well, which prompted more speculation: How drunk was Hermione last night? Had Malfoy hexed her? None of the talk made her look particularly good, and Ron, plagued with a well-deserved hangover, had emerged to lecture Hermione in the common room until she threatened a bat-bogey hex.

Now she was sitting in the library, wearing jeans and a Weasley sweater, hair in a bushy ponytail, trying to remember if there’d been anything suspicious about the wall the night before. The lights had been low and she’d been …

A series of dull thuds and flash of white-blond hair caught her attention—Malfoy, of course, hidden behind a shelf, pushing at books from his side so they’d fall to the floor near her table. Subtle. She put down her quill. It was dangerous for him to be out alone; a few students had banded together, she’d heard, vowing to rid the castle of “that Malfoy menace.”

She slipped into the Goblin History section and waited for him to follow. Few people read about goblins by choice.

“You shouldn’t be here,” she said when he joined her.

“I shouldn’t be anywhere,” he answered.

She eyed him carefully. He looked fine, if a bit hollow-eyed, in a black T-shirt and gray trousers. “What did you tell McGonagall?” she asked.

“That I didn’t attack the Weasel or that Creepy boy …”

“Creevey,” Hermione snapped.

“… And that I spent the end of the party with you, chatting amicably about potions.” He smirked. “Such dedicated students we are. I didn’t mention the part where you lay snoring on the sofa.”

“I don’t snore!” Hermione said indignantly.
“And talking in your sleep.” He closed his eyes. “’Oh Draco … Draco …’”

“I’m leaving now,” she said.

“No, wait. Please.” A long, smoothly muscled arm shot out to block her movement, the Dark Mark on his forearm suddenly before her eyes. Hermione stared at the Mark wide-eyed, then turned to frown up at him.

“Tell me,” he said. “Were you able to erase those words?”

“’Die Mudbloods,’ Malfoy, that’s what the letters said.” Her voice was sharp. “The fear to say something increases fear of the thing itself.”


“Dumbledore said it.”

Malfoy’s eyes took on a cold, distant look and he withdrew his arm, backing away slightly.

‘I know what happened in the astronomy tower,” Hermione said in a rush. “I know you didn’t want to—”

“Dumbledore, Snape, my mother,” he said bitterly. “All lining up to save my sorry arse, if not my soul. My pure, pretty soul.”

Hermione said nothing.

“I’m not sure they succeeded—no matter what you wrote in that letter,” he went on. “I still let those Death Eaters in, Granger. Fenrir tainted the curse-breaking Weasley. The old fool died.”

Hermione held his gaze. “Yes, you did what you did. I happen to understand your reasons, but that doesn’t change facts. Are any of us so pure? Harry forced Dumbledore to drink poison. Ron abandoned us while we were on the run from Voldemort. I’ve set fire to a teacher, imprisoned a woman for writing lies and disfigured a classmate. You think you’re the only one who can be ruthless?”

His eyes glittered. “How I would love to hear your stories.”

“You didn’t hurt or kill those people, but you bear responsibility,” she went on. “That’s your debt to pay.”

“Then help me pay it,” he said, surprisingly earnest. “It took the Golden Trio, an entire order and half the school to bring down the Dark—Voldemort. And now somebody wants to start it all up again.” Malfoy raised his arm, one hand on the shelf, again blocking her exit. He leaned into her.

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” he said, his voice low. “What will McGonagall do? What are you planning?”

“I won’t say.”

“Tell me,” he repeated softly. His lips were very close to hers.

“No,” she said, just as softly.

“I’ll kiss you if you tell me, Granger.”
A tremor swept up her body, constricting her throat. **Reckless**, her mind whispered. “You’ll kiss me if I don’t,” she managed to whisper.

He chuckled softly in his throat, his eyes hooded. “Clever girl …”

“Hermione?” Theo’s voice carried clearly through the library. “Hermione? Are you here?”

Malfoy backed away again, lowering his arm and glaring in Theo’s direction. Hermione drew in a much-needed gulp of air.

“I’m not telling you anything,” she said, louder.

He transferred his glare to her. “You think I would write that message? And no, I’m not saying that word and that’s final.”

“Hermione?” Theo’s voice drew closer.

“Don’t play the victim, Malfoy,” she snapped. “You tormented me and my friends for years, we’ve been talking civilly for little more than a week and you want me to betray McGonagall for you?”

Malfoy just looked down at her, frowning. Hermione was reminded of the concerned look he’d given his mother in the Entrance Hall. “That message targeted—” he began.

“Hermione!” Theo entered the goblin section, wearing a green jumper over brown trousers and a button-down shirt. *Harry could use a few fashion tips from this wizard,* Hermione thought. *Maybe get him out of those godawful sweatshirts.*

“Relax, Theo,” Malfoy said, “Granger is perfectly safe. Between the two of you, I find her much scarier.”

Theo looked at him coldly. “You’d be surprised what little tricks I know.”

“Theo, I’m fine,” Hermione said impatiently. “I need to study.” She gave Malfoy a last, doubtful look and stalked out of the goblin section.

A new stack of books had appeared on her table. Theo’s, most likely. She sat down and fussily sorted her papers, but every nerve ending in her body was tuned to the goblin section three shelves over. What did she expect: blood-curdling screams? Shelves bursting into flames? They were probably just having a pissing contest over there. Nothing to concern herself with.

Still, she was relieved when Theo re-emerged, disgruntled but unhexed. He fell gracefully into the chair opposite her. “You should stay away from him,” he grumbled.

“You should mind your own business,” she said. “I told you, I don’t need another Ron in my life.”

He smiled. “Protectiveness is entirely lost on you, isn’t it? How am I supposed to impress you?”

“Pretty harsh, Hermione,” he said, his smile gone.

She sighed. “You’re right. Malfoy seems to bring out the worst in everyone, including me.”

“I want to be clear—his behavior, those words on the wall, the rest of us Slytherins are not exactly cheering. I’ve been asked by my House to tell you that.” Theo’s green eyes were sharp, as if he was trying to bore his message into her skull. “Blaise is furious. Slughorn has threatened us with
expulsion if we do anything, or Malfoy would be in the infirmary right now.”

“We don’t know who did it, Theo,” Hermione said, “and we have no proof Malfoy did.”

“He was the last one in the common room, I heard.”

“No, Theo, I was the last one in the common room. I saw him out of the common room.”

Theo didn’t like that, she could tell. He opened his mouth to say something, but glanced at her and thought better of it.

“I am hoping you can help me study,” he said, somewhat formally. “I have a week’s worth of catching up to do.”

“I would be happy to help, Theo,” she answered, equally formal.

His perfect smile flashed again—the man turned it on and off like a light bulb, it was unnerving. She had to press her lips together to keep from smiling back. “Show me your schedule,” was all she said.
Hermione found helping Theo an absorbing task. He would be joining her Potions class and Bluebell’s DADA seminar (despite his lack of war experience). It was quite relaxing to sit with him in the library, drawing up summaries and priority grids, and unlike Harry and Ron, Theo let her color-code his study schedules.

“Hermione,” Theo said finally. “Hermione!”

“Yes?” she asked, looking up. “Do you need me to annotate the—”

“Sweet Salazar, you are relentless,” Theo said, standing. “It’s dinnertime.”

“I’m not hungry,” she said, waving her wand to rearrange his schedule again. *He can’t do the sentient transfiguration essay before the non-sentient essay, how can I make it …*

“Well, I am, and we are leaving right now.” He grasped her hand and pulled her to her feet.

“But our books, our notes …”

“Nobody would dare touch Hermione Granger’s notes,” Theo said decidedly. “Let’s go.”

He pulled her all the way to the Great Hall and retained her hand even as they entered. The environment in the hall was subdued and any noise stopped completely as people saw their clasped hands.

“Theo,” she hissed. “People are going to think—acquaintances, remember?”

“Inter-House unity,” he said.

She halted. “Of course,” she said, pulling her hand back. “You want me to join your House for dinner.”

He looked down at her, his green eyes serious. “We as a House did not write that message, nor do we support it. Show everyone that you believe that. Please.”

“This is quite Slytherin of you,” she said.

“Yes, it is.” Theo lowered his voice. “I’m asking you to do this for us, just one time. But that isn’t why I want to be acquainted.”

Hermione looked up at him, considering. Theo wasn’t as tall as Malfoy, so talking to him up close was a bit more comfortable. Talking to him in general was more comfortable. And she liked his plan. She didn’t believe the entire House was behind the message. And even if a Slytherin had cast the spell—and she was by no means convinced of that—it was unfair to blame the rest of the House. She looked over at the Slytherin table, and the sight of the little First Years silently hunched over their plates settled the matter.

“Will you follow my study schedules if I sit with your House tonight?” she asked Theo.

He smiled. “Most faithfully.”
“Lead on, then."

Their footsteps were loud in the deathly quiet hall as Theo led her to two empty seats opposite Malfoy. There were always empty seats around Malfoy. All the Slytherin males stood at her arrival and waited for her to sit before resuming their places. Malfoy’s face was expressionless, but the fingers on his right hand drummed lightly on the table. Hermione hated her sudden impulse to place her hand over his to stop it.

“Malfoy,” she said politely. Anything worth doing was worth doing well.

“Granger,” he responded. “Pumpkin juice?”

“No, thank you.”

“Apple cider?” Theo asked, a glass pitcher at ready.

“Yes, thank you,” she said. Malfoy looked affronted. *Damn it, Malfoy, I just like cider better!* Theo’s smug smile didn’t help.

“Nice to see you, Hermione,” Zabini said from further down the table. “Good party last night.”

“Thank you all for joining us,” Hermione said, forcing a smile. She put her napkin on her lap and snuck another glance at Malfoy, who was absorbed in slicing and eating slivers of chicken in a fussy way completely foreign to her experience with Gryffindor boys.


Pansy smirked. “He’s glaring at the back of your head so hard, I’m surprised it hasn’t burst into flames.”

“Is he always so angry?” a Slytherin boy asked.

“It’s been a tough year,” Hermione said gently. “He lost a brother.”

“My brother is in Azkaban,” piped up a First-Year girl with dark braids.

“I’m sorry,” Hermione said.

The little girl grinned. “I didn’t like him anyway.”

Theo choked on his cider. The rest of the table looked uncomfortable, except for Malfoy, who was now cutting his carrot with surgical precision.

“Hermione,” Zabini said. “What career might you pursue after Hogwarts?”

She paused to admire the grammar in that question, then shrugged. “I don’t know yet. I just want to do well on my NEWTs.”

“Might you join the Ministry?”

“Perhaps.” Hermione’s stomach clenched, however, at the idea. The Ministry had not impressed her during the war against Voldemort. She considered the alternatives as she sliced up her own chicken and nibbled on a roll.

“I might become an auror,” she said absently, “but it’s a hard life.”
Silence reigned and she cursed her wayward tongue. Aurors had bagged relatives of half the people at this table. Hermione glanced at Theo and he smiled wanly. Well, that’s what Zabini gets for asking. I’m Hermione Granger—of course I’m going to consider the Aurors Office.

“You would make an excellent auror, Granger,” Malfoy said.

The entire table glared at Malfoy for speaking, even the First Years, but he just sipped his juice with a tiny smile. It’s probably Ron, Hermione thought. Ron’s losing it over at the Gryffindor table and Malfoy’s loving it. Malfoy followed up his comment with an intent look at Hermione that made her face heat. He really was a monster. Then he began peeling a green apple with a silver knife, slicing and eating it, never taking his eyes from hers. Really, how could eating an apple be so suggestive?

She felt Theo take her hand again and almost groaned aloud. Yes, Malfoy was annoying, but there were other ways to deal with it. Hermione pulled her hand back, not bothering to hide the gesture, and Theo stiffened beside her. Malfoy smirked, biting into his last apple slice with a wink. Please, let this dinner be over.

“Hello, Blaise.” It was Ginny, glorious Ginny, stopping by in support of Hermione and distracting the entire table. All the male Slytherins stood again, many openly staring, and Zabini offered her his seat on the bench, but she shook her head. “Just saying hello.”

Ginny drifted away again, still smiling, and Zabini slowly resumed his seat. He rubbed a finger on his chin, which was the equivalent of dropping his jaw and clutching his hair for any other man. What happened last night? I need to talk to Ginny.

Malfoy was ignoring Hermione now, eating chocolate ice cream with the tiniest of spoonfuls. Hermione inexplicably found that more arresting than the bit with the apple and turned her head to avoid staring.

“Well, time to study, Theo!” she said brightly.

“But dessert …” he began.

“No time!” She bolted to her feet, which prompted every male Slytherin to stand again. “Thank you, everyone. It was a lovely dinner,” she said, and strode off to a chorus of thank yous and goodnights, vowing never to put herself through that again.

Ron caught up to her at the doors. “Hermione, can I talk to you? Please?” He ignored Theo.

She bit her lip. Ron actually sounded sane; he was still her friend and deserved an explanation. She turned to Theo, who looked slightly irritated, either by Ron or the loss of ice cream. Or both. “I’ll meet you at the library, okay, Theo?”

“I’ll wait,” the Slytherin said, giving Ron a hard look.

“Fine.” She led Ron out of the Great Hall and over to the House Hourglass cabinet. The Hufflepuffs were still ahead in House points, but there was a suspiciously large pile of emeralds in the bottom of the Slytherin glass. Ron gave her a tentative smile, tugging at the sleeve of his jumper. He was obviously trying to execute good advice again.

“Hermione, I’m really sorry about last night,” he said to his feet. “And for, uh, yelling at you this morning. I didn’t mean what I said … at the Three Broomsticks.” He looked up and met her eyes pleadingly. “I know I need to trust your judgment. I … uh … need to respect, uh, your agency …”
Hermione fought the urge to giggle as he continued, before finally nodding and patting his arm in acceptance of his apology. Ron stopped talking about supporting personal empowerment and looked relieved.

“Good,” he said. He took a deep breath. “About what happened just now, in the Great Hall. I don’t understand what you’re doing. Can you tell me what’s going on?” Ron’s tone was careful, like he was approaching an offended hippogriff.

“It was just dinner, Ron,” Hermione said.

“Why were you sitting with them? Are you dating Nott now?” He looked around and lowered his voice. “Is this being reckless?”

“No, Ron, this is being fair. I don’t know who put ‘Die Mudbloods’ on the wall,” she said, watching him wince just like he used to when she said “Voldemort.” She sighed. “But even if a Slytherin did it, we shouldn’t punish them all. I believe in inter-House unity, like McGonagall says.”

Ron rubbed his hands over his face and dropped the rehearsed tone. “Look, Hermione, I know you couldn’t care less, but I don’t get anything you’re doing this year. Fine, you don’t want to be with me anymore.” He looked a little woebegone. “You want to—I don’t know—find yourself or something. But do you have to do it with a bunch of snakes?”

Hermione considered this. “I suppose it’s because they don’t know me either. They don’t have a lot of preconceived notions about what Hermione Granger does and doesn’t do. I’m crazy strange to them, so they’ll accept anything.”

“But Hermione …” Ron put a hand on her shoulder. “That message … there is someone out there trying to hurt you—you and other muggle-borns. And that someone could be a Slytherin … it probably is.” He frowned and let his hand fall. “I just want you to be safe.”

“I won’t be safe, not even in Gryffindor Tower,” she said. “Even if I stayed with you every waking moment—”

“But Malfoy—”

“I know, Malfoy’s a tremendous git,” she said. “But he’s in four of my classes and he’s my potions partner, and you should know that we’ll be working on some experimental potions together. I honestly don’t think he wrote ‘Die—”

“Merlin, Hermione, do you have to say it?”

“Fear of a thing—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” Ron turned a resentful eye toward Theo, who leaned against the far wall, looking like a catalogue model. “What’s the story with that one?”

“I’m helping him catch up with schoolwork. He likes my color-coded study guides.”

“I bet he does,” Ron said sourly. “You’ll help him study, but not—”

“He’s very conscientious. Lovely handwriting, too.”

“If you could just look at my essay on Patronus charms …”
“I’m busy tonight.” She glared at Ron slightly, then reconsidered. “Fine. If you apologize to Theo for your behavior at the party, I’ll give you ten minutes at breakfast tomorrow.”

Ron nodded reluctantly and the two of them walked over to Theo.

“NottIamsorryiwasrude,” Ron said in a rush.

“I forgive you, Roy,” Theo said.

Ron growled low in this throat and stomped off without a word. Progress, Hermione thought. Maybe those Slytherins are on to something with the deal making.

“Is he in our year?” Theo asked her loudly. Ron paused, but kept walking up the marble staircase.

Hermione looked back at Theo. She wouldn’t smile. She wouldn’t. “Alright,” she said. “Let’s go set up your Potions study schedule. You’ll need to review Auramatis, and the Draught of Peace and Fiducia. If you memorize the methodology for each, you just might …” Theo groaned, but he followed.

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It was nearly 10 o’clock that night before Hermione dragged herself through the portrait hole and up to her dormitory. Ginny was sitting up in bed, reading a piece of parchment by the light of her wand.

“Pretty late there,” Ginny said, looking up.

“Library. I was helping Theo Nott with his work.” Hermione yawned and dropped her bag on the floor. Eighth Years enjoyed an extended curfew as well as the freedom to leave the castle on weekends.

Lavender’s bed was closed and dark. “Is she alright?” Hermione asked.

Ginny shrugged. “She’s upset. Everybody’s upset. We hold one little party and now we have evil blood letters on our wall.”

Hermione nodded and left the room to get ready for bed. When she returned, Ginny was still looking at her parchment, and Hermione joined her. Crookshanks jumped up on Ginny’s bed and both women petted him.

“I had an oddly … progressive … conversation with Ron after dinner,” Hermione said. “Was that your work? I thought he was going to start denouncing the patriarchy.”

Ginny nodded. “He still cares about you. So much.”

“I know.” Hermione sighed. “But I’m through with these roles we play: the fun-loving Weasley and the nagging bookworm. For years, I followed him around, crying ‘Ron!’ whenever he said something cheeky. Now he’s following me around, yelling ‘Hermione!’ And he doesn’t like it.”
Ginny pulled up her legs and rested her chin on her knees. Her brown eyes, darker than Hermione’s, looked almost black against her pale face and halo of gleaming red hair. “You may have something there,” she said.

“I know Ron’s really trying, but I don’t think we can go back.”

Ginny sighed. “I get it about the roles. It’s rather like me and Harry. Maybe he loves me, but not as an equal. He feels responsible.” Her eyes were sad. “He refused to sleep with me, Hermione. Over the summer. Didn’t feel it was right. Said I didn’t know my own mind.”

“Give him time,” Hermione said. “He’s felt responsible for the wizarding world for seven years. He hardly knows anything else.”

“I owled him today about the blood message and he wrote me this note, telling me to stay in my room between classes and never be alone.” Ginny crumpled the parchment in her fist. “That doesn’t even make sense—I’m not a target. Did Harry send a note telling you to hide?”

Hermione stroked Ginny’s hair. “He still thinks of the Chamber of Secrets.”

“I was 11!” Ginny snapped. “You and Harry and Ron fought a troll and defeated a cerberus at 11! I’m not 11 anymore! I’m a prefect and a war veteran and I will not stay in my room!”

Hermione hugged her. “I know, I know.”

“If Harry insists on seeing me as a little girl, there are others who don’t!”

“Zabini? Be careful there,” Hermione said.

Ginny snorted. “You’re one to talk. And I like Blaise. He doesn’t treat me like I’m 11 and stupid. He makes me feel sexy. Desirable. Almost … dangerous. He’s obviously never been with a Gryffindor before.” She stared into space, a slow smile on her lips. “I like the roles we play.”

Hermione swallowed hard. Those Slytherins.

Ginny’s eyes focused again on Hermione. “So. You and Malfoy. Spill. What were you two discussing so passionately last night?”

“Potions … ancient runes.”

Another snort. “No man looks that serious about ancient runes.”

“You’d be surprised,” Hermione said.

Ginny shook her head. “Draco Malfoy. And you tell me to be careful?” She fixed Hermione with an unblinking stare. “Everything I told Lavender about him still stands, you know. He’s obviously interested, but Merlin …”

“I know,” Hermione said, toying with the golden rope tassel on Ginny’s bed hangings. Crookshanks pounced on the ends.

“Malfoy won’t offer much, just some furtive—”

“I know.”

Ginny’s eyes narrowed. “And now you’re walking into the Great Hall hand-in-hand with Theodore Nott.”
“We’re … acquaintances.”

“Merlin,” Ginny said again. She crawled under her covers with a sigh. Hermione stood, and Crookshanks jumped off the bed. “Poor Ron. It’s really over,” Ginny said sleepily.

“Don’t pity him,” Hermione said, getting into her own bed. “Ron can do better for himself, if he’ll only admit it.”

A mumble from Ginny was her only response. Hermione lay on her back, muscles aching from hours at a library table. She closed her eyes and tried to slow her breathing, but sleep wouldn’t come. The letters “DIE MUDBLOODS” drifted behind her eyelids, a taunting echo of the red letters on her arm. Bluebell had said the letters manifested from a spell on the castle, but no muggle-borns were killed or injured. Why cast a spell on the castle then, when slapping some deer blood on the walls would do just as well? Did the spellcaster really hate muggle-borns or was it a ploy to discredit the Slytherins?

Enough. She couldn’t solve anything tonight; she’d just give herself nightmares. Hermione closed her eyes, remembering Theo dancing with her at the party, his hand sliding up her back. She tried to hold on to the image, but another Slytherin drifted into her thoughts, leaning close in the library, full of promises.

“I’ll kiss you if you tell me, Hermione.”

She couldn’t believe he’d said that. She couldn’t believe what she’d said back. Worst of all, she’d wanted to tell him. Tell him everything. Every thought, every feeling, every fantasy, all of it. Just lay it all at the feet of a former Death Eater. Would he be shocked? She recalled his expression when she took off her shirt in that old charms classroom. What would have happened if the Salt of the Earth hadn’t worn off, if her wand had remained useless?

He moves toward her, his hand under her shirt. “I’m unconvinced,” he says coldly, sliding open the last two buttons. “That snitch could be … anywhere.”

Her hand ran over her breasts, imagining his warm fingers, then went lower. He pulls aside her skirt. “Is it here?” … fingers inside her knickers … “I must be thorough …”

Hermione swallowed a groan and tried not to pant too loudly. His voice in her ear, the rough skin of his hand on her … “open up to me, Hermione. Tell me everything … open …”

She finished in a flurry of images, finally falling asleep to a low, deep voice: “I’ll kiss you if you tell me, Hermione … I’ll kiss you …”

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Hermione slept deeply, dreamlessly, and turned up at breakfast the next morning brimming with ambition. Nothing was impossible if you stayed organized. The Mudblood message, Ron, Malfoy, Theo, NEWTs, the alleged errors in her spare Ancient Runes essay—all manageable. She’d been acting like a ninny. All it took was a good night’s sleep to see the error of her ways.
Finishing her oatmeal, she ignored the conversations around her and opened her LOOP notebook. She had written extensive notes that morning on life’s proper priorities. No. 1, of course, was researching the source of the Mudblood message. No. 2 was NEWTs. She could not allow Theo to distract her. He certainly had enough to go on with his studies. People have to learn independence, otherwise they run after you for every little thing. One thing about Malfoy, the man was self-reliant. Granted, he didn’t have much choice, what with everybody hating him and all, but Hermione hadn’t heard him whine about that. In fact, he’d been cross with her for pitying him. Which she didn’t.

As for Ron, she didn’t consider him a major problem, as long as he kept listening to Ginny. Sooner or later, he’d meet a woman happy to nag him all the time and settle down. Hopefully sooner. Hermione made a note to keep an eye out for pretty Seventh- or Eighth-Year students with overbearing tendencies.

Theo was an interesting case. She’d be glad to pursue their … acquaintance … as long as he kept his propensity for Ron-like behavior under control. He would bear narrow watching for signs of slippage: 1. repeating her name, 2. grabbing her hand, 3. acting unnecessarily aggressive around Malfoy …

Hermione continued to scribble. Malfoy. A tricky case. The Malfoy section of her LOOP was written in runes to be on the safe side. To be even safer, she added a random dot to every 10th marking. One couldn’t be too careful.

There was a fascination there, she wrote, but that didn’t mean she needed to give in to it. The last thing she needed this year was a secret torrid affair with the Slytherin Poster Boy for Evil. She looked at the words “secret torrid affair?” scribbled in the margins by his name and circled them. Mad idea. The man was a walking nightmare born to try her, and he could find another cranky muggle-born to pursue if he wanted to turn over a new leaf so badly.

Her Malfoy strategy was simple (all the best strategies are): avoid being alone with him and cultivate a calm, tolerant attitude. The only wrench in that plan was Ancient Runes; she had been promised access to the Codex Runicus and rune stone in exchange for potions help.

She turned a page in her notebook and continued writing. Question: Was the knowledge gained from the Codex and rune stone worth the risks? She drew some lines for a pros-cons chart. Pros: Such high-level knowledge couldn’t be gotten anywhere else, certainly not from Hogwarts’s criminal travesty of a textbook. She was considering a career in Magical Archeology and missing a chance to understand those ancient languages was unacceptable. After graduation, Malfoy would take both manuscript and stone home again, and all that knowledge would be lost once more. She could use those artifacts to improve the Ancient Runes textbook and benefit all of wizarding society despite his selfish ways. One must take risks sometimes in service of a higher cause.

Cons: Doing anything on Malfoy’s terms was a recipe for disaster. At best, she’d be distracted and unsettled by his presence. At worst, she’d find herself carrying on with the most irritating man in school and one of the most notorious in the wizarding world.

Pouring herself another goblet of apple cider, Hermione looked at her chart with satisfaction. It was an excellent summation of her dilemma, very cogent and well-organized. It was also an utter failure, since she still had no idea what to do, but sometimes orderly thinking was its own reward.

‘Hermione?’ Ginny asked. ‘Why are you giggling at your notebook?’

“I thought you were finished having little conversations with your school notes,” Neville said. “I haven’t seen you do that since Fourth Year.”
Hermione looked around the table. Everyone was staring except Ron, who was madly scratching at his charms essay.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said and returned to her notebook. Some people didn’t know how to have fun.

Ron pushed his essay at Hermione and she shook her head as she scanned the slightly crumpled scroll. His discussion of corporeal vs. non-corporeal Patronuses was woefully inadequate and he completely failed to mention that a caster’s Patronus shape could change after a great shock or emotional upheaval. She didn’t mind, however. Revising Ron’s essay meant she couldn’t leave for Ancient Runes until the last possible moment, thus successfully avoiding her Life’s Trickiest Priority. Virtue often brought its own reward.

Advanced Runes continued to be stultifying, expanding on general principles and not even approaching the Elder Fubarks, the oldest magical runic alphabet. Malfoy began carving indecent comments in runes on his desk, which at least gave Hermione something to look at. She sent him a scroll with suggested edits, but Malfoy always was an ungrateful person.

Potions was not nearly so placid. Slughorn asked Hermione and Malfoy to assist their classmates with Fiducia, but nobody would let Malfoy anywhere near them. So he was exiled to the head of the class, where he held Slughorn’s pocket watch and called out seconds in a bored tone.

Hermione and Slughorn, on the other hand, were swamped, dashing between tables to keep students on track. After an hour, only two teams remained in the running. Slughorn coached a pair of Slytherins, while Hermione stood by Neville and Parvati, whispering instructions while Malfoy counted off seconds. As it became apparent that the two pairs might actually pull the potion off, Malfoy’s voice turned smooth and efficient, and Hermione began to feel that same strange connection between them as she listened for the next mark. It unsettled her, and when the successful teams put their spoons down and the class applauded, she couldn’t help glancing at Malfoy. He looked back at her with unusual seriousness, brows slightly drawn into a V.

Both potions were deemed passable, although considerably less strong than Hermione and Malfoy’s. Neville drank a vial of his potion and let Malfoy tap his nose. Slughorn beamed, giving extra House points to all parties involved, including Hermione and Malfoy.

Theo smiled at Hermione as well from his table in the back of the dungeon. He’d been matched with a pair of giggly Slytherin girls who had immediately shed their robes (“It’s so hot …”). Then they did nothing for two hours but hang on his sleeve and drop ingredients on the floor so they had to bend over and pick them up. Theo watched his partners’ antics through half-lidded eyes, making no effort to discourage such behavior, and the trio’s potion attempt was predictably miserable. Hermione sniffed and ignored them. Some people didn’t deserve help.

Hermione hadn’t forgotten about her blood magic research, and skipped lunch for some quality time with the library’s Restricted Section. She read up on tainted blood, which yielded a lot of ignorant nonsense about giants, dwarves and muggle-borns, then moved on to cursed blood, full of lurid descriptions of werewolf and vampire blood. Her reading did support the theory that the blood of a powerful magic worker was particularly effective in blood spells or curses. A witch or wizard’s blood could also have a profound effect on the spell; there was a blood curse in the 1400s, cast by a man-hating hag, that had the unintended side effect of shrinking every male's …

A small movement drew her eyes to her open bag on the table. A rune-marked scroll hopped up and down, waving its little ribbon arms for her attention. How did he do that? She looked around, expecting to see Malfoy lurking behind the shelves again, but the library was deserted. A tap of her wand opened the scroll:
Granger,

*If you’d like to keep to the terms of our deal, meet me in the former charms classroom today at 3 o’clock.*

DLM

Chapter End Notes

This is another odd chapter—again, Draco is everywhere, but says almost nothing. This chapter also does a lot of heavy lifting, setting up all kinds of future action. (Keep an eye on that little Slytherin girl.) Some paragraphs could have been entire scenes, but as Hermione would say, one must move forward.

 Appropriately, this chapter begins and ends with Hermione in the library. I imagine Theo saw their study session as a little get-to-know-you time, but then was flattened by Steamroller Hermione.

Looking ahead to the next chapter, it’s all about Hermione and Draco …
Hermione frowned at the open scroll in her hands. Continued secret meetings in abandoned classrooms would completely undermine her Malfoy management strategy. Fragments of her pros-cons chart floated around her mind. In the end, she decided to go. Perhaps she could mitigate the risks of extended interaction.

She found him lying on the teacher’s desk, his robe laid over a chair. Late afternoon sunshine poured through the room’s long, narrow Gothic windows. He had his wand out, likely defacing the high ceiling above with degenerate runes. Hermione purposely did not look to see.

“You’re late,” he said, sitting up. A fringe of white-blond hair fell over one eye, and he tossed his head back impatiently.

“I just saw the note,” she answered. “Why not after dinner?”

“Quidditch practice.”

Hermione nodded, flushing slightly. “It must be on your …”

She placed her bag on a table and tried to look stern. “Empty your pockets, Malfoy.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Surely you didn’t just order me to empty my pockets.”

“And let me search your bag.”

“That is an invasion of my privacy.”

“Says the man who dumped out my bag on that very desk.”

Malfoy scowled. “You were withholding my property, Granger.”

“You ambushed me with a hidden magical substance,” she returned.

They glared at each other until Hermione spoke again. “I’ve chosen my first experimental potion,” she said. “Blood magic.”

He blinked. “Blood magic,” he repeated. Her meaning was clear: She’d let him help her with the “Die Mudbloods” case. She didn’t think he wrote the message.

Malfoy slowly slid off the desk. “Why stop at my pockets, then?” he asked, smiling. “Perhaps you should search my person as well. Seems only fair.” Stepping closer, he deftly unspooled his green-and-silver tie, pulling it off, and Hermione found herself staring.


Malfoy’s hand tightened around the tie, then he tossed it onto the table beside them and emptied his pockets. There wasn’t much to see: a wand, a few galleons, a heavy ring. She peered down at the last item. It was a small work of art, silver and onyx, embossed with silver dragons and a large M in the center. The motto on the crest made her skin crawl. Sanctimonia Vincet Semper. Purity will always conquer.
“Why don’t you wear it?” she asked, looking up at him. Draco was now the head of the family, since Lucius’ life sentence in Azkaban had stripped the elder Malfoy of all titles, rights and fortune.

“Would you?” he asked, his smile gone. He looked away. “Would you bear that name if you didn’t have to?”

“No,” Hermione said. She stepped to the right so she could see his eyes again. “Will you ever wear it?”

His face was completely shuttered now, his eyes just silvery glass. “One day,” he said coolly. “One day that name will mean something again.” He pocketed the ring, wand and coins, then set his bag on the table before her.

Hermione stared at the soft leather bag—it probably cost more than the entire contents of her trunk—thinking about his words. How would Malfoy go about redeeming his family name? Could it even be done?

“Well, Granger?”

Hermione still hesitated, her hand over the bag’s silver clasp. What did she expect to find? Evil talismans? Wizard porn? No, she had to do this. She couldn’t risk another go-around with that horrid Salt of the Earth.

She gave the bag a quick but thorough search that yielded only schoolbooks, parchment, the cloth-wrapped Codex, empty potion vials, quills, ink and, to her amusement, a small silver hand mirror.

“Will I be subjected to this every time we meet?” Malfoy asked coldly.

“No,” she sighed. She had to trust him a little, or give the whole idea up. Malfoy repacked his bag with a flick of his wand, leaving only the wrapped Codex. He sat down before it, and Hermione took a chair beside him.

She gasped as he unwound the cloth. The book was just as intricate and beautiful as she remembered. “This should be in—”

“Don’t start, Granger,” he said. “It’s a book, not a house elf. You’re not going to free it.”

“But to carry it around stuffed in your bag—”

“It’s my manuscript and I can use it to paper my bedroom if I want. Shall we get on with it?” He opened the book, revealing an illuminated page filled with glowing, dancing runes. It was almost hard to read the text, what with the figures waving their crosshatches like little arms, competing for her attention.

“The first part of the book is a rundown of Ancient Magical Law and a primer on different runic languages,” said Malfoy, sounding very much the pedantic professor. “The second part is a history of great magical deeds.”

“What is this?” Hermione asked, tracing a strip of runes along the bottom of the page with her finger, careful not to touch the vellum.

“Musical notations,” Malfoy said.

As an answer, Malfoy tapped the strip of runes with his wand and instantly an odd, halting tune began to play, slow and sad. It tugged at her heart.

“I think it’s a dirge,” he murmured. “This Codex is dedicated to Wuluf the Elder in the year he died.”

Hermione was enraptured. She couldn’t believe she'd almost denied herself this. So the man was a pain—who cared?

“I must study this further,” she said. “We should copy it. If you won’t loan out the manuscript, you can at least offer Hogwarts a transcription.”

“No,” Malfoy said. “The Ministry has plundered our house enough, that would only encourage another raid. I won’t put Mother through that.”

Hermione sighed and nodded. She’d agreed to do this on his terms, after all. “Fine. How much have you translated?”

“Just the first few pages and the primer,” Malfoy said. He waved his wand and pages turned, revealing a sheet with single runes paired with delicate pictures, like a children’s dictionary. Hermione leaned forward, marveling at the swaying leaves in the sketch of a tree. This book was a wonder.

“You were right,” she said absently. “Our textbook is all wrong. Get it out of my bag, will you?” She shed her black robe and rolled up her shirtsleeves.

Hermione didn’t look up when he slid the textbook into her hand, just opened it and clicked her muggle pen. “Look at that,” she muttered, scribbling in the textbook. “This dotted variant separates voiceless k from the corresponding voiced consonant g, but the book doesn’t even …”

Hermione didn’t know how long she sat there, puzzling out the discrepancies between the Codex and her textbook. She occasionally consulted Malfoy, who lingered nearby for a time, then returned to lying on the desk. But most of her work was brute copying and comparing, slow-going at first, but then she began to see patterns. If the shaft of the t doesn’t go over the cross-stroke, then ...

“Granger.”

*Contractions in the nasal line signal a following ...*

“Granger.”

*But that doesn’t correspond with ...*

“Granger!”

Hermione looked up at Malfoy. He was standing beside her, and his hand was over the manuscript, blocking her view of the runes. Annoyed, she pushed at his hand, but he wouldn’t move it.

“Granger, it’s almost dinner time.”

“No it isn’t,” she said, still pushing on his hand. Slytherins were certainly intense about their meals.

He wrapped the hand around hers. “Granger, you’ve been muttering over this book for nearly two
hours.”

She blinked up at him again and stood reluctantly. Sunlight no longer streamed through the windows, and one or two lamps had lit themselves in the failing light. Malfoy released her hand and gathered up the manuscript, tucking it into his bag with a few flicks of his wand, then laid his wand on the table.

“That was brilliant,” Hermione said as she packed her own bag by hand and zipped it shut. “Our Ancient Runes textbook is practically criminal.” She walked over to the blackboard and picked up a piece of chalk. “Look at these variants, the sound changes—”

“No, I won’t look,” she heard Malfoy say behind her. “No more runes today.”

“But the shape of the letter khon …” Hermione trailed off. He was close behind her now, the scent of his cologne mingling with the smell of chalk. One straight line, another curved to meet it …

“So,” he said in her ear. His voice was deeper, huskier. “Here we are.”

Hermione’s fingers tightened on her chalk, halted in the act of drawing the rune.

“Tell me,” Malfoy went on, “have you been thinking of me?”

Her cheeks heated, and she could feel the warmth spreading to her neck, exposed by her braided hair. That was all the answer Malfoy needed, of course. A large, warm hand slid up her bare, outstretched forearm and pulled the chalk from suddenly nerveless fingers. She heard a faint clatter as he tossed the chalk to the floor.

“You do think of me. Admit it.” His breath hitched in her ear. “You want me.”

She swallowed. “Is that what you tell all the girls?”

“Only the ones who want me.” Malfoy’s voice was gently mocking.

Hermione pulled her arm away and turned to face him, sharp words at the ready. Big mistake—Malfoy had unbuttoned the top buttons of his shirt after shedding his tie, revealing the long, pale column of his throat. His gaze was hypnotic, unblinking, like a snake’s before striking.

Hermione froze. Malfoy laid his hand lightly on her throat, rough palm against her pulse. “You can’t help yourself … Hermione. There’s no shame in it.”

She was breathing him in, enchanted by his voice, his scent, his body so close, but the word “shame” dropped into her mind like a pebble into a pond. Of course there’s no shame. A person can’t help how she feels—only how she acts on it. The thought sent ripples through the pseudo-magical spell he was casting, and she drew back further against the blackboard. Her mind, slightly dulled by two hours of runes, struggled to catch up with her body. She felt all the weight of Malfoy’s personality bearing down on hers.

“I know what you want,” he whispered, his lips inches from hers.

“No,” she heard herself say, her voice a bit breathy. “You know what you want, Malfoy. You hope I want the same.”

Malfoy looked smug. “I know you want the same.” His lips brushed the side of her jaw, his hand settled at the curve of her waist. He kissed the pulse at her throat, a light pressure of tongue and teeth, while his other hand left her throat to trail over her hip and drift lower, teasing. Hermione’s
head fell back against the board, her eyelids suddenly heavy.

“It’s just us here,” he murmured in her ear. “Nobody else has to know.”

Hermione realized one of her legs was curving slightly around his. She pulled it back and stiffened her posture. “No, Malfoy,” she said, breaking free and stepping away from the blackboard. “You don’t know how I feel.”

“Oh, but I do,” he said, smiling.

Hermione shook her head like a dog shakes off water. Then she refocused on Malfoy, whose smile had slipped a bit.

“Well, this has been fun!” she said brightly. She pulled out her wand and summoned her bag and robe to her left arm. “Dinner time!”

Malfoy put his hand on her wand arm. “You don’t want to go,” he said.

“What is wrong with you, Malfoy?” she asked, fully alert now. “Get your hand off me.”

“This hand?” he asked, running light fingers along her arm, toward her wand.

*Enough.* Hermione stepped back and raised her wand. “I don’t know what Slytherin tarts you’re used to, Malfoy, but I don’t like being told what I feel, what I think and what I need.”

Malfoy’s eyes widened. His own wand was still on the table, out of reach. Hermione was glaring now.

“Was this your plan?” she asked. “To lure me here with your pretty manuscript and then bully me into kissing you?” Her temper flared. “Is that the only way you can get laid these days?”

His face darkened. “Watch that mouth of yours, Granger.”

“Apparently, you watch it enough for both of us,” she snapped. Her wand was at his throat now. “Is this your famous Slytherin sex-god technique? Needs work.”

Malfoy raised his hands, palms out. “Alright, now put the wand down—”

“Turn around and face the wall,” she said.

“Granger, I’m—”

“Turn the *fuck* around, Malfoy, or I swear I’ll Petrify you again, and I won’t go easy this time.”

He pulled a long-suffering face and turned to face the wall. “If you would only—”

Hermione didn’t wait to hear the rest. She slammed out the classroom door and into the shattered hallway, tripping over rubble, not pausing until she reached the third-floor stairs. Students scattered before her as she stomped up to Gryffindor Tower, wand still clenched in her fist.

“Happy Hippogriffs,” she snarled at the Fat Lady.
Ginny was curled up on her bed, reading, when Hermione burst into their room, throwing her bag down. “What happened to you?” Ginny asked.

“Malfoy happened,” Hermione said, tossing her wand on her desk.

“Malfoy? Really?” Ginny eyed her shrewdly. “Did he try something?”

Hermione collapsed on the room’s small sofa, heart still pounding from nerves and her sprint up to Gryffindor Tower.

“It wasn’t what he did, Ginny …” she said slowly, trying to find the words. “It was the way he did it. Like he knew all my thoughts and feelings, and nothing I said mattered.” Crookshanks hopped into her lap and she petted him. “I’ve been an idiot,” she sighed.

“Stop that,” Ginny said, scrambling off the bed and sitting next to her.

“I was so mad. I almost hexed him again.”

Ginny’s eyebrows shot up. “Again?”

“I Petrified him last week,” Hermione confessed. “He was, uh, walking toward me.”

“So you Petrified him?”

“Just a little.” Hermione sighed. “And just now—we were, um, studying. And he started crowding me, saying he knew what I wanted, what I felt …”

“Was he using Legilimency on you, d’ya think?”

“No, I don’t think so. Just his great big Malfoy ego run amok.”

“Was he …” Ginny cleared her throat. “Was he wrong?”

Hermione sighed. “No, not entirely. I thought I actually knew him. Isn’t that ridiculous? A week and a day back at school and I think I know Draco Malfoy.” Her hand clenched on Crookshanks’ fur and the cat yowled in protest. “Sorry, Crooky.”

“But you didn’t hex him this time.” Ginny wanted to be clear on that.

“No. Wish I’d slapped him,” Hermione grumbled. “Another crack to the face from me would do the man nothing but good.”

Ginny grinned.

“It was a little ridiculous, really.” Hermione crossed her eyes. “He was all like, ‘You know you want me,’” she crooned, mimicking Malfoy’s voice. “Honesty.” Ginny laughed outright.

A tapping at the window caught their attention, and Hermione looked to see a large eagle owl fluttering outside. She moved toward her desk, picking up her wand to vanish the pane, then pulled a scroll off its leg. The owl hooted in a superior way and flew off.
“Who’s it from?” Ginny asked.

“Malfoy,” Hermione said, restoring the glass with a wave of her wand. The parchment was bound and marked with a familiar green ribbon and rune.

“You recognize his notes? What have you two been doing?” Ginny demanded.

Hermione didn’t answer, just tossed the unopened scroll into the air and pointed her wand at it. “Incendio!” The scroll burned up and vanished in smoke.

Ginny nodded. “What now?”

“Nothing,” Hermione said tiredly, pulling a book out of her bag. “I have to study.”

“What about dinner?”

Hermione shook her head, although she was a bit hungry already, having skipped lunch.

“I’ll visit the kitchens and get a plate for you,” Ginny said. “I’ll say you’re not feeling well.”

After Ginny left, Hermione took a long shower to calm her nerves and crawled into bed with her homework, trying to lose herself in her Transfiguration essay. She worked steadily through her assignments until Ginny returned.

“Here you are,” Ginny said, pulling paper boxes out of her book bag. “A nice shepherd’s pie—still warm—and an apple turnover. And this.” She placed a bottle into Hermione’s hand. “The last leftover butterbeer from the party. Healer Ginny’s orders.”

“You’re a good friend,” Hermione said, digging in.

Ginny sat on the bed beside her. “Malfoy cornered me in the Entrance Hall after dinner.”

Hermione looked up in surprise, mouth full of shepherd’s pie. She swallowed and took a gulp of butterbeer. “Was he angry?”


Hermione sniffed skeptically.

“I told him you burned his note without reading it,” Ginny went on. “He really wanted to see you, followed me all the way here. I thought he was going to try to break into the tower.”

Hermione sighed. The man had truly gone around the bend.

“Ron … he came by while I was arguing with the git. Don’t worry, Ron didn’t hear anything,” Ginny reassured her. “Malfoy’s presence alone was enough to wind him up.”

“What did Ron do?”

Ginny rolled her eyes. “He started growling, telling Malfoy to get the hell out, accusing him of writing the bloody message. Malfoy stayed pretty calm until Ron told him to stay away from you, that Malfoy wasn’t worthy to be in the same space as you. Then Malfoy slammed him against the wall.”

Hermione gasped.
“The Fat Lady started screaming, and then Peeves showed up and started insulting them both.” Ginny continued. “Ron started making these wild swings at Malfoy, and I could tell that Malfoy was pulling his own punches.”

“Probably knew he’d be expelled,” Hermione said. “Fighting would violate his probation.”

“Yeah. Anyway, I told Malfoy to get the hell out, and he gave me this look …”

“Then what?” Hermione asked feebly, imagining some sort of fiendfyre spell and Malfoy packing his trunk for Azkaban.

Ginny shrugged. “He said, ‘Tell her I’m sorry.’ And he left.”

“He said what?”

“I know!” Ginny shook her head. “I hate to say it, but he sounded sincere.”

Hermione groaned. “Ron is going to be revolting tomorrow. My fucking hero.” She finished the pie and apple turnover and drained the bottle of butterbeer.

“What are you going to do?” Ginny asked.

“I’m going to bed,” Hermione said tiredly, vanishing the boxes and cutlery. She gave Ginny another hug. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“It’ll be okay,” Ginny said. “He’s just a stupid ferret, after all.”

Lying in her bed, Hermione felt overwhelmingly homesick. She wished her mother would appear with hot chocolate and a hug. She wished she knew what had set Malfoy off like that. He’d been fine, and then he seemed to … lose control. She wished she’d been able to study more of the Codex before the Slytherin went sex-crazed. She wished there was another Hogwarts student good enough to help with her experimental potion. Most of all, she wished she could feel that burning anger again, rather than this sick feeling that she’d lost some kind of friend. Stupid. Finally, she drifted off to sleep, dreaming of eagle owls laden with apple turnovers, and ancient runic manuscripts burning in a giant bonfire.

Chapter End Notes

Brace yourselves—it gets worse …
Hermione slipped down to breakfast early the next morning, hoping to eat quickly and return to Gryffindor Tower until Ancient Runes. But she was still discovered outside the Great Hall doors by a handsome Slytherin, thankfully not Malfoy.

“How’re you doing?” Theo said, striding toward her. “You weren’t at dinner last night. Ginny said you were ill.”

“Just tired,” she said. “Nothing to worry about.”

He gave her an impish grin. “We’ll have to find better reasons than studying to stay up late.”

“Perhaps.” She couldn’t help smiling back.

“In the meantime, I’ve caught up in Transfiguration and Herbology, and Slughorn is helping me brew two potions after dinner tonight.”

Hermione was pleased. “Then there’s only our Defense Against the Dark Arts seminar. That’s today, and trust me, it has not been demanding. Just remember, ‘Love is the only defense.’”

Theo chuckled. “I’m looking forward to that class.”

“That makes one of us.” Hermione was beginning to think Bluebell was another Professor Trelawney.

“I want to thank you properly,” Theo said, shifting a shoulder bag almost as weighty as Hermione’s own. “Would you care to go to Hogsmeade with me sometime?”

Hermione hesitated. Her last date in Hogsmeade hadn’t gone well, and an outing with Theo would only cause more talk. She wavered, considering putting him off. Then she saw Malfoy’s tall form emerge from the dungeons and pause beside the House Hourglass cabinet.

“I’d love to go to Hogsmeade with you,” Hermione said loudly. She leaned into Theo and kissed him on the cheek. “See you in Potions,” she whispered with a wide smile. Before Theo could respond, she flounced into the Great Hall and sat at the Gryffindor table, her back to the Slytherins, flushed with her own recklessness. That’s how much I want you, Malfoy.

Ginny showed up soon afterward, sitting opposite her. “Both Malfoy and Theo are staring, and Malfoy looks particularly dangerous,” she said, keeping her voice low.

“And Blaise?” Hermione asked.

Ginny rolled her eyes. “Yes, he’s looking over here too. There must be something in the water. I met Blaise in the Astronomy Tower last night and he had this subtle vibe, like being kissed by him was this great honor …. I finally had enough and walked out.”

“Subtle,” Hermione said, gloomily stirring her porridge. “I’d kill for subtle.”

“Well, I’ve had it with Slytherins,” Ginny poured herself a goblet of pumpkin juice. “I can’t wait until Saturday’s match. We’ll flatten them.”
“We sure will,” Ron said, sliding into the bench beside Hermione. “Hey Hermione, that ferret tried to sneak into Gryffindor Tower last night, but I sent him packing.”

Ginny snorted, drawing a glare from Ron. He clenched his fists and turned around to look at the Slytherin table. “Keep your eyes to yourselves, you gits,” he muttered, turning back.

“Hey, save it for the field, Ron,” Ginny said.

Ron grinned. “They have no chance on Saturday. With those new Chasers of ours—”

He and Ginny launched into a detailed Quidditch discussion, squabbling about plays against the Slytherins. Bored, Hermione finished her porridge and pulled out her LOOP notebook, its open pages wrinkled and creased. She smoothed them with her wand, then fished out her pen. There had been no chance that morning to write Five Things to Look Forward To. Today’s list would be easy: 1) Not looking at Malfoy. 2) Not speaking to Malfoy. 3) Not thinking of Malfoy …

Hermione froze, fingers clenched on the notebook. Scribbled in the margins of her draft “Organization Is Its Own Reward” essay was a single note, written in an elegant, loopy hand that was horrifyingly familiar:

“Like a good Organizational Plan, a secret torrid affair can be its own reward.”

Her breath caught. He knew. He’d read her notebook, even the parts about him. Especially the parts about him. It would take more than a few random dots in the runes to fool that man. That was why he’d been so confident in the charms classroom—he’d read about her feelings. He knew. Hermione’s face burned with shame, then anger, and she bolted upright, turning toward the Slytherin table. Theo looked over at her with concern, but Malfoy was already gone.

“How does that feel, Draco Malfoy?”

“Like a good Organizational Plan, a secret torrid affair can be its own reward.”

Her breath caught. He knew. He’d read her notebook, even the parts about him. Especially the parts about him. It would take more than a few random dots in the runes to fool that man. That was why he’d been so confident in the charms classroom—he’d read about her feelings. He knew. Hermione’s face burned with shame, then anger, and she bolted upright, turning toward the Slytherin table. Theo looked over at her with concern, but Malfoy was already gone.

“Hermione?” Ginny asked.

“I forgot my homework,” she said, shoving her LOOP notebook back into her bag. She would throw the wretched thing into the fire, the first chance she got. She swung her leg over the bench and stormed out of the Great Hall to Ron’s cry: “Hermione never forgets her homework!”

She pounded up the stairs to Ancient Runes, and there he was, leaning against a wall, arms crossed. His shoulders were slumped, his head down, but Hermione barely registered this unusual posture. She halted in the middle of the hallway and threw her bag aside.

“You,” she snarled.

He straightened. “Granger, look, I’m so—”

“You.” The single syllable dripped with vitriol. “You read my notebook. You read my thoughts.”

Malfoy stepped into the middle of the hallway, facing her. “Now, Granger, it was open, I just …” He trailed off as Hermione began to circle him, and he eyed her warily.

“So clever, aren’t you, Draco Malfoy?” Her voice was icy. “So smooth with the turn of phrase.” She completed her circuit and just looked at Malfoy, unblinking, and she could see his Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed.

“Yes,” she said softly. “Everything in that notebook is true, is that what you want to hear?” She advanced, and now he was the one stepping back.

“Do you want to know all the fantasies, Malfoy? Is that what you want?” She inched closer. “Go
ahead, pull them out of my mind—I’m a rubbish Occlumens. Would you like to watch all the imagined stolen kisses? The imagined games of search-for-the-snitch?”

Malfoy choked. “Granger …”

“But why stop there?” she went on, relentless. She didn’t know what her own face looked like just then, but Malfoy’s was bloodless. “Go on, Malfoy, take out your wand. Look at all my fantasies—about you, about Theo … Ron … Harry …” She smirked. “Professor Snape in Sixth Year?”

Malfoy looked away, his hair falling over his eyes. “Please, Granger …”

“No?” Hermione had him backed against the wall now, his hands at his sides, palms flat against the stone. “That’s not what you wanted? No, you just wanted to read a few warm thoughts about yourself. And then use them on me.” She laughed harshly. “It is truly a brave new world, one where Draco Malfoy tries to seduce Hermione Granger. A secret affair with a Mudblood. It must be true, mustn’t it? I have it in writing.”

Malfoy cleared his throat. “Granger, don’t,” he said, trying to sound stern. “You are taking this all wrong. You have to—”

“I don’t have to do anything,” she said. Her rage faded, leaving her empty. Malfoy’s face blurred.

“Granger, please listen.” Malfoy was pleading now. “I never meant to—”

He broke off as McGonagall appeared, heels clacking and hat bobbing, with the rest of the class trailing behind. She gave Malfoy and Hermione a sharp look before opening the classroom door and shooing the other students inside like baby ducks.

The interruption helped Malfoy regain some poise, and when Hermione looked back at him, he was frowning down at her. “Obviously, I went about this the wrong way—” he began.

“Stop. Don’t even try it,” she snarled, pulling out her wand. “You don’t care about me, Draco Malfoy. You don’t care about my feelings. You only care about your own dick, so why don’t you just fuck yourself?”

Her voice had risen during this speech, until she was shouting the last words, a spark flared from the wand she was now pointing at Malfoy, and an invisible force knocked her backward into the wall. She fell on her rear, gasping, wand clattering to the stone floor.

“How dare you?” she cried.

“I didn’t!” Malfoy’s face was shocked. He stepped forward, hand out to help her up, but she grabbed her wand instead and scrambled to her feet.

“Don’t touch me!” she shouted.

“Miss Granger! Mr. Malfoy!” McGonagall snapped. The Headmistress stood in the doorway, arms crossed, her face a thundercloud. “If you are quite finished!”

“Quite finished, Headmistress,” Hermione said. She swung away from Malfoy, grabbed her bag and entered the classroom, head held high.

A harsh curse resounded from the hallway, and the class heard McGonagall cry out, “Mr. Malfoy!”

When McGonagall reentered, Malfoy was not with her. He didn’t appear in Potions, either, and
Neville counted seconds while Hermione and Slughorn coached more pairs toward successful Fiducias. Hermione felt like a block of ice inside; she could hardly listen in Transfiguration and skipped lunch again to have a good cry in a warded bathroom. Then she washed her face, found Ginny to heal her swollen eyes, and they headed to the Defense Against the Dark Arts seminar.

Theo was outside the classroom when Hermione arrived, and touched her elbow to draw her away from Ginny.

“I hear you told Draco to fuck himself outside Ancient Runes,” he said.

“Yes,” Hermione said, glad the rumor mill had actually gotten it right this time.

“I’m sorry to have missed it.”

“I’ll do it again, if you like.”

Again that impish grin. “I’ll hold you to that.”

“Time for class, everyone!” Bluebell caroled from inside.

Malfoy was inside, lounging in his yellow beanbag as usual, closely watched by his nervous classmates. When Hermione entered with Theo, the stares shifted to her. She willed herself to stay calm and took her seat between Ron and Malfoy.

Bluebell had conjured a beanbag for Theo next to Luna, so that he was opposite Hermione. He looked at her, eyes twinkling, as Bluebell reviewed her “Love Can Defeat Any Evil” thesis. Then Ron read aloud Hermione’s scroll about Malfoy’s lovable qualities.

Malfoy’s scroll on Ron, delivered in frigid tones, listed his “absurd yet serviceable small owl”, his “excellent care for his substandard Quidditch broom” and a veiled, suggestive compliment for Ginny. Ron’s face heated, but he said nothing, and Bluebell looked satisfied.

“And now, Mr. Nott,” the fairy said, turning to Theo, “why don’t you list three things you love about a classmate?”

“Which classmate, Professor?” he asked calmly, the picture of dignity even on a fat pink beanbag.

“Anyone you like, dear boy.”

Theo spoke in a clipped voice. “I love how Hermione Granger’s curls elude any attempts to capture them, no matter how large the ribbon or hairclip. I love how she gives every person she speaks with, whether friend or foe, her entire attention, staring them down until they can hardly look at her. I love how her formidable brain constantly wars with her feelings, making her every statement unpredictable.” He looked at Bluebell. “Will that do?”

If Hermione thought her scene with Malfoy that morning was embarrassing, this was a thousand times worse. Theo thought that? What had she gotten herself into? What was it with these Slytherins? Ron, to her right, was hissing like a boiling teakettle, while Malfoy on her other side was rigid and silent.

Bluebell clapped her hands. “Well, isn’t that just lovely! Splendid to have older students who can express their feelings so! And it is a perfect introduction to our next lesson: Unpredictability.

“Most humans are very predictable, even witches and wizards,” Bluebell continued. “Every day they eat the same things, take the same routes to work or school, even repeat the same
conversations. So, it only stands to reason that they would fight in predictable ways as well.”

The whole class sat stunned by yet another trenchant display of logic by the flighty fairy. Even Hermione was impressed.

“With the most cursory of study, a witch or wizard can predict what his or her foe would do in nearly any situation.” The fairy rose about a foot in the air and spun slowly, letting her words sink in. “When you are defending yourself against a practitioner of the Dark Arts, and you are plotting your next move, your question should not be ‘what spell is the most powerful’ but ‘what spell is the least predictable?”

She spun again. “Can anyone give me an example of this concept in action?”

Ron, of all people, raised his hand. “In First Year, we were fighting a troll, and Harry Potter stuck his wand up the troll’s nose.”

Hermione was instantly taken back to that day. She was so certain she could handle the troll, and only ended up pressed up against a bathroom wall, waiting for death, when Harry and Ron burst in. The day they defeated the troll. The day they became friends. She reached out and took Ron’s hand and squeezed it, tears in her eyes, feeling the icy block in her chest thaw somewhat. He patted her hand, smiling, and she put her head on his shoulder. Some things she could trust, anyway.

“Very good!” Bluebell clapped her small hands, beaming. “In many cases, a simple, less powerful action or spell is quite effective if it is unpredictable. Whereas a powerful, yet expected, move may fail to find its mark, yes? Can anyone else give an example of an unpredictable response?”

Hermione could think of six examples off the top of her head, but she kept her hand down for once. She was more interested in hearing others’ accounts. Malfoy sat stiffly beside her, his hands clenched. She ignored him.

“My father had a story from the Battle of Hogwarts …” Ginny began, and swallowed. “He told me how Kingsley Shacklebolt faced a Death Eater Apparating through a window. Instead of aiming a curse at him, Kingsley cast a momentum-reversing spell … sent the Death Eater flying backward to his death.”

The entire class looked at Malfoy then, clearly imagining him flying backward through Bluebell’s window to his death. Except for Hermione, who stared at a point above Theo’s head.

Ernie Macmillan recalled using *Flipendo* during a classroom duel once, while someone else described how Parvati used a Body-Bind Curse on Dolohov. Lavender trembled in her beanbag and said nothing.

“Wonderful, wonderful examples. Let’s try an exercise,” Bluebell said. “Everyone pair up and stand opposite each other, wands out. Each pair will be given an advanced offensive spell, which can be defended by any minor defensive spell.”

Hermione ran through her mental catalogue of minor spells, which were extensive. Ron looked at her, and she nodded. Partners. The other students paired off quickly, leaving Malfoy with Theo, to Hermione’s amusement. The two Slytherins looked eager to face off.

Ron tugged at her hand to gain her attention. “Go easy on me, Mi,” he whispered. “Your simplest spell could drop a horse.”

Bluebell flitted between them. “Miss Granger, you are to cast *Petrificus Totalus.*”
Ron groaned. “Excellent,” Hermione said loudly. “I’ve found *Petrificus Totalus* very effective.” She turned to Ron and lifted her wand slightly. “*Petrific—*”

Tickles exploded around her ribcage, causing her to drop her wand with a clatter. “Ron,” she gasped, giggling uncontrollably. “Ron, stop …”

Ron looked down at her, grinning. “Gotcha,” he said, ending the spell. She leaned against him, still giggling.

“Good one,” she said.

Chaos had broken out among the other partners: Neville had beaten off a *Levicorpus* with an *Augmenti* water spell so powerful that it soaked Luna completely. Lavender aimed a surprisingly well-cast *Confundo* at Ginny, who spun in circles, tripped over Ernie (who was on the grassy floor recovering from a stinging jinx) and fell into a giant daisy.

Theo, meanwhile, had cast a stunning spell at Malfoy, who managed to get off a leg-locker curse at the same time. Theo’s spell went wide, smashing a globe on top of a tall cabinet. Malfoy now stood over Theo, wand aimed at his throat, while Theo lay on his back, legs snapped together. The blond Slytherin looked every inch the deadly Death Eater, and everyone was staring.

“Mr. Malfoy,” Bluebell said. “Come now.”

Malfoy flicked his wand at Theo, whose legs shot straight up, then out, then up again.

“Mr. Malfoy,” the fairy repeated. Malfoy’s lip curled but he released his partner.

“Now reverse positions,” Bluebell instructed.

Hermione had been the first to turn away. She now faced Ron, twirling her wand like a baton. “Look out, Weasley,” she said with an evil smile.

“Take it easy, Mi,” Ron said nervously.

“*Expelliarmus,*” Bluebell told them as she flitted by. Out of the corner of her eye, Hermione saw Malfoy cast a *Carpe Retractum* charm, a fiery rope spinning out of his wand, which Theo transformed into a harmless snake. Theo muttered a few words, and the snake immediately slithered out a half-open window. Hermione couldn’t help but stare. Theo was a Parselmouth?

“Hermione?” Ron asked. “Are you ready?”

She turned back to him and grinned. “Always.”

Ron swallowed and held up his wand. “*Ex—*”

“*Wingardium Leviosa,*” Hermione said crisply, barely moving her wand, and Ron shot straight up, hovering facedown just a few inches from the ceiling.

“That’s not fair!” Ron shouted down at her. “Too advanced!”

“We learned it in First Year!” she called back.

“Yeah, with a feather!”

“I don’t know my own strength! Levi-O-sa!”
“Let me down!” Ron yelled. She brought him down slowly to the floor. “Little swot,” he said fondly.

She smiled. It was good to be friends again.

Chapter End Notes

A book containing a character’s secret thoughts is like a loaded gun in this type of story—if it’s introduced in the first act, it’s bound to go off! Objects, especially personal objects, are big in this story, revealing so much about character. Draco and Hermione, in particular, will continue to squabble over objects, everything from the House Hourglasses to six bushels of clover blossoms.

And Malfoy’s lucky he’d left breakfast by the time Hermione read her LOOP, or she would have been screaming at him in the Great Hall.
Malfy didn’t approach Hermione after DADA class or after dinner, but she knew it couldn’t last. He was just waiting for his opportunity and found it that very night.

A pack of First Years had broken into the potions cupboard that afternoon and lifted Slughorn’s entire store of musflossum, also known as “squeaky flowers.” If you heavily sniff a squeaky flower, your voice gets high and squeaky like a mouse’s. It was like kids sucking on helium balloons in the muggle world.

These particular students ran off with about twenty squeaky flowers and spent a hilarious hour squealing at the top of their lungs out by Hagrid’s hut. The high voices maddened Fang, who broke out of the hut and leaped on a thestral. The thestral was hitched to a carriage, preparing to bring back a student who’d left on a family emergency. When Fang fell on the thestral, the winged animal took to the air, throwing off Fang and breaking the carriage shafts. The carriage smashed against the hut and the thestral disappeared for two days.

The students involved (all Hufflepuffs, who could never resist funny voices) were then set to write 100 sentences as detention. Slughorn was supposed to oversee them, but he was busy helping Theo brew his makeup potions and asked his favorite student to step in.

Which was why Hermione was sitting on a teacher’s desk Tuesday night, knitting a long, brown scarf while eight children hunched over their parchments, scribbling the words she’d placed on the board: “I will not sniff squeaky flowers to speak in mouse voices and upset dogs who fall on thestrals and damage valuable property and inconvenience busy Eighth-Year students.” The students had groaned over the length of her sentence, but Hermione found it perfectly appropriate.

She was knitting away, unable to leave for another half-hour, and so, of course, Malfoy strolled into the classroom. Slughorn probably told him about the detention. Hermione was truly beginning to dislike the Slytherin head.

“Granger,” Malfoy said amiably, as if they’d never had words. He sent an amused glance both at Hermione’s knitting and the sentence on the board.

“Keep writing, Imogene,” Hermione said sharply to a redheaded girl who’d looked up, open-mouthed, at Malfoy’s entrance.

Malfoy moved to lean against the teacher’s desk, standing entirely too close to Hermione’s way of thinking. The look in his eyes made her uncomfortably aware of her thin white jumper and form-fitting jeans, her hair piled messily on her head. Malfoy wore his usual black, his rolled-up shirtsleeves clearly revealing the Dark Mark on his forearm.

“You really do knit,” he said, eyeing the long needles. “I thought it was just another tale.”

“I have nothing to say to you,” Hermione said.

“Rather dull color,” he went on, tugging at the end of the brown scarf. “I hope it’s not for me.”

Hermione glared as her knitting needles clicked.
“Granger,” he said low. “I need to talk to you.”

“I’m busy.”

“You’re knitting and watching dingbats.”

“Two pastimes infinitely more interesting than talking to you.”

“Don’t worry, Granger,” he said with a smile. “I won’t try to seduce you here.”

“Malfoy!” Hermione cast a muffliato spell to avoid being overheard. The redheaded girl looked disappointed. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t hex you across the room.”

“You’d be modeling poor behavior. Adults should work out their differences amicably.”

“Like you did with Theo today?” she asked acidly. “Or Ron last night?”

“All right, you and I should work out our differences amicably. Without getting physical.” Another smile. “Unless you want to.”

Hermione shook her head. “You didn’t hear a word I said this morning.”

“I certainly did.” Malfoy’s face was suddenly all hard angles, his mouth a thin line. “I heard a version of myself I didn’t much care for. A man who would read a woman’s journal, use the information inside to manipulate her for sex, then force her to keep it secret because he’s ashamed of her. Really, Granger?”

“You read—”

He sighed loudly. “Yes, I read a bit of your precious book—who would have thought you were such a schemer? It was shocking, really … you sitting at that table working on the Codex, looking so prim and proper, while—”

“Is there an apology coming?” Hermione asked. “Because I have yet to hear one. But perhaps a Mudblood doesn’t deserve—”

“Don’t you dare put that word into my mouth. The fact that you’re a muggle-born—”

“A Mudblood!”

“Stop saying that word!” Malfoy snarled.

“Why not?” she yelled, leaping up to face him. “You taught it to me!”

The scraping of chairs caught their attention and Hermione and Malfoy turned to see the First Years lined up wide-eyed against the far wall, as far away as they could get.

Hermione glared at Malfoy. “Now look what you did. You scared them.”

“You scared them,” he muttered.

She lifted the muffliato spell. “It’s all right,” she said reassuringly. “Finish your sentences. Mr. Malfoy and I are just having a … disagreement.” The First Years looked at each other and slowly returned to their desks. Hermione perched herself on the teacher’s desk again and picked up her knitting. Maybe he’d get the hint.
No such luck. Malfoy continued to loom over her. “Look at me, Granger. Please.”

The last word drew Hermione’s eyes from her scarf. He had moved closer, one hand on the desk, the Dark Mark clear against his pale skin.

“I’m sorry,” he said, too low for the Hufflepuffs in the front row to hear, although they tried. “I’m sorry I read your book. I’m sorry I pushed you. I’m sorry I hurt you.”

Hermione turned her head away, and the Hufflepuffs under her sudden gaze began scribbling madly.

“Granger,” Malfoy said. She reluctantly looked back at him. His face wore that open expression she’d last seen at the Gryffindor portrait hole.

“Granger,” he repeated, “I’m far from reformed, but I’m not the monster you painted outside Ancient Runes, either.”

Hermione said nothing, and now it was Malfoy’s turn to look away. He sighed and joined her sitting on the desk, looking out at the rows of Hufflepuffs. The redheaded girl, Imogene, looked up from her parchment and gave him a tiny smile. His own lips quirked slightly. “Were we ever that small?” he mused.

“You were a right little shit,” Hermione said, winding yarn around her finger.

“I was,” he agreed. “And you, bursting into our train compartment … ‘Has anybody seen a toad?’” Malfoy asked in a high, fluting voice. He rolled his eyes. “As if any of us would be caught dead with a toad.”

“I should have turned you all into toads, and given one to Neville,” Hermione said.

He looked amused, then lowered his voice again. “Look, Granger, I know you don’t trust me anymore, if you ever really did,” he said. “But the muggle-borns here are in danger. You are in danger. You need to work on that potion, and I’m the only one who can help you.”

Hermione continued to knit, thinking, and Malfoy was silent as well. Finally, she put her needles down and cast another *muffliato* spell. Then she turned slightly to face Malfoy.

“You have a point,” she said, “but we’re at an impasse. You’re right, I don’t trust you. Unless you can prove you didn’t write the ‘Die Mudbloods’ message, you can’t help me.”

Malfoy frowned. “That makes no sense. Just because I acted like an idiot doesn’t make me a criminal. If that were the case, the Weasel would be in Azkaban.”

“Stop calling him that!”

“Ah, so quick to defend him,” Malfoy sneered.

“Yes, I am. Ron and I are friends. We’ve been friends for seven years. We’ve lasted through good times and bad, and we always will. Maybe you’ve never had that kind of friendship, but it’s real.”

Hermione turned back to her knitting and tried not to feel guilty. Maybe she shouldn’t have thrown his friendless state in his face, but honestly, he was always on her last nerve.

Malfoy slid off the desk and turned back to her. “Perhaps I did ruin everything, Granger. It’s probably better that way.” His fists clenched. “But you have to let me help you.”
“Then help me trust you,” she challenged. “You created the problem, then fix it.” She pointed a knitting needle at him. “Remember Fiducia? All trust has to be earned. Earn it, Draco Malfoy. For once in your fucking life, earn something.”

He met her eyes, glare for glare, brown against grey, then nodded. “Fine,” he snapped and stalked out of the room. The door slammed hard enough to make the desks shake.

Hermione turned back to the students, who had once again abandoned their sentences and were staring, open-mouthed. She waved her wand to lift the muffliato spell.

“Well?” she snapped. “Get back to work.”

“Are you going to forgive him? Whatever he did?” asked Imogene.

“You should forgive him,” said a snub-nosed blonde in the back.

“He’s very handsome,” said a third.

“Girls are so stupid,” said a boy with dark hair and an ink smudge on his nose. “He’s a total wanker.”

“Of course he is,” Imogene said. “But he likes her.”

“But she hates him.”

“That’s because she has taste …”

“She doesn’t hate him …”

“Enough!” Hermione yelled. “Go back to your House—it’s almost curfew. Professor Slughorn will oversee your extended detention tomorrow since you were too distracted to finish your sentences today!”

The students obediently gathered their things and exited the room, chattering:

“I don’t know why he likes her, anyway, she’s so crabby …”

“He just wants her body …”

“You’re a pig, Percival …”

Hermione let her head drop into her hands. Sweet Merlin, she was no smarter than that pack of squeaky idiots. She had just issued a challenge to a Malfoy, and only Godric knew what would happen next.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, little Hufflepuffs, and welcome to our show!

I bet you all were wondering if you’d ever see anything from the summary (besides the blood messages and the Dramione).

UP NEXT: A Gryffindor fracas at lunch.
“You rather let us all down over at the Slytherin table,” Theo told her. “We were hoping you’d tell Weasley to fuck himself. I lost ten galleons.”
Hermione’s sleep that night was plagued with unpleasant dreams, less powerful than the nightmares she’d suffered right after the War, but disturbing nonetheless. She kept dreaming of danger, herself running from danger, images of her parents in danger, her friends in danger. Then a particularly vivid scene of Malfoy in danger—no specific danger, just a feeling—and calling her name. This last dream finally woke her, and she found herself sweating and gasping in the dark.

She was in a vile mood at breakfast, and Malfoy’s absence in the Great Hall strangely didn’t make her feel any better. She was poking at her food, letting Ron and Ginny’s Quidditch talk wash over her, when suddenly the voices around her stopped. Hermione looked up to see McGonagall standing beside her.

“Miss Granger, if you will accompany me, please,” she said and turned away without waiting for an answer.

Hermione exchanged a baffled look with Ginny and stood up, shouldering her bag and trotting after the Headmistress. McGonagall moved quickly for her age; Hermione was panting once they reached the top of the stairs on the third floor.

She stopped and stared; a thin black mist blocked the side corridor leading to Ancient Runes. A figure emerged, pale against the mist, and her eyes narrowed. Malfoy.

“Thank you for coming, Headmistress. It’s this way,” he said.

“What is?” Hermione asked. “Did you conjure this mist?”

“Don’t be afraid,” Malfoy said.

“I’m not,” she snapped. McGonagall stepped through the mist without hesitation, and Hermione followed.

The Headmistress had stopped on the other side, and Hermione stepped around her to see better. Then she also stopped and stared at the opposite wall, the wide stretch of stone at the end of the corridor now covered in blood-red letters: “DIE MUDBLOODS.”

“Not again,” she breathed.

“Explain, Mr. Malfoy.” McGonagall’s voice was cold.

“I can’t.” Malfoy moved past them, stepping closer to the letters, then turned. His face was composed, but one hand clutched the strap of his leather bag tightly. “It was here when I arrived at the classroom.”

“Indeed, Mr. Malfoy.”

He frowned. “As soon as I saw the letters, I blocked the passageway and sent a student to find you.”

McGonagall didn’t answer, merely handed a parchment to Hermione:

\textit{Headmistress,}
Please come to the Ancient Runes classroom immediately.

Bring Granger.

Draco Malfoy

Hermione bit her lip. Malfoy’s actions, if believed, demonstrated surprisingly good judgment. McGonagall stepped forward to inspect the letters more closely, and Malfoy edged closer to Hermione. She gave him a warning look but he just rolled his eyes, pulling his hand out of his robe pocket. He held a small potions vial, half full with red liquid.

Blood from the message. Hermione stared at him. Damn, another good move. Malfoy stepped closer, pressing the vial into her hand, his fingers lightly brushing her palm, before moving away again. She clutched the vial tightly.

“Miss Granger.” McGonagall turned back to face them and Hermione hastily tucked the vial away. “Would you be so kind as to ask Professor Bluebell to join me here? There will, of course, be no Ancient Runes class this morning. You may consider this a free period.”

“Yes, Headmistress,” Hermione said.

“Mr. Malfoy, you will remain with me, please,” McGonagall said, looking back at the letters again.

Hermione turned and walked through the mist without a backward glance. It would be daft of him to write that message, then immediately inform the Headmistress and Hogwarts’ Poster Girl Mudblood. The ferret will be fine without me.

***

Malfoy reappeared at lunch, and Hermione tamped down her relief. The castle was buzzing with news of the second message, and Dennis Creevey was especially venomous about Malfoy’s guilt.

“There is absolutely no proof that Malfoy wrote those messages,” Hermione said calmly as she salted her chips.

The hate in Dennis’ eyes almost made her quail. “That Death Eater wants to carry on Voldemort’s work,” he hissed. “He wants to kill all of us muggle-borns!”

“Enough, Dennis,” Ginny said sharply. “Malfoy isn’t trying to kill anybody.”

“Now there’s a switch,” Ron said. Dennis barked a laugh, but Ginny, Hermione and Neville all frowned at Ron.

“What?” Ron asked. “Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten Sixth Year. You know, when he tried to kill Dumbledore? He nearly killed me, too!”
“He didn’t, though,” Hermione said. “He hasn’t killed anyone.”

“That we know of,” Ron said darkly. Dennis nodded. “You saw what went on at Malfoy Manor, Hermione. Merlin, you were—”

“You’re prejudiced, Ronald,” Hermione cut in. She was not going to talk about Malfoy Manor. “You don’t like Malfoy, so—”

“You’re spot on there,” Ron said, slamming down his goblet. “He’s more than just a git, he’s dangerous, and you talk about him like he’s some kind of wounded bird. It makes me sick, watching you and Ginny smile at all those Slytherins …”

“Exactly!” Hermione cried. “You’re prejudiced! You refuse to see that anyone has changed. Well, we’ve all changed—Malfoy, Theo, Ginny, Neville, all of us.” She stood and grabbed her bag. “Everyone but you, Ron! When the hell are you going to grow up?”

She slammed her way out of the Great Hall and into the Entrance Hall. The sound of footsteps echoed behind her and she halted, rubbing the ridges on her left arm, wondering what else the day had in store for her. “Sod off, Malfoy, I’m in no—”

“I’m not Draco, I’m happy to say,” said Theo’s voice.

Hermione turned around. “I’m happy too.”

“You rather let us all down over at the Slytherin table. We were hoping you’d tell Weasley to fuck himself. I lost ten galleons.”

She eyed Theo carefully. “Do you think Malfoy wrote those messages?”

“It would violate his probation, wouldn’t it? He’d never be that stupid.”

“Exactly,” Hermione said. “I—”

The Great Hall doors burst open, and students streamed into the Entrance Hall. “Let’s go,” Theo said, taking her hand. “You have Herbology in the greenhouses next, right?”

She nodded. Theo had Care of Magical Creatures, so she let him lead her up the short staircase to exit the castle. A tingling instinct made Hermione turn back, and there was Malfoy entering the Entrance Hall, walking in an empty ring as students flowed warily around him. He halted, and he could clearly see her and Theo, she knew, standing above the crowd, their hands clasped. And she could see Malfoy’s upturned face, his clear eyes holding hers, giving nothing away, the afternoon sun on his hair. Hermione swallowed and turned away, trying to ignore the twisting feeling in her chest. She held Theo’s hand more tightly, fingers curled around his smooth, broad palm, refusing to remember another, rougher palm on her throat, and the words. “I know you think of me …”

***

Herbology had become one of Hermione’s favorite classes for two very good reasons: 1) Professor
Sprout was adamant about hand-raising during recitations, and she sat nowhere near Draco Malfoy.

But this educational idyll was shattered that afternoon with Professor Sprout’s announcement of an advanced seminar in Herbology. McGonagall and the Ministry had given Sprout permission this year to allow select students to cultivate a rare but volatile plant.

“What is the plant, Professor?” Blaise asked, but Sprout very properly ignored him and nodded toward Hermione’s raised hand.

“Thank you, Professor,” Hermione said, savoring a small moment of justice in an anything-but-just world. “What is the plant?”

“I cannot reveal the plant’s name right now,” Sprout said, “but we’ll be growing three specimens in the small greenhouse on the west side.”

Everyone looked to the right-hand glass wall to see a small structure outside, its windows painted over in a rainbow of colors.

“Only six students are qualified to study this plant,” she went on, unrolling a piece of parchment. “I received the last parent waiver by owl this morning, so we can move forward.” She looked up from the parchment. “Any of you six can, of course, decline the new assignment and remain with the rest of the class. This assignment is for extra credit and you will be expected to write essays on the plants studied in our regular classes as well.”

Hermione’s pulse jumped. Parent waivers? This plant must be really dangerous. She was so busy reviewing all the dangerous plants she knew, from Nightshade to Devil’s Snare, that she nearly missed Sprout reading aloud the names.

“Granger.” Hermione expected no less.

“Greengrass.”

Also expected. In addition to her beauty and Quidditch skills, Astoria Greengrass was known for her talent in Herbology. Her family, Hermione knew, had planted the famous Greengrass Gardens, the most lavish botanical preserves in the Wizarding World. Hermione had never seen the gardens; they could be viewed by invitation only, and such invitations were never extended to Muggle-borns or Half-bloods.

“Longbottom,” she said. No surprise there. He’d been helping Sprout prepare for the lesson.

“Malfoy.”

A ripple ran through the class, and there were scattered hisses. Of course. He’d been so quiet in this class, bearing Luna’s chatter with remarkable fortitude, that Hermione had dared to hope that he wouldn’t qualify for this special group. No such luck. The Slytherin hadn’t so much as looked at her in classes all day.

Sprout rounded out the group with two Seventh-Year Slytherin boys, then addressed the rest of the class. “Please review the chapter on the Venomous Tentacula until I return.” She led the chosen six out of the main greenhouse and into the smaller structure.

There was little to see, really. No plants, just a large cupboard and three long, wooden tables with stools. A weak sun shone through the greenhouse’s only clear window above.
“Take your seats, please,” Sprout said briskly. “I’ve divided you into pairs, alphabetically by last name: Granger and Greengrass, Longbottom and Malfoy, Stern and Wheelwright.”

Hermione glanced at Neville with concern, but her friend just shrugged and joined Malfoy at a table. Hermione found herself directly facing Malfoy, but at least she didn’t have to work with him.

She was so thankful to avoid Malfoy, in fact, it didn’t even hit her that she was paired with Astoria until the young woman took her seat, eyeing Hermione with regal disdain.

“Malfoy has a very specific type,” Ginny’s voice echoed in her thoughts. “Slutty, gorgeous, rich, pureblood bitch.” Hermione couldn’t help but wonder how far things had gone between Malfoy and the tall beauty opposite her. Astoria’s hair, a rich, golden color, drew back from an arrow-straight center part to shining braids that wound around her head. Diamonds glittered in her ears and peeped above the collar of her uniform shirt.

Hermione didn’t know Astoria very well; she was just Daphne Greengrass’ little sister, and Daphne was vain and idle, not worth noticing. This Greengrass, however, could not be ignored. Ginny considered Astoria a formidable opponent in Quidditch and Hermione had seen her performance in Herbology, the only class they shared.

I wonder what she was like last year, Hermione thought. Did you follow the Carrows, Astoria? Crucio innocent students? Do you miss those days, a school free of Mudbloods, with plenty of frightened children to terrorize?

Such questions filled her mind as she held Astoria’s tilted blue eyes, now slightly wary. Your money and blood mean nothing to me, Hermione told the other woman silently. Go ahead, start something. I’m waiting.

She didn’t know how long the staring contest would have lasted, but one of the glass panes behind Professor Sprout snapped loudly, and the entire class jumped. Hermione tore her gaze from Astoria’s to see a large, multi-branched crack in the pink-painted glass.

“Dear me,” Sprout said, flustered. She repaired the glass with a flick of her wand.

Hermione bit her lip, silently cursing her lack of control, her eyes meeting Malfoy’s briefly. His brow was creased slightly as he watched her and Astoria. A parchment and quill appeared on the table before Hermione and she was grateful to have something else to look at.

“Parents of all students under 18 have signed a waiver, but the three 18-year-olds here must sign their own waivers releasing the Ministry of Magic from any liability,” Sprout said.

Hermione scanned the document quickly: typical boilerplate, promising not to sue the Ministry if she was injured or disfigured in any way. She also would sign away all rights for her family to sue on her behalf if she suffered a “fatal incident.” What kind of plant was this?

She shrugged inwardly and picked up the quill; she and her friends had cheated death every year they attended this school. She highly doubted a plant would finish her off now.

The three signed documents flew into Professor Sprout’s hand, and there was a short silence while everyone waited for something to happen.

“All the waivers include a confidentiality clause,” Sprout said. “The parchment has been magically treated so if any student shares information about this plant with others, or smuggles class material out of this greenhouse, there will be … uncomfortable consequences.”

Neville turned slightly to grin at Hermione, who smiled back, thinking of Marietta Escombe and Dumbledore’s Army. Malfoy looked at the two of them with narrowed eyes.
“We will be studying a semi-sentient plant,” Sprout went on. “Can anyone tell me what that is?”

Hermione and Neville raised their hands in the same instant, so she didn’t mind that Sprout selected her friend. “Semi-sentient plants can perceive or feel things,” Neville said breathlessly. “Some, like the Parrot Pod, can even communicate.”

“Yes, ten points to Gryffindor,” Sprout said, smiling. “While the Parrot Pod is fairly harmless, often only repeating the words spoken to it, the plant we will be studying is rather more aggressive.”

She waved her wand and a single parchment appeared on each table. It was a drawing of a flowering plant in a pot. Its branches curled like vines, curving over the pot and reaching outwards. The blossoms’ petals were broad and also curled, with sharp thorns were clearly visible.

Sprout waved her wand again, and two thin books appeared on each table. Hermione picked hers up—it was titled The Way of the Winkweed.

She looked up in surprise; she’d never heard of that plant. The faintest of lines appeared on Astoria’s brow.

“Winkweed is an extremely rare plant,” Sprout began in a lecturing tone, and there was a small rustle as the students rushed to take notes. “Its proper name is huota winchan, and it is also known as—”

“The Hoodwink plant,” Astoria said.

“Hand up please, Miss Greengrass,” Sprout said. “But yes, you are correct, it is also known as the Hoodwink plant. Is there anything else you would like to tell us, Miss Greengrass?”

“It is very dangerous,” Astoria said frostily. “And illegal to cultivate.”

“Yes,” Sprout said. “But while the plant remains extremely rare, it is beginning to spread beyond the dark, cool, isolated environments it favors. Therefore, the Ministry is allowing a select number of herbologists and students to study it. Fortunately, Winkweed is a fragile plant and difficult to pollinate, but it is aggressive, if not vicious, if threatened.

“Your assignment today is to read the first chapter of The Way of the Winkweed and label the drawing before you. This class will have no homework—all reading and studying will be accomplished in class. You may proceed.”

Sprout turned and left the room, and every student immediately opened his or her book. Hermione was disappointed that they wouldn’t get a glimpse of the plant today, but perhaps that was best. She immediately dove into the text: Winkweed was discovered in 1567 by a fur trapper in the Caucus Mountains and …

Hermione looked up suddenly. “Greengrass, what are you doing?” she hissed. Her partner had picked up her quill and was about to mark the drawing.

“The assignment, Granger.” Astoria gave her a mocking smile. “Professor assigns, students complete. Surely you are familiar with the concept.”

“Vaguely, thank you,” Hermione smiled back. “But the instructions are to read the chapter, then mark the drawing. Note the conjunctive adverb ‘then’ in that sentence. Surely you are familiar with that concept.”
Astoria waved a dismissive hand. “Unnecessary. This is obviously the stem, for example.”

“Nothing about this plant is obvious,” Hermione said. “I’d never heard of Winkweed and you obviously know next to nothing. Making assumptions sounds like a quick way to end up in St. Mungo’s.”

“And I thought Gryffindors had courage …”

“And I thought Slytherins had an ounce of self-preservation.”

The two women glared at each other until Astoria set down her quill and picked up her book. Hermione read through the first chapter, pleased to be reading more quickly than Astoria. The other woman had been right about the stem, of course, but that wasn’t the point. Hermione had hoped to read the second chapter while waiting for her partner, but the rest of the book was empty, no doubt enchanted to reveal its chapters one at a time.

Astoria closed her book and looked down her nose at Granger. Even sitting, Hermione was a few inches shorter. “I assume we may mark the drawing now, unless the Brightest Witch of Our Age has an objection.” Her voice dripped with acid.

“None at all,” Hermione said brightly. “You may label the stem if you like. It seems like a fairly conventional plant in terms of structure.”

“Yes, that was readily apparent to the discerning eye,” Astoria said, marking other parts of the drawing with quick efficiency.

The two women worked in silence, caught in a subtle competition to provide the most labels. Perhaps this seminar won’t be so bad, Hermione thought, as long as they didn’t talk. Neville and Malfoy had also discovered the virtues of silent partnership; they had finished their drawing without exchanging more than a few words.

Sprout reentered the greenhouse. “Mr. Malfoy,” she said. “The Headmistress would like to see you in her office.”

Malfoy looked surprised, but immediately packed up his things and left. Hermione frowned after him, wondering.

“I know what you’re doing,” Astoria said.

Hermione turned back to *The Way of the Winkweed*. “It’s called reading. You should try it.”

“I heard you defending him at lunch. Be assured, he will never be so desperate,” Astoria said with a curl of her perfectly painted mouth. “His family may be in disgrace, Granger, but they will never sink so low.”

Hermione sniffed. “If you’re speaking of the Malfoys, I don’t think it’s possible for them to sink any lower.”

“You think you can redeem him? Steal an ancient wizarding title? You?”

Hermione stared at the other woman in amazement. Astoria thought she wanted to be a Malfoy? Live in the manor where she was tortured? With Lucius Malfoy for a father-in-law?

She couldn’t help shaking her head and grinning a little. “Good Godric, I thought you Slytherins were supposed to know people. You honestly think I’d aspire to anything so cursed and empty?”
Sentence myself to such a cold, miserable life?”

Astoria smirked. “I’ve seen him look at you. Would it really be so cold?”

***

Hermione spent every spare minute in the library over the next week, trying to develop a potion that could identify a blood sample. It was a vital first step to finding the person who wrote the message, since McGonagall’s interviews with students and staff had revealed nothing, and only appeared to strengthen the case against Malfoy.

The wizarding world’s attitude toward blood was shockingly medieval, Hermione concluded, almost worshipful. Few witches and wizards cared to look beyond its fearsome power and see blood as a substance. A substance that could be identified.

It took days just to pinpoint the differences between magical blood, muggle blood and animal blood. She’d never have succeeded except Snape’s private library had been transferred to the Restricted Section after his death, and that man knew a few things about blood and potions. Then she worked up a methodology to match blood, a concept common in muggle detective shows, but shockingly neglected in the wizarding world.

Now the recipe for the blood potion was developed, at least in theory, and Hermione was anxious to begin. But she didn’t know how she could without Malfoy, and they still weren’t speaking. This potion was more complex than Fiducia, and she wasn’t sure she could brew it successfully even with Malfoy’s help. The Slytherin had returned to his former reserve, looking a bit like he had in Sixth Year, his eyes ringed with shadows. He spoke to Hermione in Potions only when necessary and waved away Ron’s baiting comments. Hermione began to fret: What if he ignored her ultimatum? What if he didn’t feel the need to regain her trust after all? Had she misjudged him entirely? How could she ever trust a Malfoy, whose very name meant “bad faith”?

Malfoy was her only option, though. Nobody else was adept enough. Hermione seriously considered borrowing Snape’s portrait from McGonagall’s office and propping it on a shelf in the potions lab. She was that desperate.

Hermione was sitting in her beanbag in DADA, trying to think of a way to blackmail Slughorn into helping her, when Bluebell’s wind chimes signaled the end of class. A huge relief. The session had focused on the language of flowers as part of the DADA professor’s “Love Is the Answer” thesis. Hermione continued to resent Bluebell’s teaching style. Without a textbook or syllabus, there was no way to prepare. Which meant she’d spent the entire class watching Neville wipe the floor with her in recitations as Bluebell transformed a quill into various flowers and everyone noted their meanings. Theo was surprisingly good at the lesson as well, and Malfoy’s absence meant a peaceful if academically barren afternoon. Hermione thought about sending Bluebell a basket of dark purple anemones to represent her fading hope that this class would ever help her with her NEWTs.

“Have an Apple Blossom Day!” Bluebell called as they left. Hermione grunted in annoyance. I am
a swan, floating over the pond, I am at peace …

“Hermione? …”

“What the fuck!” she shouted. Then she focused. She was standing by the potions dungeon with no idea how she got there, and Theo was looking at her quizzically.

“Hermione, are you all right?” He touched her right wrist, and she could feel his smooth, cold fingers on hers. “What are you doing here?”

“My special potions project,” she said, yanking her hand back nervously. Which was somewhat true. She needed to cross-reference the ingredients needed for her blood potion with the dungeon’s stores.

“Really? Can I help?”

His eager expression gave Hermione a pang of guilt; they hadn’t yet set a date to go to Hogsmeade, she’d been so distracted. “Thank you, Theo, but I don’t think you’re ready for this kind of potion,” she said.

“Merlin, Hermione, you know how to build up a man.”

She grinned. “Oh, Theo,” she said, fluttering her lashes, “could you help me with my little potion? I’m trying to make it pink and bubbly but it’s still just a bit too orange! And oh dear, I’ve dropped my gurdyroots—let me just pick them up!”

Theo raised an eyebrow. “Let me get this straight. I had to watch Draco practically licking his plate at dinner last week, but you object to a little harmless—”

“Hermione?” another voice interrupted.

She looked away from Theo, exasperated, to see Ernie Macmillan standing before them. The Head Boy was taller now, but still all earnestness and big ears.

“Hello, Ernie,” she said. The Hufflepuff had been trying to get her to join the Seventh and Eighth Years’ Social Committee, but she’d sworn off student government this year. “I told you, I can’t help you plan the Halloween Feast.”

“It’s not that, although we could really use you,” Ernie said. “We are trying to brainstorm ways to incorporate inter-House unity into the proceedings, and so far—”

“What are you after, then, Macmillan?” Theo cut in testily.

“I’ve just come from the Headmistress’ office,” Ernie said. “They’re waiting for you, Hermione.”

“Who?” Hermione asked.

“Aurors from the Ministry of Magic,” Ernie said. “They’re arresting Draco Malfoy.”

“For what?” Theo wanted to know.

Ernie shrugged. For such a busybody eager to organize things, he had a distinct lack of curiosity about anything that mattered. “They didn’t say, but it’s high time they did something about the Death Eater.”

Hermione ignored this, leaving Theo without a word and running up to McGonagall’s second-floor office, Ernie trailed behind, panting. Her mind whirled. Aurors at Hogwarts? Arresting Malfoy? How was that possible? Where was the proof? Malfoy may be considered an adult in the wizarding world, but his status as a Hogwarts student preempted that. Aurors could not simply dance in and arrest a student without …

“Powdered Porcupine,” Ernie gasped at the gargoyle. The Head Boy stayed below and Hermione climbed the spiraling stairs more slowly, attempting to take calming breaths.

The large, circular office looked much the same as it had after the Battle of Hogwarts, with the Pensieve and the Sorting Hat, with the addition of new portraits of Dumbledore and Snape. Two wizards in auror robes stood before McGonagall’s massive claw-footed desk, their backs to Hermione.

“Am I to understand,” Hermione asked, her voice like ice, “that an arrest is taking place here?”

The aurors turned around and one of them was Harry, looking older and yet exactly the same, his black hair still tousled and round glasses balanced precariously on his nose. He rushed forward to pull her into a hug.

“Harry!” she squeaked. Hermione dropped her bag and hugged him back hard, her eyes filling with tears, she’d missed him so much. “Look at you! So handsome!” She stepped back, running her hands over his dark auror robes with the Ministry of Magic crest. Her eyes found his face again, and he gave her a significant look.

“Hermione …” he said, tilting his head toward the other auror and McGonagall.

“Oh, of course, official business. She blushed and turned to look at Malfoy, who stood between two striped armchairs. What’s with the scowl? Merlin, Malfoy looks like he writes blood-soaked messages on walls every day and twice on Tuesdays.

So Hermione looked at McGonagall instead. “Headmistress, Malfoy is a student here and you simply can’t allow him to be taken from Hogwarts without proof—”

“Nobody is taking anyone, Miss Granger,” McGonagall said. “Head Auror Shacklebolt …” Kingsley Shacklebolt smiled at Hermione, “… and Assistant Auror Potter are here to administer Veritaserum to Mr. Malfoy.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped. “What? You can’t force—”

“It was Mr. Malfoy's idea,” the Headmistress said. “Mr. Malfoy contacted me this morning, volunteering to be questioned under Veritaserum—on the condition that you, Miss Granger, are
present for the entire interview.”

“What do you say, Granger?” Malfoy asked, gracefully dropping into one of the armchairs. His scowl had disappeared and he now appeared utterly relaxed.

Hermione didn’t answer, just stared down at him, horrified. The Ministry’s Auror Office had been most displeased with Malfoy’s sentence, considering it entirely too lenient. Kingsley himself had been quoted in the *Prophet* saying that all former Death Eaters should be given the Dementor’s Kiss. Ministry barristers continued to appeal the Wizengamot’s verdict and sentence. And Malfoy had surrendered himself to aurors? For interrogation under *Veritaserum*?

“What is the procedure?” Hermione asked Kingsley, finding her voice.

Kingsley produced a small bottle from his robes. “Quite simple, Hermione,” he said, smiling. “Mr. Malfoy will drink this Veritaserum and answer a few questions.”

Hermione frowned. “He certainly will not. You two can’t feed him a fat dose of Veritaserum and then grill him with any fool question that pops into your heads. This interview concerns the two ‘Die Mudblood’ messages, correct?”

Kingsley and Harry cringed slightly and she huffed. “Correct?” she repeated.

“Yes, it does, Hermione,” Kingsley said severely. “We are taking this case quite seriously and we expect Mr. Malfoy’s full cooperation.”

“Mr. Malfoy did agree to this, Miss Granger,” McGonagall said.

Hermione waved that away. “He’s an idiot ferret, what do you expect?” Kingsley and Harry glanced at Malfoy to see his reaction, but Malfoy’s smile only widened.

“A nice opportunity for the Aurors Office, isn’t it?” Hermione went on, eyes narrowed at Kingsley. “Maybe a chance to get a few Death Eater tidbits as well, hmmm? Well, I won’t have it.”

Kingsley and Harry goggled at her, but McGonagall was unaffected. “What do you suggest then, Miss Granger?” she asked.

“A half-bottle only, and any questions will be written out beforehand and approved by me.”

Kingsley and Harry began protesting, but McGonagall cut them both off with a look. “Mr. Malfoy?” she asked.

Malfoy looked smug. “Don’t ask me. Apparently, I have no say in any of this.”

“This is ridiculous, Headmistress,” Kingsley said with a scowl. “We aurors have a responsibility to protect the public, and it is our duty to question Mr. Malfoy thoroughly, either here …” he glared at Malfoy, “… or at the Ministry.”

“You aren’t taking him anywhere,” Hermione stormed. “He is a student—”

“Yes, he is, Miss Granger,” McGonagall said. “And as Headmistress of Hogwarts, I am perfectly capable of protecting Mr. Malfoy’s rights.”

“Well, you’ve done a rubbish job of it so far,” Hermione said.

“Hermione!” Harry cried.
Kingsley’s face was stern. “Mr. Malfoy, we appreciate your agreement to be questioned under Veritaserum, and I’m sure you wouldn’t want to go back on your word.”

Malfoy looked up at them all, eyebrows raised slightly. *He’s the one under suspicion and he’s calmer than any of us,* Hermione thought.

“I have no intention of going back on my word.” Malfoy’s voice was cool. “I agreed to be questioned under Veritaserum provided that Granger was present. If her demands are not met, she will likely stomp out of here in a Gryffindor fit of righteous anger, and then there can be no interview.”

Silence followed this statement. McGonagall pursed her lips thoughtfully while the aurors looked simply furious. Hermione gave Malfoy a rare smile of approval; she always appreciated a nice turn of logic.

“Very well,” Kingsley said through gritted teeth. “I will write out the questions.”

“And a half-bottle of the potion only,” Hermione reminded him.

“You may use my desk, Auror Shacklebolt,” McGonagall said, rising from her seat. The Headmistress moved behind Malfoy’s armchair, standing over him almost protectively now.

Harry stepped closer to Hermione. “Mi, what are you doing?”

“Protecting a fellow student, Harry,” she said.

“But it’s Malfoy!” he hissed, sounding just like Ron.

“So?” she hissed back. “His mother saved your life, remember? The Ministry can’t simply drug people and pump them for information!”

“I’d bet anything Malfoy knows something,” Harry said. “I mean, Hermione, *look* at him!”

They both glanced over at Malfoy, whose smile had admittedly turned a trifle villainous. The Ministry could probably convict him of horse stealing on looks alone.

Kingsley set down the parchment and stood. “I trust this will be sufficient.”

Hermione replaced him behind the desk, sitting in McGonagall’s chair without thinking, and picked up Kingsley’s quill. “You’re mad,” she said, striking out questions. “This one needs to go … and this … and this … and certainly this question isn’t relevant.” She handed the list back to Kingsley.

The Head Auror was outraged. “Questions about Death Eaters are vital to this investigation!”

“Malfoy has already testified to the Wizengamot and the Ministry about the Death Eaters and his actions during the War,” Hermione said, not backing down.

“New evidence has come to light …”

“Then obtain Malfoy’s permission for another interview and ask about that,” Hermione said. She folded her hands on the desk before her and looked beadily at Kingsley. “This interview is about the two ‘Die Mudblood’ messages.”

“Hermione,” Harry begged, “do you have to keep saying that?”
“Fear of saying a thing only increases fear of the thing itself,” Hermione said. Harry and Malfoy both rolled their eyes.

“I won’t limit this Office to these questions,” Kingsley said decidedly.

“Take it or leave it, Shacklebolt,” Malfoy sneered.

Kingsley clenched his fists and Hermione watched him silently count to 10. “Very well, Mr. Malfoy,” he said and handed Malfoy the clear bottle. Malfoy brought it to his mouth and took a quick gulp, leaving half the potion.

The room was suddenly tense. Malfoy’s smile was gone and his eyes took on a faintly hunted look. McGonagall put a hand on the back of Malfoy’s chair, while Hermione used every drop of self-control to remain still behind the desk. *This is a terrible idea.*

Kingsley’s voice was suddenly soft. “What is your name, sir?”

“Draco Lucius Malfoy.” His voice was equally soft.

“Were you present at Gryffindor Tower the night before the blood letters were discovered on the common room wall?”

“Yes,” Malfoy said evenly.

“What were you doing in the common room that night, Mr. Malfoy?”

“I was there to see Granger,” Malfoy said, his voice still soft.

“Why?” Harry asked.

“Harry!” Hermione snapped. “That question is not on the list!”

But it was too late. Malfoy was compelled to answer the question. “She was being an interfering busybody on my behalf and I wanted to find out why.” His mouth snapped shut. *Not bad,* Hermione thought.

“What—” Harry began but stopped at Hermione’s ferocious look.

“Did you write the words in blood on the wall, Mr. Malfoy?” Kingsley asked, frowning at his parchment.

Malfoy looked at him calmly. “No.”

“Did you assist the person who wrote the words in any way?”

“No.”

“Do you know who wrote the words, Mr. Malfoy?”

“No.”

“When did you leave the Gryffindor common room that night?”

“Granger escorted me out about ten minutes after midnight,” Malfoy said.

“Hermione saw you out?” Harry asked. “You two were alone in the common room?”
“Yes and yes,” Malfoy said, teeth clenched.

“Harry!” Hermione cried.

Harry ignored her and stepped closer to Malfoy. “What were you doing in the common room with her? Were you drunk?”

Hermione stood. “Harry, stop it!”

“I was drinking sirenscotch. I was waiting for Granger to wake up from her nap on the sofa.” Malfoy’s voice was clipped and it was obvious his words were completely driven by the potion. “I was not drunk. I was, however, slightly intoxicated, so I couldn’t help admiring her legs.”

“You were drinking and ogling Hermione while she slept?” Harry looked ready to do murder.

Malfoy smirked. "Apparently so."

Hermione’s face burned. “Quit cutting the fool, Harry,” she snapped, moving between her friend and Malfoy. “You can’t feed the man truth serum and ask him personal questions and then explode because you don’t like the answers!”

“Auror Shacklebolt,” McGonagall said, “I believe you have a few more official questions.”

Kingsley, who had been watching the exchange between Harry and Malfoy with wide eyes, cleared his throat and looked at his parchment again. “Mr. Malfoy, you were the first to see the second bloody message Wednesday morning, correct?”

“I can’t answer that,” Malfoy said.

Kingsley looked at McGonagall. “We need to administer more Veritaserum.”

“You most certainly will not,” the Headmistress answered. “Half a bottle only, you agreed.”

“I have not finished my questions,” the Head Auror said.

“It is unfortunate that your assistant wasted time with questions not on the list, but that is no reason to break your word,” McGonagall said.

Kingsley and Harry both looked ready to explode now, so Hermione reluctantly stepped in again. The goal here was to clear Malfoy’s name, not send the aurors away with more reasons to be suspicious. “The Veritaserum is still in effect,” she told them impatiently.

Hermione looked down at Malfoy, speaking directly to him for the first time. “Tell them.”

“You, Granger, need to have more fun.”

“I am extremely fun. Tell them.”

Malfoy sighed dramatically. “I cannot tell you, Shacklebolt, if I was the first to see the message. It’s likely that I was, but anybody, living or dead, who entered that passageway before me could have seen it first.”

Kingsley closed his eyes and opened them again, trying to keep a rein on his temper. “Very well. When you saw the message Wednesday morning, Mr. Malfoy, what did you do?”

“I blocked the passageway with a dark mist so other students could not see it,” Malfoy intoned.
“Then I wrote a note to the Headmistress and found a student to take it to her in the Great Hall.”

“The note is on my desk, Auror Shacklebolt,” McGonagall said. Kingsley picked up the folded parchment she indicated, read it quickly, then passed it to Harry.

“What did you do after that?” Kingsley asked.

“I stood in front of the mist to ensure no students entered. McGonagall and Granger arrived soon after.”

“Did you write that message?” Kingsley asked.

“No, I did not.”

“Do you know who wrote the message?”

“No.”

“Do you know why the message appeared in that particular place?” Harry put in.

“No.”

Hermione blinked. That question wasn’t on the list, but it was interesting. Why had the message appeared outside the Ancient Runes classroom? Her mind began turning over ideas, but then Harry spoke again.

“Did you and Hermione have an argument in that location?” Harry asked.

Malfoy scowled. “Yes.”

Hermione was shocked. How did Harry know about that? Ron, maybe …

“What did you argue about?” Harry asked.

“Don’t answer that!” Hermione cried, suddenly horrified. But it was too late; Malfoy’s face was red from strain, but he had to answer the question.

“I behaved … badly … toward her,” Malfoy gritted out. “I invaded her privacy. I read the journal in her bag. I tried to take advantage …”

Harry’s face was red as well. “What did—”

“Don’t you dare!” Hermione shouted. “If you want to hear about that argument, you can ask me!”

“I tried to apologize, but she wouldn’t listen.” Malfoy looked relieved to be finished with the answer. He gave Harry a thin smile. “She told me to fuck myself.” Kingsley and Harry both looked at Hermione with approval.

“Auror Shacklebolt, Assistant Auror Potter, this interview is at an end,” McGonagall said. She walked over to the fireplace and gestured toward the urn of Floo powder. Kingsley looked at Malfoy speculatively.

Harry took Hermione’s hand and pulled her aside. “What the hell is going on with you and Malfoy?” he hissed. “Ron wrote me that you two had a big fight before Ancient Runes, said you hated each other. Now you’re defending him to the Ministry?”
“He’s not a criminal, Harry,” Hermione said uncomfortably.

Harry frowned over at the Slytherin. “He said he took advantage. Did he—”

“It’s fine, Harry. I handled it.”

“I can’t believe you were alone with him at that party. Where was Ron?”

“Ron?” Hermione barked a laugh. “Ron left me alone at the Three Broomsticks that night when I refused to start dating him again. Then he got stinking drunk at the Gryffindor party and stormed out of the common room! Did he tell you that?”

“Potter!” called Kingsley, who had been conducting his own whispered argument with McGonagall by the fireplace. “We’re leaving!”

Harry slung an arm around Hermione’s neck and pulled her close. “I hope you know what you’re doing.” He shook his head. “Merlin.”

“Harry …” Hermione bit her lip. “Come see Ginny soon.”

He nodded, his face suddenly expressionless, and walked over to the fireplace. Hermione followed him with a glance at Malfoy. The Slytherin had apparently recovered from any small embarrassment and now lounged in his chair with an insolent smile.

“Take care now,” Malfoy called to Kingsley.

Kingsley rounded on him, a handful of purple Floo powder dribbling from his clenched fingers. “Malfoy!” he barked suddenly. “Are you currently in contact with any active Death Eaters?”

“Shacklebolt! How dare you!” McGonagall shouted.

Malfoy jumped to his feet, his own fists clenched. The look on his face frightened Hermione, and her breath caught. Even Harry looked aghast.

“No,” Malfoy ground out. “I am not in any contact with any of them. Any active Death Eaters consider me a blood traitor and would happily murder me if given the chance. Hogwarts is the best place for me right now—I certainly wouldn’t trust anyone in your pitiful Aurors Office, except perhaps Pot-head here.”

Malfoy looked as if he wanted to cut out his tongue for those words, but Hermione couldn’t help the smile spreading across her face. She looked triumphantly at Harry, who nodded reluctantly.

Kingsley’s face was full of frustrated rage. “Ministry of Magic, Aurors Office!” he snarled, throwing his remaining powder into the fire and disappearing.

“Thank you, Headmistress,” Harry said to McGonagall. “I’m sorry for this … scene … in your office.”

“Don’t apologize to me, Mr. Potter,” she said tartly. “Apologize to Miss Granger and Mr. Malfoy.”

“I’m sorry, Hermione.” Harry hesitated. “Malfoy.”

“I forgive you, Potter,” Malfoy said magnanimously. “Sometimes incompetence can’t be helped.”

“Do you always have to be an enormous git?” Harry snapped.
“Apparently. I hardly know I’m doing it anymore,” Malfoy said. His eyes cut over to Hermione. “I think Granger likes it, though.”

“Oh gods, Harry, please leave,” Hermione begged.

“With pleasure,” Harry said, scooping up powder and throwing it into the flames. “Ministry of Magic, Aurors Office!”

Harry vanished, and Hermione rounded on Malfoy. “You … you …” She couldn’t find words bad enough to describe him.

“I must say, Mr. Malfoy, that you are often your own worst enemy,” McGonagall observed.

“Undoubtedly,” Malfoy said.

“You will remain in this office until the Veritaserum is quite out of your system. You may rest assured that I will ask you no questions,” she continued, sitting behind her desk.

“Thank you, Headmistress,” Malfoy said. “Have a seat, Granger.”

“No, I’m leaving,” Hermione snapped, picking up her bag near the door.

Malfoy stood. “Are you sure?” he asked her. “There’s nothing you feel the least bit curious about? You’ve certainly earned at least one question.”

She tossed her head. “No. I won’t take advantage of you like that. Of all the mad, idiotic, dangerous stunts—”

“Come on, Granger,” he said, stepping toward her. “Ask me about my family. Ask me about the Codex. Ask me how I sleep at night. You may never have this opportunity again.”

“Stop wheedling. I said no.”

He halted a few feet from her, his eyes glittering. “Come, take advantage of me. Wasn’t this little interview enlightening?”

Hermione sniffed. “No, Malfoy,” she said. “You didn’t say one thing in this office that I didn’t already know.”

Malfoy blinked, startled, and she spun on her heel and left the room.
Hello everyone – thank you for all the supportive comments, and your patience with this very long, very slow-burn story. This story is complete, and I’ll continue posting 2-3 times a week as my schedule allows.

Some readers have noted how badly Kingsley Shacklebolt behaved in the last chapter and I agree. He’s under great pressure from the Ministry but that’s no excuse. Kingsley gets a little character arc in this story, so we’ll see what happens.

Now, get out your Omnioculars, because it’s time for the Gryffindor-Slytherin Quidditch match!

“You call this a potions lab?”

It was Saturday morning, and Malfoy stood in the doorway of the tiny, narrow room, unimpressed. Light filtered weakly through the lab’s single grimy window, rusted chains hung from the ceiling, and half-melted red candles appeared to drip blood on every surface. A scarred mahogany cabinet dominated the far wall, its doors hanging drunkenly from broken hinges. A table was shoved against the right-hand wall, holding three cobweb-shrouded cauldrons, while a high, rickety shelf lined the opposite side.

Hermione, on the other hand, was beaming. “It’s perfect,” she said, as Malfoy shut the door behind them. “It’s just a door away from Slughorn, yet separate from the main potions dungeon so he has deniability if we blow ourselves up.”

“Charming,” Malfoy said. “We should get your Squeaky Mouse Club to sort this out.”

“No need for that,” Hermione said, poking around the dusty jars on the shelves. “A few cleaning spells …” She stopped to look up at him. “You do know cleaning spells, don’t you?”

Malfoy shrugged.

“Of course you don’t,” she said, giving him a rather reptilian stare. “You’ve always had oppressed house elves without proper pay or benefits.”

“Don’t start spewing on me—”

“Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare.”

“Nobody is abusing house elves at Malfoy Manor,” Malfoy said. “My father’s treatment of Dobby was one of his convictions, if you recall. Even if my mother and I wanted to harm an elf, it would be incredibly stupid. They are well-treated.”

“But they’re not free!”

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “A Department of Magical Creatures official offered them freedom right after the War, tried to give them Ministry of Magic sweatshirts, and the elves cried for a week.”
“But if it was presented in the right way—”

“Drop it, Granger.”

“Fine,” Hermione huffed. “Get out your wand, then. I’m not cleaning this room alone.” Hermione gave her own wand a small flick. “Scourgify,” she said, and the dust vanished from half the table.

“Scourgify,” Malfoy said in a bored tone, and the table’s other half was wiped clean as well. Hermione moved closer to the table’s largest cauldron, brushing Malfoy’s arm, and there was the sound of smashing glass. She looked over her shoulder; Malfoy had bumped into the shelves, and the back of his Slytherin Quidditch jersey was now covered in green slime and shards of glass.

“Merlin, Malfoy, you spilled all the pickled toad.” Hermione raised her wand, chanting “Tergeo” and the charm siphoned the toad guts off his back. “Don’t forget the little tap, it’s very important.”

She turned back to the cauldron, holding up her lit wand to see a crawling mass of spiders inside. “Ick,” she said, flinching away. She brushed Malfoy again, and he crashed into the broken cabinet this time, sending both doors to the floor with a clatter.

“Malfoy, what’s wrong with you?” she demanded.

“I’m fine,” he snapped, siphoning the dust off his jersey and hair. He gave the cabinet an appraising look, then cleared it of dust as well. Lowering his wand, he ran his hand over the cabinet’s interior and across the top, then raised his wand again and began a series of complicated waves.

Standing behind Malfoy, Hermione craned her neck to see the cabinet practically repairing itself. Malfoy’s intricate wandwork continued as he muttered spells under his breath. In no time at all, the Slytherin had expertly reattached the cabinet doors and installed a new transfigured wooden panel and claw foot. The cabinet now looked brand-new—probably better than new, its mahogany finish glowing softly. Malfoy lowered his wand and stood still, his back tense. Hermione said nothing, just turned back to the cauldrons, ignoring the sudden ache in her chest.

She had to scour the cauldrons down the metal, stripping away layers of grime and failed potions. By the time she’d finished, Malfoy had finished cleaning and repairing the window above the cabinet, now propped half-open to let in the warm outside breeze.

“Malfoy, do you need any …” Hermione began, stepping closer, and he jerked sideways, slamming into the cabinet again. She bit her lip to avoid a smile.

“Relax, Malfoy,” she said, touching his sleeve. “It’s all right.”

“I’m perfectly relaxed,” he snapped, but he did stop trying to destroy furniture.

With two wands at work, the rest of the room was spotlessly clean in no time, with the shelves dusted and sorted and all three cauldrons spider-free. But no amount of cleaning made the laboratory any bigger, and its two occupants were forced to stand close together at the table. A draft from the window brought that warm sunshine scent with the faintest trace of cologne.

“It’s time to look at the ingredients,” she said, a bit more coldly than she’d intended. “Please hand me my bag, and don’t open it.”

Malfoy looked offended. “I thought you trusted me again.”

“I trust you not to write murderous threats in blood, Malfoy. It’s not a high bar.”
“You always knew I didn’t write those messages,” he said, giving her the bag. “You were testing me. That was quite Slytherin. Quite dangerous.”

“Well, I didn’t expect you to run off to take Veritaserum,” Hermione said, spreading out her parchments.

“Desperate times,” he murmured.

“Desperate? You?” She strove to keep her tone even. This was a very small room.

“Terribly desperate,” he said into her hair.

“Malfoy.”

Malfoy stepped back slightly, crossing his arms and leaning against the cabinet. He looked down his nose at her. “You’re wasting your time with Theo, Granger. You think he’ll be any easier to manage? A smiling, scrubbed-up, more palatable version of what you really want?”

“Never presume again to know what I want, Malfoy,” Hermione said, her voice purposely cold this time. “I am far from over what happened in the charms classroom and I’m not your plaything either.”

“Of course not, you’re something better.” Malfoy smirked. “I now have my own little war hero. Merlin, if you could only have seen yourself, bursting into McGonagall’s office like an angry lioness, defending me tooth and claw. Oh, the look on Pot-head’s face!”

“Don’t call him that! And I thought you didn’t like me fixing things for you.”

“I don’t like you fixing things behind my back,” he responded, uncrossing his arms and pointing a long finger at her. “But feel free to continue leaping into situations, yelling and defending my honor. It’s very arousing.”

“Someday they’ll come to drag you off to Azkaban for littering. And I won’t do a thing about it,” she promised. “But until that happy event arrives, do me a favor and look this recipe and ingredients list. We’ll need to gather a few things in the Forbidden Forest.”

“Bloodrot? Acromantula venom?” He moved to her side and scanned the parchments, frowning. “What exactly are we brewing here, Granger?”

“I call it Blodipsiety, or a blood identity potion. If we do this right, it will help us identify the animal or person who provided the blood in the message.”

Malfoy set down the parchments and looked down at her again. He was uncomfortably close.

“What?” she asked.

“Where did you get this recipe?” he asked sternly. “It wavers on the edge of dark magic.”

“Nowhere. I created it.”

“Have you tested it?”

She shifted nervously. “Ah, no. That’s why it’s called experimental.”

He eyed her again without speaking, his face unusually serious.
“What?”

“Sometimes you frighten me, Granger,” Malfoy said. “Pot-head may have been the Chosen One, but he had a savior, too, and I’m looking at her.”

Hermione stared up at him, her throat suddenly tight. “That’s nonsense.”

“Don’t be so sure.” He looked down at the ingredients list and returned to his usual light tone. “I assume that brutish gamekeeper of yours will help us find this lot?”

“His name is Professor Hagrid, and yes, he will.” She glowered at him. “And you will treat Hagrid with respect or I’ll do this alone.”

Malfoy waved a hand. “Yes, yes. Care to tell me why we need six bushels of clover blossoms?”

Hermione coughed. “It’s for … um … the odor.” Malfoy raised an eyebrow. “We have to put something in there or the potion will smell like rotting meat. We might need more than six bushels, actually. And I’m putting you on clover-picking duty, Malfoy, for insulting Hagrid.”

She expected him to protest, but he merely nodded, which meant he was up to something. She opened her mouth to ask, but decided she didn’t want to know.

“This takes two or three weeks to brew?” Malfoy asked.

“Yes.”

He set the list down. “Alright. I have to get to the Quidditch pitch. You’ll be at today’s match?”

“Of course,” she said airily. “I’ll be there for Ginny.” She picked a jar of lizard hearts from the shelf and shook it. They didn’t look very fresh.

“Hmmm … so you say.” Malfoy brushed past her and opened the door. He turned to look at her, his hair backlit by the light from the main dungeon.

“So you say,” he repeated with a thin smile, “but you’ll be watching me. And contrary to my usual preferences, do try to control yourself today, Granger. Don’t go running out on the pitch if I get injured, throwing hexes and whatnot. Wouldn’t look good defending a Slytherin, no matter how … fascinating.”

He noticed Hermione’s hand tightening on the jar and managed to slip out before she had the chance to throw it. *I am a pond,* she told herself, *I am a fucking unruffled pond …*

***

It was a perfect day for Quidditch, unseasonably warm with a gentle wind. Hermione and Neville had prime seats on the north side of the pitch, which had been rebuilt after the Battle of Hogwarts. The whole school had packed the stands for the first match of the season. Hermione congratulated herself for turning down McGonagall’s offer to be Head Girl, or even a prefect, or she’d be
patrolling right now and confiscating Weasleys’ Wizarding Wheezes products.

Instead, she was relaxing with Neville—who also had a hazy grasp of Quidditch and didn’t mind if she said “Wacky Faint”—among a crowd of Gryffindors, who were wildly cheering even though nothing had happened yet. Ginny was huddled with her team on the south end of the pitch. Most of the Slytherin players were in the air, practicing looping plays, leaving only Malfoy and Astoria on their side of the pitch in close discussion.

“Here, Hermione,” Neville said in an undertone. He pulled two butterbeers from under his thin cloak.

“Neville, you shouldn’t!” she scolded, but she took her bottle anyway. Yes, she was very glad not to be Head Girl. Sipping her butterbeer, Hermione tried to enjoy the sun on her face and not fret about the blood potion ingredients she could be gathering.

Malfoy and Astoria were still talking, facing each other about two feet apart, glossy brooms in hand, Astoria obviously giving last-minute instructions. They made, Hermione had to admit, a striking couple: both pale, tall and slender, with sleek, shining hair of gold and platinum. Astoria’s hair was worked into a long, intricate braid down her back, woven with green ribbons. Malfoy was bent slightly toward her, listening attentively and occasionally nodding. A prince and his princess in green and silver. He could win her again, Hermione was certain. He could easily restore his family name among the purebloods. He was still handsome and rich, after all. The rest of the wizarding world might not matter to him. Give it a few years and it would be like Voldemort had never risen, like the death and destruction and terror never happened, at least in his gilded world, so long as Lucius stayed in Azkaban. Whispers would always follow Draco and his pureblood lady, but never truly touch their lives.

“What’s wrong, Hermione?” Neville asked. “You look a little sick.”

“It’s the fliers,” she said quickly, nodding at Ron, who, she just noticed, had pulled out of a deep dive and was looping past them with a wave. “All that swooping and spinning.”

Malfoy kicked off, away from Astoria, and immediately launched into a corkscrew-like trajectory straight up into the air, then took the same swirling path down again.

“Show off,” Hermione muttered, then groaned as she saw Ron attempt the same move. He was a strong flier, but nowhere near so graceful. Malfoy snickered, then made a cheeky pass by the Gryffindor stands, bowing at the boos.

“Did Malfoy just wink at you?” Neville asked.

“Certainly not,” she said.

“Well, he wasn’t winking at me.”

“I don’t know,” Hermione teased. “You two seem awfully chummy in Herbology.”

“Not as chummy as you and Malfoy in Potions. Is it true you’re brewing something with him in the practice lab?”

Hermione looked at her friend, surprised. Word did get around quickly. “Yes, actually. We’re working on some experimental potions.”

“He’s been decent this year so far—for Malfoy, anyway,” Neville said. “Hasn’t insulted me once. Creepy.”
“It won’t last,” she said. Neville nodded in agreement and took another swig of butterbeer.

Madam Hooch released the Snitch, and immediately the players swirled into action. Malfoy was in rare form, his flying drawing cheers from the Slytherins and even some impressed growls from Gryffindors. Not the worst way to win over his own house, Hermione thought. A lot would be forgiven if he helped them win the Quidditch Cup.

She shook her head. Slytherins with the Quidditch Cup? Terrible notion. She pulled her eyes from Malfoy’s graceful circles and watched Ron make another clumsy but effective save.

Slytherin’s Beaters were a real pair of thugs, almost comically large on their skinny brooms. They seemed to enjoy slamming into people more than hitting Badgers with their bats. They followed the Lundy twins like scowling shadows, nearly knocking the Lundy sister off her broom. Ron was catching every Quibble (Quirky, Quabby?), while the Lundy brother scored twice as his sister distracted the Slytherin Beaters. Keeper Astoria was screaming at her Beaters now, a distraction that allowed another score on her, and the Gryffindors cheered wildly.

The Snitch was nowhere to be found; Ginny tried a few fake dives, but Malfoy refused to bite, simply continuing his sweeping circles. Then his body stiffened, and his circles became tighter. Hermione’s eyes narrowed.

“He’s seen something,” she said to Neville.

“Malfoy?” he whispered, following her gaze.

Malfoy was playing it cool, she could tell. His flying became less casual, and every curve brought him just a bit lower. She squinted, trying to calculate the trajectory. “I think the Snitch is by the far hoop,” she said.

Malfoy broke off to his right, cape flapping, and several things happened at once. Ginny went into a deep dive after him, and Hermione could hear Astoria shrieking orders. The two Slytherin Beaters, on opposite sides of the field at the moment, flew at high speed straight for Malfoy and Ginny.

“They’re going to ambush Ginny!” Neville cried.

Hermione shook her head. If she didn’t know better, she’d think they were aiming for … “Malfoy!” she shouted, her voice lost in the screams of Gryffindors around her. Neville gave her a strange look.

The crowd gasped as the Snitch shot up, sparking in the sun, passing nearly under Malfoy’s nose. He snatched it up and held it to his chest, and a second later the two Slytherin Beaters smashed into him, one from each side.

Hermione was on her feet, clutching Neville’s hand. “Malfoy!” she shouted again.

Crushed between two huge Beaters bearing in at full speed, bats in hand, Malfoy screamed once, and then his body tipped to the side, one arm hanging uselessly, the other still clutched at his chest. One leg flew out at an odd angle and he lost his broom and began plummeting. Ginny dove after him, her wand out.

“Malfoy!” Hermione screeched. “Draco!” Her bottle of butterbeer smashed at her feet and she groped for her own wand to stop his fall.

Malfoy landed with a thud on the pitch. Cursing her slowness, Hermione pointed her wand instead
at the Slytherin Beaters, who hovered nearby, looking smug. Suddenly they both gasped and clutched their throats.

Two strong hands grabbed her arms and forced her wand down. “Hermione! Stop it!” Neville yelled in her ear.

The Beaters, released, flew down to the pitch and fell to their knees, coughing. Astoria and Madam Hooch had reached Malfoy, who now lay on the grass, unmoving. Ginny had reached the pitch and was backing out of the way, looking worried.

“Get off me!” Hermione shouted, fighting against Neville’s hold and struggling to leave her row.

“You can’t, Hermione!” Neville’s voice was harsh in her ear. “What is wrong with you? You can’t go down there!”

Her friend grunted as Hermione jerked an elbow into his ribs. She pushed out of her row, stepping into the aisle, but Neville’s hand caught her arm before she could go any further. All the stands were in an uproar, with both Slytherins and Gryffindors on their feet and flooding the aisles to get a better look.

“Merlin, Hermione, have you lost your mind?” Neville cried. “Stop fighting me! Ow!” Her elbow had connected again, this time with his jaw. “Look, Madam Pomfrey’s with him! Ow! Shit!”

Malfoy was still prone on the grass, utterly still, with Astoria kneeling beside him. The Slytherin Beaters continued to cough, although they could breathe now, while the rest of the players, both Gryffindor and Slytherin, stood silently around the pitch. Pomfrey conjured a stretcher and levitated Malfoy into it. The stretcher floated off the pitch, with Pomfrey and Astoria following. Malfoy was unconscious, and Hermione could see a long, pale arm hanging off the stretcher, the Snitch slipping out of a nerveless hand and buzzing away.

“Hermione, stop struggling!” Neville hissed in her ear. He had both arms around her now and she couldn’t use her wand. “You can’t go down there!”

Suddenly she froze, remembering: “Do try to control yourself, Granger—don’t go running out on the pitch if I get injured, throwing hexes and whatnot …”

“Merlin!” she gasped. “He knew!”

“Who?” Neville asked.

‘Malfoy,” she said, watching the injured blond disappear into the castle. “Malfoy knew he was going to be attacked.”

***

The mood in the Gryffindor common room was somber that night. Since Malfoy had caught the Snitch and managed to retain it all the way to the ground, it was a Slytherin win despite his injury.
Hermione had talked to Theo briefly in the Great Hall after dinner. “I guess it’s great we won and all,” Theo had said. “Big party in the dungeons tonight, but I’d rather take you to Hogsmeade.” Theo was no great Quidditch fan.

“Any word on Malfoy?” Hermione asked, trying to sound casual.

“Astoria is with him in the infirmary. Draco has shattered bones in his arms and right knee,” Theo reported, always in the know. “He’ll need a night with skele-Gro, but he’ll live, no thanks to those two Beaters. McGonagall is still screaming at them in her office. They claim somebody choked them afterward, but nobody knows who.”

Hermione flushed at the memory of her hexes—what had gotten into her?

“I could slip away from the Slytherin party,” Theo said, edging closer. “Perhaps a late dessert at that new Hogsmeade restaurant …”

Hermione shook her head. “I’m sorry, Theo, I should stay with Ginny. This was her first big game as Quidditch captain, and to lose it like—”

“Blaise will console her, I’m sure,” Theo said with a glint in his eye.

“Not likely—she won’t want to see any Slytherins.” Ginny was tough and shrewd, but she was still a hot-tempered Weasley.

Theo sighed. “Quidditch. You’d think the wizarding world turned on every match.”

Hermione agreed fully. Back in the Gryffindor common room, Ginny was pounding firewhiskey with the team and Ron was already half-drunk.

“You want to tell me what happened today?” Neville asked in a low voice, joining her on the sofa by the fire.

She sighed. “There’s nothing to tell, Nev.”

“Great,” Neville said. “Then you won’t mind if I tell Ginny how you nearly charged the Quidditch pitch after Malfoy was hurt. And how he warned you about a possible attack beforehand.”

“Really, it’s nothing. I need him for my experimental potions.”

Neville nodded. “Experimental potions. Okay.” He was silent for a moment, then went on. “Let me tell you what I’ve been seeing, Hermione. You and Malfoy brew this crazy trust potion together in class and keep meeting up before Ancient Runes. Then you two fall out and he shows up at Gryffindor Tower, shouting to see you and fighting with Ron. Then you make up somehow and start working on experimental potions together, and he’s talking to you about attacks from other students.” He held her eyes in his surprisingly stern blue ones. “And today you practically break my ribs trying to get to him when he was hurt this afternoon. What in Merlin is going on here? You two aren’t—”

“No,” she said quickly. “We’re not.”

Neville looked relieved. “I thought you were dating Nott, which is crazy enough.”

“Theo and I aren’t dating either … yet,” she said. “I did say I’d go to Hogsmeade with him, though.”
He looked around and lowered his voice. “And what about hexing those Beaters? That was vicious, Hermione—they couldn’t breathe!”

“I don’t know what you’re—”

Neville flushed. “I know what I saw, Hermione. How far would you have taken it if I hadn’t stopped you?”

“Did you see what they—”

“I saw,” he said grimly. “I saw them and I saw you. You’ve been pulling your wand out a lot this year, and I’m not talking about Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

_Oh, if you only knew, Nev_, Hermione thought.

“McGonagall’s out for blood, wanting to know who hexed those Beaters,” Neville went on. “It doesn’t look very good for inter-House unity.”

“Inter-House unity,” Hermione snorted. “What about House unity? Malfoy was attacked by his own damn Beaters!”

Neville rolled his eyes. “Maybe Malfoy’s been _slightly_ less revolting this year, but I’m not going to get excited about snakes eating their own. I’m just here to take my NEWTs, and I thought that’s why you were here, too.”

Hermione remembered her Life Optimization Organization Plan. “You’re right, Neville. I have been a little distracted.” She leaned back in the sofa and looked at him thoughtfully. “We should organize a NEWT study club.”

Neville groaned. “Oh no.” He put his head in his hands. “I talk too much.”

“We’ll call it … call it … Pupil Organization to Review NEWTs!”

“P-O-R-N—PORN?” Neville sputtered, raising his head.

“Who’s got porn?” Ginny asked alertly from her table of shots.

“Hermione,” Neville said. “She wants to start a study group for NEWTs.”

“With porn?” Ron asked. “Sign me up!”

“Pupil Organization to Review Newts,” Neville said, grinning.

“This is really needed,” Hermione said stubbornly. “We Eighth Years came back to sit for our NEWTs, after all. And we should invite all the houses to join.”

The whole room groaned. “Not again!”

“It’s not a terrible idea,” Ginny said. “For you Eighth Years, anyway.”

“No study guides,” Ron pronounced, and the room cheered.

Hermione was appalled. “You can’t prepare for NEWTs without study guides!”

“I can and I will,” Ron said. “I’m not joining PORN if there are study guides.”
“It’s the Pupil Organization to Review Newts!” Hermione cried.

“Whatever, can we stop talking about studying now?” Ron asked.

‘Would you rather talk about Quidditch?” Hermione answered nastily.


All the talk of NEWTs and Quidditch killed what small buzz the common room had, and people began drifting upstairs to their dorms. Hermione had other plans, however, and after a quick visit upstairs to stuff the Mauraders Map in her jeans pocket, she returned to the common room to catch Ginny and Neville talking earnestly on the sofa. This can’t be good.

“I can’t believe you, Hermione,” Ginny hissed. “You hexed them?”

“They deserved it,” Hermione said, sitting in the armchair opposite.

Ginny frowned. “You need to be careful with this Malfoy thing.”

“What thing?” Neville asked. “Hermione, you told me you two weren’t—”

“We’re not,” she said, glaring at them both.

“Maybe you’re not, but there’s definitely a thing,” Ginny said.

“He winked at her before the game today,” Neville said.

“There’s a lot of tension there,” Ginny said.

“There’s a lot of tension between you and Blaise, too,” Hermione said.

Neville groaned. “I just want to stay out of it all,” he said. “Everyone’s gone spare these days: Ron, Dennis, the two of you, McGonagall …”

“I won’t let anyone else take the fall for those hexes,” Hermione said. “I’ll tell McGonagall myself.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” Ginny said. “You could be expelled!”

“Are you kidding?” Neville asked. “Expel Hermione Granger?”

“She might have to, if the parents make a stink,” Hermione said.

“Well, I’ve had it,” Ginny said, yawning. “I’m exhausted—I was up at six this morning, drawing up Quidditch plays, and we still lost the damn game. We’ll talk about the hexing and PORN tomorrow.” She stood up, swaying slightly.

“Pupil Organization to Review Newts,” Hermione said.

Ginny just grinned and yawned again. “Goodnight,” she said, heading upstairs.

Neville stood as well. “I’m knackered, too,” he said. “You getting some sleep?”

“I will, I promise,” Hermione said. “I’m just going to sit by the fire for a bit.”

Her friend looked down at her, his face concerned. “Be careful, Hermione. Malfoy is still trouble, you know.”
“I know,” she said, staring into the fire. “Merlin, do I ever know.”
Hermione halted outside the infirmary’s main door and unfolded Harry’s Marauders’ Map. “I solemnly swear I am up to no good,” she whispered, tapping the parchment with her wand.

Malfoy’s was the only dot in the infirmary and Madam Pomfrey’s dot was in her office just off the main ward. Hermione crept in cautiously, wishing she could light her wand, but the infirmary was now protected by wards preventing non-medical spells. Hermione approved of the security measures, as inconvenient as they were now.

She slipped from room to room, feeling her way in the near darkness, until she reached the main ward. The only light was a thin yellow line shining under Pomfrey’s closed office door and the moonlight pouring onto the ward’s single patient from the wide east window. She crept to Malfoy’s bed, her trainers making no sound on the stone floor.

Malfoy lay stretched out, looking impossibly long on the narrow bed. He was asleep, but the thin blankets were twisted around his middle and one pajama-clad leg and bare foot stuck out. The other leg was wrapped in bandages, as were both his arms. His face looked peaceful, though, free of pain, his hair ruffled. A fallen angel crashed to Earth.

Hermione shook her head and sat down in the chair by the bed, banishing the ridiculous thought. There was nothing angelic about Draco Malfoy. Quite the opposite. A silver vessel he was, shining on the outside, empty inside. That will be the man, she told herself, thinking of Astoria. Pureblood redemption. That will be his life.

She didn’t know how long she sat there, lost in gloomy imaginings, when she heard a low, hoarse voice: “Granger.”

Hermione leaned over to speak into his ear. “Quiet,” she said softly. “Pomfrey’s in her office.”

Malfoy tilted his head slightly to look up at her, eyes shining—from the pain potion, most likely. “Come to nurse me, Granger?”

Hermione said nothing, just moved to pour water from a pitcher into a tin cup. She held the cup out to him but he shook his head. “Granger …” he whispered.

She bent forward again to hear him better, a long, curly lock of her hair dropping to his shoulder. He smiled slightly. “I can’t move my arms, Nurse.”

Hermione nodded and stood, swiping a pillow from a nearby bed. She placed a hand under his neck, gently raising him and placing the pillow beneath. Then she slid her hand out of that warm skin and silky hair and picked up the cup again, putting it against his lips. His eyes held hers intently as he drank, but she was pleased to see that her hand remained steady.

“How bad is it?” she asked, bending toward his ear once more, her hair tumbling forward.

Malfoy tried to shrug his shoulders. “Could have been worse. No head injuries. The skele-Gro is just about finished, thank Merlin.” He winced slightly.

“Good,” she whispered. She straightened, absentely smoothing Malfoy’s hair back from his forehead as she eyed his bandages more closely. The right arm wrapping looked a little loose. He turned his head, lips brushing the inside of her wrist, and Hermione couldn’t suppress a small shiver. She glanced back at Pomfrey’s office and pulled her hand away.
“Tell me about the threats,” she said, looking down at him.

He sighed. “There’s nothing to say.”

“You were warning me this morning. You knew you would be attacked.”

“Yes, and you didn’t listen at all, did you?” he asked, his voice rising. “Astoria told me about those choking hexes. That was you, I know it.”

“Shhh!” Hermione hissed. She bent over him again, and her hair fell onto his shoulder, creating a wall around their faces. She pulled the curls behind her ear, impatiently, but they just fell forward again. Malfoy’s eyes closed. “Don’t go to sleep, Malfoy.”

“I’m anything but asleep,” he growled, but kept his voice low.

“Nobody knows who hexed those Beaters,” she said. He snickered softly. “Really? And how many students can cast two simultaneous choking hexes from 40-50 feet away? Merlin, Granger, you’ll get yourself expelled if you keep on like this.”

Hermione puffed a laugh into his ear. “You’re lecturing me on prudence? You’ll get yourself killed if you keep on like this. You’ve been getting death threats, haven’t you?”

He shrugged again. “Nothing new.”

“A few weeks into school and you’re in the infirmary, Malfoy. That’s new. At this rate, you won’t make it to your NEWTs. Even if you have PORN to help you.”

His eyes widened. “Even if I have what?”

She blushed. “Never mind. Listen, Malfoy, you have to tell McGonagall about the death threats. If you don’t, I will.”

“You are not to interfere—”

“Shhh!” Hermione straightened and looked over at Pomfrey’s office. She thought she saw a shadow under the door. She stood silently for a moment, then once again sat in the chair, edging it closer to the bed and leaning over to speak in his ear again.

“Granger, don’t tell McGonagall. You can’t get involved,” he whispered before she could say anything. “If anyone finds out you hexed those Beaters, you’ll be next.”

“I’m already a target,” she said. “‘Die Mudbloods,’ remember?”

"Damn it, Granger, you need to back off!” he hissed in her ear.

“Since when have I ever backed off?” she hissed back, ready to say more, but she was leaning too close now. Malfoy turned his head to answer, and her lips inadvertently swept along the side of his face, following the sharp, smooth curve of his cheekbone and over the rough, nearly invisible stubble on his jaw. Her eyes closed of their own volition, and she couldn’t resist running her lips over his jaw a second time. Merlin, the way he smelled …

“Don’t stop,” Malfoy said, his voice hoarse again. She didn’t, she couldn’t, just trailed her mouth under that pointed jaw, across the roughness to a smooth spot below his ear. Her fingers were in his hair again, tilting his head back, exposing that long, pale throat, and she could taste his skin with her tongue, feel his rapid pulse under her lips …
Pomfrey’s office door rattled, and Hermione sat up, startled. A shadow clearly moved under the door this time.

“Now you back off,” Malfoy sighed.

“I have to go,” she whispered, keeping a wary distance from his ear this time. “But this isn’t over. You are in danger and—”

“This is a Slytherin issue, and we Slytherins will handle it!” he whispered back furiously. “Astoria has already—”

Hermione stood up so suddenly that the chair fell over with a clatter. Of course. Astoria had multiple interests in this.

Pomfrey’s office door opened, flooding the ward with yellow light. “Mr. Malfoy?” the matron called.

“Granger!” he hissed. “Hermione!”

Hermione turned and slid into the shadows, following the far wall to exit the ward. Pomfrey stood at the doorway to her office, blocking much of the light, but Hermione could still see Malfoy struggling to move, his eyes glittering like a cat’s in the dark.

“There is nothing for you to worry about,” he called out, his tone significant.

Hermione disagreed. There was every reason to worry, but perhaps she had no right. She slipped through the infirmary like a shadow, stopping only to place a few wards on the infirmary door. If she could slip inside, so could someone else. Then it was a long walk back to Gryffindor Tower, silently scolding herself over her behavior. Malfoy didn't need any help. Some Slytherins did take care of their own.

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Hermione spent Sunday morning in the Gryffindor common room, grimly working through her assignments with an equally quiet Neville and Ginny. By tacit agreement, no one spoke about Quidditch or Malfoy or choking hexes. Hermione's mind kept wandering from Arithmancy, however, continuing to dwell on her stupidity the night before. What had possessed her to visit Malfoy? She'd accomplished nothing, and worse, practically attacked the man. Ron's voice echoed in her mind: "... He's more than a git, he's dangerous, and you talk about him like he's some kind of wounded bird." Ah, yes, the Florence Nightingale effect, that explained it: Malfoy had looked so winsome and vulnerable, at least when he wasn't talking. All ruffled hair and big eyes. It was a passing weakness. A misplaced savior complex. Her love of justice. Hermione nodded in satisfaction and tapped her Arithmancy figures with her wand, watching them shift.

That afternoon she went hiking with Hagrid in the Forbidden Forest, enjoying the still-fine weather and gathering herbs for the blood potion. Hagrid was excellent company, finding dark hollows full of bloodroot, talking about his new shipment of moon lynxes, and he didn't mention Quidditch either.
The rest of the school was still obsessed with Sunday’s match, however, eager to hash over Malfoy’s injury and the hexed Beaters at breakfast Monday morning. Astoria had kicked the two Beaters off the team, Seamus said, and they had detentions until Christmas. Malfoy was openly welcomed at the Slytherin table, moving a little stiffly but otherwise the picture of health, while the two Beaters wore bandages around their necks and moaned pitifully. Malfoy was obviously irritated by this sight, which amused Hermione, who hadn’t forgotten the blond’s malingering over his hippogriff wounds in Third Year. But her smile wavered at the sight of Astoria sitting by Malfoy, her hand stroking his arm, and Pansy Parkinson on his other side pouring his pumpkin juice.

“Hermione, you need to stop glaring at Malfoy,” Neville whispered. “McGonagall is watching.”

“Well, make up your mind, Neville,” she snapped, keeping her voice low. “Am I supposed to hate him or not?” She stuffed a book into her bag. “I guess all I can do is leave.” She swung her leg over the bench and stomped out of the Great Hall. To cap off her mature behavior, she went and hid in a bathroom until just before Ancient Runes.

Malfoy kept eyeing her throughout class, but didn’t try to speak to her, and when they stood opposite each other in Potions, he went about mincing his squid suckers as if he’d never had a death threat in his life. Ron kept throwing resentful glances at Malfoy across the table, but said nothing, and Hermione and Lavender exchanged relieved looks. Slughorn had them mixing up another Draught of Peace, with an eye to creating a few healing potions, and that suited everyone’s mood.

“Miss Granger, Mr. Malfoy, could you stay a bit after class?” Slughorn asked as he visited their table. Ron narrowed his eyes suspiciously but again said nothing. Maybe the heavy steam billowing from their cauldrons was having an effect. Hermione could literally feel her headband rise from her skull as her hair expanded in all directions.

After the class ended, Hermione and Malfoy sat on each side of their empty table in silence as they waited for the professor. Malfoy began drawing invisible patterns on the tabletop with a single, elegant finger. Hermione’s eyes couldn’t help tracking the movement, and Malfoy must have noticed, because he lifted his hand, waggling his fingers at her in a little wave.

Hermione flushed and looked away. “How are you feeling?” she asked politely.

“Quite well, thank you,” he said, amused.

“We still need more ingredients for the blood potion,” she said, pulling a scroll out of her bag and knocking out two others.

Malfoy picked up the nearest rolled-up scroll, looking at the outside markings. “PORN?” he asked, raising an eyebrow at her. “Why, Granger, I didn’t know you liked that sort of—”

“It’s a club,” she said, snatching it away.

“A porn club?”

“A study club.”

“You study porn?” Malfoy was smiling now. “How interesting. Need another … member?”

She scooped up all the scrolls and stuffed them into her bag. “You’re disgusting.”

“I’m not the one starting porn clubs—”
“Miss Granger, Mr. Malfoy,” Slughorn boomed. Hermione jumped in her seat, trying not to blush. “I wanted to ask you both about Friday night. I’m resuming my little gatherings this year and …”

The professor nattered on, and Hermione was suddenly too indignant to feel embarrassed. Slughorn had made her stay after Potions, stuck her alone with Malfoy while her hair staged an anti-hairband revolt (ugh, why did she even care?), plus made her late to Arithmancy, just so he could talk about his Godric-damned Slug Club?

“… Well, Miss Granger?” Slughorn and Malfoy were looking at her. “We simply couldn’t hold it without you. I know you are quite busy …”

“Yes, very busy,” Malfoy put in. “She’s starting a new study group.”

“Do tell,” Slughorn said to her, all eagerness.

“It’s an Eighth-Year inter-House group,” Hermione said, trying not to blush again. “The first meeting is Wednesday after dinner at … well, we don’t have a place yet.”

“I would like to offer the Potions dungeons,” Slughorn said. “Just say, ‘Shrivelfigs,’ and the door will open.”

“A dungeon,” Malfoy said brightly. “Perfect.”

“Now, about Friday, Miss Granger,” Slughorn said. “I know it is your birthday, so if you have other plans, I’d be happy to choose another night.”

Hermione blinked. She’d forgotten why she was sitting here with Slughorn and Malfoy in the first place.

“Friday is your birthday, Granger?” Malfoy asked.

She nodded, trying not to glare at Slughorn. She shouldn’t be surprised that the professor knew. He probably had dossiers on all his favorites.

“So Friday would be acceptable?” Slughorn pressed. Hermione tried to come up with an excuse, but her mind was blank, so she just nodded.

“Splendid! It will be a nice little affair!” The professor looked up at the wall. “Heavens, you both will be late to your next classes!” He waved a wand and two small scrolls appeared on the table. “Here are notes for your professors! And Mr. Malfoy, if I could have an additional word?”

Hermione picked up her note, hoping Slughorn hadn’t written he’d kept her behind to discuss his Slug Club. Professor Vector would not be amused. She slung her bag over her shoulder and left the Potions dungeon in a half-daze, not even coming back to herself until she was halfway on the stairs to Arithmancy. What had just happened?

***

Despite its acronym, few Eighth Years appeared interested in the Pupil Organization for Reviewing NEWTs. While the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs knew PORN’s true purpose, the Slytherins were allowed to make what Ginny called “unwarranted assumptions” that neither she nor Hermione felt
inclined to correct.

Theo came the closest to the truth as they sat together in a large windowsill Tuesday after Defense Against the Dark Arts. “I hear you’re starting a porn club,” he said with a smile.

“It is called PORN,” she admitted.

His green eyes narrowed, and for a moment he looked so much like Harry. “What’s the catch?”

She grinned at him. “Come and see. Tomorrow after dinner in the Potions dungeon.”

“I will,” he promised, reaching out a hand to take hers. His hand was broad and soft and he wore a silver signet ring embossed with an “N”. He laced his fingers through hers, looking down at the connected hands then up at her face, and his eyes didn’t look like Harry’s anymore.

“I’d like to take you to Hogsmeade Friday night,” he said quietly.

She shook her head. “I’m sorry, Slughorn’s having a supper party …”

“The Slug Club is back, eh?” Theo’s mouth twisted slightly—he obviously hadn’t received an invitation. Hermione wished she could give him hers.

“I’d rather not go, but …”

“And on Saturday?” Theo asked.

“Ron and I are meeting Harry in Hogsmeade.” She looked at their intertwined hands and impulsively said, “but not until 4 o’clock.”

“Now that sounds promising. I could meet you at …”

“Tomes and Scrolls?” she asked.

“The bookshop—why aren’t I surprised?” His voice was amused. “Meet at one?”

Hermione nodded, and Theo gave her hand a light squeeze before releasing it. “I have to go to Transfiguration,” he said. “McGonagall’s giving me a makeup test.”

“Non-sentient to sentient?” she asked.

“Yes,” Theo said. He slid out of the windowsill, bending to give her a light kiss on the cheek, then shouldered his bag and walked off. She stood there, watching him turn the corner, wondering how he always knew the perfect moment to leave.

***

Hermione arrived early on Wednesday evening for the Pupil Organization for Reviewing NEWTs’ first meeting, looking over her 6-foot scroll breaking down the exams into 47 sections. Most of her
classes were well enough, but she didn’t trust any teacher except McGonagall to prepare her properly for the most significant exams of her academic career. Her future was at stake here. She wasn’t running around in a pleated skirt and striped tie at age 18 (almost 19) out of nostalgia.

Eighth Year students began to trickle into the room, with an expectant pack of Slytherin men arriving at the last minute. Theo and Blaise took seats in front while Malfoy leaned against a stone pillar with the look of a man prepared to be entertained. They took the news that Hermione’s PORN study group was an actual academic club fairly well, except for Greg Goyle, who looked devastated. “I brought materials!” he said loudly, and the entire room nearly cried with laughter.

“I’m sorry to disappoint,” Hermione said, unable to hide her grin. Then she launched into a little speech: “Think of studying as a quest. As you begin your NEWT studies, you are going into the unknown …” She was pleased that nearly everyone stayed to the end, although looking a little glum.

“I’ll be speaking to Ginevra about this,” Blaise told Hermione afterward.

“I believe she’s starting her own group for Seventh Years,” Hermione said. “The Society for Magical Understanding of Tests.”

***

Hermione and Malfoy met in the potions lab early Thursday morning to brew a tiny test sample of the potion. But without the clover, the smell drove them out of the small room even before they’d added the troll’s blood.

“We’ll try again Saturday morning,” Malfoy said, gagging delicately as they leaned against the wall outside the Potions dungeon.

“We need six bushels of clover blossoms,” Hermione pointed out.

“I’m on it.”

“How are you—”

“Granger.” Malfoy turned to look her in the eye. “I said, I’m on it.”

“But six bushels—”

He sighed. “A little trust, Granger. Other people can be resourceful, too.”

“I can help you today before dinner—”

“No, I have plans, and they don’t involve mucking around hillsides picking flowers,” Malfoy said firmly. “Back off.”

Hermione huffed. “Fine.”
He edged closer, his expression changing. “Unless you’d rather not back off …” Malfoy glanced around the corridor. “We should keep our voices down,” he whispered.

“No we should talk LOUDLY,” Hermione boomed out.

“My knee is still a little sore, nurse,” he murmured, his breath warm on her ear, “could you—”

Hermione pushed herself away from the wall, slinging her bag over her shoulder. “Talk to me when you have the clover,” she said, then walked quickly toward the stairs before she did something stupid again. Obviously, a career as a Healer was out of the question.

Their potion’s rancid smell ended up seeping into the main Potions dungeons, and Slughorn set the Advanced class to brewing the love potion Amortentia to counteract it. Unfortunately, the smell of rotting meat combined with people’s favorite scents just made matters worse. Slughorn started out asking people what they smelled, but the combinations were so revolting (“honeysuckle and … dead pigs?”), he gave it up and dismissed them an hour early. Hermione was enormously relieved; the last thing she wanted to do was tell the entire class about the mingled scent of two separate brands of expensive cologne wafting from her cauldron, as well as eau de butcher’s shop. Both Ron and Malfoy kept glancing at her and glaring at each other, and she didn’t want to hear what they smelled either.

At least Malfoy wasn’t in Defense Against the Dark Arts that afternoon, which made education more pleasant for everyone. Bluebell had them discussing complementary dark and light magic—a cursing vs. a healing spell, for example—and there were no snide remarks or near-duels. Theo tried his best to annoy Ron, but his smiles and significant looks at Hermione didn’t set off the visceral reaction that Malfoy could elicit with the slightest of glances. Hermione and Ron were partners again for the practical portion of the class and it was nice to use her wand in a non-aggressive way.

She discovered the reason for Malfoy’s absence while leaving the North Tower: He was walking along the battlements with his mother, who was visiting again. In her deep-blue velvet cloak with embroidered silver stars, Narcissa made Astoria look like a kid in pigtails. Malfoy looked very Lord of the Manor himself, his posture at its haughtiest. Hermione hunched and tried to slip by unnoticed, creeping along the opposite wall, but to no avail.

“Miss Granger,” Narcissa Malfoy said, her soft voice full of command.


Narcissa bowed her head a fraction. “My son says you have been quite cordial to him upon his return to school. I am grateful.”

Not for the first time, Hermione wished she could raise one eyebrow, the only appropriate response to a description of her and Malfoy’s checkered relations this year as “cordial.”

She just smiled again. “We are all trying to make a fresh start, Lady Malfoy.”

“Not everyone has your generosity of heart,” Narcissa said. Her blue eyes were penetrating. Hermione clutched the wand in her pocket to keep from rubbing the scars on her arm, hidden under her robes. “My entire family must beg your forgiveness for … past events.”

“Of course,” Hermione said, her teeth gritting slightly. “One must look forward.”

“Mother,” Malfoy said quietly. “Perhaps we should go inside.”
“Nonsense,” Narcissa answered without taking her eyes off Hermione. “Madam Pomfrey said you must walk every day, Draco, and walk you shall. A shocking injury, wasn’t it, Miss Granger?”

“Yes.” Hermione turned to Malfoy, trying to match his cool bearing. “I hope your recovery has gone well.”

“It has. The nursing was excellent.” His voice held a hint of suggestion, but Hermione managed not to blush. *I am a frozen pond in Norway in sub-zero temperatures...*

“Draco tells me you are his partner in Potions,” Narcissa continued.

“Yes,” Hermione said again. An awkward silence fell and she felt compelled to add: “He’s done some remarkable work.”

“But you continue at the top of your class, as usual, Miss Granger.”

“The term has just begun,” Hermione said. “He has time to catch up.” She kind of liked this talking about Malfoy as if he wasn’t there. He looked a little irritated now.

“Yes, it is very important you do well on your NEWTs, Draco,” Narcissa lectured her son.

“I agree,” Malfoy said. “I attended a new study group yesterday.”

“How very interesting,” Narcissa said.

“Not quite as interesting as I had hoped,” Malfoy said.

“Will you be joining us in the Great Hall for dinner, Lady Malfoy?” Hermione asked to change the subject. Malfoy smiled mockingly.

“Sadly, no. I came only to reassure myself as to my son’s condition and bring a few items from home.”

Hermione recalled the huge bundles of treats and gifts Malfoy had received by owl over the years. “Jelly slugs, perhaps?” she asked.

Narcissa laughed outright. “I had forgotten! He loved those so.” She smiled fondly. “No, I today I deliver something infinitely more precious.” Her smile widened as she looked at her son, and Malfoy’s face suddenly lost all expression. “I hope to hear some happy news soon.”

“Mother, why don’t we continue our walk?” Malfoy asked quickly. “I’m sure Granger needs to get to the library.”

“Will you join us?” Narcissa asked Hermione politely.

Hermione did her best not to look appalled by the very idea. “No thank you, Lady Malfoy. Your son is correct; I am headed to the library.” She gave Narcissa another small smile. “It was a pleasure talking to you.”

“The pleasure is all ours, isn’t it, Draco?” Narcissa asked.

“Oh yes, pleasure,” Malfoy said with a suggestive glint in his eye.

“Have a good day!” Hermione said in her best fake-bright voice and walked away as quickly as she could without looking rude. Entering the tower, Hermione leaned against the wall for a minute to recover. She hoped her Potions partner managed to avoid another injury in the future; one Malfoy
in the castle was enough.
Now for Hermione’s Birthday, where this story’s obsession with personal objects truly runs rampant. And it includes the first Slug Club gathering!

Hogwarts’ unseasonably fine weather broke on Friday; Hermione could tell even before she saw the sullen clouds outside her bedroom window. Her bathroom mirror revealed a head of hair twice as large as usual, much like it was in Potions, a casualty of the sudden humidity. Her usual meditation and journal time was pissed away combing Speakeasy Hair Tonic through her curls and trying to confine them in a loose braid.

“Happy Birthday!” Ginny crowed, leaping out of bed. “Time for presents!” She pulled a stack of brightly wrapped gifts out of her wardrobe and put them on Hermione’s bed.

Lavender came back from the bathroom, already dressed for the day. “Happy Birthday, Hermione,” she said without enthusiasm.

“Staying for presents?” Ginny asked her.

Lavender picked up her bag. “Just looks like a bunch of books to me,” she sneered and left the room.

“Bitch,” Ginny muttered, sitting on Hermione’s bed. “Come on—I happen to know they’re not all books.”

Hermione smiled as she joined Ginny. Lavender wasn’t entirely wrong; most of the wrapped gifts had a suspiciously heavy, rectangular shape.

“Mine first,” Ginny said, handing her a small, soft package. Hermione unwrapped it, stared down for a moment, then glared at Ginny.

“Really?” she asked.

“Hold it up,” Ginny said, eyes dancing.

“I will not!”

“There’s nobody else here.”

Hermione glanced around anyway and held up a green silk brassiere.

“Matching knickers, too,” Ginny said smugly. “You’re dating a Slytherin now.”

“I’m not dating a Slytherin!”

Ginny folded her legs under her. “Aren’t you going to Hogsmeade with Theo Nott tomorrow?”

“Yes, before I meet Ron and Harry,” Hermione said, tugging a dangling strap away from
Crookshanks. “It’s not a green lingerie situation.”

“You never know,” Ginny said wickedly. “Now open Ron’s.”

“It’s probably a book,” Hermione sighed. Ron always gave her books. Last year’s birthday book was about the Chudley Cannons Quidditch team, and he borrowed it from her right away and never returned it.

“I know for a fact it’s not,” Ginny said, handing her a small box.

“Did he pick this gift or did you?” Hermione asked, unwrapping it.

Ginny shook her head. “Wasn’t even there.”

Hermione eyed the small velvet box suspiciously, wondering what she would find. Earrings? A diamond pendant? Godric forbid—a ring? She took a deep breath and opened it.

“Well?” Ginny asked. “It’s jewelry, right?”

“It is a golden pin,” Hermione admitted.

“At least it’s not a book, right?”

Hermione turned the open box around so Ginny could see. “It’s a pin shaped like a book,” she said flatly.

“Oh.” Ginny flushed slightly and sighed. “Well, progress.”

“Ginny.”

“Ron’s just rubbish with gifts, last year he gave me handkerchiefs—”

“Ginny.” Hermione snapped the box shut. “There’s nothing to say. That is how he sees me.”

“It’s not all he—”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “You know it’s true. It’s not meant to be. Why else would you be giving me Slytherin underwear?”

Ginny looked at her hands, a curtain of red hair falling around her face. Hermione pushed a lock behind her friend’s left ear and smiled. “It’s okay, Gin. It’s a good gift from a friend and that’s what Ron and I are. Now, let’s open my parents’ gift.” She held up the little box and card that her parents had slipped into her trunk before she left for school.

This box held a beautiful heart-shaped sapphire (her birthstone) on a silver chain. The card was signed: “In memory of the happiest day of our lives. Love, Mum and Dad.”

Hermione sniffled and held the box to her chest. They forgave her. She had erased their memories and packed them off to the other side of the world, all without their consent, but her parents still loved her and they forgave her. She let Ginny fasten the chain around her neck and tucked the sapphire inside her uniform shirt. The tiny weight on her chest lightened her heart.

“Now time for Harry’s … oooh,” Ginny said as Hermione opened her third gift. Inside was a heavy silver otter about the size of her fist, curled up and sleeping. “It’s a paperweight,” Hermione breathed. “I saw a hedgehog one in Diagon Alley.”
“Wow,” Ginny said.

Hermione hopped off the bed and picked it up, placing it on a stack of parchment on her desk. The silver otter stretched and yawned and curled up again. It was such a perfect gift, bookish yet personal. Harry must have ordered it by owl to match her Patronus.

“What’s that?” Ginny asked from the bed. “On your desk.”

Hermione suddenly noticed another present on the desk, tucked near the window sill. She picked up the flat, heavy, silver-wrapped package and brought it to her bed.

“Theo?” Ginny asked, touching its shining green ribbon.

“I don’t know.” Hermione would have liked to think it was Theo, but she had a darker suspicion.

“Aren’t you going to open it?”

Yes, best to get it over with. Hermione untied the ribbon with suddenly clumsy fingers and pulled away the silvery paper to reveal a wide, black velvet box. She looked at Ginny, who stared back wide-eyed. Hermione cracked open the box and the two women stared at its contents.

“Merlin,” Ginny breathed.

Nestled in grey silk was a jeweled hair clip, exquisitely delicate, with a single diamond in the center surrounded by diamond-studded silver wires shaped like rose petals. Accompanying the clip were two matching, diamond-studded hairpins.

“How did this box get here?” Hermione asked, looking around. “Ginny?”

Ginny shook her head. “I collected the rest of the gifts, but I never saw this one.”

Hermione rummaged through the paper. “No tag or card.”

Ginny bit her lip. “Theo?” she asked again.

“Maybe.” Or maybe not. Theo had been very cautious so far and this was … bold. Theo didn’t know where her room was, either. Someone else did, though.

Ginny was fingering the green ribbon. “You don’t think …” Her breath caught. “Malfoy?”

Hermione shrugged.

“It could be,” Ginny said, looking at the hair clip appraisingly. “Extravagant …”

“Inappropriate,” Hermione said.

“Impractical … I mean, has he seen your hair?”

Hermione picked up a hairpin and inspected it closely. Such a delicate accessory would be perfect for a Slytherin girl’s smooth, fine, never-mussed hair. Defiantly, she tucked the pin into the right side of her head, where it vanished instantly into her curls.

Ginny laughed. “You’d need a dozen of those to hold up one side!” She sobered suddenly. “How would he get the box in here?”

Hermione shrugged and placed the diamond set carefully in her trunk. Malfoy had proven himself
Ginny eyed her sharply, then dropped the subject. “Come on! Let’s open all your books!”

***

Ron was in the common room when Hermione and Ginny came down, and immediately noticed his gold book pin on Hermione’s jumper. “Alright, then?” he asked, coming up to her.

“Yes,” she smiled. “Thank you.” She stood up on tiptoe and kissed Ron on the cheek.

“Ow!” Ron said.

“What?” Hermione asked. “Did I step on your foot?”

“No, I touched your head and … ow!” Ron sucked on his finger.

Ginny snickered. “You’ll live, Ron. Come on, we’ll be late to breakfast.”

Hermione dithered throughout the meal, debating whether to acknowledge Malfoy’s gift. In the end, she decided not to—if the man wanted a proper thank you, he could include a card or tag like a normal person. Malfoy kept his distance in Ancient Runes and was well-behaved in Potions, which Hermione considered an even better birthday gift. Until, unfortunately, Malfoy noticed the book pin.

“What’s that on your jumper, Granger?” he asked wide-eyed. “A torn bit of firewhiskey label? Had a little morning tipple on your birthday?” Lavender giggled as Ron turned red.

“It’s a pin, Malfoy,” Hermione said calmly, stirring their potion. Slughorn had them brewing perfume to dispel any lingering blood potion odors, so now she had a headache and her hair was coming out of its braid from the steam and she was in no mood for his games.

“A pin?” Malfoy leaned forward, his own slightly damp hair falling into his eyes. She had a sudden urge to smooth it back. And then slap his face. It was very disturbing. “What kind of pin?” he continued. “It looks like a tiny box of biscuits.”

Lavender giggled again. Hermione ignored him, but Ron fell right into the trap.

“It’s a book, you git,” he snapped.


Hermione rolled her eyes to the heavens and silently bewailed to the unjust gods. Really? Was this to be her fate? To be trapped at a Potions table while Draco Malfoy crowed over the superiority of his secret birthday gift compared to Ron’s? What had she ever done to deserve this?

Tamping down her silent hysteria, Hermione cast Malfoy a hooded look. “I think it’s a lovely pin, a
very thoughtful gift,” she said with a smile. She took Ron’s hand, which lay on the table between them, and held it. “I’m proud to wear it,” she purred, looking into Ron's eyes.

Ron looked smug. Malfoy decanted their perfumed potion into a bottle and pounded in the cork with his fist. Hermione wondered if she’d slightly overstated her love for the book pin—would she have to wear it every day now? Looking at Malfoy's scowl, she thought it might be worth it.

Theo caught up with her outside the Potions classroom. “I hear it’s your birthday,” he said with a smile.

“Yes, I’m 19 today,” she said.

“Happy Birthday, then. I wish I’d known sooner. I would have gotten you something.”

“It’s fine,” Hermione said with great sincerity.

“Well, we can celebrate tomorrow,” Theo said, brushing a curl off her face. He frowned, looking down at his hand, but just then a cloud of perfume billowed out the Potions dungeons door, prompting students to scatter. Hermione hurried up the stairs. Hopefully Theo wouldn’t give her a book tomorrow. Or a book charm. Or a scarf with little books embroidered on it.

***

“Which of these should I wear?” Ginny asked, holding up two dresses.

“Just pick one,” Hermione said shortly. “Slughorn’s stupid dinner starts in fifteen minutes.”

“What about your hair?” Ginny asked. She threw aside the green dress from the Gryffindor party and unzipped a black lace one.

“What about it?” Hermione asked, stripping off her uniform.

Ginny pointed at the bedroom’s full-length mirror and Hermione groaned. Her hair was a frizzy mess from the day's humidity.

“It’s weird,” Ginny said. “Your whole head went crazy except for the part with that diamond hairpin. It's still in there somewhere, right?”

“What?” Hermione stepped up to the full-length mirror on the wardrobe to look more closely. Ginny was right; the hair on one side of her head was still smoothed back in a thick wave and pinned while the rest had completely freaked out.

“I’m starting to think those pins aren’t so impractical after all,” Ginny said thoughtfully.

“Well, I’m not wearing them,” Hermione said, yanking out the diamond pin. The right side of her head immediately puffed out. “Aaaargh!”

Ginny laughed so hard she could hardly put her dress on. “Do it again!”
“No,” Hermione snapped, pulling on her own blue velvet dress, chosen to match her parents’ sapphire pendant. “It’s not funny,” she said, glaring at Ginny’s smooth golden-red head. “I need better girlfriends.”

“I’m an excellent girlfriend,” Ginny said, zipping her up. “Your dress looks beautiful. And your parents’ necklace.”

Hermione picked up her sweater. “Should I wear Ron’s pin?”

“Godric, no. Go get that diamond hair set.”

“No.” Hermione had her own reasons not to wear that clip and pins. “It’ll be fine.”

“It will not be fine and we don’t have hours to tame those curls.” Ginny bullied Hermione over to her trunk and made her take out the flat box. “Give me that, and sit down.”

“There’s something weird about these pins,” Hermione said, eyes narrowed, as Ginny tugged at her curls with a brush. “Hey!”

“Don’t be a baby. Where’s my wand?”

“What are you doing?” Hermione asked, trying to turn toward the mirror.

“Stop moving … there!” Ginny stepped back.

“You’re finished? Already?” Hermione was surprised. She stood and walked over to the mirror.

An amazing sight greeted her. The deep-blue velvet dress, sleeveless with a low, square neckline, perfectly complemented the sapphire pendant on its short silver chain. Her hair, amazingly, was smoothly pulled back on the sides and twisted securely in the back, with pins and hair clip subtly peeping out between the curls.

Hermione groaned. “This totally sends the wrong message,” she said, looking at herself. “You should have heard Malfoy in Potions this morning.”

“What did he say?”

“He said Ron’s pin looked like a torn-off firewhiskey label.”

Ginny snickered.

“It’s not funny and you’re a terrible person.” Hermione looked back at her image and sighed. “I am, too.”

“Nonsense, let’s go,” Ginny said, propelling her toward the door. “We’re late.”

***
The Potions dungeon had been transformed; the tables and cauldrons had vanished and shimmering tapestries covered the stone walls. Flowers bloomed from vases (probably to mask any lingering potion odors) and candles flickered from ornate, standing candelabras, adding to the romantic scene. A long, rectangular dining table dominated one end of the cavernous space, sparkling with crystal and china, while couples danced to floating instruments on the other side.

Blaise appeared instantly at Hermione and Ginny’s entrance, looking impossibly handsome in dark green robes. He paid them a few graceful compliments and spirited Ginny away right under Slughorn’s nose, leaving Hermione with their host. Slughorn’s ermine-lined robe of green brocade clashed horribly with his shiny red nose. (He’d obviously been drinking heavily from his giant goblet.) The professor’s compliments were considerably less graceful than Blaise’s and he spoke at length about “beauty and brilliance” while introducing her to the Ministry’s Head of Departmental Communications and its Deputy Head of Sports. Quidditch and the media were not Hermione’s favorite topics of conversation, and she slipped away as soon as Slughorn turned to greet Gryffindor’s Cormac McLaggen.

She edged toward the back wall, curious about the scenes on the tapestries, and literally bumped into Malfoy, who had apparently chosen Lurking Behind Candelabras as his social strategy for the evening.

Hermione rocked back on her heels, staring up at him. Like Blaise, Malfoy was perfectly suited to such a setting, his hair and steel-grey robes shining in the candlelight, which also played off his cheekbones and the line of his jaw. He was evidently in a brooding mood, his eyes distant, much like when she watched him from the sofa the night of the Gryffindor party.

He was also silent. No snarky “where’s the Weasel?” or caustic comment about her clumsiness, he just looked down at her for a moment, then extended his hand. She didn’t hesitate, just took it, almost in a daze, and let him lead her to the dancing area. His other hand slid around her waist and he drew her into a waltz.

The lilting music and heavy smell of cut flowers washed over her. The last time she’d waltzed among flowers and candlelight had been Bill and Fleur’s wedding. The music especially brought her back to that night, the free-floating terror swirling around the dancers, finally taking shape in the form of Kingsley’s lynx Patronus landing in their midst: “Scrimgeour is dead. They are coming.”

Malfoy slowed his steps. “You’re trembling,” he whispered in her ear.

Hermione looked up at him. “The last time I heard this waltz …” She swallowed. “It was the night the Ministry fell.” She didn’t know why she told him that. She expected him to look away, ignore her words, perhaps even leave, but Malfoy looked down at her steadily with that odd, open expression.

“The air,” she went on, “it smelled of roses that night, too.”

His arm tightened around her. Whatever Malfoy’s own memories were of that dark summer, or his thoughts of a Ministry still eager to send him to Azkaban, those grey eyes held nothing but reassurance. “It’s all right,” he whispered, pulling her closer. “We’re all right now. All right.” His words sounded like a mantra, something he had oft repeated to himself. The scent of his cologne and that warm sunshine smell surrounded her. She wanted to lay her cheek on his robes, close her eyes, and breathe it in. It was unreal: Malfoys were supposed to cause distress, not alleviate it.

They continued to waltz gently, neither wanting to break the spell. Malfoy danced effortlessly, like he was born to it, which Hermione supposed he was. He led her so subtly she hardly noticed it, yet
she hadn’t stumbled once, which had to be a record. She began to feel that strange connection they’d shared while brewing the Fiducia potion, with their breaths and heartbeats synchronized as well as their steps. The chatter and laughter around them seemed to fade away.

“You look beautiful tonight,” Malfoy whispered above her right ear. His breath stirred her curls. So do you, Hermione thought. But she said nothing.

“Having a good birthday?” he asked, carefully polite. His eyes lingered on her sapphire pendant—and perhaps lower—until Hermione could feel the heat spread down her neck.

“Yes,” she answered, sounding a little breathy. Then something occurred to her and she backed away slightly. “How did you do it?”

He smiled. “How do you think I did it?”

“You flew to the window,” she answered. “Vanished the pane.”

“Ten points to Gryffendor.” He smirked. “You could say thank you, you know.”

She smirked right back. “Draco Malfoy, teaching me manners.”

“Apparently, I need to.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Oh yes, you’re eminently qualified. Because taunting people about their gifts is the epitome of good manners.”

Malfoy gave her a look that reminded her of his father. “Good manners don’t apply to the Weasel.”

“Good manners apply to everyone.”

“Then I’m still waiting for my thank you.”

“Thank you for your very thoughtful birthday gift,” she said in a singsong voice.

A muscle tightened in Malfoy’s jaw at the word “thoughtful,” but he let it go. He released her hand and ran a light finger over one of the hairpins before taking the hand back again. His grip was light and warm, and she could feel his palm rough against her knuckles.

“Just perfect,” he said smugly.

Hermione shook her head. “It’s too much, really.”

“Nonsense, nothing’s too good for Gryffindor’s Princess.” He grinned, knowing she hated that title. Hermione looked away, huffing, to see Neville entering the dungeons, wearing dress robes of dark red. Behind him was Astoria, shining in pale blue satin and long white gloves.

“My mother enjoyed speaking with you yesterday.” Malfoy was shifting back to small talk. “She gives you her best.”

Hermione frowned. “Did you tell her about my letter to the Wizengamot?”

“I assure you, I did not.”

“Well, then I’m surprised by her—”
“Let’s not discuss my mother,” he said, his jaw tight.

“You’re the one who brought her up.”

“I was being polite,” he hissed.

“Well, you need more practice,” she hissed back.

“Miss Granger! Mr. Malfoy! Come join us!” Slughorn was calling from the head of the table. The other dancers were leaving the floor and moving toward the table.

Hermione stepped away from Malfoy, flushing slightly. She moved toward an empty chair near the foot of the table, but Malfoy reached it first and pulled it out for her, and it was all she could do not to gape at him. People were staring now, but Hermione managed to sit down without tripping or knocking over a glass, an accomplishment she felt deserved congratulations. Malfoy took a seat beside her like it was the natural way of the world, and Slughorn toasted the “illustrious company.”

“And my undying gratitude to Miss Hermione Granger, who so generously joins us on the day of her birth! Happy Birthday, my dear!” the professor cried.

The whole table toasted Hermione, which she found ridiculously embarrassing. Blaise widened his grin as he raised his glass and Ginny crossed her eyes. And then, thankfully, it was time for the first course, and the conversation became general. Her relief was short-lived, though, when she realized that she was seated between Malfoy and Cormac and across from Her Majesty Astoria.

“Hermione,” Cormac rumbled, breathing brandy all over her neck. “You look absolutely stunning.” His hand appeared on the back of her chair, his fingers brushing against her skin.

She leaned forward. “Thank you, Cormac. Are you playing Quidditch this year?”

Cormac frowned. “No.” He’d never gotten over losing his bid for Keeper to Ron in Fourth Year (although he didn’t know Hermione had had a hand in it) and then he’d lost out to Ron again this year, loudly claiming that Ginny favored her brother. “I prefer to concentrate on my NEWTs.”

“That’s very good to hear,” Hermione said approvingly. “I’m glad you joined my study group.”

He grinned. “I would never turn down PORN.”

“Pupil Organization to Review Newts,” she corrected. She heard Malfoy snicker on her other side and turned to him. “And not a word from you either. You’ll all thank me when the exams arrive this spring.”

“We’re thanking you now,” Malfoy said. “I can’t think of a better name.”

Hermione took a sip of wine. Cormac’s hand left her chair to brush against the back of her neck. “I haven’t wished you a Happy Birthday yet, Hermione,” he said. “Perhaps we could … celebrate … later tonight.”

Malfoy stiffened beside Hermione, who again leaned forward to avoid Cormac’s touch. She found herself staring at Astoria’s perfect face above a long rope of pearls that twined loosely around the woman’s throat and bosom like a snake.

“Draco,” Astoria said, drawing out the two syllables. “I enjoyed my tea with your mother yesterday. I hope she had a nice visit.”
“She did, thank you,” Malfoy said.

“Narcissa was quite pleased to see you fully recovered from your injury. But I agree with her that you mustn’t overexert yourself.”

Malfoy took a sip of wine. “There’s little danger of that, Astoria.”

“Narcissa is a very wise woman,” Astoria continued. “She had some excellent thoughts about your post-Hogwarts career.”

“Since when does the new Lord Malfoy need a career?” asked Justin Finch-Fletchley, who sat beside Astoria. He looked quite refined in black and gold robes, his curly, dark blond hair smoothed back from a high forehead, but the cold glitter in his eyes looked strange on a Hufflepuff.

“Looks like all is forgiven, after all,” Justin continued. “He can just sit in his manor and count his money as if nothing ever happened.”

“Justin,” Hermione said.

“What, you’re going to defend him, Hermione?” Justin asked, eyebrows raised. “After what happened to you at his home?”

Malfoy set down his wine goblet with enough force to rattle the china. Without looking at him, Hermione reached under the lace tablecloth to touch his left wrist lightly with her fingers. She felt Malfoy relax slightly.

“This isn’t the time or place, Justin,” she said coolly, releasing Malfoy’s wrist. “It’s disrespectful to Professor Slughorn.”

“All right,” the Hufflepuff said, his prissy mouth pursed in distaste. “But some of us will never forget.”

“I hear Hogwarts will be hosting a Halloween Festival on the grounds,” Astoria said brightly to the man on her left. “Sounds lovely. Do you need any help organizing, Ernie?”

Ernie looked glum as he crunched a breadstick. “Yes, all the help I can get. The prefects have been useless.”

“I love organizing social events,” Astoria said, smiling brilliantly at Malfoy.

Hermione wanted to roll her eyes, but she was actually grateful to Astoria for turning the conversation. Justin laid off Malfoy for the rest of the dinner, but it was still interminable, and Cormac wouldn’t give up.

“So, Hermione,” he murmured. “What will it take, hmmm?” His hand ran up her spine, to the back of her neck and into her curls this time.

“Ah!” Cormac gasped, snatching back his hand. He pressed his napkin against a jagged tear on his palm.

“Oh dear,” Hermione said. “How did that happen? Hold still, now.” She healed Cormac’s wound with her wand while Malfoy snickered.

Cormac kept his hands to himself after that, but she was still relieved when the dinner ended and she could escape to a corner with Neville. “Cormac’s headed this way, don’t leave me with him,”
she instructed. “And keep me away from Justin and Ernie, too. And Slughorn. Oh, and those two Ministry luminaries Slughorn brought.”

“Are there any men here that you like?” Neville asked.

She shrugged. “You. Blaise, maybe.” She didn’t mention Malfoy. “Oh, and keep me away from Astoria, too.”

“Looks like she and Malfoy might be on again,” Neville said, tilting his head toward the fireplace, where the two stood close in conversation. Astoria’s icy blue dress shimmered against Malfoy’s grey robes. “Rumor has it his mother came to Hogwarts yesterday to look her over.”

Ginny stepped up with Blaise, her cheeks red from either wine or the wizard by her side. “Hermione, Blaise says it’s time for a real party, in the Slytherin common room. Neville, we need you, too.”

“Thank you, Blaise,” Hermione said, “but I have to be at the Potions Lab tomorrow morning …”

“And I have to set up the Quidditch pitch for practice at 7 a.m.,” Ginny said. “Live a little, both of you.”

“You’d be very welcome, Longbottom,” Blaise said. “And Hermione, always.”

“Come on, Hermione,” Ginny wheedled. “Excellent liquor, no Cormac or Justin there.”

“That is a plus,” Hermione admitted.

“Hermione hates all men tonight except for you and me, Zabini,” Neville said.

“Even Malfoy?” Ginny teased. Hermione gave her a warning frown.

“It looks like Astoria will keep him busy,” Blaise said, glancing over at the couple by the fireplace. Astoria’s gloved hand was on Malfoy’s arm now. Blaise’s dark eyes returned to hold Hermione’s. “Please come.”

There was no resisting that pull (honestly, she couldn’t fault Ginny for being intrigued), so Hermione found herself drinking with the Slytherins in their spooky, green-draped common room in the dungeons. She sat beside Neville on a sofa, pounding any drink given to her and trying not to watch the entrance. Neither Malfoy nor Astoria made an appearance, and Theo had apparently gone off to Hogsmeade on his own. Neville practically had to carry Hermione back to Gryffindor Tower, and stood with her at the stairs to the girls’ dorms, looking concerned.

“I’m fine, Nev,” she said, patting his shoulder. “Thank you.”

“Hermione,” he said, keeping his voice low. “What is going on with you? You look miserable.”

“What do I have to be miserable about?” she asked. “We won, I’m alive, you and Harry and Ron and Ginny are alive, I have a charming Slytherin whose family didn’t have Voldemort as a house guest taking me to lunch tomorrow.” She sat heavily on the staircase. “I’m a war heroine, remember? I’m going to get all Outstandings on my NEWTs and go on to change the wizarding world. I’m the last person to be miserable.”

“But Hermione, you’re crying,” Neville said, handing her a handkerchief.

“Tears of joy …”
Neville sighed and wrapped an arm around her as she sobbed how happy she was until Ginny came back.

“This is not good,” Ginny said, pulling Hermione to her feet. “Hermione, come on. Yes, yes, you’re very happy.”

“How long can she go on like this?” Neville asked.

“As long as she has to,” Ginny answered grimly. “I don’t know how this is going to turn out.”

“You two keep worrying but I’m happy,” Hermione said as Ginny dragged her upstairs. “And Neville!”

Neville looked up at her.

“Thank you. I love you, Neville, even though you gave me a book for my birthday.”

“It’s a very interesting book,” Neville said. “About magical rainforest plants.”

“Yes, riveting,” Ginny said, still pushing her upwards. “Come on, Hermione. Thank Godric your birthday only comes once a year.”

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Hogsmeade!

Ron bounced excitedly in his seat. “Did Hermione tell you about PORN?” he asked Harry.

Harry blinked. “What? No, I kind of found it on my own ...”
Hermione turned up late at the Potions lab on Saturday morning: hungover, sleep-deprived and ready to hex somebody. Every time she’d closed her eyes the night before, she’d seen Malfoy and Astoria together, imagined him sidling up to her with hooded eyes and a long, pale hand on the witch’s slender hip. She thought of Astoria laughing lightly with Narcissa Malfoy over tea, and remembered those tilted blue eyes shining at Malfoy by the fireplace at Slughorn’s party. She could only see the back of his head then, but he hadn’t exactly been trying to escape. Godric only knew what he had been saying to her, likely in that low murmuring tone, with that hypnotic stare. Hermione had tossed in bed, imagining them in some corner of the dungeons, heatedly kissing, fingers sliding through perfect hair. In the end, she fell into a restless sleep and dreamed of Malfoy whispering, “I’ll kiss you if you tell me about your gardens, Astoria …”

So she was bitterly disappointed to see six bushels of clover blossoms neatly stacked on a table in the Potions dungeon the next morning. That meant she couldn’t yell at Malfoy for failing to procure a vital ingredient, turn him into a toad and then stomp off to take a nap. Even worse, she found Malfoy virtuously stirring up a rainwater base in a small copper cauldron and looking surprisingly well-rested for a man who presumably spent the night in passionate pureblood shagging nirvana.

“Granger,” he said amiably. “You look like hell.”

She glared at him through bloodshot eyes and said nothing, just consulted the recipe and began on the flobberworms.

“That should be chopped, not mashed,” Malfoy said as he measured a teaspoonful of diced crocodile heart with delicate precision.

Hermione waved her wand, vanishing the butchered worms, and started again. Malfoy began to whistle as he minced his motherwort. Apparently, the man just needed to get laid all along, she thought. No need for games with the Mudblood anymore.

“Granger,” Malfoy said.

Well, I’m personally thrilled about it. Let Astoria haul his ass out of whatever hot soup he lands in next …

“Granger,” Malfoy said.

Sure won’t be me, don’t know why I’m fretting about a damned …

“Granger!”

“What?” she snapped, slamming down her knife. A glob of flobberworm guts spurted onto Malfoy’s Quidditch jersey.

“Merlin, Granger,” Malfoy said, wrinkling his nose. Hermione raised her wand to tergeo the guts away, but he held up a hand. “Don’t. I’d rather you didn’t point a wand at me in your current mood.”

She lowered her arm, registering his green-and-silver jersey for the first time. “You’re going to Quidditch practice,” she said.
Malfy nodded. “Madam Pomfrey cleared me to play.”

“Splendid.” Hermione began scraping her finished flobberworms into the cauldron. “I’m sure you’ll present her with any number of interesting crushes and fractures and internal damage. If you survive the season.”

“Granger.” She felt Malfoy’s hand on her arm. “I’ll be fine,” he said quietly. “I’ve taken precautions.”

“Oh, really? And what precautions could you possibly take?” She glared up at him. “You’ll be high above the pitch during games and practices. You could be hexed, your broom could be sabotaged, a Bludger could be enchanted, another player could be Imperioused, you could be Imperioused, the Snitch could be cursed—”

“Alright, enough, I get it.” Malfoy stared at her wide-eyed. “Merlin.” Then he smiled. “Maybe you should come keep an eye on me.”

Hermione pulled her arm away. “I need to get the clover.” She stomped out of the room and returned with an overflowing bushel basket, dropping it with a thud on the table. “I’m surprised you picked all this yourself,” she said, then gave Malfoy a flinty stare. “Or maybe not.”


“The First Years from detention?”

He nodded. “They were a little excited about learning the augmenti spell in Charms. Kept squirting water from their wands in Potions.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “That isn’t even original.”

“What can you expect from Hufflepuffs? Slughorn had me oversee their latest detention, so I set them sentences.” Malfoy waved his wand at the lab’s small chalkboard and the following words appeared: “I will not squirt water from my wand and put out other students' cauldron fires until the professor's back is turned.”

“While the professor’s back is turned,” Hermione growled.

Malfy shrugged and began preparing the blossoms. “That’s what Sluggy said. So I took them all outside and had them pick clovers. Sluggy heartily approved; the last thing he wants is another blood potion stinking up his dungeons. There isn’t enough Amorentia in the world.”

Hermione flushed at the mention of Amorentia, then flushed again when she realized she was staring at Malfoy as he stripped the clover’s stems from the blossoms. Who knew she had such a hand fetish? She didn’t recall ever staring at Ron’s hands, but there she was, watching Malfoy handle clover blossoms. And Theo liked to twirl his quill in his fingers while studying .... Malfoy was eyeing her with interest now, which made Hermione’s face heat a third time, and she began snatching up fistfuls of clover and dropping them into the solution.

They worked in silence, with hundreds of little white flowers disappearing into the small cauldron. A fresh, sweet smell filled the room. Hermione stirred the now-distilled, sticky potion with a flat stick.

“All right, that’s the last of the clover,” she said, pouring the cauldron’s contents into a bottle. “Go ahead and court death at Quidditch practice—I’ll finish this potion myself.”
“You certainly will not, at least not today,” Malfoy said sternly. “The murlap mixture still needs to simmer. Go get some sleep, you look completely done in. Gryffindors really don’t know how to party.”

“Maybe I didn’t have the exciting evening you did, but I know how to have fun.” Hermione’s voice dripped with acid. “I had a great evening. The only thing wrong with it was that I had to talk to you.”

“Granger, you sound certifiable. You can’t say you didn’t—”

“Fine. I’ll leave,” she snapped, shoving the stoppered bottle into her bag, “since Quidditch is more important than this blood spell, anyway.” She used her wand to clear the table, grabbed her bag and left the lab. Being completely unreasonable was oddly satisfying; maybe that was why Ron liked it so much.

“Granger!” Malfoy yelled. Hermione stomped out of the Potions dungeon, slamming the door.

***

Hermione was feeling much better when she arrived at the Tomes and Scrolls bookshop in Hogsmeade that afternoon. A two-hour nap and a Pepper-up potion had done wonders for her mood. She’d taken some care with her appearance, putting on a blue V-necked jumper, black jeans and boots. She even applied lipstick and cast a glamour spell to reduce the circles under her eyes. Fastening her new sapphire pendant around her neck, she tied her hair back with a silver ribbon. She refused to wear Malfoy’s diamonds. I didn’t ask the git to spend a fortune on hair accessories.

Theo was already there, greeting her with a smile. He was unfailingly patient in the shop, even when Hermione saw noted Runes expert Danbert Donalson promoting his latest volume of “Unraveling the Elder Fubarks” and insisted on waiting in line for a signed copy. Then Theo whisked her to an outdoor café for lunch, correctly predicting that it would not rain on them, and gave her a wrapped gift that was all the wrong shape for a book.

Hermione looked at the gift on their tiny table, thinking it was rather hypocritical of her to rail against getting books for her birthday when she couldn’t wait to sneak off to the loo and read a bit of her new Fubarks tome. She just hoped it wasn’t jewelry.

She pulled off the paper to reveal a long wooden box. “Looks old,” she said, running her hand over the grain.

“Open it,” Theo urged.

She unlatched the lid and lifted it, revealing a small scroll. Hermione glanced at Theo, then took it out, unrolling the delicate parchment carefully.

“‘12 October, 1986. Dearest Drusilla,’” she read in growing amazement. “‘I deem the task to be impossible, and rue the day I ever agreed to write … ‘Hogwarts: A History!’’” Hermione squealed the last three words, prompting other patrons to stare. “Theo, this is the letter from historian
Bathilda Bagshot to her niece, when she despaired of the task and vowed to throw the manuscript into the fire! And she almost did! But Drusilla traveled to see her and convinced her to toil on, or …” she looked at Theo, horrified, “… there wouldn’t be a ‘Hogwarts: A History’!”

“And a bleak world that would be, indeed,” Theo said with a smile.

“How did you find it?” she asked, hugging him excitedly.

“It’s nothing,” Theo said, his voice muffled by her hair.

“Where was it?”

“A little shop in Knockturn Alley.”

“Knockturn Alley?” she repeated disapprovingly.

“A lot of treasures in that place.”

“I suppose so,” Hermione said thoughtfully. Maybe she should check Knockturn Alley out sometime. She’d been there before. She tucked the letter back into its box, sternly quashing her wartime memories of Bathilda's animated corpse in Godric's Hollow. Theo had no way of knowing about that. She dropped the box into her expandable beaded bag, hearing an echoing clatter.

“Merlin,” she said, peeking inside. “I never took those candlesticks out.”

“I’ve heard about that bag,” Theo said with interest.

Hermione beamed at him. It truly was a thoughtful gift. Perfectly calibrated to her. It almost made her suspicious, how good Theo was about everything. Nonsense, she was being ridiculous. The routine fuckups by the other men in her life had simply lowered her standards to the point where decent behavior appeared remarkable. She’d have to verify the authenticity of the letter, of course, but it was the thought that counted.

“How did you know about me and ‘Hogwarts: A History’?” she asked.

He shook his head. “I never reveal a source.”

_Ginny perhaps. Or Neville. So Slytherin._ “I have to leave in an hour,” she said, glancing up at the large clock tower across the street. “I’m sorry we don’t have more time.”

“That’s fine,” Theo said. The server arrived and set down their sandwiches and two glasses of butterbeer.

“To new beginnings,” Hermione said, raising her glass.

Theo’s smile crinkled the edges of his green eyes. “To new beginnings.” They clinked glasses. “My theme for this year.”

“You seem to have made a good start,” she said.

“I’m here with you, right?” He set down his glass. “And my father is now not-so-dearly departed. I can set my own future now, put the past behind me.” His hand found hers under the table.

Hermione nodded. He certainly would have an easier time than Malfoy, Theo was a nonentity during the war and his easy charm would go a long way. She wondered why Astoria wasn’t chasing _him_ instead.
“I’m surprised you aren’t betrothed to someone,” she said, pulling the tomatoes out of her sandwich with a fork. “I thought many pureblood families made … arrangements.”

He shrugged. “My father didn’t care much about that, or about me, for that matter. Considered me a poor excuse for an heir.”

“And your mother?” she asked.

“She died before I came to Hogwarts,” he said. “I never could find out how.”

His answer hung in the air between them. “Not sure this is the best subject for today,” Theo said with a tight smile.

“You’re right,” she said, squeezing his hand.

Theo’s smile softened. “A funny thing happened in Care of Magical Creatures yesterday—Hagrid brought out this absolutely terrifying Chimera, and nobody would approach it except Luna Lovegood. She kept giving it daisies and the Chimera liked them …”

Hermione dissolved into giggles. They finished their lunch, Theo ordered a few more butterbeers, and by the end of the hour they were helplessly laughing, trying to top each other’s stories.

“I can’t believe it,” Theo said. “You called Trelawney a fraud to her face? And stomped out?”

“Divination is a load of rubbish,” she said haughtily. Then she grinned. “And you, Theodore, so quiet during First Year in Transfiguration, turning people’s needles back into toothpicks without anybody knowing. Ron failed that lesson!”

“I did it to yours, too, but you didn’t even notice, just switched it back without thinking.”

“That was you? I thought I’d done it myself, accidentally.”

Theo huffed a laugh. “Like the great Hermione Granger could make a mistake.”

She sighed. “You have no idea.” Hermione looked at the clock again and stood up. “I’m sorry, I have to go.”

Theo stood as well. “Don’t be sorry. It was a great afternoon.”

She looked up at him, brow furrowed. “Are we friends now? Or still acquaintances?”

Theo chuckled and kissed her on the cheek. It was a lingering kiss—she could feel the roughness of a mid-day stubble and a warm, sweet breath on her ear.

“Friendly acquaintances,” he said.

***
Hermione was late getting to the Three Broomsticks, her stomach rebelling slightly from Blaise’s drinks the night before, a big sandwich for lunch and a couple of butterbeers already that day. She needed to slow down, or she’d ever make it through the evening.

“Hermione!” Harry shouted her name, causing half the pub to stare, but she didn’t care, just ran between the tables and into his arms.

“Oh Harry!” she whimpered, almost tearful. She grabbed a handful of his grey Ministry of Magic sweatshirt.

“Hey,” he said, wrapping his arms around her. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s been a long week,” she said, her face still buried in his chest.

“Hey, Mi,” Ron said, clearly expecting a hug as well.

She pulled away from Harry and gave Ron a quick squeeze. “I’m just so glad the three of us are together,” she said as they settled around their corner table.

“Are you really okay?” Harry asked, sliding a butterbeer toward her. “You look upset.”

“It’s Malfoy,” Ron spat. “He won’t leave her alone.”

“Has he been bothering you?” Harry asked sternly. “I did not like the way he was looking at …”

“Looking at what?” Ron asked.

“The way he looked at his trial,” Harry lied smoothly. “I don’t trust him.”

“Yes, tell her!” Ron said. “Every time I turn around, he’s watching Hermione … and whispering to her.”

“Is he now,” Harry said, green eyes cold behind his glasses.

“Oh for Merlin’s sake,” Hermione said. “You’re blowing this all out of proportion. He’s a troublemaker, and both of you let him get under your skin. I’m just a little stressed out about NEWTs—”

Ron bounced excitedly in his seat. “Did Hermione tell you about PORN?” he asked Harry.

Harry blinked. “What? No, I kind of found it on my own—”

“Pupil Organization to Review NEWTs,” Hermione snapped.

Harry’s laughter had the entire population of the Three Broomsticks staring again. Ron’s face was red with mirth, and even Hermione couldn’t help giggling. All tension faded away and Ron and Hermione launched into every ridiculous thing that had happened the previous week. Ron gave a spirited description of the Quidditch game where Malfoy was injured, including the choking Beaters; Harry was intrigued and gave Hermione a quick glance, but said nothing. Both men snickered at Hermione’s description of the Slug Club party.

“Sounds awful,” Harry said. “Now I’m really glad I didn’t return to Hogwarts.”

“It’s a nightmare, honestly, that you had to do that on your birthday,” Ron said. “Where did you go afterward? I was looking for you.”
“Oh, a bunch of us were hanging out,” Hermione said.

“With Slytherins?” Ron asked. “Was Malfoy there?”

“No, Ronald, he wasn’t there,” she said, irritated. “He was probably with Astoria Greengrass.”

“I don’t remember her,” Harry said, frowning.

“Year behind us. A real looker, but a prize bitch,” Ron said.

“So she’s perfect for Malfoy,” Hermione said in what she thought was a light, friendly tone, but both Harry and Ron stared. “What?”

“Nothing,” Harry said. “Tell me more about your birthday.”

“My parents gave me this pendant and a sweet card. They’ve really forgiven me, Harry.” She felt like sniffling again. Harry patted her hand.

“And…” Ron prompted.

“And a lovely golden pin from Ron,” Hermione said in a sing-song voice.

“That sounds nice,” Harry said, sipping his butterbeer.

“It’s shaped like a book,” Ron said proudly.

Harry sighed. “I’m going to just bang my head on the table now.”

“It’s all right, Harry, really,” Hermione said.

“What?” Ron asked. Harry and Hermione started laughing. “What?” he asked, louder, but it was no good—his friends were out of control now.

“D’ya think he’ll ever work it out?” Harry gasped.

“What? Hermione likes books, right?” Ron asked.

Harry’s head fell on the table. “I can’t take it,” he groaned.

“Harry? What did I say?” Ron asked. “Hermione!”

She stroked Harry’s head beside her butterbeer. “Thank you, too, for the paperweight, Harry,” she said. “I just love it.”

Harry raised his head and grinned at Ron, who was still frowning.

“Pull yourself together, Harry and tell us about the Aurors Office,” Hermione commanded. “It’s important stuff for Ron to know.”

“And maybe you too, if you want to join us,” Harry said. He described the training, and it did sound demanding, but exciting. Ron seemed surprisingly distant, only half-listening, but Hermione was intrigued by the aurors’ creative approaches.


Ron burst into laughter. “What, the little fairy?” he asked.
“A fairy?” Harry asked.

“I’ve decided that her approach has some merit after all, although it wants discipline and proper NEWT preparation,” Hermione said. “She talks a lot about unpredictable spellwork and creative strategies.”

“And love,” Ron said. “She talks a lot about love.” Harry looked appalled.

“Well, the aurors can skip that part, Ron,” Hermione snapped.

“Can you see it, a bunch of aurors reading lists of what they love about each other?” asked Ron, laughing again. Hermione couldn’t help but join in, and then Harry, although he looked a little nervous about fighting Dark Wizards with love, and the three friends were off again, laughing until they were finally kicked out of the Three Broomsticks and ended up at the Hog’s Head. Harry picked up three grimy glasses and a bottle of firewhiskey from the bar.

“Hermione,” Harry said quickly while Ron was in the loo, “we have to talk about those blood messages. Kingsley’s got some theories—”

Hermione sniffed. “I’m sure he has.”

“And I want to hear about that experimental potion you’re brewing. Will it really identify the blood used?”

“I hope so,” she said. “An unexpected issue came up, but I’ve got it now. Give me ten days—no, two weeks, and we can show you something.”

“Who’s we?”

Hermione groaned inwardly at her own stupidity. She hadn’t planned to tell him. “I have an assistant.”

“Who, Neville?” Harry eyed her closely, and his freaky auror sense kicked in. “Oh no, no, no …”

“‘There’s nobody else good enough,” she hissed. “Slughorn won’t help, the coward.”

“Draco Malfoy cannot be trusted!” Harry hissed back, his lightning scar a dark, jagged line on his flushed forehead. He looked a little like he had in Sixth Year, manically trying to convince Hermione that Malfoy was a Death Eater. He had, of course, been absolutely right, she remembered uncomfortably.

“Just because Malfoy didn’t write that message …” Harry began, then looked up and stopped. Hermione followed his gaze to see Ron heading their way, stopping to goggle at a hag in the corner with tiny bats circling her head. Harry turned back to her. “All right, Mi, two weeks. I want to see this fabulous potion.” Ron was nearly to the table. “I’ll owl you,” he whispered. Hermione nodded and sipped her drink.

Ron dropped into his seat and picked up his glass of firewhiskey. “So, Harry,” he said. “When’re you seeing Ginny?”

Their friend looked wary. “Did she say something?”

“No, but you should stop by. It seems birds really go for the Slytherins these days.” Ron cut his eyes at Hermione.
“Ron,” Hermione said.

“Just seems strange, that’s all, how cozy you and Ginny are with that lot,” Ron went on. “Ginny fooling around with Zabini and you spending all this time with Nott and Malfoy …”

“Ginny’s fooling around with Zabini?” Harry asked.

Hermione nodded reluctantly. “They have been spending time together.”

Harry looked down at the drink in his hand. “I told her we should see other people, but I didn’t think that meant …” his lip curled in a very un-Harry-like way, “… Blaise Zabini.” His voice held a world of contempt.

“What aren’t you telling us?” Hermione asked.

Harry rubbed his hand through his black hair, sticking it up even more. “I’ve … I’ve met someone, too.”

Ron’s face turned red. “You’re cheating on my sister?” he asked loudly.

“Ron!” Hermione snapped. “Harry said they could see other people, and Ginny told me the same thing. It’s not cheating.”

“Ron!?” Hermione snapped. “Harry said they could see other people, and Ginny told me the same thing. It’s not cheating.”

“You’re right, it’s not,” Ron growled. “Cheating is when you think you’re in a relationship with someone, then she suddenly starts stringing you along and chasing other men.”

“I told you straight out I just wanted to be friends, and I am not chasing other men!” Hermione cried.

“The fucked-up part,” Ron continued, “is that you’re probably stringing them along, too. Poor bastards. I almost feel sorry for Malfoy.”

“Ron, that’s uncalled for,” Harry said. “Hermione says there’s nothing going on between her and Malfoy and I believe her.”

Hermione shifted slightly in her seat, thinking of lips against skin in the infirmary.

“Well, what about Nott, then?” Ron was asking her.

“Theodore Nott? Ignatius Nott’s son?” Harry stared at her wide-eyed, then shook his head. “Hermione doesn’t have to tell us anything.”

“No, it’s all right.” She took a deep breath. “Right now, Theo and I are friends, but yes, we might start dating.” She glared at Ron. “At least Theo doesn’t lose his mind every time I do or say something he doesn’t like. He’s not a big fan of Malfoy’s either, but he’s somewhat mature about it.”

“Mi, I get upset because I care,” Ron said. “Those cold-blooded snakes don’t care about anybody.”

“We’ve been over this, Ronald,” Hermione said. “Your idea of caring is acting like a Godric-damned control freak—”

“Well, you keep doing stupid shit like—”

“Don’t you dare call me stupid! When’s the last time you did anything right?” she yelled, slamming her hand on the table. Dust billowed from the wooden surface in a choking cloud and
covered their already dirty glasses of firewhiskey.

“Ron,” Harry said, “Hermione can make her own decisions.”

“So you’re on her side now,” Ron said.

“I’m on both your sides and—”

“No, you’re not,” Ron said. “You don’t think I see the looks between you, the conversations stopping whenever I approach?” His blue eyes were unusually shrewd as he looked between them. “It happened again, just now, when I came back to the table.”

Hermione was appalled. “Ron, there is nothing going on between Harry and me.”

“Absolutely nothing,” Harry said firmly. “I don’t see her that way at all.”

“All that time in the tent …”

Harry shook his head. “Nothing happened. We’ve never kissed.”

“Ewwww,” Hermione said.

Ron quirked a small smile at that. “Well, then what’s going on? Why don’t you tell me more?”

“Maybe we would if we could trust you not to go spare,” Harry said.

“I can do better, really,” Ron said, leaning forward. “I promise. What were you talking about when I came back?”

Harry and Hermione glanced at each other. Hermione sighed. “We were talking about my experimental potions with Malfoy, and I just didn’t feel like hearing twenty more verses of the same old song.”

“Malfoy! You’re still—” Ron began. Hermione and Harry glared at him across the table.

“Okay, okay,” Ron said. He blinked a few times and cleared his throat. “So, ah, how’s that going?” he asked in a painfully polite tone.

Harry started laughing. Hermione scowled as she cleared the dust off the table and glasses with a quick scourgify. “Surprisingly well,” she said. “We’re working on a blood potion that might help us find out who wrote the message on the wall.”

“And Malfoy really wants to do that?” Ron raised his hands. “I’m just asking.”

“It’s a fair question,” Harry said, pouring out more firewhiskey.

“Ron, Malfoy was questioned by aurors under Veritaserum. He didn’t write that message and he doesn’t know who did,” Hermione said.

“That’s right. I was there, Merlin help me,” Harry said.

“So what McGonagall said was true?” Ron asked.

“Have you ever known her to lie?” Hermione snapped. “Anyway, after Malfoy proved himself under Veritaserum questioning, there was no reason not to accept his help. I need him, Ron.”
“I’ve seen that potions lab,” Ron said, knocking back another firewhiskey. “It’s quite small.”

“How small?” Harry asked.

“Harry,” Hermione rolled her eyes. “Don’t you start.”

“I don’t think Malfoy wants to help Muggle-borns at all,” Ron went on. “I think he’s got a sick fixation with Hermione and he sees this as his way in.”

“I completely agree,” Harry said, his eyes like cold jade. Hermione could almost feel the magic crackling around him. “Don’t look at me that way, Hermione. I was with you two in McGonagall’s office and he was everything that Ron describes.”

“What did he do in McGonagall’s office?” Ron asked Harry.

“Hello, I’m right here,” Hermione said. “Should I just leave now so you can discuss me in peace? Doesn’t anybody want to know what I think?”

“I already know what you think, you’ve made it quite clear,” Ron said. “You think Malfoy’s changed or reformed or something, that he was Voldemort’s innocent victim and deserves a second chance.”

“He’s no innocent, Ron, but yes, he does deserve a second chance,” Hermione said. It was definitely time to change the subject. “So,” she asked Harry. “Who’s the woman you’re two-timing Ginny with?”

“Oh, Merlin, stop,” Harry groaned, dropping his head into his hands.

“Yes, what’s that all about?” asked Ron, always easily distracted. “Who is she?”

Harry flushed. “Another auror trainee. Graduated from Beauxbaton. Her name is Chloe DeGray.”

“Is she part Veela?” Ron asked with a grin.

“No,” Harry said shortly. “But she is incredibly talented, and she doesn’t care that I’m famous. She’s pureblood, and her family practically disowned her when she announced she wanted to come to Britain and be an auror—”

Suddenly their chairs began to levitate from the floor. Harry barely managed to keep his eyeglasses on his nose and Hermione grabbed her beaded bag as the chairs carried them away from the table.

“What’s happening?” Ron cried out.

“Bar’s closing,” Harry said, grinning. “This place means business.”

“Makes sense, given the clientele,” Hermione added. Half the remaining patrons were passed out in their seats.

The levitating chairs carried them outside, unceremoniously dumping them outside the door and floating back inside. Hermione and Ron fell to the wooden sidewalk, while Harry managed to stay on his feet. Hermione scrambled up quickly but most of the other expelled patrons just lay on the ground.

“I think it’s time to call it a night,” Harry grinned, helping Ron stand. Ron groaned—all the whiskey had obviously rushed to his head. “Can you get him back to Hogwarts, Hermione?”
“Of course,” she said, giving Harry a hug.

“Be careful, Hermione,” Harry whispered. “Watch yourself with Malfoy. I know you’re not telling me everything.” He slapped Ron on the shoulder, nearly knocking his tipsy friend into the dirt, and Disapparated with a pop.

“Bye Harry!” Ron shouted into thin air. “Hey, Mi, let’s just Apparate to the castle …”

“Ron, you can’t Apparate into Hogwarts, how many times …” she turned to see him grinning at her. “Very funny,” she huffed.

“I was waiting for you to quote ‘Hogwarts: A History,’” he said. “Wish we could Apparate.”

Hermione sniffed. “You’d probably splinch yourself.”

“I’m excellent at Apparition!”

“Oh, yes, so amazing you left an eyebrow behind during the Test …”

“Half an eyebrow!” Ron said indignantly. Now Hermione was grinning. “Hey!” he cried. “Very funny!”

“It is,” she said, drawing her arm through his. “And the walk to the castle will be good for you.”

“I don’t want what’s good for me,” Ron grumbled, leaning against her.

Hermione sighed. “Nobody does,” she said.
Surprises

The walk back to the castle was good for Ron, and he was mostly sober as he and Hermione climbed the stairs to Gryffindor Tower.

“Can we sit by the fire a bit, Hermione?” he asked as they entered the portrait hole.

She bit her lip, looking up at him. “I don’t want to fight,” she said.

“No fighting, I promise.”

They settled on the sofa by the fire. It was after midnight and the common room was dim and empty. Ron lay their cloaks on the armchair and sat facing her, his arm along the back of the sofa, much like Malfoy did the night of the Gryffindor party. Hermione glanced at the curtain still covering the bloody letters. It had been weeks since the message appeared, and they were no closer to figuring out who did it.

“Mi, I still don’t get it,” Ron said, almost pleadingly. “Why all the Slytherins this year?”

Hermione felt like pretending she didn’t know what he meant, but she was suddenly so tired of games. “I’m not entirely sure, myself,” she said. It was rather odd—if she’d wanted to date outside Gryffindor, why not Ravenclaws or even Hufflepuffs? Well, maybe not Hufflepuffs. Ernie Macmillan? Justin Finch-Fletchley? Ewwww.

“You think Malfoy has turned over a new leaf,” Ron went on, thankfully ignorant of her mind’s latest puzzling detour. “You think he’s handsome and funny.” He sneered the last word. “I’ve seen you trying to hide your smiles. You like the whole bad-boy Slytherin asshole thing.”

Hermione frowned. “Maybe I like that Malfoy and Theo treat me like a woman and not a book with legs.”

“I do see you as a woman,” Ron’s blue eyes gleamed at her. “You can’t have forgotten.”

“That’s just sex,” Hermione said bitterly. “The rest of the time, I’m just a walking library to you.”

“That’s not true,” Ron said, his hand reaching out to stroke her hair. It made her uncomfortable, not the way Malfoy’s hand did—when she couldn’t help but stare at the long, pale finger tugging at her curl—but tense and crawly. Ron’s purposeful touch had a not-quite-right feeling she couldn’t shake.

“Ron,” she said gently, “you gave me a book pin for my birthday.”

His hand stopped. “You said you liked it.”

“Look,” she said, tugging her hair away, much like she had with Malfoy. Was she doomed to play out this little scene with Theo next? What would she do if he sat on this sofa and played with her curls? Life was truly baffling.

“Hermione, you said you liked the pin,” Ron repeated, bringing her back to the conversation. “You like books.”

“I do … but that’s not all I like. I like personal gifts, too,” Hermione said. “I don’t want to criticize your gift, Ron, and it’s perfect if we’re just friends. As friends, I’m always happy to receive a gift
from you and have you in my life. But it’s not exactly romantic.”

“What about Harry’s present? He gave you a paperweight.”


Ron stared at her, all color fading from his face. “Personal,” he said.

He looked so woebegone that Hermione couldn’t help but hug him. “Oh Ron, you are my best friend, with Harry. I love you. I just don’t think we’re good as a couple.”

Ron held her face in his hands. “But I still want you,” he whispered, looking at her lips.

She pulled back. “It’s not meant to be.”

Ron lowered his hands. “But it’s meant to be with Slytherins, eh? Although you’ll be waiting a while to get a personal gift from Draco Malfoy. Like he’d waste his precious galleons on a gift for a—”

He stopped. Hermione tried to keep her face neutral, but his eyes narrowed anyway. “Malfoy gave you a birthday present? He did! What was it, slutty underwear?”

“Ron!” Hermione snapped, her face red.

“Well, you wanted personal,” Ron sneered.

“I’ll have you know, Ronald, the only slutty underwear I received for my birthday was from your sister.”

Ron’s expression was priceless. “Malfoy’s present was nothing disrespectful,” she went on, “and if you think I’m telling you, you’re barmy.”

“But it was personal,” Ron said, now looking ill.

“Well, it wasn’t a book,” she snapped.

That killed the conversation for a time, and only the popping and crackling of the fire could be heard.

“Ron, you wanted to tell me something,” she finally said.

He looked hesitant. “First, let me get this straight,” Ron said. “You and Harry aren’t telling me things because you say I get … excited when I don’t like it.”

Hermione nodded, wondering where he was going with this.

“Well, if I’m going to stop doing that, you have to promise to stop doing it, too.”

“When have I ever …” Hermione’s voice rose, then trailed off. “Are you saying you’re not telling us something?”

“Two things, actually.” Ron looked uncomfortable.

“What?” Now it was Hermione’s turn to lean forward, eyes narrowed.

Ron was flushing now. “When I couldn’t find any of you last night, I went off with … Romilda
“Romilda Vane? That brainless groupie? What were you—” Hermione snapped her mouth shut. She was doing it. She closed her eyes and took a breath. “Romilda Vane,” she said in a completely different tone. “How interesting.”

Ron snickered. “Yes, interesting.” He looked uncomfortable again. “Hermione, the night of the Gryffindor party, I kind of … got involved with Romilda.”

Hermione tilted her head. “Involved.”

“We shagged,” he admitted.

She stared at him. “Do you like her?” she asked, trying to sound calm.

“I don’t know, but I like how she makes me feel,” Ron said. “Like I’m powerful, important—”

“But she’s just using you, she doesn’t care—aaagh!” Hermione shook her head wildly. “I’m sorry,” she said. “This is hard.”

“You’re telling me,” Ron sighed. “You say I don’t make you feel like a woman, well, maybe you don’t make me feel like a man, just a sidekick.”

Hermione took his hand. “You’re not just a sidekick. Harry and I love you.” Ron just looked down at their hands, not answering. “Ron, if you like being with Romilda, then you should be. What I think doesn’t matter.”

Ron looked up. “You’re so beautiful, and I still want … but …” He sighed again.

“You said there were two things,” Hermione said, hoping to change the subject.

“This next one is worse,” he groaned. She looked at him skeptically. “I didn’t want to come back to Hogwarts in the first place, but since the Aurors Office wouldn’t take me, you said I didn’t have a choice.”

“That’s right, you don’t, you have to get your— aaagh, I’m doing it again!” She slapped her hands over her mouth.

“Yes, you are.” Ron’s amused, slightly superior grin looked strange on his freckled face. “But I do have a choice. I don’t have to get my NEWTs. I can work with George in the joke shop.”

Hermione said nothing, just kept her hands over her mouth.

“Harry’s been writing me about auror training. I could never hack it,” Ron said seriously. “I’m sick of trying to do things I suck at, and getting my ass handed back to me by you or Harry or both. I want to do something I’m good at. I want to make people smile, and make children laugh. George is there all alone and I want to be with him. I miss my family. I belong there, I don’t belong here anymore.”

Hermione slowly lowered her hands. “You want to drop out of Hogwarts,” she said, as neutrally as she could.

“Yes,” Ron said. “I don’t like who I am here—an angry fuck-all, sneaking around with Romilda, fighting with Slytherins …”

“What about Quidditch?” Hermione asked.
He shrugged. “McLaggen is just as good as I am. Ginny just chose me ’cause I’m her brother.”

“That’s not true!”

“Hermione, you’re brilliant, but you don’t know shit about Quidditch.”

There was another short silence and then Hermione plucked up her courage. “I just have to say this,” she said. “Are you sure? Because if you tire of the joke shop, you can’t come back. This is your only opportunity to sit for your NEWTs, and if you don’t, it will limit what you can do in the future.”

Ron shrugged. “Any job that requires stellar NEWTs is not a job I’d do well at.”

Hermione didn’t entirely agree, but she clenched her teeth and said nothing. She’d been no more tolerant of Ron’s choices than he had been of hers. He had returned to Hogwarts for her, and then just before they arrived, she’d cut him loose. No wonder he took up with that idiot Vane. Hermione still hadn’t forgiven that woman for trying to dose Harry with a love potion in Fourth Year. She thought about reminding Ron of that, even considered suggesting that she’d dosed Ron this time, but held her tongue.

“What will I do here without you?” she asked, taking his hand again.

“Apparently run around with every Slytherin prat in the school,” he said glumly, but without heat.

“When will you go?”

“A week from Friday,” Ron said. “I’m gonna tell McGonagall tomorrow.”

“Does Ginny know?”

He shook his head. “George does, of course. I’ll tell Gin tomorrow, tell my parents after I leave. I don’t fancy fielding Howlers from Mum every day.”

“I’ll come to see you every weekend,” she promised.

“Maybe.” Ron looked at her longingly for a moment, then shook his head. “We really need some time apart. Hermione …” he swallowed. “I never shagged Lavender. You were my first, you know.”

She hadn’t known. He’d been so awkward, and she had assumed that was because … Ron was just awkward. Looking back, Hermione realized she’d expected sex with him to be awkward. She’d been surprised it had been as enjoyable as it was. She shook her head—she really did always think she knew it all, and it turned out she knew nothing. Ron hadn’t just been a self-indulgent arse over the summer; he had also been a teenage boy getting laid for the first time.

“I’m glad you were my first, Ron,” she said. “I’m glad you’re doing what makes you happy.” She took a deep breath. “I will support you fully and I won’t let anybody criticize your choices.”

He kissed her for that, but it was a light, quick kiss on the mouth, full of understanding. In a way, she felt, she was meeting Ron as an adult for the first time. She just hadn’t seen it. Upstairs in bed, Hermione tossed and turned, trying to process the eventful day. Malfoy, Theo, Harry, Ron … such very different people. She considered updating her Life Optimization Organization Plan to process her thoughts—she had a new idea for a flow chart. But she fell asleep instead, lulled by dreams of magical charts with color-coded columns.
Hermione spent Sunday in the library, while nearly the entire school went to the Ravenclaw-Hufflepuff match. Between PORN and Slughorn’s party, experimental potions and Hogsmeade, she’d had little time for her assignments and was only two months ahead on her reading. It took the entire day, skipping lunch and sneaking snacks from her bag, to complete her schoolwork to her satisfaction. Theo joined her after lunch, also missing the Quidditch match, and except for a sly smile and stroke of his finger on her cheek, stayed fairly focused himself.

Later in the afternoon, after the game (Hufflepuff won in a total upset), students began filling the library, everyone catching up on work neglected over the weekend. Neville joined Hermione and Theo, then Ginny arrived, and little was heard but the scratching of quills and rustling of parchment.

Hermione’s first thought Monday morning was that today Ron would tell McGonagall he was leaving Hogwarts. All while getting ready and packing her bag, she had to restrain herself from running into Ron’s room screaming that he was making a huge mistake. *This is his life, he’s a grown man,* she repeated silently. *You didn’t like him questioning your choices.* Ginny had taken the news the night before with surprising aplomb; she’d known Ron wasn’t happy at Hogwarts and she’d been worried about George.

Ron himself was reserved at breakfast, sitting beside Hermione with his back to the wall. Hermione put her head on his shoulder and he put an arm around her, looking around the hall as if he were seeing it for the last time. He didn’t even glare at the Slytherin table. Hermione didn’t look over there either; she didn’t care what Malfoy was doing and whether Astoria was sitting beside him or not. She didn’t.

Potions class was strained and stilted. Ron was absent, and Hermione was sure he was in McGonagall’s office, which made her distracted. Lavender joined her and Malfoy’s potion and spent most of it praising Malfoy’s chopping and stirring. Malfoy kept trying to catch Hermione’s eye, but she was almost too preoccupied to notice.

Ron turned up at lunch, looking greatly relieved, and the next few days were unusually placid. Malfoy continued to watch Hermione in class and snipe at Ron at every opportunity, but Ron ignored everyone but Hermione, spending his class hours scribbling down ideas for new joke products. Aware that Ron’s days remaining at Hogwarts were few, Hermione spent all her spare time with him. He wasn’t studying much these days, so they had regular teas with Hagrid, played cards and wizard chess, and visited their old haunts. They even took some butterbeers into the Forbidden Forest and jumped into leaf piles like First Years until Ron rubbed moss in Hermione’s hair and she dropped a spider on his chest in retaliation.

She was hurrying along the second-floor corridor on Thursday after dinner, well-wrapped in a scarf
and hat in preparation for watching Ron play Quidditch, when a heavy black mist appeared before her. Hermione tried to walk through but the dark cloud felt as solid as a wall. She turned to see another mist about five feet off, effectively blocking her into the small space. Hermione huffed and crossed her arms, utterly unsurprised to see a ghostlike figure emerge from the darkness.

“Cute, Malfoy,” she said. “What are you after?”

“A moment of your time,” he answered, unsmiling. He had shed his robe, jumper and tie, and his hair and white shirt shone starkly against the blackness beyond.

“I’m late for Gryffindor’s practice,” she said.

He arched an eyebrow. “Since when do you watch Quidditch practices?”

“Since now. Let me out.”

“No,” he said, looking down his nose at her. “I’ve been trying to speak to you all week. Tell me.”

“Tell you what?”

“What I did this time.” His voice was cold. “You were a right shrew in the Potions lab on Saturday, and now you’re avoiding me and living in the Weasel’s pocket. So what fell short, Granger? The gift? The dance? Are you miffed because I didn’t dig up those wretched weeds myself?”

“Of course not,” Hermione said. “You’re being ridiculous.”

His eyes glittered. “It’s true, then. You’ve gone back to your Weasel.” His voice was so confident, that if she didn’t know better, she’d believe it herself. Malfoy moved closer. “What makes you think he’ll ever be enough?”

Hermione felt a tug at her neck and looked down to see his hand pull away her red-and-gold scarf to pool at their feet. Malfoy’s other hand drew off her hat, releasing her wild hair. She swallowed.

“No, I’m not back with Ron.”

“Then tell me, tell me now,” he demanded. “What did I do?”

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut like a child, unable to look at him. Coming from Malfoy, this was practically begging. “You didn’t do anything wrong,” she choked out, “you have every right to…”

“Then why, Hermione?” She could feel his warm hands on her throat, tilting up her face. “Why are you running from me?” he whispered.

“I’m not—” she began, but then his lips were on hers, swallowing her lie. He licked her lower lip and she responded immediately, welcoming him in, and the feel of his warm tongue against hers almost made her sob. Malfoy deepened the kiss, his hands still on her face, and she pressed against him, her own hands running up that long, sinuous body …

“She went this way!” shouted a high voice. “Cupcake!”

“There’s nothing here, Bertie!”

“That black fog! It ate her! Cupcake!”

Hermione and Malfoy broke apart, startled, as more voices filtered in from the black mist.
“Bertie lost his Pygmy Puff!”

“Again?”

“Cupcake!”

Malfoy glared in the direction of the voices. “Oh for fuck’s sake,” he muttered.

“L-look,” Hermione stammered, pointing to his feet. Her heart was still pounding, and she felt light-headed.

He looked down, and his horrified reaction to the pink Pygmy Puff on his glossy shoe sent Hermione into smothered giggles. Dark Wizard Draco Malfoy and his spooky, Puff-trapping mist … oh well, her nerves were already shot, what harm could a little hysteria do?

The Puff squeaked excitedly and disappeared inside Malfoy’s trouser cuff. “Aaaggh!” he cried.

“I heard her! Cupcake! Cupcake!” Bertie screeched. Malfoy was shaking his leg, trying to dislodge the Puff from inside his trousers, and Hermione collapsed against the wall, holding her sides. Cupcake rolled out of his trouser leg and began bouncing in the confined space, still squeaking.

“Some help you are,” Malfoy snapped at Hermione. He pulled out his wand and waved it, and the Puff bounced again, sailing into the mist and disappearing.

“Cupcake!” shouted Bertie. Both black mists dissipated, and Malfoy and Hermione found themselves facing a group of familiar Hufflepuff boys.

“Mr. Malfoy!”

“It’s Mr. Malfoy!”

“And Miss Granger!”

“They saved Cupcake! Thank you!”

“Oh no,” said Hermione, who had finally gotten her giggles under control. Malfoy was still too outraged to speak. “This was entirely Mr. Malfoy’s doing.”

“Thank you, Mr. Malfoy!” Bertie cried, running up to the Slytherin, his Puff in his hands. “Cupcake says thank you, too!” Cupcake bounced onto Malfoy’s shoulder, causing the blond to recoil.

“Look, Cupcake likes him!”

“Awwwww!”

“Come here, Cupcake!” Bertie called. The boy jumped up and down, arms outstretched in an attempt to retrieve his Pygmy Puff. The Puff squeaked, but wouldn’t leave Malfoy.

“Get it off!” Malfoy said, shaking his shoulder. He looked over at Hermione. “Where are you going?”

Hermione was wrapping her scarf around her neck again. “I told you, Quidditch practice,” she said, jamming her hat on her head.
“Now just a minute.” Malfoy strode forward and led her away from the Hufflepuffs. “Hermione,” he said in a low voice, his eyes on hers. Hermione’s breath caught. He suddenly looked so vulnerable and young, nearly as young as the boys fidgeting behind him.

“Don’t be angry,” he whispered. “Don’t shut me out.”

“I’m not angry,” Hermione said. “I liked my gift. I liked the dance. I even liked the sodding clover.” I liked the kiss, too. Merlin help me, I do like the bad-boy Slytherin asshole thing.

“Then forget Quidditch practice. Come with me.” Malfoy swallowed and looked down. “I won’t tell anyone.”

“No, Draco. We can’t do this.” She had considered everything very carefully over the past few days. She’d even created a Granger/Malfoy flow chart in her LOOP, and no matter how many times she drew it, the boxes and arrows always diverged. He was a Malfoy and she was a Muggle-born. No matter what happened between them, one day Draco would reach into his pocket and slip on that onyx-and-silver ring, with its sinister motto, and take his rightful place. She wanted no part of that world, and she wouldn’t be his youthful indiscretion, or even worse, his dirty little secret.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. She brushed his hand with her own and walked away, leaving a stunned young wizard with a pink Pygmy Puff on his shoulder.
A Complex Verbal Threat

Malfy kept his distance from Hermione the next day, his posture stiff and his face unreadable, and Hermione did the same. It was the only proper course, and she had the flow chart to prove it. Ginny threw another party Friday night in the Gryffindor common room, inviting Eighth Year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, but not Slytherins, not even Blaise. Hermione spent most of the evening on the sofa with Ron, drinking as little as possible and trying not to think back to the rich taste of sirencscotch and a long, pale finger gently tugging a curl: “Do I frighten you that much?”

On Saturday, she and Ron met Harry in Hogsmeade and the trio spent the day and night getting thrown out of various cafes and pubs. They ended up at the Hog’s Head again, where Hermione began covertly turning Harry’s eyebrows different colors and pretending to see nothing when Ron drunkenly pointed it out. The two men finally caught on and started chasing her around the pub, tripping over the empty bottles she rolled in their way, until Harry finally bound Hermione to a chair with an *incarcerous* spell and began whispering in her ear all the ways she was going to fail her NEWTs. Her screams finally got them expelled from the Hog’s Head for “frightening the clientele.”

Hermione was so distracted she’d forgotten that the second Monday in October was the introduction to the fabulous Winkweed plant in double Herbology after weeks of observation and essay writing. Her pulse sped up when she entered the small greenhouse and saw a tarp-covered object in the center of each table. Professor Sprout was bobbing on her heels, her face flushed with excitement.

“All right, class,” she said. “You are now ready to meet the star of the show. First, a quick review—can anyone tell me about the specimens we’re about to study?” Hermione, Astoria and Neville raised their hands in the same instant. “Miss Greengrass?”

“These sprouts have yet to bloom,” Astoria said with icy precision. “The stamen is fully developed, however, producing poisonous pollen that can be released in clouds if the plant feels threatened. The seeds, however, are immature, and while they can be shot out at high velocities, they have not yet developed their magical attacks.”

“Excellent, ten points to Slytherin,” Sprout said. “It is very important that once the Winkweeds are uncovered that no one startles or upsets them. They are likely sleeping now, and you all want to keep them that way. No noise-muffling spells allowed. This is an observational lesson only; you will make a drawing of your particular plant, noting any distinctive features, and label them as you did at the start of this lesson. We will save more dangerous activities, like watering the plants or setting them in direct sunlight, for next week.”

The students nodded agreement, eyeing their covered plants nervously.

“Now,” Sprout said. “Who can tell us the steps to take if a plant is awakened? And keep in mind, if one plant is awakened, it will likely wake up the others, so quick action is vital.”

Again Hermione, Astoria and Neville raised their hands at once, and Sprout nodded at Hermione.

“The first step is to loom threateningly over the plant, as close as possible,” Hermione said. “The Winkweed might think you are a larger plant and curl up, especially since it is still a seedling. If the plant doesn’t retreat, the next step is to point your wand at it while delivering a complex verbal threat.”
“Why a complex threat?” Sprout asked.

“The Winkweed considers itself a powerful being. A complex threat positions you as a superior being capable of imaginative destruction.”

“Yes, ten points to Gryffindor. Mr. Malfoy, what other quality is necessary for the threat to work?”

“It has to be heartfelt,” Malfoy said, sounding bored. “The student has to appear ready and willing to carry out whatever he or she says, no matter how dangerous.”

“Yes,” was all Sprout said. She never rewarded students who waited to be called on, an attitude that Hermione considered commendable. “And here we come to the heart of the plant’s name. Obviously, we do not want any of you to damage your plants; they are far too rare and valuable. But the plant does not know that, so your challenge is to fool it into believing you’re serious—to hoodwink it.”

Hermione thought back to the fur-trapping wizard who first discovered the plant. He had fortunately been an avid poker player with a flaming temper and an intemperate tongue.

“All right, class, uncover your plants,” Sprout said.

Astoria, predictably, shifted her stool further away, leaving Hermione to pull off the tarp. Damn cowardly Slytherins, Hermione thought, noting that Neville was left to uncover his as well.

The Winkweed plant didn’t look dangerous, especially as a seedling. It was about a foot tall, with small green bulbs that would open to become blossoms. Its thorns were tiny but still looked sharp. Its main stem and leaves were curled in sleep and Hermione let out a breath she didn’t realize she was holding.

Astoria spread out her parchment and began sketching, and Hermione did the same. Soon the only sound in the greenhouse was the scratching of quills on parchment. Astoria apparently included a flair for drawing in her long list of talents and her meticulous sketch was a work of art with lovely crosshatching on the leaves. Hermione’s was merely serviceable.

After thirty minutes of silence, the Seventh-Year Slytherin boys began speaking in low voices, and Astoria decided it was time to chat as well.

“Our betrothal is still valid, you know,” she murmured.

“Why, Astoria, I didn’t know you cared,” Hermione said, retracing her drawing’s jagged line of the stem. “Would you like a large wedding?”

“It was signed years ago,” the Slytherin continued, keeping her voice low. “Signed, sealed … and consummated.” Astoria smirked. “Consummated repeatedly.”

“I don’t need to hear about your archaic customs,” Hermione said at regular volume. “This isn’t 1470.” She was alluding to a wizarding tradition begun that year where betrothals were consummated before both sets of families to “ruin” the prospective bride for anyone else. She’d spent an eye-opening hour on Sunday researching pureblood betrothals. Purely academic interest, of course.

Astoria’s hand clenched on her quill, but her voice remained cool and low-pitched. “Draco’s name may be slightly … tarnished, but not for long. He is clearly plotting the Malfoys’ return to power.”

“Perhaps,” Hermione said, putting down her quill and finally looking at her partner. “But repairing
that family’s reputation could take decades. Are you willing to wait that long?”

“You’ve given this some thought, Granger,” Astoria purred.

Hermione shrugged. “It’s rather obvious. Death Eaters and their families have little choice but to atone as best they can, contribute to the greater good, and hope time does the rest.”

“A hard road,” Astoria said. “Some prefer less rigorous paths.”

“Then they will fail,” Hermione asserted. “There are no shortcuts here unless one wants to be dogged by fear and suspicion for the rest of his or her life.” She held Astoria’s eyes. “And that goes for the families’ precious heirs as well. Are you sure you want to be Lady Malfoy, Greengrass? Are you sure you want that for your children?”

Her voice had risen near the end, and her final words rang out in the silence. The plant before her quivered, and Hermione snapped her mouth shut. She couldn’t help but look over Astoria’s shoulder at Malfoy, and his horrified expression made her stomach twist. She looked down at her trembling hands, already regretting her words. How could she say such a thing? Damn that Astoria!

The plant drooped again, to both women’s relief, and Hermione dared to hope that she’d at least shut Astoria up for good. She glanced over at Malfoy and Neville’s table again and was alarmed to see Neville's sleeve tip over his inkpot. He righted it immediately, but the table was slightly tilted, and a thin rivulet of ink ran quickly toward a trailing Winkweed vine.

“Neville!” she hissed. Neville looked at her, startled, while Malfoy, lost in his own obviously unpleasant thoughts, hadn’t noticed. A drop of ink touched the vine.

“Neville! Malfoy!” Hermione said louder, sliding off her stool and stepping closer to their table. The little plant shot straight upright, rattling its leaves menacingly.

Both men understood the situation instantly and leaped to their feet, wands out. The plant’s vines whipped out, reaching for Neville, and Malfoy shoved his partner aside, knocking over a stool. The noise enraged the plant and it turned on Malfoy.

“Get Sprout,” Hermione told the Slytherin boys and drew her own wand. Astoria slid smoothly to the other side of their table, further from the threatening plant. Hermione stepped closer to Malfoy.

“Granger,” Malfoy warned, moving between her and the plant and raising his wand. His looming height wasn’t enough; the plant was fully awake now.

“Fire,” Hermione said.

Malfoy nodded and addressed the plant. “I will burn you to ash in an instant. Incindienda!”

For an instant, Hermione thought he had done it—destroyed his Winkweed on the first day. His face was a mask of fury and his voice, while pitched low to avoid waking the other plants, was bursting with power. But then she realized he had pronounced the last syllable of the charm incorrectly and Malfoy would never make such a mistake.

The Winkweed obviously believed him, however. The plant curled back into its pot, unharmed, and when Sprout burst in, all three plants were sleeping and Hermione was helping Neville to his feet.

Sprout waved her wand, covering the plants and casting a spell shielding them from any noise. “What happened here?” she demanded.
“I knocked over my inkpot,” Neville said miserably. “Some of the ink reached the plant’s leaves.”

“It probably thought you were trying to water it,” Sprout said. “Hoodwinks hate to be watered. You were able to quiet it, however?”

“Malfoy did,” Neville said. “He knocked me down and confronted it, threatening to burn it up.”

“Very good, Mr. Malfoy. Twenty points to Slytherin,” Sprout said. She waved her wand and levitated the three plants into a cabinet and closed it. “I think we’ve done enough practical applications today. Each of you will write an essay on today’s incident and the lessons learned. Leave your scrolls on your tables.” She turned and left the greenhouse again.

“Oh, thanks, Malfoy,” Hermione heard Neville say as she returned to her stool.

“Next time I’ll let you deliver the threat, Longbottom,” Malfoy drawled. “I could use a good laugh.”

All was quiet in the small greenhouse once more, and Hermione was outlining her Winkweed essay and trying not to look at Malfoy when she noticed that Astoria wasn’t writing. She looked up to see the blonde woman eyeing her.

“What now?” Hermione asked.

Astoria’s head was tilted slightly. “Rather heroic of Draco, really, to protect his partner.”

“Yes, he’s a peach,” Hermione said.

“So passionate under that cool exterior,” Astoria murmured. From her low tone, she could be describing the characteristics of quality parchment. “So … demanding.”

“You don’t say.” Hermione’s hand never faltered as she wrote.

“Draco was insatiable Sixth Year.” Astoria gave her a thin smile. “And now he is a man.”

Hermione ignored her, drawing up a timeline of the events after the ink touched Neville and Malfoy’s Winkweed.

“Some might consider his tastes somewhat … debauched,” Astoria went on, her voice still low. She leaned closer, her tongue flickering out between white teeth. “Such imagination. Such appetites. Could a prissy little bookworm ever satisfy them?”

Hermione carefully placed her quill beside her parchment and looked straight at Astoria. The blood pounded in her head but her voice was cool. “Yes, Greengrass, I am a proper person and a scholar, and I will not apologize for it.”

“So sad,” Astoria said, now writing again.

Hermione leaned closer, and she also kept her voice low this time. “I’ll tell you what’s sad. Remember Dolores Umbridge? You’re just like her, you know. That same sweet, venomous tongue.” She looked into Astoria’s eyes. “You live in fear, don’t you, little Greengrass? That horrible fear that someone will look past that lovely shell and see the empty, disgusting toad of a person inside?”

Two spots of color appeared on Astoria’s cheeks and she began breathing sharply through her nose.

“So pretty right now, aren’t you, little girl?” Hermione continued relentlessly, her voice still low.
She was going to fucking end this—right here, right now. “But you won’t always be pretty … better find yourself a title quickly, Greengrass, before the bulging toad eyes and wide toad smile come out in your face and you’re just a tall, skinny Umbridge with a little … diamond … bow in your …”

Astoria’s wand was out, her face contorted with fury: “Cruc—“

Hermione’s right hand touched her wand inside her skirt pocket and she murmured softly, simultaneously disarming Astoria, summoning the Slytherin’s wand into her own hand, and slamming Astoria against the greenhouse wall. Two glass panes cracked but held, and Astoria slid to the floor, dazed and choking just a little bit.

Malfoy stepped forward, but Hermione flung out an open hand, halting him without looking. She stalked over to the Slytherin woman, who blinked up at her from the stone floor.

Hermione bent down slightly to make eye contact again. “Never pull a wand on me again, Greengrass,” she said loudly. “You will lose every time.”

She tossed Astoria’s wand on the floor, then summoned her bag and left the classroom, pushing past a startled Professor Sprout. Once outside the greenhouse, she ran blindly, pounding down a thin path and finding herself outside Hagrid’s hut.

Care of Magical Creatures had apparently ended, and she saw only the stone hut and adjoining garden with its giant pumpkins. She paused, catching her breath, then trudged onward. A quiet hour with Hagrid and some hot tea would do her a world of good. With luck, she could stay out of the castle until dinnertime. The hut was dark, however, the door shut and no sign of Hagrid or Fang. Hermione began circling the small stone building to make sure.

Footsteps crunched the leaves behind her, too quick and light to be Hagrid’s, and Hermione turned to see Malfoy round the corner of the hut. “Hermione!” He advanced toward her, grasping her upper arms and looking into her face. “Are you all right?”

“I’m not the one you should be asking,” Hermione said.

“I don’t care if she’s half-dead. What happened back there?” She looked up at him and he stared back, hands still on her arms, his eyes the same color as the clouds looming over the castle behind him.

Hermione had always believed that nearly any difficult situation could be overcome given a moment of rational thought. But Malfoy’s sudden nearness and Astoria’s recent words were too powerful; her mind couldn’t focus. Consummated, repeatedly … his appetites are debauched … insatiable … no prim little bookworm can ever …

Her anger blazed up again, no longer cold, now crackling and furious—how dare she?—and Hermione shook off Malfoy’s hands and grabbed his tie, pulling him to her and crashing her lips against his so hard their teeth cracked together. Neither backed away, though and this time Malfoy’s hands slid around her waist, under her open robe, pulling her body to his. She released the tie and plunged her hands into that thick, silky hair she remembered from the infirmary. It was the second-floor corridor again, but this time there was no softness, only raw need, and the words I can, I can, I can … pounded in her head. His magic surrounded her, she could feel it pulsing in time with her heart.

“Hermione,” he moaned against her mouth, his arms like iron, holding her so tightly to him that she could hardly breathe and frankly, didn’t care. His lips were rough, desperate, like he had to fit a
world’s worth of kisses into a few short minutes. His body pushed her against the stone hut, she
could feel his arousal, his other hand sliding down her hip, demanding …

**Demanding. Passionate.** Astoria’s voice—“**Our betrothal is still valid**”—and her coolly superior
face bloomed in Hermione’s mind and she jerked away, panting. Malfoy stepped back, his arms
dropping to his sides.

“No. No,” she stuttered, nearly falling over a pumpkin vine. “I m-meant what I said. This changes
nothing.”

Malfoy growled in frustration. He looked beautifully rumpled: cheeks flushed, hair tousled, tie
askew. Hermione swallowed.

“Do I have Astoria to thank for this, then?” he asked, striving for his usual drawl. “Whatever she
said, it must have been a treat.”

“You don’t need to know,” Hermione snapped. “Just leave.” She wouldn’t do this, she just

“Alright, then,” he said coldly, eyes narrowed. “You’ve made yourself very clear. Go lead Theo on
a merry chase while you sort out what you really want.”

He brushed past without looking at her and disappeared around the corner again. Hermione stayed
behind in Hagrid’s garden, her shoes sinking into the soft earth, tears running down her cheeks,
until she could no longer hear the crunching and shuffling of leaves under his feet as he walked
away.
Annoying, but Occasionally Useful

Hermione strode along the corridor to the Potions dungeon on Wednesday night, dressed in jeans and a red jumper, her hair bristling with aggravation. She had spent hours preparing for that night’s PORN session on Charms. The dust-up with Astoria and the second encounter with Malfoy had rattled Hermione, driving her back to her studies and PORN with an intensity that startled her friends. She still carved out time for Ron, however, aware that only a few days remained with him. Ron was developing a line of mischievous quills that wrote improper phrases into students’ notes or randomly broke out into song, and Hermione was helping him perfect the charms. One must be supportive, after all.

Hermione had also been anxiously awaiting McGonagall’s response to her attack on Astoria; she fully expected Astoria to report her and was prepared to accept any consequences. She even drew up a list of appropriate punishments, such as marking papers for professors or writing essays on violence as a social problem. But it was all for naught. Instead of informing a teacher, Astoria went around telling people that Hermione had lost control of her wand, which absolutely nobody believed. So now the story sweeping the castle was that Astoria and Hermione had been dueling for Theo’s affections. Which made even less sense than the truth, in Hermione’s opinion, and the truth was ridiculous enough. Theo found this rumor quite amusing and began referring to himself as “the spoils of war.”

It was all terribly embarrassing. Obviously, there was a middle ground between bookishly prim and bat-shit crazy that other witches seemed to navigate with ease, but Hermione had never been good at finding a happy medium. So she'd been counting on her Wednesday PORN session to present a calm, academic persona to balance out her recent … ah … spirited behavior.

But then that son-of-a-banshee Ernie Macmillan called an emergency prefect meeting Wednesday night to discuss his accursed Halloween Festival, stealing away half of Hermione’s group and forcing her to cancel PORN. Worse, Slughorn had learned of the cancellation and asked Hermione to oversee a “special detention” in the Potions dungeon so he could go schmooze at some Ministry event.

Hermione was livid; she’d spent over an hour creating 57 little origami shapes, each one representing a different charm, and all for nothing. And now she had to waste time disciplining rule-breakers. Honestly, why couldn’t people just behave themselves? If those were the Squeaky Mice down there in the Potions dungeon, fresh from their latest prank, they were going to regret the day they received their Hogwarts letters. Malfoy had been entirely too easy on them; they’d find her less accommodating, let’s see how they liked writing 6-foot essays on …

The dungeon door was ajar, which meant the students were already inside, probably trashing the place and plundering Slughorn’s stores again. Hermione charged forward and slammed open the heavy door with enough force to rattle nearby tables and stools.

She halted in the middle of the room, mouth open, for instead of a pack of schemy little badgers, the dungeon held only two students: both tall and hulking with comically small heads on their muscled shoulders. They were the former Slytherin Beaters who had injured Malfoy, still serving their twice-weekly detentions until Christmas.

The two huge boys leaped to their feet at Hermione’s entrance, eyeing her warily. Nobody knew
who had choked them on the pitch (except Neville, Ginny and Malfoy), but Hermione’s name had been whispered. She stepped forward and the boys cringed slightly, backing away. Hermione rolled her eyes. Obviously, she wasn’t going to hex them now.

With an effort, she recalled their names. “Mr. Bloom, Mr. Pratt, sit down, please.” The two instantly obeyed.

Hermione set her bag on Slughorn’s desk and eyed them thoughtfully. Despite Malfoy’s protests that night in the infirmary, Hermione had gone to McGonagall the following week anyway, demanding to hear the school’s response to Malfoy’s injury and the death threats. The Headmistress’ answer had been less than reassuring: Bloom and Pratt had simply sought payback for years of Malfoy’s bullying in Slytherin House, and the death threats had been a crude effort to scare Malfoy off the team. Hermione had sniffed skeptically and hounded McGonagall with questions until the Headmistress tossed her out of the office, along with a veiled warning about using her wand “responsibly.”

Now the Beaters were shifting nervously on their stools under her stare, and the blond one (Bloom?) raised his hand. She nodded.

“M-Miss Granger,” he said. “Uh, would you like us to start scrubbing now?”

“Scrubbing? Scrubbing what?” she asked.

“We’ve been scrubbing the giant cauldrons,” Bloom said. He swallowed. “Without magic.”

Hermione looked toward the back of the dungeons, where three monstrous cauldrons squatted. Ancient and hulking, the iron cauldrons were covered in infinite layers of grime and scorched potions, constantly emitting vile fumes. Nobody ever used them. Not even the strongest Scourgify could clean them, and the most back-breaking scrubbing would make little difference.

She bit her lip, considering. While the thought of these two spending the evening in hopeless toil warmed her heart, there were other, more productive, options. Hermione stepped up to their table and the two boys shrank back, looking down at her uneasily.

“Perhaps,” she said coolly. “You two would prefer to do something else.”


Hermione squinted up at them. “You could … write sentences.”


Hermione pulled out her wand (the Beaters flinched) and a sentence appeared on the board: “I will not lose control of my broom and smash into annoying but occasionally useful Seekers at high speed.”

Bloom raised his hand. “Uh, Miss Granger?” He flinched again as she looked at him. “We didn’t lose control of our brooms.”

“That’s right,” Pratt said. “We didn’t.”

Hermione blinked slowly at them, a trick she’d picked up from Astoria, of all people. Quite effective, really. “Well, it’s very important that the sentence be accurate. Wouldn’t you agree?” Pratt and Bloom both nodded, happy to help.
She waved her wand again: “I will not slam into annoying but occasionally useful Seekers at high speed for no good reason.”

“We had a good reason!” Pratt protested.

“Rupert!” Bloom hissed.

“Did someone make you do it?” Hermione asked.

Pratt shook his head, his face grim. “No, but that poncy git bullied us for years, Miss Granger. Every day, he’d call me prat—”

“Isn’t that your name?” Hermione asked.

Pratt glowered. “It was the way he said it. Bum and prat, he called us.” Bloom nodded agreement.

Hermione’s mouth fell open. Merlin help her, she almost believed them. That sounded just like Malfoy. She waved her wand again: “I will not purposely slam into annoying but occasionally useful Seekers at high speed, in response to years of bullying, without proper warning.”

“We did warn him!” Pratt cried.

“Rupert!” Bloom hissed. “Don’t listen to him, Miss Granger—”

“It’s very simple, Mr. Bloom,” Hermione said sternly. “You can either write me accurate sentences or …” Her eyes drifted back to the three giant, filthy cauldrons. The boys shuddered.

Bloom sighed. “We may have sent the git some letters. We hoped he’d just quit.”

Hermione waved her wand again: “I will not purposely slam into annoying but occasionally useful Seekers at high speed, in response to years of bullying, after sending pitiful letters that would scare nobody.”

“Oi!” Pratt cried.

“We can’t write that, Miss Granger!” said Bloom, stung. Apparently, the former Beater took pride in his death threats. “We wrote Malfoy that if he tried to play in the Slytherin-Gryffindor match, they’d be scraping his ass off the pitch!”

“Charming,” Hermione said faintly.

Pratt beamed. “Tell her the other one.”

“I don’t think it’s appropriate, Rupe,” Bloom whispered loudly.

“I think we’re beyond that,” Hermione said.

“We … we wrote that if he tried to play, we’d use his bollocks for Bludgers.”

“Lovely,” Hermione said. She waved her wand one more time. “I will not purposely slam into annoying but occasionally useful Seekers at high speed in response to years of bullying after sending several stylish and imaginative death threats.”

Bloom and Pratt both nodded, pleased.

“Very well.” Hermione left their table and sat down behind Slughorn’s desk. “Write that sentence
twenty times—neatly, and with proper punctuation—and I will excuse you from the cauldrons this time. Go on now.” She pulled out her study schedule and began plotting ways to add an extra PORN session to her calendar.

The former Beaters obeyed, and the dungeon was quiet except for Pratt’s muttered swearing whenever he splattered ink blots on his parchment, which was often. Hermione twirled a curl with a finger, thinking. It looked like Malfoy’s injuries were the result of rampant stupidity, from all parties involved. Honestly, Quidditch should be banned at Hogwarts. Hermione was trying to think of legal precedents for such a ban when a squabble—delivered in what the boys fondly thought were whispers—caught her attention.

“Oi, Alf.”

“Piss off, Rupert.”

“She’s fit.”

“Shut up, you fucking moron.”

“Don’t you think she’s fit?”

“Yeah, but she’s dead scary too, so shut up!”

“I hear she likes Slytherins.”

“You have a fucking death wish.”

“I ain’t scared of Nott.”

“I’m talking about her, you fucktwat.”

“Do you think she likes younger—”

“Alright, boys!” Hermione said loudly as she stood. “That’s enough for tonight—bring me your sentences!” She was not sitting here listening to this.

Pratt and Bloom looked surprised but handed over their parchments, thanking her again and practically running out the door. Hermione was tucking their sentences into her bag (Bloom had managed five full lines and Pratt had written two) when she heard a thud that sounded suspiciously like Bloom slamming Pratt into the corridor wall. Hermione could only approve.

***

Ron left Hogwarts Friday evening. His plan was to slip out of the castle after curfew and meet McGonagall at the entrance. From there he’d take a thestral carriage to Hogsmeade and floo to the joke shop in Diagon Alley, sharing the flat above the shop with George.
McGonagall had objected to this “cloak-and-dagger” way of departing, fearing that it would seem like a disgraced exit and hurt Ron’s reputation. But Ron hadn’t told his family yet and feared any public exit would be reported in *The Daily Prophet*, which obviously still had spies in the castle. Hermione privately agreed with McGonagall but told the Headmistress in her office that Ron should be allowed to handle this in his own way. Ron had looked at her in gratitude and squeezed her hand, and McGonagall had reluctantly approved.

“You have performed invaluable services to this castle, and I won’t allow anything to overshadow that, Mr. Weasley,” she said.

Hermione “helped him pack,” which meant sitting his bed and trying not to sniffle as Ron gleefully turned his school uniforms and robes into marshmallows, squashing them flat under his shoe and then *Incendioing* them. He kept his prefect badge, however, and other mementos, even a “Potter Stinks” badge. Then they sat together and looked at pictures. One from First Year, when they were so little, made Hermione sob outright, as did the picture of her and Ron dancing at Bill and Fleur’s wedding before the Death Eaters arrived. Suddenly she couldn’t stop crying, and Ron held her like he did at Dumbledore’s funeral.

“I don’t want you to go,” she sobbed. “I feel like I just got you back!”

“I have to, Mi,” he said.

Hermione buried her face in the Quidditch jersey he’d given her. She just felt so alone, with Ron leaving. She had Ginny, of course, and Neville, and Theo was a quiet, regular presence. And Malfoy … well, she tried not to think of Malfoy. She hadn’t told anyone, not even Ginny, the details of her confrontation with Astoria or recent encounters with Malfoy. Hermione knew she’d been cold and hurtful to him, she had implied to Astoria that marrying him would be a degradation. She should apologize, but wouldn’t that only make everything worse?

Harry was due to visit Hogwarts the next day, and Hermione had asked Malfoy during Potions to meet them at the lab at noon. Malfoy just nodded shortly and turned away. Hermione didn’t know how she’d handle Potions with only him and Lavender—Lavender had suddenly turned smug and sneering this week, reminding Hermione of Sixth Year, when Lavender was dating Ron.

Ron was sitting cross-legged on the floor now, sorting through books. Nearly all of them would be donated to the small Gryffindor library in the common room.

“Ron,” she said suddenly, “have you noticed anything odd about Lavender lately?”

He blinked up at her. “Yeah, she’s been acting a little strange.”

“I wonder what she’s doing.”

“I wonder *who* she’s doing,” Ron said darkly.

“What do you mean?”

He shrugged and tossed another book into the “common room” pile. “That’s Lav. It’s all about blokes to her. She’s shagging somebody and it’s got her feeling on top.” He gave her a roguish look at the innuendo, and Hermione couldn’t help smiling. Did he really have to leave now?

“Hey, look!” Ron held up a lumpy blue hat. “One of your first knitted hats for SPEW!”

“I’m keeping this,” Ron declared, putting it on top of his jumpers.

In the end, the trunk was only half-full when they finished, and Ron dragged it out of the room. He was wearing jeans and a Weasley sweater and already looked more relaxed. This was the right choice.

He had already said goodbye to Ginny, so Hermione walked him to the entrance, using the Marauders’ Map to avoid anyone, and McGonagall led them outside. The night was clear and bright, and the thestral was practically invisible. Ron shook McGonagall’s hand.

“Best of luck in all your endeavors, Mr. Weasley, and don’t let me see any of your products in my school,” she said. Ron gave her a very Fred-and-George smile.

He turned to hug Hermione. “I’ll see you Sunday,” he said, kissing her lightly on the mouth. “Be careful. That message on the walls—it’s a real threat, and all you’ve got is that Malfoy …”

“And Harry,” she said. “He’s coming tomorrow to look at our potion.”

“I’ll owl you some good stuff from the shop,” he whispered in her ear. “It’ll cheer you up.”

“Ron!” she protested. He winked at her and climbed into the carriage and flew away. Hermione burst into tears again. They’d treated each other abominably for much of the term, and now he was gone.

“Now, now, Miss Granger,” McGonagall said. “That young man knows how you feel. You must forge your own paths.”

“I wish I could have loved him,” Hermione whispered, too low for the Headmistress to hear, or so she thought.

“We can’t fight our hearts,” the Headmistress said, and Hermione stared to hear her talk this way. McGonagall’s hat created a tall, pointed silhouette against the flickering lights of the castle. “Not even you, Miss Granger.”

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Hermione was up early Saturday morning, after a restless night of sleep. Most Gryffindors thought Ron was just gone for the weekend, all except Hermione, Ginny and Neville. Hermione spent a solid hour with her LOOP notebook, listing 38 ways she would stay in touch with Ron. She transfigured a picture frame for the photo of herself, Harry and Ron in First Year and put it on her desk beside her otter paperweight and Theo’s wood box containing the Bagshot letter. Then she put on her own Weasley sweater and Ron’s book pin and walked down to the potions lab. Her hair was tied back with a broad red ribbon; she hadn’t worn Malfoy’s diamonds since Slughorn’s party. Her eyes were still puffy from tears, but she didn’t feel any need for glamours.

At least the potion looked good. The murlap mixture had simmered down to a dull brown powder. She was carefully scooping the powder into a large bottle when Malfoy appeared in the open
doorway, wearing his Quidditch jersey again.

He didn’t look so well himself, she noticed. Maybe being engaged to a rabid sex fiend was catching up with him, she thought waspishly. His eyes were heavy with dark circles and his face was alarmingly pale; he looked a bit like he had in Sixth Year.

“What happened?” he asked, reminding her of Monday’s encounter by Hagrid’s hut and sending a shiver down her back.

“Nothing,” she said. She couldn’t betray Ron’s confidence.

“Fine,” he said indifferently and moved to the other side of the narrow table. His eyes looked dull, almost empty.

“Harry’s coming today to see our potion,” she said, stoppering the bottle.

“Why?”

“Harry wants to help us,” she said. “Don’t worry—Kingsley doesn’t know. If we get a lead from this potion, we might need Harry to chase it down. We need him. Malfoy, I can’t do this alone. I need you both.” She looked at him pleadingly.

Something moved behind Malfoy’s eyes and he nodded. The room suddenly felt too small again. Hermione cleared her throat.

“Quidditch practice today?” she asked, just for something to say.

“Yes,” he said, putting on gloves to handle the nightshade. “And please, I don’t need to hear all the ways I could die horribly.”

Hermione shrugged. “It’s likely you’ll survive, since Pratt and Bloom apparently acted alone.”

Malfoy put down the nightshade leaves. “How do you know that?”

“I have it in writing.” She pulled Bloom’s scroll out of her bag. “They did detention with me on Wednesday.”

Malfoy stripped off a glove to take the scroll. “I will not purposely slam into annoying but occasionally useful …” He read the rest of the sentence and looked up, scowling. “You made them write this?”

“We worked on it together,” she said, shaking a vial of thestral blood. “I told them the sentence had to be accurate.”

“This is anything but accurate,” Malfoy huffed.

“It’s accurate enough,” Hermione said. “That was terrible, what happened to them.”

“Yes, it was, my knee still—to them?” Malfoy’s voice hit a surprisingly high register on the last word.

“Bullying them like that, no wonder they threatened your bollocks—”

“They told—”

“And bullying only perpetuates a cycle of violence, as you have now discovered,” she finished.
“I am not talking about this,” Malfoy said, shoving the scroll back at her. “Save your lectures for the Weasel.”

Hermione turned her back on him, clenching her hands, while Malfoy finished chopping the nightshade and added the leaves. She took a few deep breaths, then opened the vial of thestral blood.

“I’ll add the blood while you stir,” Hermione said, pleased that both her voice and hands were steady.

Malfoy nodded, careful to finish the proper one-and-a-half counter-clockwise stir after each tablespoon. As with Fiducia, the potion’s intricate steps soothed both their nerves. They took turns repeating the spell after each spoonful of blood, but it was tiring work, and they were both relieved when the potion emitted the proper yellow steam. Hermione could catch a faint whiff of that rotting meat smell.

“Quick, distilled clover juice,” Hermione said, and Malfoy emptied the bottle into the cauldron and stirred. The smell vanished and they smiled triumphantly at each other, everything else forgotten for an instant, then looked away.

“Well, that was amazing,” said a deep voice. Harry was standing in the doorway—leaning, actually, like he’d been there a while. “The way you two work together, it’s spooky.”

“Harry!” Hermione slid over to him for a quick hug. “Have you seen him?” she whispered in his ear.

He shook his head. “Tomorrow.”

Malfoy cleared his throat and Hermione and Harry broke apart. “Tell me about the potion,” Harry said. He wore jeans and a black, hooded sweatshirt with white letters reading “GO AHEAD, RUN FOR IT.”

“It’s about ten days from completion, if what we did today works out,” Hermione said as Malfoy divided a cup of the potion into two tiny cauldrons and set them simmering. “We have a few more ingredients to add. Each of these ...” she held up two small bottles, “contains a bit of those bloody letters on the walls. We can add them now.”

Harry and Malfoy watched as she shook some dried scrapings into each cauldron. The potion inside both bubbled and turned identically grey.

“Is that good?” Harry asked.

“Very good,” Malfoy said.

“The blood from the walls combined with thestral blood absorbs any other animal blood, leaving just magical blood behind,” Hermione said. “That’s why the liquid went from black to grey. That means magical blood was used to write the letters. This also shows that both messages were created using the same blood.”

“When the potion is finished, we’ll spoon a little into a vial,” Malfoy said. “Then we can add somebody’s blood. If the new blood doesn’t match the magical blood in the potion, nothing will happen.”

“But if they do match, it will turn a deep purple,” Hermione said.
“So if we have a suspect, we can test their blood against this potion to see if it matches the bloody message. Perfect, Hermione!” Harry cried. He tried to pace, but the room was too small, so he contented himself with shifting his feet. “This has amazing implications for the auror department. So many threatening messages are written in blood…”

“And while muggle scientists have faster and equally valid ways to identify blood, the Ministry would never accept them,” Hermione said. “What we’re brewing here is the magical equivalent.”

“Are we finished here?” Malfoy asked.

“Yes, of course,” Hermione said. She cast a protective spell on the cauldrons and she and Malfoy began their now well-practiced regimen of cleaning spells. When they finished, Malfoy pocketed his wand. “Granger, Potter,” he said, and left.

Harry stared after him. “He was almost human.”

Hermione sighed. “Yes, he quite often is.”

“You work that way together all the time? Like you can read each other’s mind?”

Hermione shrugged and led the way out of the dungeon. “We’ve been Potions partners for a while now. We have a rhythm.”

“I’ll say. I can’t believe I’m asking this, but you two are really not—”

“No,” Hermione said shortly. “Actually, I have a date with Theo tonight.”

“Good,” Harry said. Hermione raised her eyebrows. “I don’t have anything against Nott—horrible family and Slytherin, of course—but you can handle yourself.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “What a relief it is you think so, Harry. I was ready to cancel if you objected.”

He ignored this. “You and Ron are coming to lunch tomorrow, right?” he asked. She nodded again. Harry glanced at his watch—a birthday present from Hermione, who had inlaid various charms on an ordinary muggle Rolex. “I have to meet Ginny by the lake. Skeeter’s been sniffing around the Aurors Office and I don’t want her to hear about Chloe from The Daily Prophet.”

“All right,” Hermione said.

“That’s an incredible potion you created,” he said, shaking his head. “I still can’t believe it.”

“It might not help much,” she warned. “We can’t exactly draw blood from the entire student body to test. But we know already that messages weren’t created with simple deer blood, and that’s something.”

They had climbed the stairs from the dungeons and stood in the entrance of the castle. Harry was beginning to attract looks from passing students. “Do you think those messages might be curses?” he asked her, keeping his voice low.

She shrugged. “Maybe. Our DADA fairy doesn’t think so, however. Either way, whatever blood was used was from a powerful wizard or witch.”

Harry frowned.

“I’ve been reading into blood magic,” she went on. “It stands to reason. The more powerful the
“I’d like to think there aren’t any powerful Dark wizards or witches at Hogwarts, but I’m sure that’s not true,” Harry said grimly. “You could be in real danger, like all the muggle-borns. Be careful.”

Hermione smiled. “I’m always careful,” she said, and turned back toward Gryffindor Tower.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Hermione and Theo go out to dinner.
Dinner With Theo

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a big turning point, since many of the actions taken have major repercussions—much like the Gryffindor Party and that scene in McGonagall's office. This chapter was already planned when I first began this story and has changed very little since.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione had hoped Ginny would be around to help her dress for dinner with Theo, but Ginny never returned to their room after meeting Harry by the lake. Lavender was a poor substitute, lying on her bed in knickers and a chemise and sneering at Hermione’s every move.

“You really should be studying, Lavender,” Hermione said as she pulled dresses out of her wardrobe. She was sick of the staring. “At the rate you’re going, you’ll earn no NEWTs at all.”

“I have better things to do with my time,” Lavender said, languidly stretching. “We’re not all frigid swots.”

Hermione’s fingers tightened on a hanger, but she said nothing, just held up the blue velvet dress she’d worn to Slughorn’s dinner. Theo hadn’t seen her in it yet. Lavender watched as Hermione shed her fluffy pink robe.

“See something you like?” Hermione asked, raising her eyebrows. “Don’t you have some poor bloke to follow around? There must be someone at Hogwarts who likes the desperate, clingy type.”

“You’d be surprised,” Lavender said wickedly, running a finger from stomach to throat.

Hermione refused to ask; it was probably Cormac or some other rubbish heap of a person. She dressed quickly and fastened her parents' sapphire pendant. She even put on makeup—a little more than usual, she was stalling. She didn’t fancy wrestling with her hair in front of Lavender.

In the end, she had no choice; it was either do her hair now or be late to dinner. And her hair, of course, sensed this on some level (she’d long suspected her mane was semi-sentient) and was at its most perverse, frizzing with abandon despite how much Sleakeasy potion she heaped on. Hermione struggled to twist or braid the curls, even with the help of her wand, and the more she worked the bigger her hair grew. Lavender’s snide remarks certainly didn’t help, and the wretched girl was now sitting straight on her bed, eyes sparkling, giggling uncontrollably.

Flushed and desperate, Hermione did the one thing she’d vowed she wouldn't do: She went to her trunk and pulled out the flat velvet box from Malfoy. Lavender stopped laughing, and her eyebrows climbed into her dark blonde hair at the sight of the clip and hairpins.

“Birthday gift?” Lavender asked.

“Yes,” Hermione said. She dragged the diamond clip through her frizzy curls like it was a comb, and blinked in amazement as the clip left soft waves in its wake. She twisted up the thick waves and fastened them easily with the clip, then inserted the hairpins. Malfoy’s clip and pins stood out
clearly this time against her smoothed dark locks, but that couldn’t be helped. Lavender watched sullenly as Hermione teased out a few curls with her wand.

“Have a good evening, Lavender,” she said with a thin smile. “You do, I assume, have plans with your mystery man? Off to creep around in a corner somewhere?”

Lavender’s dark expression vanished. “You’re not the only one who can bag a Slytherin,” she purred.

Hermione tried not to react as she tugged candlesticks and three books out of her small beaded bag. Was Lavender sneaking around with a Seventh Year, then? Because there weren’t any Slytherin men in Eighth Year except Blaise, Theo, Goyle and …

_Malfoy._ Hunched over her bag, a candlestick in hand, Hermione looked sharply at Lavender, who was flushing now with triumph, her eyes sparkling. “Yes, you know who I’m talking about,” her roommate said. She licked her lips. “So hot. Likes it rough.”

“Isn’t he betrothed?” Hermione asked, trying to keep her voice light. Lavender looked even more smug.

“To the Ice Queen? So what?” She shrugged. “I know what he wants.”

“I don’t think he’d like you spreading this around,” Hermione said, straightening. She looked fixedly at the woman on the bed. “But that’s what you do best, isn’t it, Lav? Spread it around?”

“I spread it for him, that’s for sure,” Lavender said. “You haven’t lived until you’ve had that blond head between your—”

All the window glass panes behind Hermione suddenly shattered, letting in a harsh, freezing wind from the mountains. Lavender yelped and scrambled behind the bed. Hermione could see herself in the full-length mirror—her face flushed, eyes cold, glass shards on her hair and skin, raising the candlestick like a wand. The curls around her face whipped in the wind, but the rest of her hair didn’t budge. She dropped the candlestick and picked up her wand, repairing the glass in an instant, all the shards and bits reassembling themselves. The howling of wind stopped, and the room was silent.

“Merlin!” Lavender popped up from behind the bed. “You’re mental! You could have killed us!” Her voice quivered with fear.

Hermione summoned her beaded bag and red cloak and walked calmly toward the door. She turned to look at Lavender, who was still shaking.

“I wish you joy of him,” she said coldly. Lavender’s eyes filled with tears and she looked down at her bedcovers. Hermione swept out the door without another word.

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She didn’t remember walking down the stairs and through the common room. She didn’t remember walking through the portrait hole; it seemed like she was just suddenly in the corridor beside the Fat Lady’s portrait and before a smiling Theo.

Apparently, psychotic behavior agreed with her, because he seemed struck by her appearance, his eyes widening. “You, Hermione Granger, are a rare beauty,” he said. “I am a lucky man tonight.”

Hermione blinked at him, trying to focus, but the blood still pounded in her veins and she could feel her magic crawling up her fingertips. She managed a weak smile, however, and clutched her cloak and bag.

Theo frowned. “Are you all right? You look upset.”

“Fight with my roommate,” she said. “It’s nothing.”

“It doesn’t look like nothing.” He took her hand and led her away from the portrait. “Still alright for dinner?”

She nodded. “I just need to cool down.”

“Well, that’s easy in this drafty castle.” Theo took her along the corridor, eyeing the tapestries until he saw one that fluttered. “Here we are.” He pulled aside the tapestry, revealing a small balcony hemmed in by stone. Hermione entered and looked up to see a wide square of grey clouds.

“All this time I didn’t know it was here,” she breathed, distracted slightly. The cool outside air felt good on her cheeks and neck. She turned to smile at Theo, standing broad and solid with the tapestry dropping behind him. He looked quite dashing—and Slytherin—in a black suit with a green shirt and tie, a rich black cloak slung over one arm.

“You always know what to do,” she told him. “How is that?”

“Yes, you’re very good at it,” she teased.

“For example,” Theo continued in a low, rumbling tone, “I know what I want to do right now, but I’m not sure it’s what I should do, because you seem upset, and I’m still not entirely sure you see me that way.” He took a step toward her, his hand grazing her bare arm. “Can you advise me, O Brightest Witch of Her Age?”

“I love to give advice,” she said. Her blood still thrummed slightly, with Lavender’s words ringing in her ears, and Theo’s green eyes looking nothing like Harry’s. Thank Merlin.

“And what would be your advice?” he asked, bending closer.

“Kiss me,” she whispered. Their lips met, and it was sweet and arousing. Theo deepened the kiss, his arms around her, his hands stroking the velvet of her dress, and then the bare skin of her upper back. His cologne, a dark, musky scent, surrounded her. She was flush against his body now, and her bag and their cloaks fell to the stone floor of the balcony, forgotten.

She had expected Theo to stop there, but he was Slytherin, after all, always more ready to ask forgiveness than permission, so she shouldn’t have been surprised to find herself gently pressed against the stone wall. One large hand moved to her thigh and slid upwards, while the other tugged down a dress strap as Theo’s lips trailed lightly to the soft curve between neck and shoulder. She needed to stop this, but every time she thought of pulling away, Lavender’s sneering “I know what
he wants” echoed in her head and Hermione found her hands inside Theo’s suitcoat, running under his silk shirt.

When her fingers met warm, softly hairy skin, her mind cleared. She didn’t want a quick shag in an alcove; she could ruin this if she wasn’t careful. Theo’s fingers were nearly up to her … she stepped away, panting. Theo let his hands drop and they stared at each other, both a little stunned.

“Well,” Theo said, with a slightly trembling smile. “I’m going to pay your roommate to fight with you before every date from now on.”

They both laughed, perhaps a little more than the weak joke deserved, trying to manage the sudden awkwardness. “I’m not … I don’t usually …” Hermione stuttered.

“I’m not complaining,” Theo said, tucking his shirt in and straightening his coat and tie. He cleared his throat. “But perhaps we should go to dinner now.”

“Yes,” she said, still catching her breath slightly. She pulled up her straps and tugged down her dress. She put a hand to her curls, but Theo hadn’t touched her hair, so hopefully she didn’t look like a total disheveled slag. She transfigured a bit of stone wall into a mirror to find her makeup still intact as well, requiring only a fresh swipe of lipstick. Theo now looked as impeccable as before, and Hermione couldn’t help eyeing him as he handed over her bag and cloak. He was obviously quite adept at such discreet encounters.

Theo took the odd beginning to their date all in stride, keeping up a steady patter of light conversation on the walk to Hogsmeade. Hermione concentrated on not acting like a mental case. By the time they reached The Spangled Veil, she was a bit more relaxed.

The Spangled Veil was a new addition to Hogsmeade, a high-end restaurant replacing a woodcutter’s shed destroyed during the war. Much of Hogsmeade had been rebuilt, often to serve a more well-heeled clientele, and Hermione had heard some complaints from locals about the “new, rich blood.” She made a mental note to ask Madame Rosmerta and few others about that; it wouldn’t do for locals to be priced out of their own village.

But tonight, she enjoyed the opulent surroundings: brocade-covered walls, waterfall chandeliers, lovely views of the Scottish mountains. A ripple ran through the tables as diners turned to see Hermione Granger enter on the arm of a man who obviously wasn’t Ron Weasley. Theo was a striking figure in his own right, although not generally known, and Hermione noted witches’ speculative glances as they passed.

The atmosphere was almost oppressively posh, and the thought of encountering Malfoy here with Astoria made Hermione stumble slightly, but no, Malfoy couldn’t be taking his pureblood princess out to dinner tonight if he was shagging his brainless strumpet in some empty classroom. She stumbled again—good show, there, Hermione. Theo looked at her quizzically, but she made it to their table all right. Good thing she’d never claimed to be graceful.

She was happy to sit back and think about unruffled ponds in Norway as Theo selected a bottle of wine and bantered back and forth with the waiter. Once settled with their orders and their wine, Hermione asked Theo what brought him back to Hogwarts.

He eyed her over his glass of Domaine Rappelé à la Vie. “I was quite conflicted,” he said finally. “I didn’t plan to return.”

“What changed your mind?”
Theo shrugged. “I was in Germany with my grandmother—she has this beautiful Bavarian castle, you’d like it—and I suddenly realized that I would always be an outsider in that country. Britain was my home and any meaningful future was here.

“And to make a future here, I needed to do well on my NEWTs.” He winked at her. “So I portkeyed directly to Diagon Alley, didn’t even stop at Nott Estate. I bought everything new: trunk, clothes, books, and paid a local to take me to Hogwarts in a wagon.”

“That was the day of the Gryffindor party,” Hermione said.

He nodded. “I just left my things in the Entrance Hall and went to McGonagall’s office. She didn’t seem surprised to see me, probably has her ways of knowing things. She sent me to the Slytherin dungeons to bunk with Blaise and Greg. Good thing those two had an extra bed, or they would have put me with Draco.”

“Why is that?”

“Draco has his own dorm—no one would room with him.”

“Mmmm,” Hermione said, sipping her wine. *Guess Malfoy doesn’t need to sneak around in empty classrooms after all.*

“Something wrong?” Theo asked. He touched her hand on the table.

“Oh no,” she said. “Of course nobody wants to live with Malfoy.”

“Yes, he’ll have a hard time changing minds,” Theo said, rather indifferently. “People won’t forget.”

Hermione nodded, looking down at his fingers lightly holding hers on the white tablecloth. His silver signet ring and emerald cufflink glinted in the light of the candles. Her hand and arm were bare, the word “MUDBLOOD” written clearly in red on her inner forearm.

“Nobody should forget what happened, Hermione,” Theo said softly, turning her hand slightly to see the scars better. Hermione gently pulled her hand away and placed it on her lap.

“This is a lovely restaurant,” she said. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

Theo gave her a boyish grin. “My pleasure. You’ve earned it, slaying the Dragon Lady for my honor.” Hermione couldn’t help smiling back.

“Whatever Astoria said to you, I’m sure she deserved what she got,” he went on.

She sniffed. “I didn’t hex her because of what she said. She tried to *crucio* me.”

“She what?”

Hermione took a ragged breath. She hadn’t told anyone that. “Please don’t tell people.” She bit her lip. “Don’t tell Malfoy.”

“Damn it.” His voice rose and other diners were glancing their way. “This is all wrong. We Slytherins need to reenter the entire wizarding world, not just pureblood society, and Astoria attacks a war heroine?” Theo shook his head in disgust. Then a thought occurred to him, and his eyes widened. “*Crucio*? That’s an Unforgivable. She could be arrested for even—”

“Hush now,” Hermione said. “I’m fine. I can handle Greengrass.” She gave him a hard look. “I’m
telling you this in confidence.”

“Why can’t Draco know?”

“He just can’t. Can we please not talk about him?” Hermione shifted uncomfortably.

“Most certainly.” Theo leaned back in his chair, still frowning a little. What a strange evening this was turning out to be—would future dates include such wild mood swings?

“Tell me about your grandmother,” Hermione said, buttering a small chunk of bread.

“Lady Gretchen?” Theo brightened and launched into a vivid description. His maternal grandmother was more than 100 years old, a great society beauty in her day, and ruled her castle like a queen. She’d sent five specially trained battlewizards to fetch Theo when his father openly joined the Death Eaters, determined that her grandson wouldn’t take the Mark. The wizards had literally kidnapped Theo in the dead of night, right out of Nott Estate, and dragged him kicking to Germany.

“I mean, I was grateful, don’t get me wrong.” Theo sighed. “But it would have been nice to have a choice.”

“She did the right thing,” Hermione said. “I sent my parents to Australia. They didn’t have a choice either.” She touched the sapphire at her throat.

“That’s a lovely necklace. I was admiring it … earlier.” Theo leaned forward, his eyes taking on a heated look from under heavy dark lashes.

“Birthday gift from my parents.”

“Of course. Your birthstone. Mine is ruby.” He sat back again as the waiter presented their steaks.

“Ruby? That’s not very Slytherin,” she teased. “So you know birthstones as well as flowers, then?” she asked, thinking back to the DADA lesson. Only Neville had beaten Theo at reciting that day.

“I know all the birthstones and meanings of flowers and gifts and proper ribbons for messages …” He grimaced. “My governess.” He eyed her hair as she turned away to retrieve a dropped napkin. “That’s a lovely hair set. Another birthday gift?”

“Yes,” she said simply. \textit{Damn that Lavender.}

“A rather significant gift,” Theo said, his face taking on a cool, appraising look. No trace of a smile.

“No, it’s really not,” she said, cutting her steak with unnecessary vigor. She was never wearing the diamond set again. She didn’t care how good it made her hair look.

They spoke of light topics again after that, giggling over Bluebell’s antics in DADA. Dessert was served while Theo was away from the table, which was fine with Hermione. She appreciated the breathing spell, a chance to nibble her cheesecake without having to school her expressions.

Alas, it couldn’t last. “Hermione!” called a voice, a deeper version of Ron’s. She looked up to see Bill and Fleur Weasley, hand in hand. Fleur glowed in blue silk, drawing every eye in the room. Hermione rose immediately to hug them both.

“‘Ou look so beautiful, my dear!” Fleur cried. “Such a lovely dress, and your ‘air!” She gasped.
“Zose diamonds!” Her blue eyes widened. “Zey are Goblin-make!”

“Wha-what?” Hermione stuttered, reaching up to touch a pin nervously. What had possessed her to wear Malfoy’s present tonight? She should have wrapped a scarf around her head!

“Definitely historic, reset in the last century,” Bill added, regarding her hair with a professional eye. A treasure hunter for Gringott’s, Ron’s brother knew jewelry.

“’Ermione!” Fleur breathed.

“Who are you here with?” Bill asked suddenly, the werewolf scars harsh on his face.

“Hello, I’m Theodore Nott,” said a voice from behind Hermione. Bill and Fleur looked startled by the last name, but they rallied instantly. “Good to meet you,” Bill said, smiling, shaking Theo’s hand. “Bill Weasley, and this is my wife, Fleur.”

Hermione could only be grateful that they introduced themselves since she was suddenly incapable of speech. Her mind whirled. Malfoy had given her historic, goblin-made jewelry? No wonder Theo was suspicious!

And now looking at Bill and Fleur’s smiling faces, she almost groaned. They obviously believed the diamonds were from Theo, and she couldn’t very well correct them. Anything was better than the truth.

“Would you like to join us?” Theo asked, urbane as always.

“Oh no, zank you, you are nearly finit, I see,” Fleur said. “We ’ave just arrived.”

“Good to meet you, though,” Bill said. He kissed Hermione’s cheek in an oddly careful way and Fleur kissed both her cheeks before leaving with a final brilliant smile.

“Bill—he’s the eldest Weasley boy, yes?” Theo asked as they sat down.

“Yes, he and Fleur were married last year.” Hermione was taken suddenly back to the wedding again, but now her waltz with Malfoy was overlaid over the memory. Blinking, she realized that Theo was holding her left hand again.

“You’re back,” he said quietly.

“I’m sorry.” Hermione bit her lip, feeling guilty.

“Don’t be sorry. Ever,” Theo said, his jaw tight. “I heard what happened when the Ministry fell. The rest of us should be sorry. Getting to know you makes me think …” he trailed off.

“Think what?” Hermione asked, ever curious.

“Maybe I should have stayed. And fought my father.”

“Would you have?” she asked.

“Honestly?” His eyes were a bit sad. “No, I wouldn’t have. I’m a Slytherin. Self-preservation.”

“People change,” Hermione said. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned so far this school term, it’s that people change.”
He gave her a weak smile. “I’m very glad I came back to Hogwarts.” He squeezed Hermione’s hand, then leaned over the table and gave her a light kiss on the lips.

“I meant what I said at lunch last weekend,” Theo continued, pouring them more wine. He sat back in his chair, glass in hand. “About setting my own future. Thanks to my father and uncles, the Nott name is synonymous with Death Eater, but that will change. *Ab ipso ferro,*” he said, and his signet ring glowed for an instant.

“*Ab ipso ferro?*” Hermione repeated.

“‘From the Same Iron,’” Theo said. “A bit of luck there. When trying to redeem one’s name, it helps when the family motto makes no sense at all.”

Theo winked and Hermione couldn’t help but smile back. It certainly beat “Purity Will Always Conquer.”

They were a little quiet, walking back hand in hand, and Hermione felt like sighing. No matter how much they tried to make this a fun date, darker things kept creeping in.

“I’d like to try again,” Theo said finally. “Another dinner.”

“This was lovely,” she said. “Just a little … intense.”

Theo turned to face her, standing in the dark path with nobody around and a huge moon above. “I refuse to give up,” he said. “There are two incredibly frivolous people inside us just crying to get out.”

She laughed, and he put a cool hand to her cheek, bending to kiss her again. She responded, their kisses full of wine and softness. He pulled her closer, and his lips brushed her eyelids, then her ear.

“Hermione,” Theo whispered, lips moving higher into her hair, his hand at her waist, drawing her closer. “Mmmm … Hermione, come with me … ah!” He hissed and pulled away.

“They?” Hermione’s eyes popped open. Theo’s other hand was pressed against his forehead. He removed his fingers, revealing a thin streak of blood, black in the bright moonlight.

Hermione drew her wand and healed the wound instantly. “I’m so sorry—I don’t know what happened.” Although she now had a strong suspicion; she had definitely felt a hairpin move that time. *Malfoy* …

Theo frowned and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. “Nothing to apologize for,” he said, tucking the square of cloth into his pocket. He moved closer again. ‘Such a dangerous girl,” he purred. “I’ll just be more careful.”

Hermione stepped back. “We don’t need to rush anything,” she said. “I was a little … heated earlier.”

Theo nodded and took her hand with a smile. “Of course.” They walked on, and Hermione concentrated on managing her breathing.

“Every roommate has her price, you know,” Theo said conversationally as they neared the castle. “I intend to find out hers.”

Chapter End Notes
NEXT UP: Hermione has drinks with Pansy Parkinson.
“What the hell did you do to Lavender?” Ginny asked Sunday morning, stuffing a toothbrush into her toiletries bag.

“What do you mean?” Hermione pulled on a black jumper, her bushy head popping out the top.

“I mean, I got back to the room last night to find out you’d left not ten minutes before. Lavender was freaking out, screaming that you tried to kill her.”

“Nonsense.” Hermione tied up her hair with a gold ribbon. She looked and felt much better today. Time with Theo appeared to be therapeutic.

Ginny put her hands on her hips, Molly Weasley-style. “Hermione Jean Granger, did you or did you not shatter our window?”

“That was an accident.”

“What did you say, then?” Ginny persisted. “It took forever to get Lavender out from under the bed.”

Hermione stuffed a cloak into her beaded bag. “Coming to breakfast?”

“Hermione!” Ginny pulled her over to sit down on Hermione’s bed. Crookshanks immediately jumped up to get as much orange hair as possible on Hermione’s black sweater. “What’s going on? Lavender said that you went absolutely spare, and that she can’t sleep here anymore. Then she packed up all her stuff and left!”

“What? Really?” Hermione looked around. The giant stuffed bear was gone from Lavender’s bed, along with her trunk and all those weird googly-eyed dolls from her desk, and the pictures in pink, heart-shaped frames. “Lavender’s gone?”

“She’s rooming with Parvati and a couple of Seventh Years.”

Hermione grinned. “I should’ve done this years ago.”

“That. That is what I’m talking about,” Ginny said, pointing at her. “You are not acting like yourself this year at all.” She stared at Hermione fixedly. “Let me guess … Malfoy, right? Funny how he’s always a part of your little episodes.”

Hermione looked away, her hand stroking Crookshanks’ fur. “Maybe.”

“Well?”

Hermione sighed and gave it to her straight. “Malfoy shagged Lavender.”
Ginny’s jaw dropped. “I don’t believe it.”

“Believe it. There I was, innocently getting ready to meet Theo, and Lavender presents the latest episode of the Slytherin Sex-God Chronicles starring Draco Malfoy and his wonder dick.” The drums were starting to beat inside her head again. She really needed to calm down about this.

“Oh Merlin,” Ginny breathed, wide-eyed. “Are you sure—”

“Apparently, I haven’t lived until I have that blond head between my legs,” Hermione said bitterly.

“Merlin,” Ginny said again. “I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?”

“Well, you … you … like Malfoy. I know you do. Ye gods, no wonder you shattered the window.”

Hermione sighed. “Maybe. But he’s betrothed to Astoria Greengrass and now apparently with a little Lavender on the side and I want no part of that mess.”

“How do you know he’s betrothed to Astoria?” Ginny asked shrewdly.

“Astoria told me.”

“Before or after you choked her and slammed her into a wall?”

Hermione played with the beads on her bag, reluctant to bring up the attempted crucio. “She was being annoying.”

“Annoying, Merlin,” Ginny huffed. “Just because Astoria says they’re betrothed doesn’t mean it’s true. She’s been saying that for years. Malfoy’s still a git, but he’s been almost human this year. Neville says he hasn’t insulted him once. That, along with the injury and snitch-catching—well, Malfoy’s making headway with students despite the blood messages. People actually talk to him now. Astoria thinks she’s got a string on him, and she’s yanking it.”

“She can’t be pulling the leash very hard if he’s shagging Lavender,” Hermione pointed out.

Ginny was frowning. “I just can’t see it, Malfoy and Lavender.” She sighed. “I should have been here for you.”

Hermione pulled the redhead into a hug. “No, no, none of this was your fault. How did your talk with Harry go yesterday?”

Ginny’s face was downcast. “He met someone else, but you already know that.”

“Yes.”

“We took a walk around the lake and it was fucking awful. Harry was all mature and noble and understanding. When I mentioned Blaise …” Ginny choked. “It was obvious I’d shagged him, I mean, my face was so hot. I couldn’t even look at Harry, and when I finally did, his mouth was doing that thing …”

Hermione nodded. She knew that look, when Harry folded his lips into a grim line, from an injury or hurt feelings, and was trying to hide it.

“Then he starts acting like my father.” Her roommate eerily mimicked Harry’s serious auror voice:
‘People are not always what they seem, Ginny …’"

Ginny sighed. “It’s just … I loved Harry for so long. I don’t know how I feel now, but it doesn’t matter, really.” She looked at Hermione. “You’re meeting him today, aren’t you?”

Hermione nodded. “I’m leaving for Diagon Alley after breakfast.”

“Now I just have Blaise,” Ginny sighed. “And I have no clue how I feel about him. I feel like it could crash and burn just like you and Malfoy.”

“There wasn’t enough of us to crash and burn,” Hermione said earnestly. “It’s just not going to happen. I’m with Theo now. I like being with him. Even if Malfoy isn’t engaged to Astoria and isn’t shagging Lavender, it doesn’t matter. The whole thing was ridiculous. He’s a Malfoy. I’m a muggle-born. There’s no future there. We could never be real. We are Potions partners and that’s it.”

***

The Daily Prophet’s Sunday edition arrived at breakfast, with owls dropping thick wads of parchment on people’s heads and plates. Hermione was still cleaning pumpkin juice off her smeared paper when Ginny nudged her.

“Hermione,” she said, shoving another folded copy at her.

“MAGICAL VIRUS INFECTS AZKABAN,” Hermione read. “Look, Ginny, there’s a sickness running through the prison. It seems that many inmates are weak and vulnerable after years with Dementors …”

“Not there.” Ginny rolled her eyes. “The real news.” She unfolded the top half. “Look.”

Hermione bent her head over the parchment again. There on the front page, under the headline “WAR HEROINE IN LOVE TRYST WITH DEATH EATER’S SON” was a picture of Hermione and Theo at The Spangled Veil the night before. She sat in shock, watching the two of them kiss lightly over the table again and again. “Rita Skeeter,” she murmured.

She read on: “During a lovely meal at Hogsmeade’s hottest new restaurant, The Spangled Veil, this reporter was shocked to see war heroine Hermione Granger enter with none other than Theodore Nott, son of infamous Death Eater Ignatius Nott who was executed by the Wizengamot in August for murder, assault and conspiracy. (See SCANDAL, page 17.)”

Hermione riffled through the pages. “Granger, 19, right-hand woman to Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived, and a major combatant in the Battle of Hogwarts, has returned to her alma mater to finish her education. Undoubtedly that is where she took up with Nott, 18, who spent the war overseas and only returned once the fighting was over.

“Granger is well-known for her generosity of spirit, and it looks like the handsome Slytherin’s charms may have overcome the judgment of the Brightest Witch of Her Age. Only months ago we
expected wedding bells between Granger and fellow war hero Ronald Weasley, and now she is seen canoodling with a rival House.

“However, one admits, if Granger must take up with a Slytherin, young Nott is probably the best choice, despite his background. Nott is in full possession of the family fortune and has contributed to various worthy causes, including muggles displaced, killed or injured by the war. And unlike Granger’s previous suitor, he can obviously offer the famous muggle-born the best of everything, from lands to diamonds. Perhaps Nott’s relationship with Granger is a sign that the charismatic pureblood has turned over a new leaf and rejected his family’s past prejudices.”

Hermione looked up from the page to see the entire Gryffindor table staring. Murmurs from the other tables had risen to a dull roar. Thank Merlin Ron isn't here for this, she thought.

“It’s not too bad,” Hermione said, shrugging. “Nice picture.”

“Hermione …” Neville began.

“It’s okay, really. Could be much worse. Theo and I are dating. We’re not hiding it; we just didn’t think it would get out so quickly.” She looked around again. “Really, everyone. It’s fine.”

The entire table looked relieved and began to talk again.

“A bit jumpy, aren’t they?” Hermione asked Neville and Ginny.

Ginny snorted. “They’re probably afraid you’re going to blast the windows out of the Great Hall. Lavender’s been blabbing.” She cast an evil look at their former roommate, who sat further down the table with Parvati.

“I don’t remember seeing Skeeter at the restaurant.” Hermione skimmed over the article again; something about the tone seemed off. “In any case, I don’t see anything damaging here. I’ll have a quick word with Theo, then I’m off to Diagon Alley.”

Hermione gave the Gryffindor table a reassuring smile that they all seemed to appreciate and left her bench, slinging the thin strap of her beaded bag across her chest. She looked over at the Slytherin table and nearly flinched at Malfoy’s glare. The open Prophet was in his hand. Merlin, what was wrong with him? If anyone should be glaring, it should be her. She wasn’t shagging his roommate (as if anybody wanted to be his roommate). Random men weren’t bragging to him about her sexual appetites. She just went on a date.

Now Theo was walking her way, a set smile on his face. She grinned back at him and he relaxed immediately, taking her hand. Everyone was certainly very tense this year.

“Hello, Son of Death Eater,” she said.

“Hello, Muggle-born Gold-Digger,” he answered. “Headed to the library?”

“Not now,” she said. “I’m meeting Harry and Ron in Diagon Alley.”

They passed through the double doors and left the castle through the Entrance Hall. “I’m sorry about the Prophet,” Theo said, as they stood outside. “That was quite quick.”

Hermione pulled out her cloak, and Theo arranged it around her shoulders. “It’s all right, I’ve had worse,” she said.

Theo deftly fastened the cloak under her chin, a small gesture that made her blush. “If I kiss you
here, will it cause a media frenzy?” he asked.

She looked around—students were streaming out the castle doors. “I think the people have seen enough,” Hermione said with a smile. She squeezed his hand and headed up the chilly path to Hogsmeade.

***

The newspaper story made shopping in Diagon Alley an ordeal for Hermione, who was constantly followed by hisses of “Death Eater whore!” plus two Howlers from irate Ron fans. After a few hours of that, she stomped over to the Leaky Cauldron. It was near The Daily Prophet offices, and she’d just bought herself a nice glass jar.

“Firewhiskey, neat,” Hermione ordered, taking a seat at the bar. She pulled out her wand and began poking holes in the jar’s lid.

“Bit early for a shot, isn’t it, Granger?” a female voice asked.

Hermione turned around, hoping she had misidentified the voice, but no, it was most certainly Pansy Parkinson standing there, looking decidedly out of place in her yellow sheath dress. A wide yellow band smoothed back her black hair, and she held a little white purse and lace gloves.

“If I’d known you were here, Parkinson,” Hermione said, “I would’ve ordered two.”

Pansy sniffed. “I don’t care for whiskey.”

“Two shots for me.”

“I suppose you’re celebrating in your own common way,” Pansy said. “Looking to be the next Lady Nott, are you?”

Hermione sighed and stuffed the jar back into her beaded bag. “Why does everyone think I’m chasing a title? I actually like Theo, you know.”

“He’s a better prospect than Draco, anyway.”

Hermione grunted and knocked back her shot. She was not discussing Malfoy with another one of his bints. She never wanted to discuss Malfoy again. She never wanted to see or think or hear about Malfoy again. Maybe he would drop out of Hogwarts. Maybe she should drop out of Hogwarts.

She caught the bartender’s eye and pointed at her empty shot glass, then turned to glare at Pansy. “Why are you still here?”

“I like Theo too, actually,” Pansy said.

“Let me guess,” Hermione said, knocking back her second shot. “You have a prior agreement with Theo, which you’ve consummated in the most disgusting ways possible, and you plan to stalk me
and criticize my drinking habits until I leave him alone.”

Pansy blinked. “Is that why you hexed Astoria? Because of her past with Draco?”

“NO. Get that into your sugar-spun head, Parkinson: I did not hex Astoria because of what she said about Malfoy.” She held Pansy’s dark eyes with her own. “It was self-defense. And they call me violent. Fuck.” She slammed her shot glass on the table.

“I believe you,” Pansy said.

“Splendid.”

“When I said I liked Theo, I meant as a friend, Granger. I don’t want him used.”

“Neither do I. I have no plans to be Lady Nott. Fuck that.” The firewhiskey was really going to her head.

“I believe you,” Pansy said again.

Hermione squinted up at her. “I must be particularly persuasive when I’m drinking. Are we done here?”

“Is Longbottom seeing anyone?”

Hermione blinked. “I thought you asked me if Neville was seeing anyone.”

“I did.” Pansy took the stool beside her, crossing her ankles and placing her purse and gloves on her knees. Her back was straight, and she looked completely ridiculous.

“Another one?” the bartender said. Hermione looked at Pansy, who nodded.

“Two more shots and some bread and cheese, please,” Hermione said. “I have a lunch. I’d rather not turn up sloshed.”

“Too late,” Pansy said.

“No,” Hermione went on, “I don’t know if Neville is seeing someone, but he’s one of my very best friends, a good man, and anybody who hurts him is going to think Astoria got off easy. Hell, they’ll think Bellatrix got off easy. Hear me?”

“Loud and clear,” Pansy said. The two shots arrived, along with the bread and cheese, and the two women drank. Hermione immediately started in on the bread.

“I’ve been watching Draco this year,” Pansy went on. Hermione groaned. “I’m beginning to think our House has been a little hard on him.”

“Go tell him that,” Hermione said. “I don’t care.”

“He’s been behaving quite strangely,” Pansy said.

“He was always strange. See ‘don’t care’, above.”

“I heard you tried to murder Lavender Brown.” Pansy smirked. “My, don’t you have a temper this year.”

Hermione shrugged. “So I’ve been a little testy.”
“If you say so. We've all seen Brown following Draco around for weeks, even right up to the Slytherin dungeons. You Gryffindors have no pride.”

“Maybe she considers herself your successor, Parkinson,” said Hermione, remembering how Pansy hung on Malfoy for years.

“Mee-ow. Brown, Astoria … As I said, I’ve been watching. It’s disturbing, what happens to people who get between you and Draco. He’s been a little testy, too.” Pansy’s eyes narrowed. “It makes me worry about Theo.”

“Theo can handle himself,” Hermione said. “I understand where you’re coming from, but you don’t have to worry—there’s nothing going on between me and Malfoy.”

“Alright, then.” Pansy set a galleon down on the bar. “Drinks on me.” Hermione shook her head and pushed the coin back toward her. “You can pick up the tab next time, Granger.”

Hermione smiled reluctantly. “Alright.”

Pansy left her stool quite gracefully for someone who’d just had a shot of whiskey, and minced out the door in her heeled shoes. Hermione put her forehead on the bar.

She must have dozed off a little, face-down on the bar, because she felt a bit better when Harry found her. He teased her about the smell of firewhiskey and the heavy line on her forehead, then bore her off to the Three Broomsticks, where Ron and George were on their second (maybe third) butterbeers. Ron looked more relaxed than she’d seen him in years; his hug was friendly, and he made only a few pointed remarks about her and Theo’s front-page news. The turnaround was stunning, and Hermione spent most of the lunch staring at this new Ron.

Ron and George needed to get to the Burrow afterward, inviting the rest to come along, but Hermione said she had to study, and Harry had training. Hermione spent the afternoon working in the Gryffindor common room, and after dinner she studied in the library with Ginny and Neville, as well as Theo, who was still manfully trying to follow her color-coded study guides.

It was a quiet evening: Ginny looked a little pale and heavy-eyed, and Theo kept glancing at Hermione worriedly when he thought she wasn’t looking. Hermione was glad to return to the dorm, where she and Ginny split a butterbeer and went to bed early. Ginny didn’t mention Blaise and Hermione didn’t mention Malfoy. Hermione lay on her back for a long time, staring at the canopy above, thinking of everything and nothing, and she was pretty sure Ginny was doing the same.

Her mind, especially, kept drifting back to Malfoy’s diamonds, still stowed at the very bottom of Hermione’s trunk, protected by strong wards. A few times over the past week, the jewels had drawn her out of bed, and she’d held the pieces up to the candlelight, admiring their faceted fire, touching the cool, smooth diamond in the center of the clip. Dark, dangerous jewelry. Historic jewelry. Possibly … family jewelry? Hermione tossed restlessly in her bed, unable to accept the possibility that she lived in a world where Draco Malfoy gave her, a muggle-born, such a treasure. Just because it was her birthday. There simply had to be another explanation. Dark doubts drifted in … perhaps the diamonds were cursed, an intricate plan of revenge …

She sat up. Oh Merlin, now she was being truly ridiculous. Malfoy was no saint, but he wasn’t a diabolical dark wizard trying to live up to his Dark Mark again with another careless delivery of deadly jewelry. Then why …
Hermione flopped back onto the bed. She could start a new LOOP section on the topic, but she lacked sufficient data to draw any reasonable conclusions. Asking Malfoy directly was out of the question. He’d probably just put her off. So, where were answers she needed? What were the right books? The right sources? She was still pondering research options when she fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Hermione considers skiving off class.

But she could just hear her mother: “Now, honey, those bits about shattered windows and bloodsoaked jewelry sound like excuses to me. One mustn’t fear success.”
I apologize for the unintended hiatus—I'm a journalist, and I just changed jobs. This project, my first fanfiction, has been a great way to flex completely different writing muscles and has been quite rewarding. Here we go with our next chapter, where confusion is rampant and Hermione's attempts at control are feeble at best.

Breakfast Monday morning began with a dramatic announcement. McGonagall rose from her throne-like chair in the Great Hall and the assembled students immediately quieted. Hermione looked across the table at Ginny, who nodded.

“I have an important announcement regarding one of our most valued students,” the Headmistress said. “Ronald Weasley has elected to leave Hogwarts and accept a partnership with his brother George at Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes. I have absolutely no doubt that both Mr. Weasleys will continue to find great success with their business.”

Murmurs rippled through the mass of students, and a good number of them looked at Hermione and Ginny, who both smiled and nodded.

“I cannot emphasize enough the debt this school owes to Mr. Weasley personally. He has been a brave and loyal addition to Hogwarts, and worthy of our respect. He regrets he was unable to say goodbye to you all personally but felt his family needs him after the events earlier this year.” She lifted her goblet. “I would like us all assembled to toast Mr. Ronald Weasley.”

Hermione stood up immediately, and the entire Gryffindor table followed, as well as the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. Ginny gave Blaise a significant look and he rose with Theo, bringing the Slytherin table along. Even Malfoy stood with a glance at Hermione.

She felt a bit teary after they sat down again, but the memory of Ron so cheerful and relaxed at Diagon Alley the day before was a comfort. She took out her quill to update the day’s study schedule and it suddenly quivered in her hand. *Oh no …*

“Feeeeelings … nothing more than feeelings …” the quill sang.

Ginny whipped around in her seat. “Is that …”

“Trying to forgееееее my feelings of loooovе …”

The rest of the table looked at Hermione nervously, but she just smiled down at the crooning quill. *Oh yes, definitely the right choice.*
For the first time in her life, Hermione seriously considered skiving off a class. Anything was better than sitting at a Potions table with Malfoy and Lavender. But then she thought how disappointed her parents would be if they knew she’d compromised her education just because her roommate shagged a former Death Eater that Hermione had blackmailed, hexed and kissed. She could just hear her mother: “Now, honey, those bits about shattered windows and bloodsoaked jewelry sound like excuses to me. One mustn’t fear success.”

So she marched into Potions, head held high, to find Malfoy setting up their cauldron without an ounce of shame. Disgusting. She gave her Potions partner the cold look he deserved and took her seat. Lavender arrived and looked nervously at Malfoy, who regarded her with his usual bored indifference. Hermione glared at them both as she ground an Erumpent horn to dust. Sickening. Absolutely sickening. The angrier Hermione became, the smugger Lavender’s expression grew, and by the end of the class she was cooing at Malfoy as usual. Malfoy gave Hermione an occasional sharp look, but if he had any thoughts, he wisely kept them to himself.

The entire week after Ron’s departure was marked by a steady, pouring rain that seemed to oppress the entire castle. Malfoy especially was a dark, brooding presence, which irritated Hermione to no end. What in Godric’s name did he have to brood about? He was living the pureblood dream over there in Slytherin, with his pureblood betrothed and his pureblood mistress. All he needed was a cane and one of those aristocratic hounds.

She turned to her schoolwork for distraction, and Theo proved diverting as well. The Slytherin was quite good at luring her into alcoves for a bit of snogging, but Hermione never let things progress very far until Friday afternoon after classes.

“I’m beginning to think you don’t really like me, Hermione,” Theo murmured in her ear. He had found them a storage room off the Dungeon Corridor. The large space was packed with tents, strings of lights and folded wooden tables for outside events.

“Oh, I like you fine,” she said, drawing his hand out from under her uniform skirt. She was seated on a picnic table with Theo standing between her legs, his hands now on her hips. The piles of boxes and assorted outdoor junk reminded her of Arthur Weasley’s muggle shack, and she hadn’t forgotten how having sex there had turned out.

“I don’t believe you.” Theo’s voice took on that rumbling tone. “Convince me.”

“I wrote up a chart on all your positive attributes in my LOOP, ranked in order of importance,” she said brightly. “I could read it to you if you like.”

Theo withdrew his hands and looked down at her sternly. Like Hermione, he had shed his robe, tie and jumper, and with his artfully messy black hair and five o’clock shadow, he looked nothing like a student. The top buttons of his shirt were undone, revealing a quantity of dark chest hair. Hermione swallowed but didn’t look away.

“I’m guessing the words considerate, kind and agreeable figure prominently in your chart,” Theo said.

Hermione nodded. “And organized. Your study guides are coming along nicely.”

“Ah, the words every man longs to hear. I wonder,” Theo murmured, twining a hand into her curls.
and pulling her head back gently, “if you’d like me better if I was a bit less … agreeable.”

Hermione’s breath quickened, and she flushed, realizing she’d given herself away. She and Theo locked eyes, and his hand in her hair tightened. His kisses were rougher now, his other hand tearing at her shirt, he was pressing her backward, and things might have advanced further if Ernie Macmillan hadn’t flung open the door with a bang.

“Hermione!” Ernie said hoarsely, his ears turning red.

Theo spared Ernie the slightest of glances, not moving his hands an inch. “Whatever you’re here for can obviously wait, Macmillan,” he said coolly.


“What? No,” Ernie said. “I’m here to take inventory for the Halloween Festival. I told the prefects to do it, but—”

“Have you organized a Festival steering committee?” Hermione pulled away from Theo and turned toward Ernie, wagging her finger. “You won’t get anywhere unless you hold people accountable … Ernie, are you listening to me?”

Ernie’s whole face was brick-red now as well as his ears. Hermione looked down—her shirt was completely unbuttoned. Flushing, she pulled it closed, clamping her knees together as well to avoid a view straight up her ...

“It’s all right, Macmillan,” Theo said, chuckling. “I wasn’t listening, either.” He gave Ernie a superior look. “Perhaps you should take care of your own tent before you start counting these.”

“Theo!” Hermione scolded. Ernie fled, utterly mortified, and Theo pulled her close, enveloping her in that musky cologne.

“I’m impressed,” Hermione said.

“I haven’t even begun,” he murmured into her throat.

“You don’t care that Ernie got an eyeful? I thought you Slytherins were jealous types.” She almost shivered thinking of Malfoy’s likely reaction in such a situation.

Theo raised his head and snickered. “Jealous? Of a Hufflepuff? Hardly. Next, you’ll expect me to feel threatened by Justin Fat-Fuckhead.” He tugged at her bra strap. “Did you put a sticking charm on this?”

She had, as well as on other items of clothing in strategic places, which Theo considered “unsporting.” Hermione enjoyed the resulting squabble, but Ernie’s entrance had rather killed the mood. Ernie had seen her bra. Ewww. But maybe she should have tried harder because when she left the storage room, followed by a slightly disgruntled Theo, she bumped right into Astoria Greengrass.

Hermione was not pleased. She’d already had her Recommended Daily Allowance of Astoria in Herbology, where the atmosphere at their table had been cold enough to frost over their Winkweed. Literally. Bloody accidental magic.

“THEODORE,” Astoria said, drawing out the syllables as she had with “Draco” at the Slug Club dinner. She was wearing her Keeper’s jersey and holding a broom—obviously on her way back
from afternoon Quidditch practice. But despite the wind and rain outside, Astoria looked painfully tidy, with only a slight dampness curling the ends of her long golden braid. She ostentatiously brushed at her sleeve where Hermione had touched her.

“Astoria,” Theo said curtly.

Astoria looked him up and down, then cut her eyes between Hermione’s rumpled state and the still-ajar storage room door. Hermione flushed. Theo’s hair and clothing, of course, were above reproach.


“Astoria,” Theo repeated, an edge of warning in his tone. Hermione’s fingers twitched for her wand.

The blonde’s cat-in-the-cream look only intensified. “Perhaps it’s for the best, Theeee-odore,” she went on. “You wouldn’t want to spoil your … appetite.” She smirked at Hermione.

“Astoria, I asked you to …” Malfoy strode into the corridor, also wearing a Quidditch jersey and holding a broom. He halted, seeing them, then turned a deadly, unblinking gaze on Theo, who smiled back pleasantly.

“Look what I found, Draco,” Astoria said, “outside a storage room, no less.”

“We were counting inventory for the Halloween Festival,” Hermione blurted. “Tables and folding chairs and candles and …. Shut up, her mind screamed, shut up!”

“And tents,” Theo put in. “So many tents.”

“And cauldrons for apple bobbing,” Hermione babbled, “you can’t have too many cauldrons!” Shut UP about the cauldrons! You sound like Percy!

“Draco and I are headed to the Common Room for a little mulled wine before dinner. Please join us,” Astoria said to Theo as if Hermione hadn’t spoken.

“Thank you, Astoria,” Theo said smoothly, “but I don’t think Hermione and I are quite finished.”

Malfroy’s hand tightened on his broom and Hermione bit her lip, wondering what to do. Despite Astoria’s needling, Hermione wasn’t slipping back into that storage room with Theo. And she certainly wasn’t going down to the Slytherin Common Room. Manipulative snakes. … Finally, she summoned the one phrase that had never failed her.

“I have to go to the library,” Hermione announced.

Astoria cast her a look of burning contempt. Malfoy raised an eyebrow.

“The library?” Theo repeated. “Now?”

“I have an Astronomy essay,” Hermione said. “Some scrolls can only be read when Venus and Mercury are above the horizon.” She pulled her study schedule out of her skirt pocket (she always carried the tiny scroll, never knowing when inspiration would strike), expanded it, and gave it a quick scan.
“Yes,” she said decisively. “Finishing that essay tonight gives me more time for PORN.”

Hermione pocketed the scroll and looked calmly at the Slytherins: Astoria was staring in confusion, mouth slightly open, and Malfoy appeared to be suppressing a smile.

“So, thank you for the invitation, Greengrass, but we must decline,” Hermione said in her swottiest tone, and flounced off without a backward look. Theo had no choice but to follow her.

“Well played, Hermione,” he murmured as they climbed the staircase to the first floor. “Clever of you to dream that up. Now, there’s this interesting tapestry of Everard the Evil back in the …”

“Oh no, I was serious,” Hermione said, refusing to be lured into another alcove. “I never lie about the library. There really are astronomy scrolls that can only be read under certain skies.” She stopped at the library corridor. “I understand if you’d prefer to sip mulled wine with Astoria,” she said, and she meant it. Better him than me, anyway.

Theo groaned and scrubbed at his hair, making it look like Harry’s. “And watch Astoria hold court with the Slytherin Prince?” He widened his eyes. “Draaay-cooh.” Hermione grinned.

“Lead on, then,” Theo said, waving a hand. “Obviously, I am still too considerate, kind and agreeable.”

***

The skies cleared temporarily Saturday night, revealing a crisp, clear sky lit by the full moon. Unable to bear another minute in the castle, Hermione asked Theo to meet her by the Quidditch pitch as soon as he could escape some pretentious Slytherin cocktail party. Tucked in her bag were three more astronomy scrolls that could be read under mid-October skies and she couldn’t wait to look at them. She wondered if Firenze the centaur might help her track constellations or whether he’d just say “Mars is bright tonight” or spout Divination rubbish. Hermione almost didn’t need a light, the moon was so bright, but she illuminated her wand anyway with a red glow.

She picked a bench high in the Hufflepuff stands and just sat for a moment, enjoying the quiet and solitude, her red-and-gold knitted hat pulled low on her forehead and her scarf wrapped tightly around her throat. Then she flattened the Cygnus scroll and laid it on her knees under the starlight. Tiny, inky stars appeared almost immediately, moving across the parchment and reminding her of the little waving runes in Malfoy’s Codex. Cygnus the Swan rotated slowly on the scroll and yes, there was its neighbor, the constellation Draco, huge with a bright yellow eye, bullying his way into her chart. Figured.

A movement spotted out of the corner of her eye made her look up, and she saw a familiar silhouette on a broom against the fat moon. Speak of the devil. The picture was such a cliché. All he needed was a pointy hat. Hermione watched the flier’s movements with a faint smile; it was a pity all their interactions couldn’t be silent and at least 500 feet apart.

Her smile faded entirely as the figure made a sweeping curve and barreled straight toward her—she barely kept from screaming as the black shape swooped down and pulled up just a few feet away.
“Granger?” Malfoy asked.

He hovered before her, moonlight shining on his eyes and hair, drawing shadows along the sharp lines of his nose and jaw. With his hair ruffled by the wind, he looked much like he had in the infirmary.

“Only you would be out here doing schoolwork, in the dark,” he sneered. Hermione made no answer, and they just looked at each other for a few heartbeats, unsure what to say. The only sound was the wind rattling the Quidditch stands and snapping the flags.

“So the Weasel left,” Malfoy said out of nowhere. “That’s why you spent so much time with him.”

“Yes.”

“You didn’t tell me that.”

“It wasn’t my secret to tell, and certainly not to you. I don’t owe you anything.”

His eyes glittered. “You’re angry at me. Again.”

“Well spotted.”

“Why the fuck now?” he demanded.

Hermione looked down, not wanting to meet his eyes. He’d touched her and … why was that so terrible? For all she knew, Malfoy and Astoria were breaking furniture every night. Why was it so sickening to imagine him with …

“You don’t even like her,” said Hermione, hands tightening on her scrolls.

“Like who?”

“You think she’s nothing, beneath your notice. You barely tolerate her. And yet you still …”

“Granger.” Malfoy’s voice was strained. “Granger, I would greatly appreciate it if you would make a little sense here.”

Hermione jumped to her feet, scrolls tumbling off her lap. “Fine,” she hissed. “You want to do this now? We’ll do it now. You fucked her. You fucked Lavender Brown. And apparently, you fucked her so well that she—”

“I what?” Malfoy nearly fell off his broom. “Brown? Have you run mad?”

“Don’t even try to deny it,” Hermione snapped. “Lavender told me last Saturday, and let me tell you, I’ve had it up to here with your witches bragging—”

“And you believed it?” Malfoy’s eyes narrowed. “Of course you did. I’m capable of anything, aren’t I, Granger? Apparently, there are no depths I won’t sink to.”

Malfoy leaped from his broom to the nearest bench in a single, fluid motion, shadows rippling across his face. He stepped down into Hermione’s row and she stiffened, resisting the urge to step back.

“Look who knows so much,” he said in a soft, cold voice. “Tell me, how many other slags have I bent over, willingly—or not?” His hands were on her shoulders, clutching the cloth of her wool coat. “I saw a lot of things during the war.” She couldn’t look away from those deadly eyes. “I’m a
bad man, remember?”

Hermione breathed in sharply. “D-don’t be stupid. I don’t think—”

“You don’t think, you know, don’t you, Granger?” He pulled her closer. “Tell me what I’ve done,” he whispered, his breath hot in her ear. “Wands and knives weren’t the only weapons at Malfoy Manor.”

Hermione’s heart pounded, she couldn’t move, and the moment held. Then Malfoy released her and stepped back, lip curling.

“You insufferable little know-it-all,” he said. He drew his wand and pointed it at his broom, still hovering nearby.

The movement spurred Hermione into action and she pulled out her own wand, shooting a _Colloshoo_ hex to stick Malfoy’s feet to the stands. He struggled to move, his face a mask of fury. “Granger!”

“Expelliarmus!” Hermione yelled, capturing his wand. Bluebell was really on to something with the unpredictable spellwork. Hermione backed away, just out of his reach.

“You Slytherins,” she sniffed. “So much drama.” She tucked their wands into her pocket.

“Give me my wand, Granger,” Malfoy said through gritted teeth.

“Not until you calm down,” she said. “Of course you’re not some sicko wizard doing … you know …” Hermione flapped her hands menacingly, “… that stuff.”

Malfoy glared. “Why not? You thought that I would—”

“Oh, come now,” Hermione snapped. “Let’s say Cormac rolled up to you Saturday night and said, ‘Hey Malfoy, Hermione’s a hot shag and let me tell you about the oral sex.’ I suppose you would’ve been all, ‘Now McLaggen, I find it hard to believe Granger would do that, so why don’t we have a nice, calm chat about your motives.’ Really?”

Malfoy seemed struck by this, but said only, “Oral sex?”

“Yes, I’m told I haven’t lived until I’ve had that blond head between my legs.” Hermione flushed. She couldn’t seem to stop quoting that awful line.

Malfoy looked pained. “With her? I can’t even imagine …” he winced. “Now I just did.”

Hermione grinned at him, her spirits restored. “Apparently, it was sooo hot.”

“Swear to Salazar, Granger, if you don’t free my—”

“Hermione?” Theo was climbing the stands at a rapid pace, holding his wand like a torch, black cloak whipping behind him. Hermione quickly freed Malfoy’s feet and handed him his wand.

“Ooooh, look, Granger has a new Weasel,” the ingrate sneered when Theo reached them.

Theo just smirked. “Hardly. You look a trifle disturbed there, Draco.” He slipped an arm around Hermione’s waist.

Malfoy stepped down a few benches and summoned his broom. “Please,” he drawled, “wait until I leave before you start pawing her.”
“Like you were pawing her just now? Don’t think I didn’t see.” Theo’s icy tone sent a shiver down Hermione’s back. “You Malfoys, always grabbing whatever you want.”

“Theo, it wasn’t what it looked like,” Hermione said. “It was …” she trailed off, unable to produce an explanation that didn’t sound completely mental.

Theo left her side and stepped lightly down to join Malfoy, who easily kept his balance on the other end of the wobbling bench, his broom in hand. Slytherins were so well-coordinated. Theo’s cloak billowed in a sudden gust of wind and a crackling dark power clung to both wizards.

“You ruin everything you touch, Draco,” Theo went on. His green eyes glowed like a cat’s. “Stay away from her.”

“Or what? Go back to your grandmother, little Theodore,” Malfoy sneered. “Don’t try to play with the big boys and girls.”

“Theo, please, let me explain.” Hermione scrambled onto a slightly higher bench with a complete lack of grace. “You see, I was getting ready for dinner with you, and Lavender said Malfoy shagged her …”

“You think she’ll be satisfied with your little games?” Malfoy continued as if Hermione hadn’t spoken. He stepped closer to Theo on the bench. “She’s a Gryffindor, she’ll demand everything—heart, mind, body. Can you give it to her?”

Theo’s smile shone white in the moonlight. “I’ll give it to her, alright.”

“I know I shouldn’t have believed her,” Hermione was rambling on, only half-listening. There had to be a way to explain this. Maybe she could create a timeline. “But Lavender said I hadn’t lived—well, never mind about that—and I … Malfoy, what are you doing? STOP!”

Malfoy had slammed the handle of his Quidditch broom into Theo’s jaw, and a side jab to the ribs knocked the black-haired wizard off the bench. Malfoy glanced back at Hermione, broom in hand. “Granger, don’t—”

“Everte Statum!” Theo’s voice boomed, and a bolt of red light shot upwards, lighting up the stands. The dueling spell, designed to knock back an opponent, missed Malfoy by inches.

“STOP!” Hermione shouted again and drew her own wand. “What is wrong with—”

“Expelliarmus!” Malfoy snapped, catching her wand and tucking it into his coat. He smoothly retreated, still holding his broom, and vanished into the shadows of a yellow-painted wall.

Undaunted, Hermione charged after him, tripping on a step and falling to one knee. Malfoy emerged from the shadow, looking down at her, and Theo suddenly popped up again and threw a stinging hex at the blond wizard. Malfoy grunted with pain and raised his wand: “Tarantallegra!”

The white spark from his wand lit up Malfoy’s face like a flash of lightning, and for an instant Hermione was back in the Department of Mysteries, dodging curses from Death Eaters in the dim light. She remembered Ignatius Nott’s hulking form, his huge hand on Harry’s arm, and the smooth rush of magic from her wand, Nott’s mask torn off and his green eyes—so like Theo’s—widening when she stunned him, the wizard falling amid toppling shelves of prophecies.

Hermione froze, still kneeling, lost in the memory, even as Malfoy’s dancing curse directly hit Theo. The pain from the stinging hex must have weakened Malfoy’s casting, however, for Theo began a light tap dance rather than the spell’s usually fast, frantic tarantula. Theo could still use his
wand, and a flagpole ripped itself off the stands and flew spinning toward Malfoy. The blond wizard yelled “Incendio!” burning up the flag in a mid-air fireball, then he cast Petrificus Totalus. Theo fell between two benches with a clatter and the stands were suddenly dark and quiet once more.

Hermione jumped to her feet and ran to Malfoy, shoving him back into the shadows against the wall. She could hear him panting, trying to catch his breath, and his broom clattering to the wooden floor of the stands.

“Have you lost your mind?” Hermione hissed at him. “Give me my wand!” She began riffling through his pockets, and when that yielded nothing, pulled open his coat, refusing to be distracted by the sudden burst of cologne and the feel of hard muscle under her fingers. She was inches from punching him as she had in Third Year.

“Ow!” Malfoy cried, wincing as Hermione pulled his wand out of his hand. “Accio wand.” She caught her wand with a snap and stepped back.

Malfoy strode after her, scowling ferociously. His swollen left arm strained its coat sleeve. “Give me my—”

“You don’t deserve to have a wand, not after the demonstration I just saw,” Hermione snapped. “You and Theo can have your wands back tomorrow. How could you attack him like that?”

“Didn’t you hear what he—”

“I don’t care what he said—whatever it was, he just said it to get a rise out of you.”

“It’s after curfew, how am I supposed to get back to the dungeons without—”

“I don’t care. Accio astronomy scrolls.” Hermione’s scrolls shot into her hand, and she summoned her bag and stuffed them into it.

“At least heal my—”

“Forget it.”

“I can’t believe you’re blaming me for this,” Malfoy said sullenly, slumping back against a flagpole.

“Believe it,” she said. “You’re the one who went spare and launched that whole evil creep wizard routine—congratulations, now Theo thinks you were—”

Hermione stopped speaking as a babble of voices reached her ears. Dark figures had gathered at the bottom of the stands—teachers, most likely—finally investigating the lights and noise. Honestly, she’d expected a quicker response time, had they learned nothing from the war? The staff obviously needed additional training.

“You can’t leave me here without a wand!” Malfoy protested.

“Watch me!” Hermione stomped down the stands to pinch Theo’s wand as well and lift the Petrificus Totalus hex. Theo took the news that she was leaving him wandless and unhealed no better than Malfoy had.

“Now, sweetheart, you can’t be serious,” Theo said reasonably as he sat up on a bench, the effect slightly marred by his swollen jaw and still-twitching legs. Malfoy stood nearby, still glaring and
clutching his arm, which was now twice its usual size.

“I’m quite serious,” Hermione said as she backed away. “I hope you both get detentions until spring!” She cast a disillusionment charm around herself, rendering her almost invisible, and crept away from the two now-squabbling wizards.

“I am going to fucking waste you, Theo, when I get my wand back …”

“I don’t need a wand to break every bone in…”

*Children, absolute children,* Hermione thought as she slipped past Hagrid and two other professors and stalked back to the castle. Maybe she should have listened to Ron; he always said nothing good came out of hanging out with Slytherins.

Chapter End Notes

OK, so obviously, I didn’t fool anybody with the whole Lavender thing. You all are too smart for me. I hope you liked the duel!

NEXT UP: Hermione teaches Draco about owls.
The rain returned Sunday morning with a vengeance, pounding on Hermione's bedroom window as she packed a few items into her pink beaded bag and added two square packages marked with runes. Beneath a heavy black cloak she wore jeans and a red jumper, and her hair was tied up into as tight a bun as she could manage, although it would all fall apart by noon in such weather.

She’d had a restless night, plagued with dreams of the war again, the terror and confusion at the Department of Mysteries, the pain of Dolohov’s curse. She’d woken up sweating, and when she finally fell asleep again, confused dreams of Theo followed, and then the one with Malfoy in danger. The last dream Hermione had dismissed as guilt; stinging hexes were painful, and she didn’t think Malfoy would ask anyone to heal him. She’d literally found herself standing by the bedroom door, wearing slippers and her pink robe, clutching her wand and the Marauders’ Map. *You’re being stupid,* she told herself, turning around and getting back into bed. *He’s fine. He’s resourceful. You need to stay away from him.*

Now it was morning, and Hermione stopped by the Owlery first thing to send two stubborn gits their wands. Not that they deserved them, any more than they deserved the books she’d included to advance their knowledge. She had chosen “Happy Hoots! Advanced Owl Feeding and Care” for Malfoy (his eagle owl looked a little peaky and she'd written out a recommended diet) and “Sands of the Hourglass: Advanced Time Management Techniques” for Theo. Both packages were tied with large red-and-gold ribbons and covered in smiley faces. She almost regretted not being in the Great Hall for the delivery.

Her packages sent, she hurried down the West Tower stairs and had almost reached the statue of the one-eyed humpbacked witch when Theo’s return owl found her. Hermione unrolled the small parchment, sealed with green wax bearing the imprint of the Nott ring:

*Dear Hermione,*

*Please meet me at the Entrance Hall. I’m sorry.*

*Yours,*

*Theo*

Hermione groaned. How could she ignore such a note, with an apology and everything? At least one wizard knew how to be properly contrite. Theo was standing alone by the Slytherin Hourglass, which looked suspiciously full again. He wore dark trousers and a high-necked green sweater, and his jaw, she noted, was still a bit swollen and bruised. He greeted her a bit cautiously, even thanked
her for the book. Then he eyed her cloak.

“You’re leaving the castle today,” he said.

“I have an errand,” she answered a bit coolly.

“Please, just one minute before you go,” Theo said. “There’s that tapestry of Everard the Evil—”

“If you even think I’m going to—”

“Hermione.” Theo raised his eyes to the hall’s high Gothic ceilings for patience and apparently found it. He looked back at her intently. “I just want to talk to you, and given the look on your face, I’d rather be behind a Muffliato charm while I do so.”

She agreed, and they walked in silence to the ground-floor corridor leading to Firenze’s Divination classroom. Theo pulled aside a faded grey tapestry depicting a dark wizard felled by a nasty spell that had turned his limbs into tentacles. Hermione paused to inspect the weaving—the artistry was remarkable, really, some of the tentacles' suckers were stuck to Everard's face and a slight puckering in the weave seemed to show how his skin was pulled …

“Hermione?” Theo asked, the faintest hint of impatience to his tone.

She gave him a dark look and flounced into the alcove. Honestly, who was the injured party here?

“Where are you going?” Theo asked after casting the Muffliato.

“Nowhere. I just got here.”

“I mean your errand, of course. Hogsmeade? I could come—oh, no, I can’t,” he said, glowering. “I’m confined to the castle.”

Hermione gasped. “You mean you were—”

“Yes, we were caught. What did you expect, leaving us out there without our wands?” Theo looked quite displeased. “Draco and I can’t step outside of the castle for two weeks, not even to walk the grounds unless we’re escorted to classes by a prefect. First offense is grounds for expulsion.”

“Expulsion?” Hermione was shocked. “But expulsion would violate Malfoy’s probation; his sentencing was very—”

“Oh yes, Draco’s probationary status was my very first thought as well,” Theo said dryly. “Half the castle thinks we blew up the Quidditch stands in some dark wizards’ battle, with corpses hanging from …”

“Well, that’s ridiculous,” Hermione said. “You and Malfoy would never be stupid enough to fight … oh, wait …”

Theo’s displeasure deepened. “All the talk isn’t doing the Slytherins’ reputation any good. Draco and I managed to keep your name out of it, but it wasn’t easy to convince McGonagall that we caused all that light and noise without wands.”

“Especially the fireball,” Hermione said. “Fire spells are quite tricky to control without wands due to the lack of precise—”

“Yes, yes, I know,” Theo said. He seemed a bit tense, Hermione thought, but that’s what happened when one broke rules. He took a deep breath and continued. “We managed to convince
McGonagall that we were practicing wandless magic and some of the spells got out of hand. You’re welcome, by the way.”

Hermione sniffed and straightened her beaded bag, its thin strap slung across her chest. “I take no responsibility for that duel, which, by the way, you have yet to apologize for.”

“I’m not apologizing for the duel. Draco attacked me.”

“What, with an oh-so-deadly broomstick? And you responded with *Everte Statum*? That’s a second-year dueling spell. I thought Bluebell taught you better.”

Theo looked stern. “Let me get this straight. First, you scold me for dueling Draco, and now you’re upset because I didn’t perform up to your standards?”

“Anything worth doing is worth doing well,” Hermione said primly.

Theo groaned and ran his hands through his hair. “You’re impossible.”

“I’m not hearing any apology.”

He pressed his lips together, then sighed. “I’m sorry for what I said about you.”

“You should be,” Hermione said.

“I very much regret it.”

“You should.”

“I was trying to provoke Draco, and it obviously succeeded—all too well,” he went on. “I didn’t expect such a response. But what I said was crude and disrespectful and …” Theo’s eyes narrowed in a disturbingly Harry-like way. “You don’t know what I’m talking about, do you?”

“Oh of course I do. I’m appalled,” Hermione said unconvincingly.

Theo groaned again. “You weren’t even listening to us back on those stands, were you? You were yammering on about Brown and …” He let his head fall back against the alcove’s stone wall and rubbed his hands over his eyes. He looked a bit tired, Hermione noticed. It had been a long night for everyone.

“This whole conversation was a terrible idea,” Theo said.

“It was, rather,” she said. Obviously, he’d wasted both their time. “But I’m here now, so you might as well tell me what you said.”

Theo looked shocked. “I can’t tell you out of context—it would sound awful!”

“And it sounded better on the Quidditch stands?” Teasing Theo was speedily restoring Hermione's good humor. “I suppose I could ask Malfoy,” she said.

“Dating you seemed like such a good idea,” Theo said. “You seemed so nice.” He looked at her speculatively. “You obviously won’t rest until you know, so here goes: Draco asked if I could give you what you want, and I said…” he put on a suggestive tone, “‘Oh, I can give it to her.’” Then he stood stiffly as if awaiting a blow.

Hermione blinked up at him. “That’s terrible.”
“I know.”

“I’m very offended.”

“I know, and I’m …” Theo’s jaw dropped. “Damn it, you’re not offended at all!”

“What did Malfoy say I wanted?”

“That’s it, this conversation is over,” Theo snapped, his patience finally at an end. “I don’t know what I expected. Talking with you never goes the way it’s supposed to go.”

“Don’t you want to know what happened with Malfoy and me on the stands?”

Theo shook his head. “No, I don’t even care anymore.”

“But I made up a timeline and everything,” Hermione was disappointed.

He eyed her for a moment, lips finally quivering into a smile. His cool, broad hand touched her cheek. “Maybe another time,” he said. “Will you accept my apology, even if you aren’t offended?”

“Yes,” she said, smiling back. “And thank you for protecting me, even though I took your wand.”

“And refused to heal me,” Theo said. “My feet were tapping all night.” He shifted closer, thick lashes slipping lower over green eyes. “I needed you, Hermione. I was thinking of you.”

He was terribly close, and Hermione felt awkward, unsure of how to respond, when the strap on her beaded purse snapped, dropping its suddenly heavy weight on Theo’s foot. “Ah!” Theo hissed. He gave Hermione a sharp look as he wiggled his toes inside his shoe. “Cuts, bruises … next you’ll give me burns.”

“You talk a lot of nonsense,” Hermione said, drawing her wand to both heal his foot and repair her bag. “And I need to go.” She pulled aside the tapestry and looked back at him. “I don’t want to hear about any duels while I’m gone, Theo, and if you do enter into a duel, try to do better than Everte Statum.”

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Hermione visits an old acquaintance.
This chapter was conceived and outlined before I even began writing this story, and it has changed very little since its first draft. Here goes ...

Hermione hesitated outside a dark shop in Knockturn Alley. Only a faint yellow light in a corner of the grimy front window hinted that the building was occupied. After leaving Theo at Hogwarts, she had taken a Marauders’ passageway to Hogsmeade, then Apparated to Diagon Alley, where she dawdled over breakfast for an hour before slipping into this dark, dodgy street.

She was wearing her black cloak, hood up, to shield her from unfriendly eyes and the relentless rain. There were no canopies or awnings on Knockturn Alley shops, and hunched, often misshapen figures huddled at the edges of spreading puddles. Honestly, the Ministry should do something—set up a rain shelter, or at least offer soup or ponchos.

Despite the downpour, the Alley remained endlessly fascinating; she’d had to exercise strict self-control not to poke around in the bundles and barrels heaped carelessly on the dirty cobblestones. She did stop into Mr. Mulpepper’s Apothocary, discovering that this branch had potions supplies that the Diagon Alley shop didn’t carry. She burned to ask the wizened proprietor about thestral blood or dragon eyes but left without a word. Yes, Knockturn Alley was definitely worth a return trip.

Taking a deep breath, she pushed open the store’s age-darkened wood and brass door and entered. Borgin and Burkes was just the same as she remembered, a shadowy, whispery place crammed to the rafters with dark artifacts. Fascinating. She could hear the tick of a giant grandfather clock, its hands both stopped at 13. A green-scaled hand crawled along a shelf like a spider. She froze at the sight of a vanishing cabinet, twin to the cabinet Malfoy fixed in Sixth Year. She had visited this shop once before, during that year, trying to find out what the blond boy was up to, and had failed miserably.

Hermione wandered the antique shop’s crowded aisles, wondering what would have happened if she had succeeded. Could she have stopped Malfoy, stopped all the terror and destruction he caused? She dismissed such thoughts as useless and eyed a malevolent-looking letter opener, its handle fashioned into a twisting snake and its blade stained with blood. More a weapon than a letter opener, she thought, even if it was on a shelf labeled “Office Supplies.” She was more tempted by the inkpot beside it, purported to hold never-ending ink. She looked into the pot and saw a tiny green face scowling at her. An evil genie in an inkpot, perhaps?

“May I help you, my lady?” asked an oily voice.

She turned to see Mr. Borgin himself, creepy as ever, although much smaller and frailer than he’d been two years before. It couldn’t have been easy for him during the war, with Death Eaters dancing in every two minutes demanding deadly artifacts, although Hermione had no sympathy. The man was lucky he was still alive and not in Azkaban. The Aurors Office should do something about this place.
Hermione gave the shop another check to make sure they were alone and touched her wand inside her cloak. The shop’s doors, front and back, immediately locked in response to her nonverbal spell. She warded them against entry and eavesdropping, then approached the counter.

“My lady, I must protest . . .” his voice trailed off when he saw her face, but he was too cagey to speak her name. “It’s an honor to have you visit my humble shop.”

Hermione wanted to grin, but kept her face blank. The last thing this man wanted was Assistant Auror Harry Potter’s best friend hanging around. Borgin’s bulging eyes took in every detail of her appearance, the black cloak still swathed around her, her face framed by the hood.

“I need information, Borgin,” Hermione said, trying to channel Bellatrix Lestrange on a bad hair day (and really, they had all been bad hair days). “I expect full confidentiality.”

“Of course, nothing but discretion for the affairs of a most honored—”

Hermione pulled a flat box out of her beaded bag and laid it on the counter. “It’s an appraisal, actually. I’ve come into possession of some jewelry and would like to know more about it.”

She laid her hand on black velvet box and willed it not to tremble. Visiting Borgin’s shop was a calculated risk, Hermione knew, but she couldn’t keep these diamonds any longer without knowing more about them. They could be Malfoy family jewelry—as unbelievable as that seemed—and Borgin had been buying magically corrupt items from Lucius for decades. If Hermione couldn’t get answers here, she’d go to Bill Weasley.

Borgin rubbed his hands greedily, his eyes lingering on the box’s ornate silver clasp, which Hermione now noticed was shaped like a sinuous dragon. She slowly opened it. The rose hair clip and pins shimmered from their grey silk bed. Borgin gasped, a faint sound through discolored teeth.

“May I?” he asked, pulling out an ornate white wand. She nodded, and he waved it over the diamonds, murmuring spells under his breath.

Hermione watched, and waited.

“An old family heirloom, clearly,” Borgin said, breaking the silence. “Very rare. From the 16th century, I believe. The larger diamonds are from a previous piece, a crown perhaps. The setting has been modernized slightly, about a century ago, to make it look more . . . delicate.”

Hermione did a faint touch of *Legilimency* on the shopkeeper, not enough for him to notice. He seemed to be telling the truth.

“There is powerful magic here, in all three pieces,” Borgin continued.

“Dark magic?” Hermione asked.

“I don’t believe so.” He waved his wand and muttered again. “No, no curses, at least not now. There was a small curse, but it has been expertly removed.”

“What kind of curse?” Hermione asked.

He blinked at her. “A curse aimed to prevent the touch of a . . . muggle.”

*Oh.* Hermione nodded to show she wasn’t offended. “Go on, please.”

“There are multiple spells on these pieces, mostly smoothing and expansion spells. Noble witches
throughout history would cast such spells on their hair ornaments to help them create their intricate styles.”

That seemed harmless enough. “Jewelry like this, was it a traditionally popular gift? Such as …” Hermione trailed off, unsure how to ask what she wanted to know.

But Borgin grasped her intent immediately. “Hair jewelry is a very personal gift, far more personal than other types of jewelry. Such jewelry is often passed from mother to daughter.”

Borgin’s rheumy eyes looked straight into hers. “This jewelry is not.”

The shop seemed utterly silent to Hermione’s ears now; she could no longer hear the ticking of the clock or the soft sobbing of some cursed plant in the corner. She didn’t know what Borgin was going to say next, but she was sure she wasn’t going to like it.

“Tell me,” she said softly.

Borgin nodded and continued. “This particular heirloom has been exclusively given as an interest gift.”

“An interest gift,” Hermione repeated. The term sounded vaguely familiar. She raised her eyebrows, silently asking him to go on.

“Courtship rituals among the oldest magical families are quite complex,” Borgin explained. “The first step to betrothal is the interest gift, a small token of regard.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped. Courtship? Betrothal? Did he know? He must have known something if he went through the trouble of taking the anti-muggle curse off. What was he about, giving her family jewelry with such … associations? She almost shivered.

Borgin cleared his throat. “I mean no disrespect, my lady, but I hope that you do not intend to sell these pieces.”

“What? No!” she croaked. She couldn’t imagine doing such a thing.

“I thought not. Pity.” Borgin gave the jewels a covetous look. “The binding, of course, would prevent that.”

“Binding?” Hermione gasped. What fresh hell was this?

“Accepting this jewelry, and wearing it, forges a bond between the giver, the recipient and the diamonds themselves,” the shopkeeper went on, eyeing her closely. “Only the woman who receives the diamonds may wear them, and only the man who gave them to her may touch them.”

Hermione nodded, thinking of Ron and Cormac, not to mention poor Theo. She touched her wand again but sensed no deception from Borgin, only greed and fascination.

“And if another man touches them …” she began.

“A small cut, nothing dangerous. Usually. The first time, anyway,” the shopkeeper said with an evil smile.

Hermione almost groaned. Of all the reckless, careless …

“Quite romantic,” Borgin added, admiring the diamonds.
Well, yes, she supposed, in a creepy, possessive, pureblood kind of way. And so died Hermione’s last hope that the diamonds were an impulse buy at some swank shop. She was holding enchanted Malfoy treasure passed down through generations. And to think she’d been walking around wearing the things like plastic hair claws …

“My lady.” Borgin dropped his oily tone and replaced it with one of portent. “This is a significant gift from a noble house. You obviously were not aware of the implications, and I would never dare to speculate on the mind of the nobleman who no doubt humbly presented it to you …”

“He didn’t present it to me. He left it on my desk,” Hermione said, goggling slightly at the idea of Draco Malfoy humbly doing anything. “No note or anything.”

Borgin looked thoughtful but said nothing.

“Does that make a difference?” she asked hopefully. “Like the jewelry was technically … ah … abandoned? And I just happened to pick it up? What if I covered the box in gift wrap and threw it at his head and knocked him out, and when he came to …”

Hermione trailed off at the shocked look on Borgin’s face. “What?” she asked. This man maintained a Godric-damned magical trove of evil, and he had the nerve to look alarmed by her?

“Well?” she went on, hands on hips. “Any further insights? I don’t have all day.”

“Of … of course, my lady.” Borgin bobbed nervously and smoothed his greasy hair. “You have identified the giver, yes? Did … did you thank him?”

“Yes, and yes,” Hermione said reluctantly, thinking back to her dance with Malfoy on her birthday. She couldn’t believe she was standing around discussing her personal life with the shopkeeper of Borgin and Burkes. This whole school term had been nothing but weird.

“And you have worn the jewels?” he went on. She nodded. “After you thanked him, he touched these pieces and escaped unscathed?” She nodded again, grimacing.

Borgin’s eyes gleamed. “Then a bond has been forged.”

Merlin. “Have I committed to anything here?” Hermione asked nervously. “I have no plans to marry this man.”

He shook his head. “Again, simply an interest gift, not a betrothal. You may even return the jewels if you wish, to the family. But no other woman may wear these particular jewels until your death.”

Hermione could have wept. She wanted to kill Malfoy, then resurrect him with the Philosopher’s Stone, then kill him again. Of all the irresponsible …

Borgin watched her owlishly, waiting for her next move. There was a hint of eagerness about him, which made no sense, he couldn’t buy the diamonds. Wait a minute …

“Do you know what family this heirloom belongs to?” she asked softly, touching her wand inside her cloak.

Borgin licked his lips. “Sadly, no, my lady.” He’s lying this time. He knows it’s Malfoy jewelry.

“Thank you,” Hermione said. She closed the box and slid it back into her beaded bag, which disappeared under her cloak. “I know I can rely on your discretion.”
“Implicitly, my lady,” Borgin said.

“Very well, then, I appreciate your—” Hermione whipped out her wand and pointed it between his eyes. “Obliviate!”

Borgin’s eyes unfocused, then focused again, and he swayed and clutched the counter. Hermione quickly turned and headed toward the door.

“My … lady?” the shopkeeper called hesitantly after her. “May I help you?”

“Not today,” she rasped, trying to disguise her voice. She pushed open the door, waving her wand to dispel the wards, and practically ran out of the shop.

Hermione had planned to head straight back to Hogwarts, but instead found herself dazedly wandering Diagon Alley, clutching the hood of her cloak and sloshing through puddles. She was still trembling. What on Earth should she do now? She wanted to throw the jewels into the gutter, then catch the first portkey to North Africa and join the French Magical Legion under an assumed name and never return. *Wonder what the requirements would be …*

“Miss Granger.”

Hermione turned around and stared, silently cursing her evil luck, for standing before her, tall and elegant under a silver-chased black umbrella, was none other than Narcissa Malfoy.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Narcissa …
Tea With Narcissa

Chapter Notes

I’ve always been a sucker for a good Hermione-Narcissa scene in Dramione, and here’s my take on the whole dynamic. I set it right after the Borgin scene, so Hermione is still a bit in shock, silently processing all the information she just received about the diamonds while coping with Draco’s mother.

“Lady Malfoy,” Hermione said weakly, expecting the older witch to nod and walk on.

But Narcissa just looked at her, blue eyes weighing and measuring. The elegant witch wore a soft grey cloak and matching gloves and an enormous diamond pin fastened the cloak at her left shoulder. Her eyes were ringed in black and her mouth a perfect red bow.

Hermione’s face, on the other hand, had been washed clean by the rain, which had also sent her hair exploding in all directions. Her bare hands were blue with cold and her jeans were wet to the knees.

“Miss Granger. You look in need of some hot tea,” Narcissa said. Her words were kind, but the tone was cold. Hermione stuttered a polite objection, but found herself taken by the elbow and whisked into a nearby tea shop in seconds.

The shop’s hostess collected their cloaks and Narcissa’s umbrella at the door. The tea shop wasn’t frilly and romantic like Madame Puddifoot’s in Hogsmeade, or bright and bustling like a muggle shop. This place was sumptuous, all sparkling crystal and gold gilt, with oil paintings on the walls and graceful chairs and sofas covered in blue and green brocade. Narcissa selected a tiny table apart from the rest, beneath a large window.

Once they were seated, the older witch removed her gloves and patted her hair, although not a smooth blond strand was out of place. Hermione took a moment to dry her clothes and face with her wand. Her tight hair bun had exploded into a bushy ponytail, and all she could do was gather up the extra tendrils with a red hair ribbon, which she did a bit tremblingly under Narcissa’s cold eye.

“A large pot of Magical Merlin and a plate of your pumpkin scones,” Narcissa told the waiter. Hermione nodded agreement—not that it mattered anyway—and tried to look pleased to be there.

“I understand you are to be commended,” Narcissa said after a short silence. “Theodore Nott is a fine young man.”

Hermione said nothing. She certainly wasn’t going to thank Narcissa for complimenting her on bagging a pureblood.

“A large pot of Magical Merlin and a plate of your pumpkin scones,” Narcissa continued. “Such stories help promote healing after the war.”

Hermione didn’t see how headlines screaming “SON OF DEATH EATER” healed anything, but she nodded anyway.
Narcissa’s eyebrows rose slightly at her taciturnity. *This is your party, honey,* Hermione thought. *I’ll talk when you bring up something worth talking about.*

The tea and scones arrived at that moment, giving the two women something to do, at least. Narcissa was certainly right about a cup of hot tea. Hermione downed two cups immediately and felt much better.

“What brings you to Diagon Alley, Lady Malfoy?” she asked, pouring her third cup from the bottomless pot.

“A bit of shopping,” Narcissa answered. She was still sipping her first cup of tea and hadn’t touched her scone, while Hermione had already eaten two. “Some warm blankets, a knit hat, scarf and gloves, and a few books. Tomorrow is my day to visit Lucius, you see. Perhaps you can suggest a book, Miss Granger.”

Hermione’s fingers tightened on her teacup, but she managed to set it down on its china saucer without a clink. “What subjects is he interested in, Lady Malfoy?”

“He enjoys history, biographies of famous wizards. His collection of ancient texts is one of the best in Wizarding Britain. He has always had a particular interest in … ancient runes.”

Hermione cleared her throat. “Ah, well. Danbert Donalson just published Volume Six of ‘Unraveling the Elder Fubarks’. It’s a fine analysis of the typology and graphic variation among the North Sea cultures.” She looked down at her teacup. Was she really sitting here brainstorming gift ideas for *Lucius Malfoy*?

“He will certainly be interested in that. Runes have been a lifelong passion. In fact, until recently, Miss Granger, the Malfoy library held a copy of the Codex Runica.”

“The Codex Runica,” Hermione repeated, still staring fixedly at the teacup. “That is a significant manuscript.”

“Priceless, of course,” Narcissa said. “Such precious heirlooms should be protected and properly cared for, yes?”

*Yes, and they should be in a museum or another public venue,* Hermione thought, looking up again. She kept her mouth shut and dabbed a little more clotted cream on her scone. Clearly, a speech about hoarding cultural treasures wouldn’t go over any better with Narcissa than it had with her son.

“That was a lovely photograph of you and dear Theodore in the *Prophet,*” Narcissa said, returning to her original topic. “Your hair looked especially charming.”

Hermione froze, the bit of scone raised halfway to her mouth. *Fuck all. She knew. Narcissa knew.* She’d recognized the diamonds in Hermione’s hair from the newspaper. How could she miss them? And Hermione would bet her last knut that Narcissa had personally delivered those very diamonds to her son at Hogwarts after his Quidditch injury. She had probably assumed the set was for Astoria. *Ye gods, Malfoy, what have you done?*

Hermione sighed and lowered the scone again. There was no sense in hiding it. It was out there now. “Thank you, Lady Malfoy,” she said. “I suppose I had your son to thank for that since my curls usually have a mind of their own.”

“You can imagine my surprise upon seeing that photograph,” Narcissa said icily. “That hairpin was
unmistakable. I find it … mystifying … that Draco would present you, Miss Granger, with such a gift.”

“Perhaps after seven years of insulting my hair, he decided to be part of the solution.”

“I do not find this a joking matter, Miss Granger,” Narcissa snapped, a spot of red appearing in each cheek. “Draco is betrothed to Miss Astoria Greengrass, and that he would present this particular family heirloom to you beggars the imagination.”

The younger witch shrugged. “It was my birthday.” Narcissa looked ready to break her in half, so Hermione dropped the light tone. “Lady Malfoy, these are questions best put to your son. I honestly don’t know why he gave me something so significant.”

“He certainly couldn’t have given those diamonds to a more ungrateful recipient,” Narcissa said, her cheeks still red. “That jewelry, Miss Granger, is the fabled Gloriana Set from the 1500s, resized for modern use. That you would wear it to dinner with another man is a most grievous insult.”

“I didn’t mean to insult anyone, Lady Malfoy,” Hermione answered earnestly. “I know it was foolish of me to wear those diamonds that night. I sincerely apologize. I wore them out of vanity and spite, and I regret doing so.”

Narcissa blinked at the ready apology, but she was not appeased. “I simply don’t understand, Miss Granger.”

“I don’t either,” Hermione said frankly. “Again, you’ll have to ask Malfoy. I had no idea at the time that he’d given me a family heirloom, let alone one with such an … er … history.”

“But now you know what this gift signifies and why your possession of it is deplorable—an affront to the proprieties.”

_Merlin’s fucking balls, the bitch wants the jewels back_, Hermione thought, mouth hanging open slightly. She clutched the beaded bag against her hip a little more tightly, hoping it could repel an _accio_ spell. Surely Narcissa didn’t know she had the diamonds with her now. “Then it must be on your person, Granger.”

Narcissa’s cold voice brought her back to her surroundings. “I will forgive your fault in accepting such a gift, since it was through ignorance of our ways,” she said magnanimously. “But this state of affairs cannot be allowed to continue.”

“My only fault, Lady Malfoy, was wearing that jewelry to dinner with Theo, and I again apologize for that,” Hermione said, frowning. “The gift itself I consider nothing more than the careless, extravagant gesture of a rich noble with a guilty conscience.”

“I do not agree with that assessment,” Narcissa said.

“Oh? You see no reason for guilt or remorse?” Hermione asked. “Your son may not have killed anyone …” Narcissa flinched, “… but he has caused enormous pain and suffering, and has insulted and persecuted me and my friends for years.”

She met Narcissa’s gaze unwaveringly. “Words have power, as you well know, Lady Malfoy, since you are so quick to describe my actions as _deplorable_ and _ignorant_.”

“My son is a gentleman, and you—”

“Oh, is he, now? Multiple times in my dealings with Malfoy this term I have had to draw my
wand.” Hermione grinned suddenly. “And trust me when I tell you, you do not want to know the circumstances.”

Her implication was clear, and the blood drained from Narcissa’s face, but she was made of stern stuff. “Obviously the two of you have a complicated relationship …”

Hermione snorted at that, earning a slight glare from her companion that was much like Malfoy’s.

“But surely you understand that the Gloriana Set is part of the Malfoy legacy and belongs with our family.” Narcissa’s voice was cool again; she obviously felt on firm ground here. “I must insist on the jewelry’s return to us this very day.”

Hermione poured herself another cup of tea and leaned back in her armchair, just sipping and watching the rain spatter against the window. She needed time to consider, and like her son, Narcissa seemed inclined to let her have it. The tea shop’s server, seeing a temporary cessation in hostilities, took the opportunity to whisk away the uneaten scones and bring more sugar cubes and milk before running for his life.

The interruption gave Hermione additional time to ponder, which she desperately needed. It was a tempting thought, to simply pull the flat velvet box out of her bag and hand it over. Malfoy had obviously made a huge mistake giving her those jewels, and returning them would help rectify the error. But really, it wasn’t her job to clean up Malfoy’s messes any more than it was her job to pander to Theo’s ego or instruct Ron on what to do with his life. They were all grown men, after all, even when they didn’t act like it.

Hermione added another dollop of milk to her tea and stirred it absently. But perhaps she should take the high road here if Malfoy was too pig-headed to do so. Perhaps it was the right thing to give back this Gloriana Set. It wasn’t like she would ever wear it again.

She opened her mouth to say the words: “Certainly I will return the jewelry, Lady Malfoy.” Narcissa looked confident enough, sipping her own tea with a faintly smug air. Hermione could practically read her thoughts: Narcissa had presented her case with unassailable logic, surely even a commoner like Hermione Granger had the wit to see the only appropriate choice. *Come, young lady, show a little class for a Mudblood. Don’t try to ape your betters.*

“Why do you think he gave me those diamonds, Lady Malfoy?” Hermione asked, tilting her head slightly.

Narcissa froze in the act of drinking, her blue eyes sharp over the teacup’s gilt rim.

“I don’t pretend to know him well—he’s your son, after all,” Hermione went on. “Why would a pureblood noble, steeped in your traditional Malfoy customs, do something so … unconventional?”

Narcissa’s expression was poisonous. “Apparently, your company has caused him to temporarily forget his duty to his family, his betrothed and to himself.”

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“Hermione Granger, seductress,” she said chuckling. “Another headline for The Daily Prophet.” She leaned forward and set down her own cup. She had made her decision and she was done with playing games. She had a three-foot Charms essay to write and a certain blond Slytherin to yell at and it was time to end this and head back to the castle. She sat up straight and clasped her hands before her on the table.

“Here’s the thing, Lady Malfoy,” Hermione said in her best lecturing tone. “Despite your efforts to infantilize him, Draco Malfoy is not some wayward heir. When Lucius Malfoy was deservedly
sentenced to life in Azkaban, his rights to hold property and legally control assets were revoked. Draco Malfoy is of age and now the head of your family. He holds the Malfoy ring.”

Narcissa looked too incensed to speak; clearly, she didn’t enjoy being instructed on family inheritance laws by a muggle-born slip of a girl. She even gave another small wince at Hermione’s mention of the ring; perhaps she knew why her son refused to wear it. Hermione rolled on, holding up fingers to emphasize her points.

“Draco Malfoy didn’t steal those jewels from the family vaults,” Hermione continued in her best know-it-all tone. “He owns those jewels; they are his to do with as he pleases. Perhaps he didn’t bother to consider the ramifications; perhaps it was a reckless thing to do. But he was fully within his rights to ask you to bring those jewels to him, and fully within his rights to give them to me, for whatever reason.”

Narcissa’s eyes were burning slits. “Within his rights?” she choked. “Draco is betrothed to Miss Greengrass!”

“Is he now?” Hermione asked. A certain idea, simmering in the back of her mind since her visit to Borgin and Burkes, now blazed forth. “I’ve made it my business to learn about those jewels from an independent source. I understand that this Gloriana Set has traditionally been what’s called an ‘interest gift’ in the Malfoy family. Once presented to a witch and accepted, these jewels are bound to the giver and recipient. That is correct, isn’t it?”

Narcissa gathered herself and gave a reluctant nod.

Hermione smiled. “Now, Lady Malfoy. Would such a powerful, magical set of jewelry allow itself to be bound to me if he was betrothed to another?” She raised her eyebrows. “Hmmm?”

The older witch stared at Hermione so long that she became nervous. Was Narcissa going to have a stroke? How would she explain that to Malfoy?

“No,” Narcissa said decidedly. “It can’t be true. You can’t be bound to the set.”

“Oh yes, I can,” Hermione said, a glint in her eye. “I thought there was something strange about those jewels. Other men have touched them and come away with cuts and scratches, but not Draco.” Hermione drew out his name, much like Astoria did, and Narcissa's blue eyes flashed with anger.

“So you are determined to marry Draco then,” she bit out. “This business with young Theodore is just a ruse.”

“Merlin, no,” Hermione said. “I have no plans to marry your son. We’d probably kill each other within a month. I have no plans to marry Theo, either. Muggles typically marry much later than witches and wizards.” She returned to her earlier pedantic tone. “I’m simply saying that your son was completely free to give this jewelry to somebody besides Astoria.”

“Completely free ...” Those words seemed to echo in the air. If nothing else, Hermione’s visit to Borgin’s shop had proven Ginny correct: Malfoy and Astoria were not betrothed. The thought swept through Hermione’s mind like a fresh breeze gusting through suddenly open windows. She stood, almost knocking her teacup off the table. She couldn’t sit here anymore, she had to move, run, jump, something …

“I’m not giving you the Gloriana Set, Lady Malfoy. Draco wouldn’t like it,” she said, smiling down at the astounded witch. “If he personally asks me to return the jewels to him, then, of course,
I will comply. Until then, I consider the diamonds merely a thoughtful birthday gift. Thank you for the tea—I really think your husband will enjoy the Elder Fubarks book.”

Hermione managed to walk out of the tea shop without hurrying, accepting her cloak from the hostess and clutching her beaded bag to her chest. Once outside the shop, she immediately twirled on one foot and Apparated to Hogsmeade. She couldn’t get away fast enough. Not that she was scared or anything; she just had a Transfiguration essay due in ten days with only a first draft finished.

Once in Hogsmeade, she wrapped her sodden cloak around her and followed the passageway to Hogwarts, wishing for nothing more than a warm bath and a shot of firewhiskey. Maybe two shots. *Merlin, Malfoy,* she thought as she trudged, *why didn’t you just give me a book pin?* One thing was for sure—never again would Hermione complain that a birthday gift was too impersonal.

Chapter End Notes

Whew! Tense. And now we know for sure where the title came from, you clever readers you. Writing that scene practically gave me heart palpitations.

NEXT UP: Hermione goes fishing.
“I solemnly swear I am up to no good,” Hermione said, tapping the Marauders Map with her wand. She stood in the middle of her bedroom, her black robe slung over her desk chair, that damned Gloriana Set sitting on her bed. It was her free afternoon, since there was no Defense Against the Dark Arts on Mondays, and the perfect time to talk to Malfoy.

For Hermione’s mind was made up. She would return the diamonds to him personally. Malfoy’s dot was in Slughorn’s office, where he was likely marking Potions assignments so the professor could dance off to some Ministry reception or ribbon-cutting. Honestly, it seemed like the Slytherin Head just taught Potions in his spare time. Hermione pushed the flat velvet box into her beaded bag, which she stuck into her uniform skirt pocket. Her wand and the map she tucked into her other pocket. She took a moment to straighten her jumper and try to smooth her hair before heading down to the sixth floor.

She didn’t fear running into Theo; he was at a Charms study group this afternoon. He and Malfoy had spent all day Sunday together serving detention in Bluebell’s meadow. Theo had arrived at the library afterward tight-lipped and a little shaken, refusing to provide details. He had recovered well enough by Monday but Malfoy was colder and more distant to everyone than before.

Hermione ducked into a dark alcove just past the trophy room, lighting the map with her wand. Malfoy was still there and still alone. He must be pretty thick with Slughorn these days to gain access to the professor’s precious office. Her pounding heart sounded loud in the tiny space. Don’t be a coward, she told herself. Just give him the diamonds, thank him and go. He might not be engaged to Astoria, but Purity Will Always Conquer. Hermione refused to be a part of Malfoy’s little rebellion against his family. He would just have to put the Gloriana Set away for his grandson, or Godric willing, great-grandson.

Looking down, she realized she was clutching her magical purse to her chest, the pink beaded bag feeling suddenly heavy. You can’t keep them, she told herself silently, hating the tears pushing behind her eyes. You’re being greedy. And selfish. Maybe she should talk to Ginny—but no, she knew what Ginny would say, she’d hear “family diamonds” and go spare. She’d have Hermione and Malfoy practically married in no time. Hermione snorted at the very idea. Sure, and then they’d go live with Narcissa in Malfoy Manor and Hermione would sit in the drawing room where she was fucking tortured and knit scarves for Lucius while Draco went around removing all the estate’s muggle-killing traps and curses so her parents could visit. You can’t have them, you idiot. You can’t have … him.

She took a deep breath (“You can do this”) and left the alcove, only for a young Slytherin boy, scroll in hand, to reach the office door first. “Excuse me,” he said to the portrait hanging beside it, “I need to—”

“Nasty little slug!” shrieked an old woman’s voice. “Trying to sneak in with an overdue essay! Slug! I should chop you up … yessss, you would make a tasty addition to a Liquid Death potion, sliced fine with a pinch of …”

The boy squeaked and fled in terror, and Hermione quailed slightly. Slughorn’s portrait, she knew, was of the famously ill-named Potions master Galatea Merrythought. She thought of just waiting in the corridor for Malfoy to leave, but that seemed unworthy of a Gryffindor.
Hermione strode up to the door. “I—”

“Attention!” Merrythought rapped out. “How does one split open a Chizpurgle carapace?”

“Feed it to a Venomous Tentacula,” Hermione answered promptly. “It will eat the Chizpurgle and spit out the carapace.”

Merrythought opened the office door with a snarl. Hermione entered, grateful that she’d made some kind of list.

Slughorn’s office looked much more impressive when it wasn’t packed with people, as it had been during his silly Christmas Party in Hermione’s Sixth Year. The large room was rich and opulent, all heavy brocade and dark, polished wood. A single petal floated in a large glass bowl of water, and Hermione watched as the petal sank and turned into a silver fish. Two sofas flanked a stone fireplace covered by an elaborate brass screen.

Malfoy was stretched out on one of the sofas in his socks, looking perfectly at home, his tie loosened, a stack of essays on the floor beside him. He held a piece of parchment with a broken seal in one hand and a drink in the other.

“What is it, Granger?” he asked, looking displeased to be interrupted.

“We need to talk.”

“No, we really don’t,” he said, eyes back on his letter.

Hermione sat down on the sofa opposite him anyway, prepared to wait him out. She had planned to throw a giant fit—had been looking forward to it, actually—but Malfoy’s face was lined with worry despite his relaxed posture. She cast about for something else to look at. On a table behind Malfoy’s sofa sat a large hourglass, its brass handles shaped like snakes, with green sand streaming swiftly into the lower bell. Hermione was intrigued; she’d read somewhere that the sand ran according to the quality of the conversation: if stimulating, the sand fell slowly, and vice versa.

“How did you know I was here?” Malfoy asked, still frowning at the parchment.

“That’s a secret.”

“Having me followed, Granger?”

“No, nothing like that.”

Malfoy tossed the letter aside and plucked a scroll from the pile. “I have work to do.” He set down his drink and dipped his quill into a red inkpot floating beside him.

Hermione just waited, listening to the snapping fire and the scratching of Malfoy’s quill. A brass-bound clock ticked softly. She watched him rapidly mark essays without spilling a drop of ink as the hourglass sands poured downward. The fish in the glass bowl turned back into a petal and floated back to the water’s surface.

She felt like she was back in the Gryffindor common room at the end of that fateful party, except this time she was the one watching Malfoy and she had the agenda. Perhaps she should pour her own drink—Slughorn’s liquor was likely top-notch—and swirl the ice, saying, “I don’t like this pattern, Malfoy, you doing and saying all these weird things that make me think you …”

Hermione shook her head. Focus. Time was passing, and Malfoy looked determined to ignore her
all night. She cleared her throat.

“I had tea with your mother on Sunday,” she said.

That did it. Malfoy looked up, eyes wide, a red ink blot spreading like blood on the essay on his lap.

“I see.” He cast aside the ruined essay and sat up a little higher on the sofa’s large satin pillows. “That would explain this letter I just received.” The scroll with the broken seal floated off the sofa and over to her.

Hermione used a bit of wandless magic to flatten the parchment. She scanned the first few words, then looked over at him. “Malfoy, I shouldn’t be reading this—”

“Read it,” he commanded.

His tone earned him a sharp look, but she complied. There was no salutation; the note read:

“I am dictating this missive to your mother since my current residence does not allow owls. Be aware that I am sacrificing precious time with my wife to communicate with you instead. However, the intelligence she brings demands immediate action.

“When I entered this place, never to return to my ancestral home, my only comfort was that I was in possession of an heir prepared to take on the mantle of the Malfoy legacy. But as word of your recent activities reaches my ears, I wonder if perhaps the Dementor’s Kiss would not have been a kinder fate then being forced to watch as my only son disgraces the name he has the honor to bear. I speak of your abandonment of a most advantageous alliance, and the surrender of family treasures cherished for generations into ignorant, ungrateful and undeserving hands.

“I demand the immediate return of our property by any means necessary to Malfoy Manor. I look forward to your reply confirming that this has been accomplished. Only then will you again have the right to call me,

Father”

Hermione read the letter swiftly but pretended to need more time to calm her breathing and consider the implications. She should have expected this. Hermione knew that Narcissa was visiting her husband the following day. But this cold, poisonous letter convinced Hermione that even after years of fighting Death Eaters, she understood nothing of Lucius Malfoy.

She gave a tiny sigh, rolling up the scroll with a flick of her finger. Then she looked over at the recipient of those words. “Well, he’s a fine one to talk of disgracing the name of Malfoy,” she said.

“You think this is funny, Granger?” he asked, dropping his black-stockinged feet onto the carpet and leaning forward. His face, hair and white uniform shirt shone golden in the light of Slughorn’s lamps.

“I find it anything but funny,” Hermione said calmly, floating the letter back to him. “How dare he defy your authority?”

“Yes, exact—defy my what?”
She huffed in exasperation. “You know, I try to be perfectly clear, but people, they just don’t want to listen.”

“What are you talking about?”

Hermione stood and looked down at him, hands on hips. “I explained all this to your mother very carefully yesterday. I said: ‘Your son is not the heir; he is now head of the family. He owns the Malfoy treasures, they are his to do with as he pleases, to give them to whomever he pleases.’”

Malfoy stared up at her like he’d never seen her before. “You explained this to Mother.”

“I didn’t care for her tone,” Hermione sniffed.

Malfoy’s jaw dropped.

“And by extension,” she continued, “although I did not admittedly spell this out, you are fully within your rights to enter in or out of any betrothal agreement, unilaterally.” A curl fell into her eyes and she impatiently pushed it back. “I was there when Lucius was sentenced; I clearly remember the law as it was read, and your father is in no position to demand anything.” She scowled. “Neither is your mother.”

Malfoy’s eyes narrowed, and she stepped back as he also stood, facing her, rising up and up. Godric, he was tall. The sand in the hourglass behind him, Hermione noticed, had slowed to a trickle. “What did Mother say to you?” he asked tensely.

Hermione tilted her head up at him. “She demanded that I return the diamonds, of course, and she’s unhappy you took the Codex, and probably the rune stone, from the Manor. Anyway, she was willing to forgive my ‘ignorant acceptance’ of the diamonds as long as I gave them back to her that very day.”

He winced at the word “ignorant”. “Obviously, you didn’t return them,” he said.

“No, I didn’t,” she answered softly, holding his gaze. “I told her, ‘Draco wouldn’t like it.’”

“You were right.” Malfoy’s voice was husky. “I wouldn’t like it at all.” He stepped closer. “You called me Draco.”

“Oh, yes,” she grinned. “It drove your mother wild.”

Malfoy smirked. “No wonder my parents went mental. Serves them right for questioning my judgment.”

“Oh, they should certainly question your judgment,” Hermione said. “Your judgment is horrid.”

He blinked, startled.

“You gave me the Gloriana Set!” Hermione cried. “What in the name of all that is unholy were you thinking? A priceless heirloom, and you just toss it through my window? What did you expect to happen?”

“Well, I didn’t expect you to get it on the Prophet’s front page with Theo,” Malfoy snapped. “I could’ve done without that.”

Hermione sighed and fell onto the sofa again. “I know. I’m sorry, Malfoy. I apologized to your mother, too. It was stupid of me, but Lavender … aargh!” She gritted her teeth. “Theo recognized it
as a significant piece of jewelry and wondered about it, and then Fleur—"

"Who?"

"Remember the Triwizard champion from Beauxbatons? Fourth Year?"

"Most definitely," Malfoy said, eyes glinting. "The veela."

"Yes," Hermione said rather grumpily. "Anyway, Theo and I met her and Bill Weasley at dinner. She recognized the diamond pin as goblin-make, and that made me suspicious. So I went yesterday morning to Borgin and Burkes …"

The shop name drew Malfoy out of his trance. "What? You went to Borgin and Burkes?"

"It wasn’t the first time."

"You’ve been there before?"

Hermione looked down. "Sixth Year," she said in a small voice.

"Why were you there?" he asked. She didn’t answer. "Hermione." He joined her on the sofa, frowning into her face. "Why were you there in Sixth Year?"

"I followed you."

Malfoy’s frown deepened. "You followed me there?"

She shrugged. "After you left, I went inside to find out what you were doing. I’ll admit subtlety is not my strong suit, Borgin kicked me out right quick, but—"

"Talk about horrid judgment! He could have hurt you. If I’d seen you following me, I could have hurt you!"

Hermione scoffed. "Like I was afraid of you."

"Sweet mother of—and then you went back yesterday? How could you?"

"I knew what I was doing," Hermione said. "I’m not a 16-year-old girl anymore. War heroine, remember? Fully grown witch. You forced my hand, giving me such a significant set of jewelry."

"You weren’t supposed to know," Malfoy muttered, glancing away.

"Hello? Have we met? Hermione Granger? Of course I started getting suspicious, what with my curls suddenly tamed, and friends getting all cut up—"

"Sorry, I didn’t realize that half the men in Eighth Year would be petting your hair!" Malfoy glared at her. "So then you just danced into Borgin and Burkes and slapped the Gloriana Set down on the counter? You’re lucky Borgin didn’t hex you and steal the jewels!"

Hermione scoffed again. "Do I look like an idiot? I warded the room and kept my hand on my wand the whole time. Borgin couldn’t take them anyway because the bloody jewels are bound to us, which means only I can wear them and only you can touch them." She looked at him levelly, trying to ignore his closeness on the sofa. "But you knew that. At Slughorn’s party, you prompted me to thank you, then touched the pin. You knew Malfoy men give out this jewelry as a bloody interest gift. Again, what were you thinking?"
“Borgin’s going to spread this all over,” Malfoy grumbled.

“Nonsense. I Obliviated him, of course.”

Malfoy looked at her sternly, reminding her of Theo. Slytherin men were so bossy. “You are not to go back to that shop, Hermione.”

“I will go back any time I want!” Hermione cried, jumping to her feet. “I am not your betrothed or prior-betrothed or interest payment or any other fool pureblood pre-marriage classification! I don’t care how many spell-addled hair accessories you throw my way! I will go where I want, when I want, how I want …”

“All right!” Malfoy yelled back. “Calm down!” He took a deep breath, his hands on his knees. “Just … allow me to come with you when you go to Knockturn Alley again.”

“Of course I will,” she said. “The apothecary branch has some potion ingredients it would be very hard to get anywhere else.”

Malfoy stared up at her, not knowing what to do with the sudden capitulation. Then he leaned back on the sofa and shook his head, chuckling.

“What’s so funny?” Hermione demanded.

“You,” he said, stretching an arm along the sofa back. “Facing off Mother. She demands the jewels, and not only do you not obey, but you instruct her.”

He tilted his head slightly, a silent invitation to join him, and Hermione found herself complying without thought, twisting on the sofa cushions to face him. The sand in the hourglass was practically dropping one grain at a time.

Malfoy was looking at her with hooded eyes, the firelight playing across his face. “You defended me, Hermione,” he said quietly. “After everything that’s happened, you still defended me, and you defended my gift. You should have jumped at the chance to get rid of Malfoy jewelry. Instead, you protected it.”

“I will always defend your right to be an idiot,” Hermione said. “Even when you trick your mother into delivering family jewelry by implying it’s for another witch, thereby prompting said witch to brag about your betrothal and all your little sex games …”

Malfoy’s eyes widened in surprise, and Hermione flushed. Merlin, she had a big mouth. She turned to face forward, hands clasped on her lap.

“I know I’m not what you and Theo are used to,” she said. “I’m not as … experienced …” Her face was hot; she felt like Ginny, telling Harry she’d shagged Blaise. At that moment, Hermione felt incredibly grateful that Ernie had interrupted her with Theo in that storage room. Maybe she should help him salvage that travesty of a Halloween Festival.

“Look at me, Hermione,” Malfoy commanded. Again, she complied without thought. His eyes were unusually gentle. “You are enough for any wizard,” he said. His mouth quirked slightly. “Too much for most, I’d say.”

They were very close now, and she could feel the warmth of his arm against her shoulder. The faint scent of his cologne beckoned her. The ticking of the clock seemed very loud. Hermione blinked a few times, then looked away and pulled her beaded bag out of her pocket. Do it. Do it now.
“Here,” she said, tugging out the velvet box holding the Gloriana Set. “I couldn't care less what your parents think, but this still belongs …”

“No.” Malfoy leaped off the sofa and backed away as if to put distance between himself and the jewels. “I gave you the Gloriana Set. It is yours.”

Hermione stood as well, holding out the box to him. “This set is a family heirloom!”

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “Is it now? I had no idea.”

“Draco, you have to take it back!” Hermione was feeling a little panicked. She was trying to do the right thing here. She rushed forward, trying to shove the box into his hands, but Malfoy dodged her with his Seeker reflexes, grinning.

“Is that the best you can do?” he asked, circling Slughorn’s desk.

“Take it back!” she repeated. She backed him up against a carved stone pillar and slapped the box against his chest repeatedly.

“Merlin, you’re violent,” Malfoy said, grinning. “Is that how you treat a priceless heirloom? What would Mother say?” She felt warm fingers brush back her curls. “You might as well keep the diamonds,” he said in her ear. “It’s not like anyone else can wear them.”

Hermione stilled, holding the velvet box against his chest and staring up at him. “But I can't wear them either,” she said gently. “It wouldn’t be right, not when …”

“Then don’t wear the set.” His tone was careless as his hands left her hair and gently pushed the box back at her. “Pass it on to your daughter. Give the set away to a museum. You're always going on about historic pieces being available to the masses. Whatever you decide, it’s yours now.”

Now Hermione was backing away, looking down at the box in her hands. “Merlin, Draco … I still don’t understand. Why did you give this to me?”

“Something had to be done about your hair,” he said.

“But such a rare, priceless—”

“Will you stop going on about it? I gave it to you because I wanted to, alright?” Malfoy was glaring now. “When Slughorn mentioned your birthday, and you were sitting there in Potions with your hair practically brushing the ceiling, and blood messages dripping all over the castle, the Gloriana Set was the first thing I thought of. I knew its history, but I knew its protections, too!”

Hermione stared at him, unbelieving.

“I didn’t care about the set’s significance!” Malfoy’s voice was raised, fists clenched. “I just wanted you to have it!”

He turned away, striding across the room to throw himself back on the sofa. Then he cleaned red ink off the blotted essay and resumed marking, legs stretched out on the cushions, ignoring her once more. The hourglass, which had stopped entirely, once again poured down its sand.

Hermione just stood there by the pillar, clutching the box to her pounding heart. How could he do such a thing? How could any Malfoy do such a thing? What of Sanctimonia Vincet Semper? Pure, flawless diamonds, passed for centuries down a pure, flawless line, only to end up in the crowded pocket of a muggle-born daughter of dentists? Hermione was suddenly humbled by the gift, no
matter how reckless it may have been.

She tucked the box back into her beaded bag and walked over to stand before him. Malfoy looked up at her warily, quill in hand. “All right then, Lord Malfoy,” she said. “Thank you. I’m honored to accept it.” She bent down and kissed him lightly on the cheek, then quietly left the office.

***

Hermione skipped dinner that night and went to bed early with her textbooks, but she didn’t study. She just lay in bed, fingering the letters carved by Bellatrix into her arm. The cold, implacable tone of Lucius’ letter still made her tremble. He had basically ordered Draco to hurt her or worse if necessary to get the diamonds back. What must it have been like to have such a man as a father? It was a wonder his son was sane at all.

She found she couldn’t even attempt sleep without getting the Gloriana Set out of her trunk and putting it under her pillow, warding her window and bed with every spell she remembered from the Horcrux hunt. Anyone entering the bedroom wouldn't be able to even see the bed. By any means necessary. She shivered. The room was very dark now; Ginny had come in and gone to sleep immediately. She was exhausted, Hermione knew, worn out from her studies and Quidditch Captain duties. Her relations with Blaise were strained again; something had happened, but Ginny wouldn’t tell her what. Hermione hadn’t pressed; it wasn’t like Ginny knew every in and out of her and Malfoy’s … relations.

Hermione lay on her back, listening to her breathing, for how long she didn’t know, but the moon had risen, and she pulled open her bed hangings a bit to let in the light. Moonlight glittered on the hairpin in her hand. When had she taken it out of its box? She settled under her covers again and lifted up the pin, admiring the diamonds. She hoped she was just loony and the damn thing wasn’t casting a spell on her.

Closing her eyes, she lay on her side, the pin clutched against her chest. At least she and Malfoy might be speaking again. A little bit. That husky tone: “You are enough for any wizard.” That phrase had joined “I’ll kiss you if you tell me” and “It must be on your person” echoing in her mind, slipping in when she was tired or tipsy. When her defenses were down.

“You are enough for any wizard.” His mouth quirks slightly. “Too much for most, I’d say.”

She licks her lips. “Too much for you?”

His hand slides under her curls to the back of her neck. “Never,” he whispers into her mouth, his other hand sliding up her thigh. “I want all of it … I want everything …”

Hermione sat up and opened her palm. Her hand had clutched the pin so tightly that the jewels had dug into her skin. She was panting, and her other hand was inside her knickers. She had to stop this. Malfoy was dangerous, for all kinds of reasons. She shook her head almost violently, then pulled out her hand. It was slick with need. This has to stop. She dropped the pin and grabbed her wand, Tergeoing her hand before replacing the pin carefully in its box and tucking it under her pillow.
Then she led her thoughts to Theo, that broad body and slow smile. She closed her eyes, but her speculative fantasies kept drifting from soft, hairy skin to supple, muscled smoothness. Finally, in desperation, she dropped them both and fell asleep to dreams of an angst-ridden American actor with dark hair and eyes. He didn’t play the hero of the story, though, he was the villain. A villain searching for redemption.

***

Hermione went down early for breakfast and was leaning against the wall outside Ancient Runes the next morning, working on her PORN, when Malfoy stepped up with a scroll in his hand.

“Another one?” Hermione asked, raising her eyebrows. “Next he’ll have your mother send a Howler.”

“This was my reply,” he said, holding it out. He looked fully in command except for a little tightness around the eyes. “I thought you’d like to see a copy.”

She flattened out the scroll and read:

“Dear Sir,

I regret to say I am unable to accede to your request. The object in question is in the possession of an individual more than worthy of receiving it, and I will not accept its return. Two more objects remain in my personal possession, to use as I see fit.

“As for disgracing my name, I clearly remember a day at Flourish and Blotts in my Second Year, when Arthur Weasley said to you, “We have a very different idea of what disgraces the name of wizard.” His words proved prophetic, I think, and undoubtedly there will be many times in the future where you and I disagree on how to best honor the Malfoy legacy.

Sincerely,

Lord Draco Malfoy

Again, Hermione pretended to read more slowly, allowing her to marshal her emotions. She rolled up the scroll by hand, blinking back a thin film of tears.

“Well, aren’t you a big deal,” she said, smiling up at him.

“Don’t start blubbering,” he said, his mouth curving upward as well. “It’s just a letter.”
“I remember that day,” Hermione said, recalling her parents’ wariness of the strange, sneering wizard shrouded in dark power, cane in hand, pale hair streaming around the shoulders of his rich cloak.

“I was outraged on my father’s behalf, of course, at the time,” Malfoy said. “But I remembered Weasley’s words.”

She held out the scroll to him and he took it, his warm fingers brushing over hers, like their first time standing together outside Ancient Runes. Malfoy leaned forward slightly. “I meant it, Hermione. You are more than worthy,” he whispered. “There is nothing too good.”

Hermione stared up at him, uncertain what to say, but just then McGonagall came sailing down the corridor with the rest of the class. Malfoy stepped back, and the students eyed them nervously. “Are they going to fight again?” she heard someone whisper loudly. Half the class backed off.

“Not today,” Malfoy said, stepping aside to let Hermione enter the classroom first. She smiled at him again and walked through the door, ignoring the goggling students. Sitting at her desk, she fussily arranged her parchment, quills and inkpot, all the while trying to put a name to the swelling, soaring feeling in her chest. As the rest of the class settled and McGonagall began the day’s lesson (at this rate they’d never reach the Elder Fubarks), she finally identified the emotion: she’d felt it for Harry, for Ron, for Ginny, and certainly for Neville, and now for Malfoy and herself.

It was pride.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Hermione chats with Lavender in the worst possible place.
Moaning Myrtle

Chapter Notes

Yay! Another bit from the “Gloriana Set” summary. I thought we’d never get to this chapter, which quickly gets weird and then … weirder. Thank you again for all the supportive comments!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione’s pride faded a bit when she entered her next Potions class on Wednesday and saw Lavender absent yet again. Her former roommate was staying away, and Hermione had a dark suspicion why. She lingered in the potions supply closet to check the Mauraders’ Map, blocking the door shut so nobody could see. Since nearly all the students were in classes, Lavender’s dot was easy to find in Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom. Hermione sighed—nobody went into Myrtle’s bathroom to celebrate the good things in life. Lavender was likely crying in there, too scared to go to Potions.

Hermione returned to the table and flung down the ingredients. “You’ll have to brew this Confusing Concoction alone,” she told Malfoy with a slight glare. “I have a mess to clean up.” He looked at her quizzically, but she just shook her head and walked off to wheedle a pass out of Slughorn.

Pass obtained, she wove through the corridors toward Myrtle’s bathroom. Lavender owed her big; Hermione had to agree to another dog-and-pony-show on Saturday night before Slughorn would write the pass. Godric forbid a Slytherin just did something without a favor in return.

She could hear the sound of wild, uncontrolled tears as she approached the bathroom door. Hermione was no stranger to crying in a bathroom herself: over Harry, over Ron, over other students’ insults. She’d cried many a time over Malfoy’s words, too. Boys were wretched beings, every one of them.

Lavender was sitting curled up on the stone tile floor, Myrtle’s ghost floating before her, the bathroom half-flooded as usual. Neither noticed Hermione’s entrance.

“… head between her legs,” Lavender was saying.

“What else did you say?” Myrtle asked, her voice filled with excitement.

“I said it was hot, that he likes it rough.”

“He’s so naughty … do you think he likes it rough?”

“Oh yes, he probably wouldn’t be romantic, he’d just push you against a wall …”

Merlin. Hermione had to stop this conversation before she threw up all over the bathroom. “Hello, Lavender,” she said loudly, stepping further inside.

“You!” Myrtle’s face convulsed with rage. Hermione wasn’t her favorite person anyway, and now she’d interrupted what was probably the ghost’s most titillating conversation ever. “Get out of my bathroom, Kitty!”
Hermione ignored her and knelt before Lavender. She could see the deep scars on the young woman’s legs and felt a twinge of guilt. “Lavender,” she said again.

Lavender looked up and her face was streaked with black makeup lines. “Come to finish me off, have you?” she snapped.

“No,” Hermione said, settling back on her heels. “You weren’t at Potions again.”

“I tried,” Lavender said. “I just … couldn’t.”

“Fine!” Myrtle shouted. “Ignore me! Everyone wants to talk to Myrtle until somebody living comes along and it’s back to the toilet!” She started sobbing. “I’ll never get to have that blond—”

“Don’t say it!” Lavender and Hermione shrieked together.

“Fine!” the ghost shouted again. “Be that way!” she flounced off, and they could hear her sobbing in the toilet in the last stall.

“That was close,” Hermione said. Lavender smiled a tiny smile, which grew into a snicker, and soon they were both giggling. Every time they managed to stop, Myrtle would give a loud moan, and set them off again.

“Lavender,” Hermione said when they’d finally calmed down. “Please, tell me.” She tried to keep her voice gentle. “Why did you do it? Why did you say you shagged Malfoy?”

Her former roommate sniffled. “‘Cause you’re so mean.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped. “Because I’m what?”

Lavender pouted. “You’re mean. You’re very mean to Draco, and Theo Nott, too, which is terrible, because they’re so handsome and charming, and they like you anyway. You’re always snapping at Draco and telling him to fuck himself, when I’m sure he doesn’t deserve it, and you keep making Nott study …” Lavender’s face turned increasingly red as she continued to list Hermione’s sins against the Slytherins, and Hermione couldn’t even stop her, she was so astonished.

“Let me get this straight,” Hermione finally choked out. “You think I’m mean to Draco Malfoy.”

She didn’t address Lavender’s words about Theo—she probably was a little mean to him. “And Malfoy doesn’t deserve it?”

Lavender looked at her resentfully. “Draco’s nice to you, only to you, and you just don’t care. And there you were that Saturday night, getting ready for your fancy date with Nott and acting all …” she flapped her hands, “… superior.”

“You told that story because I was acting superior?” Hermione repeated.

Lavender nodded.

“Of course I was acting superior. You were lying on your bed in your underwear and insulting me in disgusting ways,” Hermione said. “It wasn’t a high bar.”

Lavender glared. “And now you’re doing it again.”

“You’re crying in a flooded bathroom because you lied about shagging a wizard. Again, not a big hurdle to clear.”

“At least I don’t choke people or hurt people or scare people!” Lavender snapped. “I don’t know
where you come off acting like you know what the hell you’re doing! You treated Ron like shit, and now you’re treating Draco like shit, and Nott like shit! They might think you’re Little Miss Perfect, but we know better!"

Hermione looked down at her hands. “You’re right.”

“… And watching you swan around like … I’m what?”

“You’re right.” Hermione handed her a tissue, which Lavender looked at curiously before dabbing her cheeks. “I’m sorry I scared you in our room,” Hermione said. “I didn’t mean to break that window, honest.” She sighed. “Ever since the war, I’ve been having trouble with self-control. I keep breaking windows in Herbology, too.”

Lavender sniffled. “I heard about Astoria Greengrass.”

“Yes, that wasn’t great, either,” Hermione admitted.

“She probably deserved it,” Lavender said.

“Oh, she definitely deserved it.” Hermione sat down on the cold tile next to Lavender, who eyed her nervously. “Lavender, you’re right,” she repeated. “I don’t know what I’m doing. And these Slytherins are driving me crazy …” She sighed. “I’m not shagging Malfoy. I’m not shagging Theo either. Merlin, I just came back to school to take my NEWTs.”

“You are such a swot,” Lavender said with a reluctant smile. “Only you would found a group like PORN.”

“You have porn?” Myrtle popped out of her stall to look at them hopefully. “I’ve heard of porn!”

“Oh Merlin,” Lavender groaned, and the two women collapsed into giggles again. Myrtle, offended, returned to her toilet.

“She has a terrible crush on Draco,” Lavender said. “She says his eyes shine so pretty when he cries.”

“Ooookay,” Hermione said, desperately trying to get back to her purpose for being here. “Look, Lav, you’ve got to come back to Potions. You can’t let all this drama compromise your education.”

Lavender’s face, which had gained some color during their giggling fit, went pale again. “I … I can’t.”

Hermione touched her arm. “Lavender, tell me. Is it Malfoy? Did he say something to you? Do something?”

“He … he came up to me Monday after breakfast. Pulled me into an alcove.”

“Did he want to snog you?” asked a voice.

“That’s what I thought at first … I was like, ‘finally’, but …”

“Did he touch you?”

“Just my arm, firmly but gently, you know? Like I think he’d—”

“MYRTLE!” Hermione shouted. Ugh, this was going to be excruciating. “Lavender, let’s stay focused here, okay? What did Malfoy do then?”
Lavender looked down. “He was so angry. It was scary. He asked me if I’d been spreading that lie around, and I said no, I just told you, and I said you shattered that window, and his face …”

“What about his face?” Hermione asked before she could stop herself.

“It just … crumpled.” Lavender shook her head. “But then he was really mad. I … I thought he was going to hurt me.”

“Do you like the hurt? Is that what you mean by rough?”

“Maybe, a little, but I really like—”

“Myrtle!” Hermione shrieked again, red-faced. The ghost had snuck up on them again, eager for more. Myrtle stuck her tongue out at them and swirled away. “Lavender, what else did Malfoy say?”

Lavender started to cry again. “He said he’d never be desperate enough to fuck me and that if I ever bothered you again he’d also shatter a window and … and …”

“Go on, Lavender,” Hermione said softly.

“And slit my throat with the shards,” Lavender sobbed.

_Oh, Draco._ Hermione slid closer and put her arms around the crying girl. ‘I’m sorry, Lavender. It was a terrible thing for him to say; you didn’t deserve that.”

“He said he’d cut me …” she hiccupped.

“I know, but he would never do that.”

“How do you know he wouldn’t?” Lavender whispered. “He’s Draco Malfoy. He’s a Death Eater.”

“I just know.”

Lavender sniffled. “Easy for you to say.”

“He's trying to change. He’s just really bad at it sometimes,” Hermione said. She let Lavender go and backed up a bit so she could see her face.

Lavender didn’t look convinced, and Hermione sighed. She'd never heard anything so unhealthy—Malfoy was a deadly Death Eater, but he was handsome with pretty eyes, so Hermione shouldn't be mean to him. The war had truly fucked everybody up.

“Look, Lavender,” she said with decision. “You still have to come to Potions. I wouldn’t let anything happen to you.”

Lavender shook her head violently, her dark blonde hair covering her face. “I can’t go sit with him.”

Hermione bit her lip. This wouldn’t be easy to fix. She took a moment to consider the situation, listening to the gurgle of water and Myrtle’s faint moaning.

“Lavender, listen,” she said finally. “Malfoy feels *terrible* about his behavior.”

Lavender blew her nose. “Really?”
“He asks about you every day in Potions. He’s, ah … terribly upset,” Hermione said, lying with impunity. She’d paint Malfoy crying into his pillow every night if it would help.

“He is?”

“He’s devastated, haven’t you noticed?”

Lavender shook her head. “He was smiling at breakfast today.”

“Yes, but he was crying inside,” Hermione said. “He’s desperate to apologize, but he’s afraid you won’t talk to him.”

“Desperate …” Lavender’s eyes were shining.

“Yes, desperate.” Hermione tried not to roll her own eyes. “If Malfoy tries to talk to you again, will you listen?”

“I don’t know,” Lavender pouted. “He was very mean to me.”

“I know,” Hermione said, loathing herself. “Do you think you can forgive him?”

“Maybe,” Lavender said. “He is very handsome.” Hermione’s mouth fell open.

Lavender pulled herself to her feet and staggered to a nearby sink. “Merlin!” she cried, looking into the mirror. “I can’t leave looking like this!”

Hermione fidgeted while Lavender primped, keeping a weather eye out for Myrtle. Finally Lavender pronounced herself fit to be seen, and Hermione dragged her out of the bathroom and shooed her over to Gryffindor Tower.

“Now Lavender, don’t tell anyone about this,” she instructed. “Malfoy will be quite angry if you spread around that he wants to apologize. Give him a chance to earn your forgiveness.”

Lavender nodded, a beatific smile on her face.

“And don’t approach him,” Hermione added. She couldn’t have Lavender pestering the man. “He’s the one in the wrong. Let him come to you, alright?”

Lavender nodded again. She had some fantasy going on now behind her eyes that Hermione did not want to know about. The whole thing was making her ill, she’d never felt so Slytherin, and she was not happy about having to clean up Malfoy’s mess. Well, she wasn’t doing it for him, she was doing it for Lavender, who had deserved better at his hands, even if she did lie like a cheap … well, enough to say she deserved better.

She gave Lavender a final, reassuring pat on the shoulder, and sent her to the Common Room to relax until lunch. Hermione herself trudged tiredly back to Potions dungeon. It was barely 10:30 a.m. and she was already exhausted. Harry always said she sacrificed herself too much for other people.

***
When Hermione returned to Potions, all the cauldrons had vanished, and the tables had divided again. Students were sitting in pairs side by side, pretending to be writing, but mostly chatting, while Slughorn slept in an armchair.

She hopped onto her stool beside Malfoy, who was doodling dragons on his parchment. “What happened?” she asked.

Malfoy shrugged. “Everyone finished their potions, so Slughorn’s having us work on our lacewing essay.”

“The one due next week?”

“That’s the one.” Malfoy tapped his parchment with his wand, making the dragons’ wings flap and little inky fire burst out of their jaws.

Hermione glanced around to make sure nobody was listening, then turned toward him on her stool. “This is good because I want to talk to you.”

Malfoy immediately put down his quill and turned to face her, their knees touching. “I like this seating arrangement,” he purred. “Cozy.” He’d become increasingly friendly since their chat outside Ancient Runes, something Hermione had not anticipated. She was finding this new, darkly flirtatious Malfoy quite unsettling.

“It’s important,” she said primly.

“I’m listening.” Malfoy stretched one arm along the table so that his hand touched the sleeve of her jumper. Their knees were still touching.

“It’s about Lavender,” she said.

Malfoy frowned and withdrew his hand. “Let’s talk about something else. Anything else. Let’s talk about lacewings. Or PORN.” Hermione opened her mouth but he went on. “Fine, Pupil Organization for Reviewing NEWTs.” He leaned closer, eyes bright. “I know, let’s talk about the Weasel—how does he like being a shopkeeper? So nice to see someone accepting their limitations.”

“You are foul,” Hermione said. “Ron is happy with his family, and we need to talk about Lavender. She hasn’t been to Potions this week and that is unacceptable. She told me what you said. You have to apologize.”

Malfoy straightened and his face hardened. “I am not speaking to that lying slag—”

“That’s enough!” Hermione hissed. Other students looked over at their table and she lowered her voice. “You threatened her—”

His face hardened further. “I certainly did. She lied to you about—”

“I know what she did. I was there, remember?” She leaned closer. “There’s been bad blood between Lavender and me for years because of Ron, and she lied about him, too.” Hermione glanced around; half the class was watching them now, including Theo far away at his back table. His Slytherin partners sat pouting at the lack of attention.

“Never mind,” she continued. “That was still horrible, what you did, threatening her like that. She’s
afraid of you now, afraid to come to class. She’s going to fail Potions if she keeps staying away.”

Malfoy chuckled and straightened, turning toward the table again and picking up his quill. “If she’s fool enough to allow us to scare her away from class, her bad Potions marks are on her,” he said, his voice a perfect imitation of Lucius at his most snifty. He drew a long, curling line, the beginnings of another dragon.

“She’s not being a fool,” Hermione said. “I mean, she’s always been kind of a fool, but it’s more than that.” She sighed. “Malfoy, look at me, please. Draco.”

He put down his quill and turned to face her again, bumping his knees against hers. “Hmmm … I like it when you beg for my attention. Hermione.”

Hermione ignored this. “She has every right to be afraid,” she said quietly. “She was attacked by Fenrir at the Battle of Hogwarts. She almost died. She still bears the scars. And you threaten her? Threaten her with cutting?”

Malfoy was silent, a touch of pain in his eyes. The sounds of students chattering, of quills scratching on paper, Slughorn’s snores from the front of the room, all seemed to recede. There were only the two of them, looking into each other’s faces.

A brass bell hanging in the corner began to ring, signaling the end of class. Malfoy and Hermione both stood, and he put his hand on her wrist.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll talk to Brown. I’ll apologize.” His eyes held hers. “I went too far, I know. I just couldn’t bear ...”

“I apologized to her, too,” Hermione said. “I completely overreacted. Even if her story was true, I had no right to be so angry.”

Malfoy stepped closer, his warm fingers sliding down from her wrist to intertwine with hers. “Well, that’s the thing, Hermione,” he murmured in her ear, which was exposed by the wide, black headband holding back her curls. “I want you to have the right to be angry.”

His lips brushed her ear lightly. Then he released her and walked away, leaving Hermione red-faced, wondering if Draco Malfoy had just said what she thought he’d said.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Bluebell’s DADA class helps with Halloween Festival preparations.
I apologize for the delay—I was serving jury duty last week, so instead of writing and editing I was off dispensing frontier justice.

Now I’m back, and here’s a nice, long chapter, just packed with stuff. Props to anyone who can recognize the adapted line from “The Godfather.”

“I want you to have the right to be angry.”

Hermione spent the rest of Wednesday not thinking about that statement. She didn’t think about it in Arithmancy or during lunch, or in Herbology. She didn’t. PORN that night was a disaster. Malfoy made proper concentration almost impossible since he insisted on standing against the back wall and, well, looking at her. Hermione could hardly hold her wand properly, what with “I want you to have the right to be angry” not playing in a continuous loop in her head. Why did Malfoy say that? What did it mean? Why wouldn’t he explain himself? And what was that expression he was wearing now? It wasn’t sneering or haughty or flirty or even amused. He almost looked content, just stood there watching Hermione make paper origami shapes float or expand or change color, and when she glanced at him he’d just nod encouragingly. What the hell was that?

After PORN she stormed back to Gryffindor Tower, found Ginny in the common room and dragged her upstairs. Ginny sat on their small sofa as Hermione stood before her, practically acting out her morning conversation with Lavender. (Her description of Moaning Myrtle had Ginny laughing so hard that Hermione had to threaten to leave before she would calm down.)

“Can you believe that?” Hermione shrieked when she’d finished describing the scene in the bathroom. “Can you believe that?”

“Which part?” Ginny asked. “It all sounds unbelievable. I think I’ll visit Myrtle myself—give her a little thrill. Blaise does this thing where …”

“You’re disgusting,” said Hermione, hands on hips. “I’m talking about why Lavender lied! She lied because I’m mean to Draco Malfoy! Who does that? Who even thinks that?”

“Well, you do yell at him and hex him quite often,” Ginny said, sitting back so Crookshanks could jump on her lap. “But don’t worry. I think he likes it.” She winked. “I bet he remembers your punch during Third Year quite fondly. Talk to Luna, she’s into all kinds of kinky things like that. She says the—”

“You’re mad,” Hermione said. “Stark, raving mad. But that’s not the worst of it. I go back to Potions, and …” she described her and Malfoy’s conversation, “… and then he says: ‘I want you to have the right to be angry.’”

Her roommate’s eyes widened. “He said what?”

Hermione repeated the statement. “What does that even mean?”

“I want you to have the right to be angry.”
Ginny tilted her head slightly, considering. “I don’t know,” she said finally.

“You don’t know. Everything else, you have a hundred opinions, but on this, you don’t know.”

Ginny pushed Crookshanks off her lap and grabbed her robe and toiletries bag. “I wouldn’t care to speculate.”

“What?” Hermione was ready to bust out the windows again. “You love to speculate! You spend hours speculating about the stupidest things! Please, Ginny.” Hermione followed her friend to the door. “I need you to speculate! I simply can’t extrapolate from that sentence without additional data!”

Ginny, however, would not be moved. Her attitude, which had only been strengthened by nearly two months of dating Blaise Zabini, was that Slytherins simply could not be parsed out. Hermione, she stated, would have to Gryffindor up and ask Malfoy directly what he meant.

“Just be careful,” Ginny said, winding her hair into a clip in preparation for a shower. “Don’t ask a question unless you’re prepared to hear the answer.”

***

Theo was waiting by the portrait when Hermione left the Gryffindor common room Thursday morning, asking if he could join her table for breakfast. Hermione accepted immediately.

“It’s nice to see a cheerful face in the morning,” she said, sitting opposite him in the Great Hall. There was only a smattering of students at the tables this early, either bright-eyed early risers or desperate students working on last-minute assignments.

“How early do you wake up?” he asked.

“About 6 o’clock,” she said. “It gives me a chance to work on my LOOP.”

“LOOP? Is that your knitting?”

“My Life Optimization Organization Plan.” Hermione poured herself some chocolate. “I list five things to look forward to every day, review best practices and write about my life’s goals.”

“What are your life’s goals, if you don’t mind sharing?” Theo asked, with every air of interest. So refreshing. Certainly superior to past LOOP discussions with Malfoy.

Hermione smiled back at him. “At the moment, my goals are to finish my education and determine my career path. I have a rubric …”

“Oh Godric, is she talking about LOOP?” Ginny asked, crashing heavily into a seat beside Hermione. “Quick, Theo, distract her.”

“Willingly,” Theo said, leaning over the table and giving her a light kiss, much like the one at the Spangled Veil.
Hermione couldn’t help glancing at Malfoy, who was passing on his way the Slytherin table. She expected a scowl, but that smug look of his didn’t waver. She narrowed her eyes at him and he winked back. *Git.*

“Anyway,” Hermione continued briskly, “Professor Sinastra is advising me on Ministry applications.” She looked over at the head table. “I don’t see her this morning.”

“I hear she’s leaving Hogwarts,” Ginny said.

Theo shook his head. “No, she didn’t get that Ministry job after all.” He smirked at Hermione. “You might need a new adviser.”

“You’re spooky, Theo,” Ginny said. “I bet you knew that before she did.”

“Who says she knows yet?” Theo asked, raising his goblet of pumpkin juice with a graceful hand. “Knowledge is power, little Gryffindor. Pull up a chair and be instructed.”

“Is he always this arrogant?” Dean Thomas asked Hermione.

“He’s Slytherin,” Hermione said, shrugging. “I agree that knowledge is power, but I don’t see the value in knowing who’s fighting with his parents or flunking Herbology.”

“You’ll find that you’ll need such knowledge to advance in the adult world,” Theo said.

Hermione finished her chocolate and poured a cup of tea. “I’d rather advance on my own merits. I’ll leave you to play politics.”

“You bring the cleverness, I’ll bring the connections,” Theo said, tipping the goblet slightly toward her. “Together we’d make a great team.” Ginny dropped her fork, open-mouthed.

“You talk a lot of nonsense,” Hermione said, trying to keep her tone light. “I have to get to Ancient Runes.” Theo stood as she left the table, giving the still-seated Gryffindor men a slightly contemptuous glance. But he made no move to walk Hermione to class, just resumed his seat and started talking to Ginny. Hermione left the Great Hall pleased that Theo, anyway, saw the benefits of inter-House unity.

***

She could feel Malfoy’s eyes watching her as she entered Ancient Runes, but he made no effort to approach her. There was no Potions class on Thursdays, and Hermione spent her morning free period alone in the Potions Lab. The blood potion was developing well, with an appropriate, if rather disgusting, film spreading on the surface. A week perhaps, maybe less. She considered adding some dewberries to hasten the congealing action but deemed it too risky.

After lunch, she arrived at DADA to find a note on the door, instructing the advanced students to head to the grounds and help prepare for the Halloween Festival the following night. Hermione shifted her too-heavy bag and stomped back down the stairs, grumbling under her breath. It didn’t
seem right to forego educational opportunities just because Ernie couldn’t manage his prefects.

The skies had cleared again and a rare October sun had dried out a broad, grassy area between the castle and the school’s entrance gates. Hermione joined the small clump of DADA students just outside the castle. A harried-looking Ernie was directing prefects on raising a giant tent in the space. Ginny volunteered to take over the task, and the Head Boy had the rest of the class assemble tables and place them on previously marked locations on the grass. Bluebell took Theo and Luna to pick up pumpkins from Hagrid’s garden, and Hermione was assembling a table with her wand when she saw Malfoy approach Lavender, who was staring, baffled, at her pile of table parts.

Malfoy was obviously set to apologize, and while Hermione couldn’t hear what the two were saying, their expressions and body language were eloquent.

Malfoy: “I’m sorry for going all Death Eater on you, Brown, because you lied to Granger for patently ridiculous reasons.”

Lavender: “Oh, Draco, I accept your apology. You can say anything you like because you’re handsome.”

Malfoy: “I’ve already adequately apologized, but because I’m Draco Malfoy, I have to overdo everything. So I’m going to continue apologizing in a ridiculously suave voice.”

Lavender: “Oh, Draco, you can say whatever you want—your lips do such cute things when you’re threatening to kill me.”

Malfoy: “Alright then, you seem entirely too happy about this, so I’m going to back away slowly.”

Lavender (reaching out to grasp his sleeve): “Oh, it’s too late, Draco darling. I’m completely mesmerized again, and I’ll stop at nothing to prove my devotion. Where are you going? Come back!”

At this point, Hermione was overcome with giggles (she did not cackle dementedly, no matter what Ginny had said at the party), to the detriment of her half-assembled table, which now had a leg sticking out the top. She glanced up to see Malfoy standing before her, looking a little drained.

“Don’t tell me you heard all that,” he said, waving a hand back at Lavender, who watched them closely, likely on the lookout for signs of meanness. Like Hermione, he’d shed his robes and jumper and loosened his tie to soak in the rare sunshine.

“I didn’t need to,” Hermione answered, amused. “You’re obviously forgiven.”

Malfoy looked over at Lavender, who beamed and waved at him. “I hope I don’t live to regret this day’s work,” he said.

Ernie strode by, still barking orders. “Alright, folks, we’re putting all tables on the east side of the meadow by the Entrance gate, instead of the west … oh, Hermione.” Ernie stopped and turned beet-red.

“Hello, Ernie,” Hermione said, resisting the urge to close the top two buttons on her shirt.

“I’ve … uh … changed the marks, so you’ll know where to place the tables,” Ernie said to his shoes. Malfoy looked from Hermione to Ernie, eyebrows raised.

“Ah, Macmillan, excellent work here,” said a condescending voice, and Hermione nearly groaned, for Theo had arrived in all his Slytherin glory.
“So glad to see you found everything you needed from the storage room,” Theo rumbled on, ignoring Ernie’s flushed face and Malfoy’s frown. “Did you form a committee as Hermione suggested? She can be quite persuasive, can’t she?”

Hermione glared at Theo, then turned to the Head Boy. “Ernie, you’re doing a wonderful job with the Festival,” she lied calmly. “I’m going to make sure the Headmistress appreciates all your hard work.”

Ernie preened. “All it takes is an organized mind.”

“Yes, very few people appreciate the value of time management,” she said.

“Ernie!” Ginny called over. “The tent’s up!”

“Is it now,” said Theo.

“Be right there!” Ernie called back and walked away quickly.

Hermione crossed her arms. “I would consider it a personal favor, Theo, if you didn’t embarrass my friends in front of me,” she said in freezing tones.

“Now, Hermione…” Theo began. He stopped and gave Malfoy an irritated look. “Don’t you have somewhere else to be, Draco?”

“Not at all,” said Malfoy, who was detaching the leg from the top of Hermione’s table and repairing it with his wand. “Carry on. I believe you were explaining to Hermione why you bullied her pet Hufflepuff, who apparently had the misfortune to walk in on the two of you. Surely he has suffered enough.”

“I expect you to apologize, Theo,” Hermione said, arms still crossed.

“Fine, Hermione, I’m sorry I—”

“Not to me,” she said through gritted teeth. “To Ernie.”

Theo cast both Hermione and Malfoy a look of equal dislike, then stalked off toward the large tent, which was already collapsing on one side.

“I spend a lot of time making you boys apologize to people,” Hermione grumbled.

“We find it difficult to live up to your righteous Gryffindor standards,” Malfoy said as he expertly attached the table’s remaining legs. Then he righted the table with a wave of his wand. “For someone who’s supposed to be so morally upright, you’re quite effective at bullying the two of us.” He leaned closer, hands on the table between them. “Do continue on. Theo might kick, but I rather enjoy it.”

“You are mean to him,” Ginny’s voice suddenly echoed in Hermione’s head. “But I think he likes it.”

Malfoy’s eyes glittered. “You’re blushing, Hermione. Interesting.”

Hermione waved her wand, pulling the assembled table out from under Malfoy’s hands and he staggered slightly to keep his balance. She began levitating it toward an appointed spot. “I was thinking of Theo,” she said haughtily.

“Yes, quite splendid, isn’t he?” Malfoy said as they crossed the meadow with the table floating...
before them. “Trying so hard to appear fully in command, adopting that superior, indulgent tone with you.” His tone was light, but his displeasure was clear. “I’m surprised you can stomach it.”

“I am a very tolerant and forgiving person,” Hermione said. She gave Malfoy a sideways look. “Obviously.”

“Ah, and there he is,” Malfoy said as they passed Theo and Ernie. “I’m sure he’s making everything better.”

Hermione almost groaned. It was obvious from Ernie’s expression that Theo’s apology wasn’t soothing any sore feelings. Most likely he’d strolled up to Ernie and said, “So Macmillan, I’m here to apologize for embarrassing you, especially since that scene was the probably the closest you’ll ever get to a woman’s breasts …”

“Lovely,” Hermione grouched. “I’ll probably have to volunteer at the Halloween Festival to make it up to Ernie. Topless.” Malfoy raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

She landed the table on the very edge of the meadow, near the entrance gate. A copse of trees, a more benign outgrowth of the Forbidden Forest, lined the field here.

“What a dull little chore that was. Let’s take a stroll,” Malfoy said, walking off toward the trees.

“What? No—you can’t wander about,” Hermione protested. “You’re banned from the grounds now that class is finished …”

“Except for Quidditch,” he called back.

“Except for Quidditch,” she sniffed. No mere school rule was ever considered as important as that stupid sport.

“That’s enough dawdling,” called Malfoy, who had almost reached the trees. “Come along.”

“Malfoy!” Hermione hissed, trailing behind him. “You could be expelled, and that would break your probation! You could go—”

“Oh, look, a path, perfect for exploring all these … shrubby things,” Malfoy said, disappearing into the copse.

“Malfoy!” she hissed again, hurrying after him. “Get out of there!” She looked around the meadow, but no one else was nearby. The big tent was billowing up again, with a few remaining students standing around it, wands raised. Ginny had already left for a quick Gryffindor Quidditch practice.

Malfoy’s voice floated out of the trees. “Oh, come see, I’ve found bits of an overgrown hedge. And a rotting stump. Charming.”

“Get back here!” Hermione snapped. Ugh, he was such a toddler. She followed the path into the trees, mostly small oaks, with a thick carpet of red-gold leaves. He was nowhere to be seen. “Malfoy!” The path curved deeper and a few bedraggled firs appeared, stark green against the other trees’ turning leaves.

She stopped by a crumbling brick wall and looked about. “Malfoy, where are—”

“Looking for me?” Malfoy appeared from behind a large oak, suddenly standing before her. He was only inches away, but he made no move to touch her, just looked down at her intently. That warm sunshine smell filled her senses, not cologne or shampoo, just him, so close. She raised her
hands to push him out of the way, but the instant her hands touched his chest they stilled, feeling the warmth of his body under his white shirt.

His hands closed over hers, trapping them on his chest. “You haven’t asked me,” he said gently.

Hermione glared at the knot of his green-and-silver striped tie. “Ask you what?”

“About what I said in Potions.”

She gave a small huff of annoyance. “I haven’t thought about it.”

“Alright, since you demand to know,” Malfoy said into her hair, still holding her hands against his chest. “This is what I want. I want you to terrify anyone who comes to you with a story about me and another witch. Then I want you to find me and threaten all sorts of hexes and hideous curses for even looking at another witch. And I want you to feel entirely justified in doing so.”

Hermione stared up at him before she could stop herself. “You are quite disturbed, you know that, right? I’m not going to play into your little dominatrix fantasies—”

His eyes shone silver. “And what do you know about dominatrix fantasies? Have you been reading on the subject?”

Hermione flushed and pulled her hands out of his. She stepped back, feeling the wall’s rough bricks behind her. Malfoy stepped forward, keeping a thin distance between them. “We’re not discussing this,” she said hoarsely. “I’m with Theo, and—”

“Are you really?” he asked, leaning closer. “Do you really want him, Hermione? That farce you like to play with Theo, all those little kisses in the Great Hall, do you think they could fool a Malfoy?”

His tone made Hermione tremble, and their lips were only inches apart. Hermione cleared her throat and took on a lecturing tone. “Now, Draco, let’s be reasonable. It simply wouldn’t work. I won’t sneak around in woods and dark corners with you when I can have a real, public relationship —”

“Oh, you and Theo are public, alright,” Malfoy said, still standing too close. “That doesn’t make your relationship real. And I’m not talking about some secret affair—this has gone quite beyond that.”

His voice grew rougher. “I finally worked it out, you know. You thought I was going to keep to the old ways. You thought I wanted to hide you while I courted Astoria. As if anyone could hide Hermione Granger.” Malfoy gave her a disappointed look. “No wonder you rejected me. How could you believe that?”

“You said you wouldn’t tell anybody—”

“I thought you wanted to hide me,” Malfoy said. He backed off slightly, the leaves rustling under his feet. “I’m too dark, too tainted, and my future … my children’s future …” He choked, and his face suddenly looked so bleak that Hermione wanted to fling her arms around him right there. She clenched her hands into fists, trying to keep her body under control.

“I’m so sorry, Draco,” she whispered. “I didn’t mean what I said that day in Herbology. Astoria said …”

“I can guess what Astoria said.” Malfoy’s voice was harsh. “She certainly didn’t hold back about
you to me in the Slytherin dungeons. Merlin, I almost hexed her myself.”

“I didn’t mean it,” she repeated. Now her voice was choked, she was near tears. “You have every reason to hope for a real future. Your children will be proud of you. Everything you’ve done matters, and in time, in perhaps less time than …”

Malfoy stepped forward just enough to put a hand on her wrist but no closer. “Shhh, it’s alright, I know you didn’t mean it.”

Hermione nodded, swallowing hard.

“We understand each other now.” He went on, his grey eyes determined. “I want you, Hermione, and I need you,” he said. “You’re mine, and I’m yours. You won’t deny me in the end.”

Hermione’s mouth fell open in shock. “I-I’m with Theo …” she repeated.

Malfoy looked smug. “For now.”

Hermione stumbled away from both him and the wall, practically falling down in the leaves. She didn’t know what to say. She didn’t know what to think. She didn’t know what to do. Hermione Granger, know-it-all, didn’t know anything.

“You want me, and you need me, too, Hermione,” Malfoy said. His voice was conversational, like he was discussing ancient runes. “This isn’t over.”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed. She couldn’t help but think of the Charms classroom. She would not be hurried into anything.

“Keep in mind what happened last time you told me what I wanted and needed, Draco,” she warned.

“Yes, I was quite the idiot,” he said, his voice calm, almost distant. “But I wasn’t entirely wrong.” He gave her a thin smile and turned to rejoin the path, disappearing among the trees.

***

Theo found her as she re-entered the meadow picking leaves out of her curls. A few students had lingered to enjoy the sun and a quick scan revealed no Malfoy in sight.

“I have apologized to Macmillan,” Theo said in a tone that invited staggered admiration.

“Good,” she said. She walked back to where she had assembled the table and pulled on her jumper, tucking her robe into her bag. She needed to talk to Ginny.

Theo put a hand on her arm. “Are you still angry at me, Hermione?” he asked.

She smiled and shook her head. “No.” He was just being Theo, and Ernie was a big boy.
Theo loosened his tie. “It’s good to be out of the castle, I think we could walk a bit, as long as I’m in sight of the prefects.”

“NO—I mean, no thank you, Theo,” Hermione stammered. No more walks with Slytherins today. “I’m headed to the Quidditch pitch.”

Theo raised an eyebrow. “You’re still going to Gryffindor practices?”

“I have to talk to Ginny. Um, girl stuff.”

Theo looked skeptical, and Hermione was again struck by how different Slytherin men were. “Girl talk,” was a magical phrase around Harry and Ron; they immediately backed off when she invoked it, possibly terrified they’d be drawn into a discussion of tampons or mango body wash.

Then he shrugged. “Alright,” he said easily, kissing her on the cheek. “Perhaps we’ll do something later.”

“Maybe,” Hermione said, trying to sound light and flirtatious, but it just came out awkward and breathy. Theo didn’t seem to mind, however, probably thought she was overcome with shyness in his sexy presence. Sometimes those giant Slytherin egos were a real advantage.

***

Ginny was on her broom about forty feet above the pitch and yelling at her team. Hermione held a wand to her throat and cast Sonorous: “Ginny! I have to talk to you!”

Her friend waved to her to fly up, pointing to the extra brooms lying on the grass, and Hermione groaned. She hated flying, and heights. But her need was too great, so she dropped her bag and grabbed a broom, rising slowly upwards until she hung in the air beside Ginny. Her broom rolled slightly, and she grabbed its handle in a death grip.

“Alright there, Hermione?” Ginny asked, looking amused. She looked over the pitch. “Carter!” she shouted, “the snitch is by the quaffle, for Merlin’s sake! Get it! Lundy and Lundy – block him! Robins, look to your left!”

“Maybe this isn’t a good time,” Hermione said.

“Well, you’re up here now.” Ginny looked her over. “You look a bit mental.”

“It’s been a day.”

“Carter, it’s right there!” Ginny shouted. She eyed Hermione again. “So what’s up?”

“Malfoy wants a public relationship,” Hermione said tersely, hoping to keep her time in the air as short as possible.

“Carter, look over by the—WHAT?” Ginny stared at her wide-eyed. “I saw you with him earlier. Don’t tell me you went and asked Malfoy about his intentions like a normal person.”
“No, he lured me into some woods, backed me against a wall, and shared his rather disturbing line of thought. I said it sounded like a dominatrix fantasy.”

Ginny raised her eyebrows. “You two are a bit odd, you know that, right?”

Hermione couldn’t deny it. “The ‘whole right to be angry’ bit was basically permission for me to be a violent jealous nutcase, which is clearly typical behavior in Slytherin relationships.”

“Tell me everything,” Ginny commanded, dark eyes boring into Hermione’s.

“Not up here, I won’t,” Hermione answered, wobbling precariously.

“Tell me something,” Ginny demanded. “I know, what about those diamonds? Where do they fit in?”

“The hair set? Turned out to be a priceless family heirloom. A pureblood courtship gift. His parents found out and went spare. Malfoy got a note from his father telling him to get the jewelry back ‘by any means necessary.’” That phrase still made Hermione shudder.


“He wrote Lucius back, basically telling his father to fuck himself.” Again, Hermione felt that flush of pride. “He quoted your father, actually.”

“He quoted who? My—”

“Hey, Ginny! I got the snitch!” cried Carter, a pudgy kid with hair almost as light as Malfoy’s. He held up the golden ball triumphantly.

“Great!” Ginny shouted. “Release it again! Everyone else, you play Seekers too, all of you! Everybody chases the snitch!” She turned back to Hermione, who was biting her lip and trying to keep her legs together. “That ought to keep them busy. Did you say Draco Malfoy quoted my father?”

Hermione nodded. “That time in the bookstore your First Year, when Lucius …”

“… slipped that diary into my cauldron,” Ginny breathed, her face suddenly pale. “Tell me.”

“Lucius said, ‘What’s the use of being a disgrace to the name of wizard if they don’t even pay you?’ and your father said, ‘We have a very different idea of what disgraces the name of wizard, Malfoy.’”

Ginny clutched the sides of her head, and when that wasn’t enough to express her feelings, she spun around her broom a few times, looping up and down. She ended up in front of Hermione again, her broom hanging still and straight. “I don’t believe it.”

“Believe it. I tried to return the diamond set to Malfoy on Monday. Practically beat him over the head with it. He won’t take it back.”

“This is crazy—have you two even kissed yet? You have! How was—oh, shit, they’re early.” Ginny spun on her broom to look back at the castle.

“What?” Hermione tried to do the same and nearly fell off.

“Slytherins. They get the pitch for practice at 5 o’clock.”
“Oh no!” Hermione would have wrung her hands in horror, but she was afraid to release her grip on her broom. “That means—”

“Why, Hermione Granger,” said an unwelcome voice behind her, “do my eyes deceive me or are you sitting on a broom? I’d say ‘flying’ but that word implies some basic skill.”

Hermione started, then turned to look, causing the front of the broom to point upwards. She clutched the handle desperately, trying not to slide backward. Malfoy hovered to her left in his green-and-silver Quidditch gear, looking supremely entertained. He knew his little confession in the trees had driven her straight to Ginny. Oh, he was foul.

“Malfoy,” Ginny groaned.

“Just push the handle down,” he told Hermione. She did, and the broom straightened, but then Malfoy flew right under her, missing her by inches and causing her to shriek and do a complete roll. She ended up on her stomach on the broom, heart pounding, her legs spread.

“Nice skirt,” Malfoy said wickedly. Hermione clamped her legs together again, and he sailed off, laughing.

Ginny watched him depart. “Are you sure he likes you?” she asked.

Hermione straightened herself, glaring after Malfoy. “Unfortunately, yes.”

“Look sharp,” Ginny warned. “Here comes Astoria.” The Slytherin captain flew up to the two of them, an elegant sight in green and silver, her blonde hair streaming behind her.

“Weasley,” Astoria said, halting with a graceful swirl. She looked at Hermione. “I’m surprised to see you up here with us, Granger. Feet of clay, and all that.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes at Astoria, disliking the reference.

“Aspiring to greater heights, are you, Granger?” Astoria continued. “One should be content with one’s own level.”

“Shut it, Greengrass,” Ginny snapped.

Astoria’s ice blue eyes swept the skies, where Ginny’s team was aimlessly flying, the snitch nowhere in sight. The Lundy brother was snarling something at Malfoy, who looked at him like he was a particularly disgusting beetle.

“Your team appears a bit … wayward,” Astoria said.

Ginny flushed brick-red and moved slightly away, turning her back to Hermione and Astoria. “Everyone, back in!” she shouted.

The Slytherin captain eyed Hermione again. “What, no pithy response from the Gryffindor know-it-all? Care to strike at me … now?”

Astoria’s wand moved in her hand, and Hermione’s broom suddenly bucked, causing her to lose her grip. Hermione’s legs parted and she tumbled left, hands scrambling to grab the handle, but missing. Then she was falling like a rock, from fifty feet up, the green pitch below rising up to meet her.

She heard Ginny scream, “Hermione!” but there was no time, no time to grab her own wand, or
even to remember a wandless spell that might arrest her fall. She closed her eyes against the impact, hoping for merciful darkness.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: War stories.
No posting this weekend, as I will be traveling, but at least we won’t keep poor Hermione hanging in mid-air! Thank you to everyone, once more, for all the lovely, insightful comments. While this story was entirely written when I began posting it, your thoughts have deepened the story immeasurably, prompting me to ponder characters’ feelings and motivations as I prepare each chapter for posting.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Fain would I climb, yet fear I to fall.” — Sir Walter Raleigh, said to have written on a window with a diamond to Queen Elizabeth I

“If thy heart fails thee, climb not at all.” — the queen’s response

Hermione crashed into a hard surface, expecting the snap of broken bones, but the hard surface was soft as well, and she found herself clutching Malfoy, who had flown directly beneath her. He had caught her in his arms, one arm around her waist, the other under her knees. “I’ve got you,” he said hoarsely, climbing again.

She wanted to bury her head in his shoulder and bawl, but Astoria was undoubtedly watching, so Hermione just nodded. Her arms tightened around Malfoy’s neck as they rose until he began gasping for air.

Hermione loosened her grip slightly. Malfoy swung around on his broomstick, using only his knees for control. He hovered high over the pitch, holding Hermione to his chest, before a frowning Astoria and a white-faced Ginny.

“That was a dangerous, vile trick, Astoria,” he snarled.

“It’s not my fault that Granger can’t control her broom,” Astoria sneered.

The hand under Hermione’s legs began twitching; Malfoy was trying to summon his wand. His breath came in rapid pants and the arm around her waist was like iron. “Don’t,” she said to him, her voice low. She released one hand to place it on Malfoy’s spastic one beneath her. “Draco.”

“Bound to the earth,” Astoria drawled, “yet so desperate to fly.”

Malfoy snarled again and now Ginny had her wand out. Hermione pulled her hand from Malfoy’s to draw her own wand, pointing it at both Ginny and Astoria, her other arm half-choking Malfoy once more.

“NO,” Hermione said in harsh, commanding tones. “We start trading hexes up here, and someone will truly end up dead.”

Ginny’s smile was cold. “You can’t stay up here forever, Greengrass.”
“No, Ginny,” Hermione said, looking straight at Astoria. “She’s mine.” Astoria blanched slightly, then tried to cover it with a disdainful sniff.

“Enough, I’m taking Hermione back to the castle,” Malfoy said.

“You are certainly not,” Astoria said. “We have practice.”

“Fuck your practice,” Malfoy snapped and turned his broom away.

“Draco!” Astoria called. “You leave this pitch and you won’t be playing Quidditch at all!”

He continued his course. “Then I won’t play!”

“Malfoy, I’m fine,” Hermione said.

“That’s what you think of me?” he asked. “You think I’d just dump you on the ground and fly off with Astoria? As soon as we get back to the castle we are reporting—”

“No,” Hermione repeated. “I will handle Greengrass.” She frowned up into his face. “No reporting, no Slytherin revenge, no little accidents in Herbology.” She squeezed the hand under her legs again, now distractingly warm against her thigh. “Trust me.”

Malfoy’s jaw tightened, but he nodded, turning the broom again. “Where are we going?” Hermione asked.

“Over the Forbidden Forest,” he said. “You are getting over this ridiculous fear of flying before you kill yourself.”

Hermione nodded, slipping her wand back in her pocket and linking both arms around Malfoy’s neck again. Her anger had faded, but she couldn’t stop trembling.

“Hey,” Malfoy said, halting the broom. “It’s alright,” he whispered, just as he had during their dance at Slughorn’s party when she’d had a flashback to the Ministry’s fall. “We’re alright now.” He placed her on the broomstick before him, both of her legs dangling off one side, and wrapped both arms around her. Then they sat silently, the broom hanging still in mid-air, waiting for both of their breaths and heartbeats to slow.

Hermione didn’t know how long they remained like this, but eventually she emerged from her contented daze to feel Malfoy’s soft lips on her temple, brushing down the curve of her cheek, and she straightened and released his neck. She now felt secure enough to look around, still holding his arm, and see they were already far beyond the pitch. She carefully did not look down.

“I hate brooms,” she muttered as Malfoy put one hand on the broom handle and flew forward again.

“Is it the height?” he asked. “Have you ever flown on anything else?”

“A hippogriff. And a thestral. Oh, and a dragon, too.”

Malfoy stopped dead in the air again, staring at her. His arm tightened around her waist. “A 

She tossed her head. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Tell me about the thestral then,” he said. “Come on, Hermione, I just saved your life. Surely that’s worth a story.”
His grin widened. “Unless you’d like to thank me another way.”

“So it was the summer after Sixth Year,” Hermione began immediately, leaning away from him. He was flying in slow, wide circles now, so smoothly that it seemed they hung suspended while the world turned around them. The sun was low in the sky, turning streaks of clouds pinkish-orange. “The Order of the Phoenix was moving Harry from his aunt’s house to a secret location.”

“I remember that,” Malfoy said quietly. *Sure he does—Voldemort was at the manor that summer,* Hermione thought.

She took a deep breath, looking at the silver embroidery on his chest. “We hoped to move him without Voldemort knowing.”

“He knew,” Malfoy said. “Severus told him.”

“Yes,” Hermione said sadly. She blinked a few times, her cheek now resting against his jersey. “To improve Harry’s chances of escape, the Order created six more Harrys, each with a trunk and a stuffed owl. We drank Polyjuice potion and flew off in different directions, each of us with a protector.”

“What?” Malfoy’s body stiffened, and Hermione looked up at him, startled at his tone. “You were one of the Harry Potters?” He looked furious. “That Pot-head, he doesn’t care how many bodies he has to hide behind—”

“Don’t say that!” Hermione snapped. “He absolutely refused at first! The Order had to threaten force to get his hair for the potion!”

“There you go defending him—”

“I will always defend him, you prat! I thought you liked it when I defended people!”

“Not when you defend suicidal heroes with savior complexes!”

“Well it’s better than defending egomaniacal former Death Eaters, but you don’t seem to mind that!” Hermione snapped. She turned away from him and crossed her arms.

Malfoy huffed and steered the broom around the Forbidden Forest. “Fine. Go on then.”

“I’ve told you enough. Take me back.”

“You haven’t told me anything but the Order’s daft plan. Where does the thestral come in?”

She sighed. “I was paired with Kingsley Shacklebolt on a thestral, since they knew I didn’t like brooms. We were headed to his country house, but as soon as we left …” she trailed off.

His arm around her tightened again. “Go on.”

“They found us. We were surrounded by Death Eaters.” Hermione closed her eyes, leaning against his chest, her cheek rubbing against the scratchy embroidery. Malfoy’s scent was all around her, his lips at her temple again. But she barely noticed, remembering the ring of black-cloaked fliers, wands raised to kill. “The thestral climbed above them and dove straight into the clouds, but two were right behind us, throwing curses blindly, hoping to get lucky. One knocked the trunk off the thestral’s back. It was so wet in the clouds, so cold …”

Another hand was in her curls and she could feel the weight of his chin on the top of her head. “We
flew that way for ages, then suddenly descended, out of the clouds. There was a vast forest below. The Death Eaters were right behind us, still casting killing curses, but now we could fight back.” Hermione began to tremble again.

“That’s enough,” Malfoy said above her. “You don’t have to say anymore.”

“I want to,” she said, her eyes still closed, clutching his jersey. She hadn’t talked to anyone about this—not even Kingsley.

“Kingsley was shooting killing curses back,” she continued “He launched one after another—so fast. I couldn’t do the same—you have to mean those hexes—but I tried blinding hexes, stinging hexes, anything I could think of . . .

They flew in silence for a time, Malfoy continuing to make slow and steady rings over the Forbidden Forest. Then Hermione spoke again.

“Kingsley steered the thestral straight down, into the trees, to try to lose them. The leaves were so thick we couldn’t see, and I constantly worried we’d be brained by a branch or smash into a trunk. Then we shot upwards again, and there one of them was, like he was waiting for us, and I . . . I . . .”

“Open your eyes,” Malfoy commanded. “Look at me.”

She obeyed, looking into his grey eyes, so soft and serious. It gave her the courage to finish. “I shot a full body-bind curse,” she whispered. “His arms and legs immediately slammed together, and he and his broom fell into the trees. I don’t know if he died, he must have . . .”

“He didn’t,” Malfoy said. “That was Jugson. He was found the next day, hanging from a tree, perfectly fine but unable to move.”

“There was still one more, but before we could take him out, that damned stuffed owl . . .” Hermione sighed. “It fell off the thestral and the Death Eater hexed it, slicing it in half, and all the stuffing fell out. It was obvious it was a fake owl, and that I wasn’t Harry, so the Death Eater vanished.”

Malfoy sighed with relief. “That Salazar for that owl!”

“No!” Hermione straightened in his arms, too enraged suddenly to care that they were now a hundred feet over the forest. “We failed! Our job was to lure away the Death Eaters so Harry could make it to the safe house! When our cover was blown, that was one more Death Eater Voldemort could call to him!”

Malfoy was angry, too—his face was flushed and his short hair streamed in the wind. His arm around her felt like iron. “You could have died!”

“I was ready to die! It would have been worth it!” she yelled.

The broom hung still in the air and their faces were inches apart. Malfoy leaned forward and his lips brushed hers. Her entire body thrummed at the contact, and her hands on his arms tightened.

“No, we’re not doing this.” She spun around, slinging a leg over the broomstick, her back to him. She grasped the broom handle with both hands, hitching forward. “We need to go back to the castle.”

Malfoy said nothing, just steered the broom smoothly downwards until they landed on the grass outside the castle entrance. Hermione awkwardly hopped off and they stood facing each other, both
still rattled by what had happened in the air.

He was shaking his head. “By Salazar, you’ll defend anybody, won’t you? You went on a suicide mission to save Potter. You faced off your best friend and the auror who saved your life to defend me. You even defended those Beaters to me!” He rubbed his hand through his windblown hair. “Merlin, you talked me into apologizing to a girl you don’t even like!”

He stepped closer. “But you’re being a coward about us. You won’t accept what’s going on. You won’t admit what you’re feeling—”

“Don’t tell me what I’m feeling,” Hermione snapped. “You made my life and my friends’ lives miserable for years, bullied us, tried to thwart us at every turn, and if I’m a little skittish about jumping into bed—”

“I’m not asking you—”

“We both know what we’re talking about here,” she said coldly.

“You think this is about fucking? Because if that’s all I want, there’s no shortage of willing partners these days—”

“Including another Eighth-Year Gryffindor and certain bathroom ghost,” Hermione snarled, hands on hips, feet planted wide apart. “Fine. Go play with them, then.”

“That’s the point. I am not playing here,” Malfoy was flushed, and his hand clenched his broomstick so tightly his knuckles were white. “I made that clear back in those wretched woods. My feelings for you are serious. And you feel the same way—that business with my parents proved that. You continue to defend me. You believe in me. You understand what I’m trying to do.”

Hermione sniffed. “As I said, I didn’t like your mother’s tone.”

Malfoy sighed. “You’re putting up walls again. Some Gryffindor you are. I’m trying to be patient, Hermione, but watching you deny what’s in front of your face and fool around with Theo fucking Nott makes me wonder if you’re so brilliant after all.”

“Don’t you try to bully me, Malfoy, I’ll date whoever I want, when I want and—”

“Yes, yes, I’ve heard this too many times.” He rolled his eyes. “Fine. I know I’m a prime arsehole and you have every reason to run the other way, but here’s the thing.” He stepped closer, suddenly more cheerful. “You like it. You like all of it. When I was teasing you up there on the Quidditch pitch, you were creaming your knickers. I could see it on your face.”

“You’re disgusting,” Hermione said, crossing her arms.

“I am,” he whispered in her ear. “And you like that, too.”

A faint bell tolled from the castle, six tolls.

“Dinnertime,” Malfoy stepped back with a mocking grin. “Excellent. Worked up an appetite, haven’t we? I’ll leave you to ponder all of this, maybe draw up a nice pros/cons chart. You know,” he went on conversationally, “I look forward to your LOON plan—”

“LOOP!”

“Now, don’t get bogged down by semantics, Hermione.”
“Wacky Faint.”

“Wro—ah, nice one. Just think of the lovely charts you’ll draw up after this is all resolved in the way I intend: ‘The Pros and Cons of Various Sexual Positions’ and ‘Five Nice Things a Day I Can Do for Draco.’ Number one …”

Hermione slapped her hands over her eyes so she didn’t have to see his smirking face. “Stop, just stop,” she begged. “I’d rather talk sex with Moaning Myrtle again.”

“Now that is one story I don’t want to hear,” she heard him say. “Don’t be late for dinner.” He walked off toward the castle, or at least she assumed so, since his whistling grew fainter in that direction. She cautiously brought her hands down, relieved to see his green-and-silver back slipping through the giant front doors and Ginny walking forward to meet her.

Hermione took out her wand and summoned her book bag, which obediently streaked her way from the direction of the Quidditch pitch. Then she went to join Ginny, thinking about how wrong Malfoy was. No matter what madness lay ahead, she was never writing a list of ‘Five Nice Things a Day I Can Do for Draco.’

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Halloween! Draco makes a list and Theo gets an owl.

“Why, Malfoy,” Hermione said, acting surprised. “Are you still here?”

“He’s very needy,” Pansy said. “Can’t bear it when he’s not the center of attention.”
Hello all, I’ve decided to split Halloween into two parts—big apologies to all you Pansy fans. Pansy will be bringing the sirenschotch and have plenty to say in Part Two.

Dawn found Hermione at her desk, working on her LOOP. She stood to push heavy red curtains aside to let in the golden light, her gaze falling on the framed picture of herself and Ron waltzing at Bill and Fleur’s wedding. Or trying to waltz—Ron was pumping her arm up and down and Hermione stumbled twice just in the photo’s brief loop of movement. But Ron’s wide smile … It was perfect like that, she thought, sitting down again. That was us. Her thoughts turned to the sweep and euphoria of another waltz, with a different partner, also perfect. Also us. Hermione opened a drawer and extracted a newspaper clipping of a couple kissing over a sparkling dinner table, diamonds in her dark hair. Quite perfect. But was it really us?

Hermione replaced the clipping in the drawer and resumed scribbling. She was working up a whole new life plan, centered around four ranked priorities: 1) NEWTs, 2) the blood potion, 3) regular schoolwork and 4) learning to fly properly. The plan carefully did not include Draco Malfoy except for his role in No. 2. Theo was incorporated into No. 3 since work-life balance was vital to any sustainable organizational plan. Her half-formed plan for Astoria was also part of No. 3, listed under “hobbies.”

Satisfied, she closed the notebook on the last page, a ten-part agenda for her first flying lesson. Then she tucked the notebook into the drawer with the clipping and left the desk to begin her day.

Theo was waiting when she stepped through the portrait hole. “Are you all right?” he asked. “I heard you had dinner in the infirmary.”

“Yes and yes,” Hermione said. Ginny had frogmarched her straight to the infirmary, where Hermione had to listen to all her own arguments against Quidditch. Madam Pomfrey was passionate about the dangers of reckless joyriding on brooms. “You should be studying for your NEWTs, Miss Granger,” the matron said.

And now Theo was looking her up and down, frowning. “They’re saying you lost control of your broom.”

“Yes,” Hermione said again. Only Ginny and Malfoy knew Astoria had hexed her broom, and Hermione wanted to keep it that way. Astoria was a menace in the air, she must be stopped, and now Ginny could be a target as well.

“I understand that Draco saved you,” Theo continued.

Hermione nodded. “Yes, he was nearby.”

“He usually is.” Hermione blinked at the edge to Theo’s voice. Then his face softened slightly and he wound a hand in her loose hair. “I’m just glad you’re alright.”
“I’m fine,” she said. Theo’s hand in her hair gently pulled her head back and then his lips were on hers, deepening the kiss, needing reassurance. The creak of the portrait hole opening broke them apart, and Parvati gave them an impish smile as she walked by.

Hermione mulled over Theo’s words as they walked to breakfast. Obviously, Astoria had lost no time spreading her version of the incident, so it was important that Hermione appear calm and collected.

“Dean, I was holding on with both hands!” she was screeching five minutes later. She and Theo had arrived to find the Gryffindor table locked in a passionate debate over her fall. The Lundy twins were listing Hermione’s likely blunders, including improper altitude, excessive speed and failure to account for wind direction. Chaser Demelza Robins scolded Hermione for not brushing the broom’s straws before her flight. “An untidy broom is an unbalanced broom,” Demelza said, and the whole table nodded in agreement.

“Her hand positions have always been terrible, too,” Seamus put in. “I’m surprised this hasn’t happened before.”

Hermione viciously tore apart her scone. Splendid, the entire school now thought she’d almost died through sheer incompetence, only to be saved by Malfoy. She didn’t know what was worse—the pitying glances from the other Gryffindors or Malfoy’s face as eager Slytherins asked if he was still Seeker. She appreciated his discretion about Astoria, but he didn’t have to look so smug.

“Well, that’s up to our lovely Captain, isn’t it?” she heard Malfoy say cheerily. “Let me know when you find out!”

“Great,” Hermione grumbled into her toast. “I’m the idiot and he’s the hero.”

“Well, Malfoy did save you, right?” Neville asked her. Hermione and Theo gave him an irritated look. “Right?”

“Yes, he did,” answered Ginny slipping onto the bench beside Theo. “Hermione could have been seriously injured, even killed, and if he wants to lord it over everyone for a while, that’s fine with me.” She looked sternly at Hermione. “I hope you thanked Malfoy.”

“Uh … er …” Hermione couldn’t remember if she’d actually thanked him. “I told him a story.”

“You need to ’ank ’im,” Ginny said, stuffing a muffin into her mouth, Ron-style.

“Yes,” Theo said, taking the high road. He slid an arm around her shoulders. “I, for one, am very grateful.”

***

“Thank you for saving me yesterday,” Hermione said to Malfoy in a surly tone before Potions began.
Malfey eyed her over their cauldron. “You told me the thestral story.”

“Apparently, that’s not good enough for some people.”

“Yes, well, I hope you’ve considered what I said about flying lessons.”

“I did,” she answered, setting out her Potions book. “Ginny’s too busy, so I owled Ron. He’s been begging to teach me for years.”

“That wasn’t exactly—” Malfey began, but just then Lavender arrived and took her old seat beside him.

“Hello, Draco,” Lavender breathed, eyes wide. She wore her dark blonde hair in a mass of curls today, piled up on the top of her head and fastened with purple metal pins.

“Hello, Brown,” Malfey said smoothly, lighting their cauldron with his wand.

“You were so brave yesterday, Draco,” Lavender said. “Everyone’s talking about it.” She looked coldly across the table. “You should be more grateful, Hermione.”

“She really should,” Malfey agreed in velvet tones. “I can think of many ways Hermione could show her gratitude.”

Potions went downhill from there, to Hermione’s way of thinking. Lavender spoke at length about if she were saved from certain death, she would certainly be grateful, instead of scowling all the time. Malfey nodded sagely and scribbled runes on a piece of parchment, leaving Hermione to brew the day’s potion, a solution for magical aquariums, all alone. Her task was complicated by Lavender’s hairstyle, which began to fall apart under the steam and shed hairpins. Every time a pin fell into the cauldron, Hermione had to vanish the contents, since the potion had to be absolutely metal-free for use in the magical aquariums.

She was finally able to finish the potion and pour it into a bottle while Lavender was in the supply cupboard. Malfey also took advantage of their partner’s absence, handing Hermione a list of suggestions for “demonstrating proper gratitude.”

“Malfey!” Hermione choked as she read the rune-filled parchment.

“Do take note of No. 6. I found our conversation in the woods quite enlightening.”

Hermione’s face was fiery red now. “Malfey! You are the most appalling—”

“Mean,” rapped out Lavender, who had returned with a jar of pickled toad they didn’t need. “You are so mean to him, Hermione.”

“She truly is,” Malfey said sadly.

Slughorn’s brass bell rang, and Hermione flounced off, discreetly tucking the list into her bag so Malfey wouldn’t notice, but judging from the low chuckle behind her, he definitely had.

***
Afternoon classes were canceled in honor of Halloween, and most of the students rushed outside, eager to begin their weekend. Hermione spent the time studying in the Gryffindor common room; she was not hiding, no matter what Ginny said before heading to the Spangled Veil with Blaise. Hermione skipped the Feast and curled up on the sofa with Crookshanks, reading her Elder Fubarks book and eating the entire bag of sugar-free Halloween candy her parents sent. She was relaxing, not hiding.

At 7 o’clock she headed down to the Festival and regretted it immediately. Hermione had approached Ernie at lunch, offering to help—there was still time to set up a proper volunteer sheet, for example, and she had some last-minute ideas to promote inter-House unity—but Ernie wouldn’t listen. Theo’s antics had offended the Hufflepuff’s pride, and he was convinced Hermione had been in on the joke. (Where people got the idea Hufflepuffs were humble, Hermione had no idea. Obviously, they’d never spent time with Ernie or Justin Finch-Fletchley, not to mention the Squeaky Mice.) Nothing Hermione could say would change the Head Boy’s mind, and Ernie had stalked off in high dungeon, muttering that all Slytherins should be in Azkaban.

The end result was a school event that failed on nearly every possible level. Its theme, “The Forbidden Forest,” would likely scare the First Years and traumatize every war veteran in the castle. The Forest was Voldemort’s headquarters during the Battle of Hogwarts and Harry had confronted Voldemort there, ready to die. Hermione was surprised that McGonagall had allowed it. All the Hufflepuffs dressed up, and many of the Gryffindors, but few Ravenclaws participated and not one Slytherin wore a costume. Some students dressed up as spiders or unicorns or centaurs (deeply offending Firenze, who left early and spent the evening sulking in his classroom—nobody could sulk like a centaur). Hermione came as one of the Forest’s black flowers, wearing tight green robes and large black petals on her head like a sunhat. Neville created a Winkweed costume with Luna’s help and went around asking people to try to intimidate him. He’d apparently planted a few Winkweed cuttings in the Forest, although he considered them unlikely to flourish. Hermione disagreed; from what she’d seen of the vile plants, the Winkweeds would likely love the Forbidden Forest and would spread to terrorize unwary Hogwarts students for generations to come.

Ernie’s planned activities failed as well, mostly because the Squeaky Mice, all dressed as black forest mice, sabotaged every one of them. They put spiders in the cauldrons for apple-bobbing and added so many dead-ends to the hedge maze that nobody could get out. They talked the little Slytherin girl into wearing mouse ears too and then they all charmed the pumpkins to scream in pain when anyone tried to carve them.

Hermione saw no sign of Theo as she wove through the crowd. The lighting was lovely, she had to admit: floating lights draped with tulle gave off a ghostly glow in the dark sky, standing torches burned beside every table, and lanterns strung on silver rope lit up the dance floor.

Poor Ernie was manning the raffle table, where the Grand Prize, courtesy of Professor Sprout, the Hufflepuff Head of House, was the complete collection of “Herbs of Desire: Loving the Plant Life Around You” (volumes 1-14). Hermione sighed; another opportunity lost, since she could have arranged for Weasleys’ Wizarding Wheezes merchandise. She stopped by the refreshment table and loaded a tray with cauldron cakes and a flagon of punch.

“How are sales?” she asked, placing the tray in front of Ernie.

“How dismal,” the Head Boy said, too depressed or perhaps too hungry to snub her. The table’s glass bowl held only a few folded half-tickets.
“Careful,” she said. “The punch is spiked.”

“Thank Merlin,” Ernie said, pouring a glass and downing it.

“I’m really sorry about Theo, Ernie,” Hermione said, scribbling her name on a ticket and handing him two Sickles. “These Slytherins are driving me crazy too.” She stood by the table’s extra chair, and Ernie nodded for her to join him. Then they munched silently for a time, looking out over the crowd.

“Bit of a shit festival, isn’t it?” Ernie finally said.

“The music is nice,” Hermione said. Slughorn had lent his floating orchestra for the occasion. Neville was dancing with Parvati, who tried to avoid his writhing vines. Theo was still nowhere in sight, but there was Malfoy chatting with Pansy by the dance floor, dressed in his usual black.

“I’ve decided to take your suggestion from earlier this term,” Ernie said. “About hosting a prefect brainstorming retreat. I’m thinking a three-hour session tomorrow, with dinner brought in.”

“That’s marvelous,” Hermione said. “Failing to plan is planning to fail.”

Ernie looked hopefully at her. “I know you said you wouldn’t do student government this year, but …”

“I’d be glad to attend,” she said. “I’ll even write up some possible activities.” Ernie gave a relieved sigh. “Why don’t you go have fun, Ernie,” she went on. “I’ll stay here for a while and sell tickets.”

“Really?” Ernie sounded pathetically grateful. “You don’t have to, really. It’s alright. I know you didn’t—”

Hermione smiled. “I want to, go ahead.”

“Well, thank you, Hermione,” Ernie said, regaining a bit of his old pompous manner. He stood and shook her hand. Hermione bit her lip to keep from smiling. “Be sure to fold the ticket stubs before putting them in the bowl, that’s a good girl.”

Hermione rolled her eyes as the Hufflepuff strode off, but it felt good to see him happily bossing the prefects as they tried to de-spider the apple-bobbing cauldrons.

“Well, don’t you look lovely in green,” purred a voice beside her.

She knew that voice; he was probably here to deliver another shocking list. The list from Potions was now in her trunk, warded along with the Gloriana Set. It wouldn’t do for Ginny to find it, and possibly add to it. Her cheeks heated at the very idea.

“Hello, Malfoy,” Hermione said.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Hermione says something nice to Draco.
Halloween, Part II

Chapter Notes

Another big thank you to everyone who has read and commented on this story!

It's funny how so many major characters and plot threads in this story—Slughorn, Pansy, Ernie and his festival, the Squeaky Mice, PORN, Lavender's crush on Draco, even Hermione's LOOP—were originally supposed to be cameos or just a fun little joke. Next thing you know, they're driving the plot!

Anyway, we continue on with the Halloween Festival in all its crumbling glory. I had originally envisioned a typically awe-inspiring Hogwarts celebration, perhaps a marvelous masquerade overflowing with beauty and breathless magic. But then I decided to subvert the whole darn trope and this is all our poor characters get.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Hello, Malfoy,” Hermione said, brightly polite. “Here to buy a raffle ticket?”

Malfoy’s lip curled. “Hardly.”

A pair of snifty little Slytherin boys then stepped up to the raffle table, looking like mini-Malfos with their hair slicked back.

“Raffle tickets?” Hermione asked in the same cheery tone. “Proceeds go to St. Mungo’s.”

The boys looked at the 14-volume stack of “Herbs of Desire” and sneered identical sneers.

“Forget it,” the taller boy said. Hermione gave him a look. “Uh, no thank you, Miss Granger.”

“Two Sickles each,” Malfoy said. He casually pushed up his black coat sleeve and shirt cuff, revealing just the edge of a snake and skull on his forearm. The boys stared wide-eyed, then practically broke their arms getting coins out of their pockets. Hermione handed them two tickets and watched them flee.

“Draco Malfoy using the Dark Mark to sell charity tickets,” she said with a grin. “You’re giving Death Eaters a bad name.” She touched the chair beside her, a silent invitation.

Malfoy slid gracefully into the chair but didn’t look at her. His pale profile shone in the lamplight.

“They’re still out there, you know,” he said soberly. “Scattered and leaderless, but watching.”

“Yes,” was all she said. She knew Harry and the other aurors were chasing every lead in their hunt for Death Eaters still at large. She was surprised Kingsley hadn’t returned with another warrant to question Malfoy.

“Aren’t you afraid, knowing they’re out there?” he asked.

“Not right now,” she said, sipping her punch. It did taste rather awful.

He snorted lightly in disbelief, still looking out at the rather listless crowd. “You feel safe at
Hogwarts?"

“I feel safe with you.”

Malfoy’s profile froze, then he slowly turned his head toward her, shifting in his chair. Hermione didn’t look away. It was the truth. Of course Hogwarts was a dangerous place, she’d known that since First Year. The war might be over, but danger still lurked in dark corners, and Hermione never felt safe these days unless she was with the wizard beside her.

Malfoy was still staring at her—nobody, it was clear, had said such a thing to him before. His warm hand found hers under the table. “I can’t believe you said that,” he whispered, a slight tremble to his voice.

“Number three,” she said, trying to keep her own voice steady.

Malfoy blinked at her, confused.

“Number three on the ‘Gratitude’ list: ‘Say Something Nice to Draco.’”

He gave her a predatory smile. “Feel free to skip ahead.”

Hermione flushed. “You and your lists. You could develop your own Life Optimization Organizational Plan. I could help.”

A faint eye roll. “I think not.”

“At least let me review your study guides …”

Malfoy bent his head closer to hers, soft breath against her cheek, hand still holding hers. “I look forward to you touching many things of mine, Hermione … but never my study guides.”

“AHA!” Hermione cried. Malfoy jumped back in his chair and dropped her hand, startled.

She beamed at him. “I knew it! I knew you couldn’t do so well in classes without study guides! Good on you! Do you use a subject-based or time-based system? I find a hybrid—”

“My study guides are my own private business,” Malfoy snapped, nettled.

“Yes, very true,” Hermione said cordially. “One should always respect others’ personal planning documents.”

Malfoy ground his teeth but said nothing. Hermione followed up with a few useful suggestions about estimating time blocks as they watched the dancers. Ernie was now attempting to waltz with Luna, who insisted on following some tune inside her head. Blaise was leading out Ginny, who had traded her dinner dress for slashed and tattered pink robes with a pink bow in her hair. Ginny had obviously followed through on her threat to dress as Umbridge after her run-in with the centaurs. Hermione could only be grateful that Firenze had already left.

“Alright, Draco, sod off,” a snippy voice said. Pansy stood before them in purple brocade robes. She held a bottle of sirenscotch in one green-gloved hand.

“Finally, some decent liquor,” Malfoy drawled.

“Not for you,” Pansy said, waving him away. “Sod off, I said.”

“I think Hermione would prefer …” Malfoy began smoothly in his best Lucius voice.
Hermione grinned. “You heard Parkinson. Sod off.”

“I didn’t know you two even spoke,” Malfoy said, eyes narrowing.

Pansy smirked and splashed scotch into two cups, handing one to Hermione.

“How about a raffle ticket, Parkinson?” Hermione asked, sipping her drink. These Slytherins were spoiling her.

Pansy sniffed at the stack of books. “I hate plants.”

“Which is ironic, if you think about it,” Malfoy said.

“Why, Malfoy,” Hermione said, acting surprised. “Are you still here?”

“He’s very needy,” Pansy said. “Can’t bear it when he’s not the center of attention.”

Malfoy’s eyes darted between them. “I find this situation frankly terrifying.”

“Did you hear something?” Hermione asked.

“Not a thing,” Pansy said.

Malfoy stood, scowling at them both, and stalked off. Hermione and Pansy tapped their cups together and drank.

“That was fun,” Pansy said, settling in the chair he had vacated.

Hermione eyed the dark-haired woman over the rim of her cup. “I suspect you’re not here to help me sell raffle tickets.”

“Salazar, no.” Pansy looked over at Malfoy, who’d been stopped by Percival and Bertie (and Cupcake) by the face-painting booth. Both boys wore snake faces with glowing red eyes, and someone had turned the pygmy puff green. They looked like tiny Voldemorts. Honestly, where was McGonagall? This whole cursed festival would give everybody nightmares.

“Strange, seeing Draco with baby Hufflepuffs,” Pansy said. “I suppose that’s your influence.”

Hermione glowered. “He enjoys corrupting them.” The scotch was tingling through her veins and the smell brought her back to Slughorn’s office: “You’re right, I wouldn’t like it at all …”

“Granger,” Pansy snapped. “Focus. I want to talk about Draco.”

“Last time it was Theo.” Hermione set down her cup. “Will we be discussing Blaise next week? Or are you stalking Ginny as well?”

Pansy shrugged and poured another drink for each of them. “Blaise can handle Weasley. Draco, on the other hand …” She glanced around, then leaned closer to Hermione. “His behavior toward you has not gone unnoticed, Granger. At first, I thought it was part of his plan, befriending you, helping you with that potion. Now I suspect feelings are involved.”

Hermione said nothing, just took another drink. What could she possibly say?

“I don’t like it, and not just for Theo’s sake,” Pansy said, her eyes intent. “Draco is now pursuing you openly, any fool can see it, but a public relationship between you two could only hurt him. How do you think the wizarding world would treat a Death Eater who seduced the innocent
Golden Princess?"

“T’m hardly—”

“It won’t matter.” Pansy sighed. “That will be the story. It already is. Theo received some
threatening owls and Howlers after the Prophet picture. He’s a Nott, which is as good as a Death
Eater to many.”

Hermione sat up straight. “He never told me.”

“It would be even worse for Draco,” Pansy went on. “The Wizengamot could open his case
again.”

Hermione slammed her drink on the table, liquid sloshing out of the cup. “No, Parkinson. Malfoy
is not going back to Azkaban. I will not allow it. Harry would not allow it. I will bring down the
fucking Ministry before he spends one day—”

A loud snap made both women jump, startled. Pansy stared at the large crack in the glass bowl
holding the raffle tickets.

“So you can just dial down the threats,” Hermione continued calmly, repairing the bowl with a
touch of her wand. “I appreciate that you care about your friends, and like I said in the Leaky
Cauldron, you’re not entirely out of line. Yes, the Aurors Office is interested in Malfoy, and yes, I
know that linking his name with mine will harm more than help his reputation.” Hermione gave
Pansy a hard look. “But don’t you dare say that caring for me will land him in Azkaban. I would
not allow it.”

Pansy swallowed. “I believe you.”

“Excellent.” Hermione drained her drink. “I hope we’re done here.”

“Not quite. You’ll want to watch yourself.”


Hermione just smiled. “Let’s just say that Astoria has my attention now.”

“You’re planning something.” A crafty smile curved Pansy’s mouth, heavily painted in dark red
lipstick. “I want to help.”

“It’s just an idea. I need more time in the library.”

“What’s this?” asked an amused voice. “Pansy Parkinson and Hermione Granger making plans to
go to the library? Over scotch?”

Hermione looked up and smiled. “Hello, Theo.” The Slytherin looked entirely at ease, his long
black coat open to reveal a grey jumper and black trousers, but his gaze was watchful.

“Just a Charms project,” Pansy said airily.

Theo gave Pansy a sharp look, clearly unconvinced. “Would you care to dance, Hermione?”

“Yes, thank you.” Hermione jumped up and set down her cup, wobbling a bit.

“Oh no, Granger,” Pansy objected. “You are not leaving me here to—”
“Is it too late to buy tickets?” Neville appeared in front of the table, looking eager. He had shed the most obnoxious features of his Winkweed costume (which is to say, nearly all of them, including the vines and big flower hat). Now he looked quite dashing in dark green robes, standing an inch taller than Theo and his shoulders nearly as broad. Hermione caught the gleam in Pansy’s eyes.

“Parkinson will help you, Nev,” Hermione said, taking Theo’s hand. “She’s very interested in plants.”

Hermione tugged at Theo, who was frowning in confusion, and led him to the dance floor as Neville asked Pansy, “Really? Do you prefer flowering plants or arboreal …”

“What was that all about? Pansy kills any plant she touches,” Theo asked as he pulled her into a waltz. (Really, did Slughorn’s instruments know anything else?) “And when did you and Pansy start drinking together? And studying?”

Hermione shrugged. “Inter-House unity. Extra credit.”

“I didn’t know Pansy cared about either of those things.”

“People change,” Hermione said.

Theo smiled but said nothing, and they waltzed in silence for a time. Theo danced as elegantly as Malfoy, but held her more firmly and led more aggressively. While Malfoy enticed her when they danced, lightly drawing her where he wanted to go, Theo kept her close, his body leaving her little room to maneuver.

“I love seeing you in green,” he murmured in her ear. “You should be draped in emeralds.”


“Rebirth,” Theo said, “love.” He smiled down at her. “We Slytherins aren’t all cold calculation.”

Hermione stumbled, blushing. Maybe she should have paid attention in Bluebell’s class. She hoped to Godric that Theo didn’t have some emerald bauble in his coat pocket, passed down through generations of Notts and enchanted to scream horribly whenever another man complimented her.

The sound of flapping wings made Hermione and Theo look up to see a rather bedraggled owl circling above them. Theo instantly released her and moved off the dance floor to where the owl had perched on a chair. The owl’s brown feathers were ruffled and matted, its eyes dull. Theo pulled a tightly rolled message off the bird’s leg and opened it.

“Theo, I think it’s injured,” Hermione said, stroking its rumpled feathers. It hooted softly. “Can you make it to the owlry?” she asked the bird. “There’s food there, and you can rest.” The owl hooted again and awkwardly flew off.

“I must go,” Theo said. Hermione looked up, startled. The note had vanished, and he was buttoning his coat. “Urgent business. I’m very sorry.” He gave her a quick, hard kiss and strode off toward the castle, apparently considering that a sufficient explanation.


He stopped and turned, his broad, handsome face lit by a floating light above them. “It’s nothing for you to worry about, Hermione,” he said, trying to smile. “I will see you tomorrow.”
“Something’s wrong,” she said. “Where did that owl come from? Tell me.”

Theo brushed her cheek with his fingers. “I can’t, Hermione. Go back to the Festival. Have fun.”

“Tell me,” she repeated stubbornly.

He dropped the half-smile and gave her a stern look. “No, Hermione, I don’t think I will.”

She stared up at him open-mouthed.

“I didn’t press you last Sunday when you rushed out of the castle in a black cloak,” Theo went on, his voice cool. “I haven’t asked what you were doing in those woods yesterday, and I won’t ask you again why you’re scheming with Pansy.” His green eyes held hers. “I only request the same courtesy.”

“This … this is different,” Hermione stammered. “Theo …”

“Don’t worry,” he said, patting her hand. “I’m not angry with you.”

Hermione frowned. “I don’t care if you’re angry at me. I want to know why bloodstained owls are dropping urgent messages on your head!”

“Now, Hermione, you’re making a scene.”

Hermione glared. “I’ll make a scene if I want to, Theodore Nott! I’ll yell when I want, where I want—did you just kiss my forehead?” she screeched. He just kissed her forehead! And patted her on the top of her flower hat!

She couldn’t move, she was so outraged, and thus lost valuable time, allowing Theo to dash through the castle doors. Hermione ran after him, hiking up her robes, pounding through the Entrance Hall and down to the dungeons. She stopped at the portrait of a Snake Charmer guarding the Slytherin common room.

“What’s this, a nosey little Gryffindor dressed as a black hellebore?” the Charmer sneered. “How … common.”

“Did Theodore Nott come through here?” she panted.

The Charmer shrugged. “I really can’t say.”

Hermione stamped her foot in frustration and the portrait looked even more contemptuous if that were possible. Even his bloody snake was sneering at her, but she locked eyes with it anyway. Theo was a Parselmouth.

“Tell him I’m here, please,” she begged the painted cobra. The hooded snake swayed for a few seconds, then slithered out of the frame. Hermione waited, tapping her foot for several agonizing minutes. Finally, the snake returned.

“Is he there?” she asked. The snake shook its head and coiled up at the Snake Charmer’s feet. Hermione slumped, defeated. She hoped Theo wasn’t trying to sneak out of the castle. Stubborn man—why wouldn’t he just let her help?

“Run along, little Gryffindor,” the Charmer said, and began to play a slow, haunting tune. The cobra uncoiled and swayed, red eyes fixed on Hermione. She stomped off, back straight. Ye gods, the dungeons were a horrible place.
She couldn’t bring herself to return to that wretched festival, so she went up to her bedroom instead and sat on her desk, wrapped in a blanket so she could look out the window. Ginny was still off with Blaise and likely wouldn't return that night. The sky was cloudy and dark, with only an eerie glow from the celebration far below. Hermione cracked the window, allowing the faint sound of Slughorn’s instruments to drift into the room along with the colder air. She leaned her cheek against the cold glass, thinking of the look in Malfoy’s eyes when she said she felt safe with him. See, I can admit what I’m feeling. Hermione dozed off to the music, pressed against the glass, dreaming of waltzes—sweeping, heady waltzes high in the air, so high she couldn’t possibly fall.

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: Hermione makes a new friend.
Chapter Notes

Yes, it’s time for another Slug Club party, which starts out weird, then gets snarky, then gets a little creepy. Something for everyone!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Theo appeared at breakfast Saturday morning, urbane as always, full of apologies for leaving the Festival so abruptly. He still refused to say why he’d left, and Hermione, feeling the justice of his words the night before, didn’t press. She asked him if he’d like to study with her (a major Potions exam was coming up), but Theo begged off, vaguely saying he was “helping teachers.” He looked a bit surly about that, and Hermione wondered if he’d earned detentions again, perhaps by trying to sneak out of the castle. Again, she didn’t press the issue.

Hermione did, however, stop by the owlry after breakfast to visit the bird who had delivered Theo’s note. The poor owl still looked exhausted, drooping on its perch, but its feathers were cleaner and it snapped up the bits of bacon she’d saved from breakfast. “Hey, Brownie,” she said, stroking its coffee-and-cream feathers. The owl hooted softly, seeming to like the name. It looked to be a young bird, its feathers still rather downy. “Be careful if you go back,” she whispered, not knowing exactly what she meant, but still eager to help. “Find me if he tries to leave again.” Brownie hooted in agreement.

The rest of the day was surprisingly productive, and Hermione showed up to the Slug Club that night in an excellent mood. She even endured Cormac’s loud explanation of defense tactics to Slughorn’s guest—a Keeper for the Holyhead Harpies—with rare patience but was quite relieved when Ginny dragged her off into a corner.

Ginny outshone the candles that night, Hermione thought, dressed in silver lace with her glowing hair piled on the top of her head. Those diamond ear drops looked new. If only Harry could see her so. A quick scan of the room revealed no Malfoy or Blaise.

“Alright, spill,” Ginny said in greeting. “Which was it—Theo or Malfoy?”

“Honestly, Ginny, give a girl a chance to get a drink,” Hermione said, raising a hand to smooth her own unbound hair. She’d barely had time to put on one of Ginny’s wrap dresses, a green silk number that hung longer on Hermione, but still seemed too short. “What are you on about?”

Ginny’s eyes were sparkling. “You’re rosy, happy and relaxed, so obviously, something wonderful happened. Tell me.”

Hermione sighed in contentment. “It was wonderful, and it’s been too long.”

“Was it planned, or in the heat of the moment?” Ginny asked wickedly.

“Planned, of course,” Hermine said. She leaned against a tapestry and fiddled with a tassel, still smiling. “So much energy and excitement. I had this list of activities—”

Ginny’s eyes bugged out. “You had a list? Of activities?”
“To stimulate creativity,” Hermione said.

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“Luna needs to hear about this.”

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“There was no orgy,” Hermione snapped.

“Can we all please stop saying ‘orgy’?” Neville begged.

“Fear to name a thing only increases fear of the thing itself,” Ginny said, smirking at Hermione.

“Nonsense, nobody fears an orgy,” Blaise purred, stroking Ginny’s back.

“I do,” Neville said.

“That’s it, Neville, we’re dancing,” Hermione said. “I’ll leave you two to your sick, sick fantasies.”

“Oh, you love it,” Ginny said.

Neville grabbed Hermione’s hand and practically yanked her over to the dance floor. “That whole conversation never happened,” he said sternly.

“Agreed,” Hermione said in relief. She really did love Neville. Thank Godric Malfoy wasn't here yet. She certainly didn’t need to hear his thoughts. At all. Not one bit.

Neville spun her around, staying carefully away from Ginny and Blaise. His dancing had come on amazingly and he looked quite sophisticated in a tailored black robe.

“I heard you won the Halloween raffle,” Hermione said. “Congratulations.”

“Well, I ended up buying a few extra tickets,” he said sheepishly. “Twenty tickets, actually.”

“You bought twenty raffle tickets to win ‘Herbs of Desire’?” Hermione asked.

“It’s a seminal work,” Neville said.

“May I cut in?” Cormac McLaggen had slipped behind Hermione, his hand on her back.

“No thank you, I’m finished dancing for now,” Hermione said. She blindly pulled Neville with her into the nearest group, then froze in horror, blinking at the Holyhead Harpy, a Slytherin Seventh-Year girl and … Astoria.

“Oh, we’re sorry to interrupt,” Hermione said, turning to propel Neville somewhere else.

“Hello Miss Granger,” the fresh-faced Harpy said. She was a tall, athletic blonde with a dewy complexion that required no makeup.

“Hello,” Hermione said. “Lavinia Clarke, I’d like to present Neville Longbottom.”

“Hello Mr. Longbottom,” the Harpy said, her eyes glinting.

“Call me Neville, Miss Clarke,” he answered politely, smiling that new slow smile of his.

“I’m Lavinia, please.”

“Surely you have more … suitable people to talk to, Granger,” Astoria sneered, seeing Lavinia’s attention drawn to Neville.

“More interesting people, certainly,” Hermione told her.

“Isn’t Astoria’s necklace lovely?” asked the Seventh Year spitefully. “It’s from someone special.”
“Dazzling,” Hermione said. It was, actually. Astoria wore a strapless dress in green satin, her hair in an intricate braid wound around her head and studded with tiny emeralds. It was the perfect outfit to showcase said necklace, a wide diamond choker that covered most of her throat.

“It’s Draco’s interest gift,” Astoria preened. “He is hopelessly extravagant.”

“Draco? Draco Malfoy?” asked Lavinia, turning from Neville. “I heard he was at Hogwarts this year.”

“Yes, many of us returned to repeat our Seventh Year,” Neville said. Lavinia smiled back at him.

Hermione, meanwhile, couldn’t help looking at Astoria’s necklace more closely. A crooked line of larger diamonds spelled out a subtle “M.” She wondered if the necklace choked its wearer if she shagged another man. You never knew with Malfoys.

“So sweet and romantic, Astoria!” exclaimed the other Slytherin woman. “Will the betrothal be publicly announced soon?” Lavinia looked back at Astoria with interest.

“Quite soon,” Astoria said airily. “First, I’ll have to inform certain parties.”

“Have you informed Draco?” Hermione asked politely.

Astoria laughed a little shrilly. Neville gave Hermione a warning look.

“Well, I look forward to meeting him,” Lavinia said. “Neville, would you like to dance?”

“Of course,” Neville said quickly, taking Lavinia’s hand. He moved away with a final frown at Hermione.

“Draco and I have had our tiffs,” Astoria said. “There have been a few indiscretions.” She looked straight at Hermione and the other Slytherin tittered.

“It’s only to be expected, of course. Malfoy men are so hot-blooded,” Astoria went on, her smile growing wider. “But Draco will always return to me. Narcissa tells me his father was the same before marriage. Have you met Lady Malfoy, Granger?”

“At Malfoy Manor,” Hermione said. “When I was tortured.”

The Seventh Year gasped and spilled wine on her dress.

“Regrettable,” Astoria said.

“What, that it happened?” Hermione asked, “or that it didn’t work?”

“I’m sorry you still hold a grudge,” Astoria said. “Draco is working so hard to redeem the family name. As his betrothed, I hope to help him with this endeavor.”

“Is that so, Astoria?” asked Blaise, who had appeared behind the Slytherins. “I thought your father abandoned the betrothal agreement.”

“It is still valid,” Astoria said, sipping her wine.

“You don’t say.” Blaise’s eyes were cold.

“Oh, let her play her games, Blaise,” said Hermione. “Nobody will ever trap Dray-co into anything. The man’s as slippery as an eel.”
“That’s true,” Blaise agreed, chuckling.

“Perhaps you have found him so.” Astoria’s smile was patronizing. “But he is fully aware of his duty to me.”

Hermione scoffed. “He has no duty to you. Your family dropped the Malfoys like a bad knut when Lucius went to Azkaban during the war. Draco’s the head of the family now, and he doesn’t have to do anything.”

Astoria’s eyes narrowed. “You seem rather well-informed.”

“Simple logic.”

“You will break his mother’s heart,” Astoria said. “Hasn’t dear Narcissa been through enough? The family just wants peace. Surely you can understand that.”

“I’m not driving this bus,” Hermione said. “Talk to Draco about his mother’s heart. I couldn’t care less.”

“Well, this has been fascinating,” Blaise said. “Will you honor me with a dance, Hermione?”

“Certainly.” She flashed Astoria a smile and let Blaise lead her away.

“Tell me you didn’t just compare the new Lord Malfoy’s future marriage to a bus,” Blaise said with a smile.

“More like a train wreck, if Astoria is involved,” Hermione said.

“She’s right about one thing, you are very well-informed.” Blaise’s dark face was thoughtful as he rotated her around the floor. “You and Draco have discussed this.”

“You’re his friend now?” Hermione asked. “You’ve barely spoken all term. Amazing how many friends he has all of a sudden.”

“We’ve barely spoken publicly. Privately, Pansy and I have been helping him.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Wow. Impressive. You know what would have been more impressive? Not leaving him to sit alone at classes and meals for nearly two months while the entire school pinned him as a Death Eater and racist vandal.” Blaise smiled down at her, not at all offended. “What?” she asked.

“It’s just as Draco said. You’re like a lioness defending her cub.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“It’s a shame he isn’t here yet. He would have enjoyed hearing you dress down Astoria.”

“Are you saying that you ignoring him was some sort of Slytherin plan?”

Blaise sighed. “Apparently, your Gryffindor biases have overwhelmed that fine intellect. Yes, we felt it was important that Draco be seen to suffer for his crimes, show some heroic fortitude—”

“But that’s outrageous!” Hermione cried. “You have manipulated all of us! He hasn’t suffered at all!”

“He certainly has,” Blaise said seriously. “More than you know. There are Death Eaters and their
families who have vowed to murder him for his defection. Hogwarts is truly the safest place for him.”

“I believe you,” Hermione said, calming down. “He said so under Veritiserum.”

“Yes, he told me how you protected him from Shacklebolt.” Blaise raised the hand he was holding and brushed his lips against it. “Draco has changed, and Pansy and I want people to realize it,” he said. “Not just Slytherins. Those blood messages were … unexpected and threatened everything we’d been working for.” He smiled widely. “But then you came along. You were never afraid of him, gave him a fair chance, worked with him in Potions. He is so grateful, Hermione. As am I.” He lightly kissed her hand again.

Hermione cleared her throat. Blaise truly was charismatic. “So that’s it? You’re done?” she asked, backing away slightly.

“That’s it,” he said. “I can turn my attention to more interesting things now, such as the lovely Ginevra.”

“I assume you have plans for the lovely Ginevra, too,” Hermione said darkly as the music ended. “I wouldn’t like to see her hurt.”

“And have you rain hexes on my head like an avenging goddess? Never,” Blaise said smiling. “Save your hexes for Draco.” He led her off the dance floor and bowed before strolling off.

Hermione sighed. Everyone truly did think she was a violent, crazy person. She watched Neville dance with Lavinia, and Blaise twirl Ginny, his dark eyes never leaving hers. Astoria still held court, her diamond choker sparkling, her eyes on the door. Where was that wretched wizard anyway? If he didn’t get here soon, Astoria would have them married with an heir by the end of the evening.

“Miss Granger!” Slughorn boomed behind her. Hermione groaned inwardly, but it served her right for being so inattentive. “How do you like my little affair?”

“It’s lovely, Professor,” she said, turning to face him. “Everyone is enjoying the dancing.”

“I’d like to introduce you to Vasile Montesque, my dear.” Slughorn moved slightly to reveal a tall, gaunt man in shapeless black robes.

The man’s eyes were dark on a pale face, his lips red. There was something about those eyes, a deadness she’d seen before, at another Slug Club gathering …

Hermione looked at Slughorn. “Is he a …?”

“Yes, my dear,” Slughorn said jovially. “So clever of you to spot it outright, but then that’s to be expected, yes? Dear Vasile is a vampire, visiting from Romania. Vasile, this is the celebrated Hermione Granger. I’m sure you will have plenty to talk about—excuse me.” The professor moved away quickly. If she didn’t know better, she’d think he was nervous.

“That one,” the vampire in a low, hissing voice. “He sees everything and yet nothing, knows everyone and yet nobody.”

“He can be very canny, however,” Hermione said. “About people, I mean.”

“Yes,” he said softly. “Like any collector, he likes the rare and the beautiful.” His eyes, an endless black, swept over her. “In you, I suspect, he finds both.”
Hermione did her best not to shiver. Blast Slughorn for leaving her alone with a vampire. “Mr. Montesque …”

“Vasile, please.”

“Vasile,” Hermione repeated. She thought about giving the same permission but found herself not wishing to hear her name on his lips. “What brings you to Britain?”

“I am an exile,” he said slowly. “The vampire community in my native Romania no longer welcomes me.”

“Why not?” she asked. “I’m sorry, that was rude, my curiosity often gets the better of me—”

“Such a lovely blush,” Vasile crooned. “The blood rushing to that sweet face …”

“Vasile,” Hermine said sharply, “there will be no talking about my blood.” She’d read enough about vampires to want to head off that line of thinking. Vampires weren’t the mindless predators everyone believed, but they were given to sudden, dangerous impulses. Especially in the shadows. She was uneasily aware of the dungeon’s romantic (and suddenly rather inadequate) candlelit setting.

“Of course, my abject apologies.” The vampire tilted his head slightly. “Yes, truly rare.” She glowered a little, and he bowed again. “My native Romania has expelled me because I crave too much the company of others.”

Hermione frowned. “Is that a euphemism for … you know …” She bared her teeth and pretended to bite.

Vasile gave an odd cough that she realized was a laugh. “No, no. I drink the blood of animals now.” He sighed. “Sustains the life, yet always I hunger.” He bowed again in apology, obviously worried he had offended her again. “Vampires, we are traditionally solitary, yet I so enjoy the talking with others. But in a small country like Romania, this is dangerous. I had hoped in a larger wizarding community I may do better.”

“Is Slughorn your sponsor?” Hermione asked. She remembered that all foreign vampires require a sponsor to guarantee their behavior. It was part of the Ministry’s Guidelines for the Treatment of Non-Wizard Part-Humans.

“So knowledgeable,” he murmured. “No, that would be … shall we say … too …”

“Risky?” Hermione hazarded.

“Yes,” he nodded, satisfied. “Professor Slughorn, he likes the sure thing. No, my sponsor is domnul Kingsley Shacklebolt, who captured me once long ago in Romania, then helped integrate me into my community.”

“Kingsley,” Hermione said warmly.

“You know him?”

“He is a personal friend,” she said. “He saved my life during the war.”

“A very brave and powerful wizard,” Vasile said. “He has saved my life as well.” He stared at her with those spooky eyes. “I find myself jealous of my friend, that he once saved the life of one such as yourself. I would count myself entirely satisfied.”
Hermione shook her head. “You vampires. Always a way with the ladies. I wonder…” She looked at the creature thoughtfully, an idea taking shape in her mind.

“How may I serve you, prințesă?” Vasile asked. He bowed. “Princess.”

“I’m not a princess,” she said. “My parents are muggles. They fix teeth.”

“You are a prințesă in the truest sense of the word. Again, how may I serve you? Something moves within those wide, beautiful eyes, shining like rarest amber. They pierce the heart. You have a look not unlike my friend Kingsley, yet deeper still, more … seeing.”

Hermione was only half-listening, having come to a decision. Any minute, her friends would spot her with a vampire and carry her off. “I am working on an experimental potion,” she said. “Before I say any more, I’ll have to ask you to keep this secret, even from Kingsley. He will likely know eventually, but not yet.”

“I will keep your secrets, prințesă.”

“I’m not a—” She sighed and gave up. “I’m trying to create a magical blood potion. If it works, it can identify if a substance contains magical blood. This potion can also match that magical blood with blood from a witch or wizard.”

“A powerful potion indeed,” Vasile said, eyes narrowing.

Hermione looked around and moved a bit closer into the corner. She didn’t want to be too far in the shadows with a vampire, yet wanted to elude notice a little longer. Ginny was looking her way.

“Vasile,” she continued, “the blood we need to identify is from a message that has appeared twice at Hogwarts. The message was “Die Mudbloods.” My potions partner and I think the messages may be the result of a curse rather than merely painted on the walls. These words have appeared in two separate locations on castle walls and we’re trying to find the source of the curse before another one appears.”

The vampire tapped his lips with a stick-like finger, topped with a red nail. “How can I help?”

“I don’t know, honestly.” She bit her lip. “But if anybody knows about curses and blood, it’s a vampire.”

“I will consider this,” Vasile said. “May I meet you again?”

“Someplace public,” Hermione warned.


“That will have to do, I suppose,” she said. There weren’t many public places one could meet a vampire. She pulled two galleons out of her dress’ expandable pocket and tapped them with her wand, muttering a charm. “When I’d like to meet, I will change the date on my coin and it will change on yours.” She tossed him a coin, not wanting to touch him, and his white fingers snagged it.

“A Protean charm,” he murmured.

“Yes, it—”

“I do hope I’m not interrupting,” said a voice behind her so cold and terrifying that she hardly
recognized it. Vasile’s coin vanished in a flash, and she pocketed hers again. Then she turned.

“Vasile,” she said. “May I present Lord Draco Malfoy.”

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Draco throws a tantrum.
Well, obviously I've gone mad, because we're more than 120,000 words into this thing, and I'm still introducing new characters, romances and subplots, not to mention new jewelry. And I haven't tied up much of ANYTHING, except we know who attacked Draco during the Quidditch match and we've learned about the Gloriana Set.

We'll have to begin our descent eventually, but meanwhile here's the rest of the Slug Club party, where Draco starts "throwing toys out of the pram" (as Astute Reader karma_cookie puts it) and Neville learns to share.

Malfoy shifted smoothly to stand between Hermione and Vasile, pinning the vampire against the wall. The Slytherin’s eyes shone in the candlelight like a cat’s. Vasile cringed.

“That’s enough, Draco,” Hermione said calmly. “We were just talking. Vasile has been perfectly respectful.”

“Well, perhaps he could be respectful from a further distance,” Malfoy said, now employing a polite tone that was somehow worse. The vampire began to tremble.

“Draco, you’re scaring him.”

“Really,” Malfoy said softly. “Vasile, is it? You know my family, I presume. Be aware that I hold this witch’s life infinitely higher than my own.”

Vasile’s shaking intensified. The vampire was directly under a candelabra now, its light falling on his long dark hair, his paper-white skin even paler than Malfoy’s. It was Malfoy who stood in the shadows, eyes still shining with reflected light.

“Draco, this isn’t necessary and Slughorn won’t like you terrifying his guest.”

“I don’t care what Slughorn likes or doesn’t like.” Malfoy didn’t take his eyes off Vasile. “I care that this vampire understands the consequences if he touches you in any way.”

Hermione huffed in frustration. “Stop making a fool of yourself. His name is Vasile Montesque and he is a friend of Kingsley, who is sponsoring his stay in this country.” She turned to the vampire with a smile. “Vasile, it was a pleasure to meet you. It might be best if you went back to Slughorn now.”

“As you wish, prințesă.” Vasile bowed and slipped noiselessly across the floor, headed directly for Slughorn.

Hermione turned back to Malfoy, who had stepped out of the shadows and looked ready to explode.

“Prințesă?” he hissed.
“Princess. It’s a bit of a nickname,” she admitted.

“A nickname.” Malfoy closed his eyes for a few seconds, obviously trying to calm himself. Then he opened them again and Hermione wasn’t sure he had succeeded. His eyes were like grey glass on the verge of shattering. “I cannot leave you alone for a moment,” he hissed. “I arrive a little late to one party, and you’re in the shadows with a vampire?”

Hermione looked out at the room. “Vasile could be quite useful.” The vampire was huddled close to Slughorn now, who looked a bit nervous. “You know,” she continued, her gaze returning to Malfoy, “I’ve seen advertisements in the Prophet for the Society for the Tolerance of Vampires. They coordinate human blood donations for …”

“You must be joking,” Malfoy snarled. “You are not giving blood to some sodding SPEW for vampires!”

“I think you’re completely overreacting—”

“Oh really, Hermione? You do?” His voice hardened. “Well, let me tell you, when the Dar—Voldemort—was in my home, I saw a few vampires. I saw what they did to people. To muggles. To women. So, forgive me if I don’t agree. I don’t believe I am overreacting when you suddenly adopt pet vampires who give you nicknames. He knows the smell of your blood now and he won’t forget, he’ll imagine the taste—”

“Draco,” Hermione said. He couldn’t hear her, his fists were clenched and his eyes swept the room, obviously looking for a vampire to throttle. “Draco!” He looked at her. She placed her hands over his and drew them chest-high between them.

“I am fine, Draco,” she said softly, looking up into his eyes. “He never touched me. I am fine. I am perfectly fine. I am exactly the same person I was before. I am fine.”

“Is everything alright?” asked a voice—Zabini’s. He and Ginny stood beside them.

Malfoy blinked and turned away as Hermione released his hands. “Yes, thank you. Draco found me talking alone with Slughorn’s vampire.” Ginny gasped.

Blaise looked grim. “Do you know how dangerous that was?”

“Yes.” she sighed. “I won’t do it again.”

“Thank you for making such a sacrifice,” said Malfoy, scowling. “Slughorn …”

“Slughorn didn’t leave me in this corner with him,” Hermione said. “That was my idea. I didn’t want to be interrupted.” Ginny gasped again, and Blaise moaned.

“She didn’t want to be interrupted,” Blaise repeated.

“Hermione!” Ginny was shocked.

“I feel sorry for you, mate,” Blaise told Malfoy. “You’ll never know a quiet moment again.”

“Alright, that’s quite enough of that.” Hermione glowered at Blaise as she took Malfoy’s hand. “Come along, Draco,” she said bossily, pulling him toward the dance floor.

The prospect of dancing cheered Malfoy slightly, as she’d hoped it would, at least enough to distract him from plots of vampicide. He held her a little too close, his lips brushing her temple and
hair, but she could feel his heart pounding even now, so she allowed it. His hand at her waist felt warm through her dress’ thin cloth, beneath her long curls, sending tremors to her core. Her heart began to pound. The adrenalin from talking with Vasile and then watching such a dark Draco had her trembling now.

“You’re alright,” he murmured.

“I wasn’t afraid,” she said quickly.

He chuckled. “No, not you, Hermione.” She found herself leaning her cheek against his robes, overlaid with dark blue velvet tonight. The sensation was now familiar from their broomstick flight. They danced slowly, not saying a word. That same safe feeling surrounded her, like she was wrapped in his magic.

“You look lovely this evening,” Malfoy said, his voice calmer. His hand left her waist to stroke her hair. “But you should be wearing my gift.”

She looked up at him. “I think there are enough Malfoy diamonds here tonight.”

“Astoria.” There was a wealth of contempt behind those four syllables. They both looked over at the younger Greengrass, still holding court, now talking to Ernie and Cormac. The Slytherin’s eyes glittered back coldly like her diamonds. Malfoy flawlessly kept time to the music although his thoughts were plainly elsewhere.

“I truly wanted her, once,” he said pensively. “Did I really expect so little?”

“That necklace …” Hermione swallowed. “Was that your …”

He looked down at her, his eyes faintly reflecting the blue of his robes. “No, that’s Mother’s work. Now I know why Astoria skipped Quidditch practice today to visit Hogsmeade.”

Hermione looked over at Astoria again. She couldn't see that crooked “M” in diamonds from across the room, but she knew it was there.

“Draco,” she said, “that necklace isn’t just a string of diamonds. It’s obviously a Malfoy family heirloom, and you are head of the Malfoy family so your mother can’t …” she trailed off.

“No,” she said.

Malfoy nodded, his face grim.

“Draco, it isn’t.”

Malfoy stopped dancing and guided her gently toward a nearby sofa, drawing her down beside him. Hermione clenched her hands together on her lap and looked out over the party once more: Blaise and Ginny standing close together, drinking champagne, Vasile still dogging Slughorn’s steps, Ernie boring some poor girl half to death. Neville, she noticed, had made good his escape.

“It was hers, wasn’t it?” Hermione asked, her fingers rubbing the ridges on her left arm.

A large, warm hand closed over hers, halting the motion. “Yes, that diamond choker was Mother’s interest gift from Father.”

“I’m that much of a threat,” Hermione said. Her voice sounded low and breathy to her own ears. “I’m so horrible that she would risk her own …”
“It was likely Father’s idea.” Malfoy’s voice was cold. “I’d say he ordered her to give the necklace to Astoria.” Hermione looked at him wide-eyed. “Yes, you’re that much of a threat, Hermione. And yes, he hates you, and all muggle-borns, that much. You’re surprised by that?”

No, she supposed she wasn’t. “That was a terrible thing to force your mother to do.”

Malfoy shrugged. He was surprisingly calm about all this, but then after the whole Voldemort House Guest thing, probably nothing surprised him about his parents anymore. “She rarely wore it.” His eyes narrowed as he looked over at Astoria. “Mother is too good for such a gaudy, vulgar piece.” His lip curled in distaste. “Perhaps it has found a more suitable owner.”

“Does the necklace have any … ah …” Hermione coughed, “… properties?”

His look of distaste deepened. “Mother would never say, but Father implied the jewels contained charms of … submission.”

Hermione felt sick. Malfoy tried to pull his hand away, but she put hers over it, holding it in place. “You’re not your father, Draco.”

“I know,” he said tensely. “I would never use it on her, even to …”

She grinned suddenly. “You couldn’t anyway. Remember, your mother gave her the necklace.”

Malfoy blinked, looking rather shocked, then met her eyes. He snickered lightly, and she couldn’t help joining in until they were both shaking with suppressed laughter.

“I … I don’t think Father considered that,” he said, still chuckling. He slid an arm around her waist. Astoria was looking at them suspiciously, and Malfoy gave her a little wave.

“Draco!” Hermione pulled his arm back down, but she was still smiling.

Malfoy sobered slightly. “I must speak to her. Astoria’s little fairy tale has to end. I can’t imagine what she’s saying now.”

Hermione sighed. She had to tell him, but he wasn’t going to like it. “She’s positioned me as your fun on the side before marriage.” She gritted her teeth. “Like your father used to have.”

He nodded. “They’re all trying to force my hand.” His arm around her waist tightened, and she could feel his breath on her ear.

“I told Astoria it wouldn’t work,” she murmured, “that nobody could make you do anything.”

“I’m sure you did, but that isn’t entirely true now, is it?” Malfoy whispered back. “Are you going to make me apologize to the vampire now?”

“No,” Hermione said. She knew a lost cause when she saw it, and she’d sworn off making people apologize anyway. It always ended in tears, usually Hermione’s. Malfoy’s rich cologne was swirling through her senses. She had to get off this sofa.

The music thankfully ended, and Hermione pulled away slightly to clap along with everyone else. Slughorn raised his goblet. “Thank you all, for coming to my little affair,” he said, taking a hearty gulp. He was wobbling a bit on his legs, and Ernie and Cormac quickly stepped up to help support him. “Have a ‘onderful evening!”

Hermione and Malfoy stood and followed the other guests moving toward the only exit door. A
small bottleneck developed, and Blaise and Ginny joined them standing near a silver tapestry. Then Astoria swept up.

“Draco,” she said delightedly. She kissed him on both cheeks, lingering slightly before stepping back. “I’ve been looking for you.”

Malfoy smiled back thinly. “Does this mean we’re friends again, Astoria?”

Astoria waved a gloved hand, dismissing any disagreement the two of them may have ever possibly had. “We never stopped being friends,” she purred, touching the diamonds at her throat.

“Splendid,” Malfoy said.

“I wonder, Draco, if we could speak a moment,” Astoria said, her hand on his arm.

“Tomorrow, perhaps,” Malfoy said. “Tonight Blaise and I are going to escort these two Gryffindors back to their Tower.”

“I’m sure they know the way,” Astoria said, giving Hermione and Ginny the most cursory of glances. Hermione couldn’t help but glare back. That witch had a lot of nerve, traipsing up to Malfoy in his mother’s jewels, demanding his attention.

“Yes, but that wouldn’t be very gentlemanly, would it?” Blaise said, putting an arm around Ginny.

“I would think that Theodore would much prefer …”

“Well, Theo isn’t here, so I will escort Hermione instead,” Malfoy said easily.

Hermione understood what Malfoy was doing, but she didn’t like playing the timid maiden afraid to walk alone in the big, bad castle. She glanced at Ginny, who was beginning to shift impatiently and glower at Blaise.

“Oh look, the doorway is clear,” Malfoy said. “Goodnight, Astoria.” Taking Hermione’s elbow, he led her out the door, with Blaise and Ginny following.

“Stop grabbing me, Blaise,” Ginny grumbled. “That was revoltingly medieval.”

“But quite symbolic,” Blaise said. “Draco had to do it that way.”

Hermione and Ginny relaxed once they emerged from the dungeons, the four of them chatting lightly as they climbed staircase after staircase. No one mentioned the vampire or Astoria, and even Malfoy unwound a bit, holding Hermione’s hand lightly and running a thumb over her palm. The women ended the evening at the portrait hole, drawing a slight scowl from Blaise, but Malfoy simply nodded and gave Hermione an intent look before wishing them good night and pulling Blaise away.

“So who goes first?” Ginny asked once they had settled by the fireplace with hot chocolate, sitting on The Sofa of Significant Conversations.

Hermione sighed. “I’m ending things with Theo.”

“Because of Malfoy.”

“Yes.” Hermione blew on her chocolate to cool it, although the warm mug felt good in her hands. It felt good to say it out loud. Merlin help her.
Ginny nodded. “And Theo?”

Hermione sighed again. “Draco once called Theo and my relationship public, but not real. I see that now.”

“What do you mean?”

“Theo and I—we hide things,” Hermione said. “We don’t hide everything, just everything that matters.” She sighed, looking into her mug’s swirls of foam. “There’s so much Theo doesn’t know.” Merlin, everything was such a mess. “And Theo has secrets, too.” She thought of the owl the night before, the shuttered look in Theo’s green eyes.

Ginny was grinning now. “Ye gods, Malfoy is going to be revolting.”

Hermione bit her lip. “I don’t see how dating Draco publicly can end well, Gin. All my friends—except for you and Neville—hate him. His family hates my very existence. The press will have a field day.”

Ginny shrugged again. “Maybe it will burn out quickly. And you can go back to disliking each other and move on.”

The idea of moving on from Malfoy, of seeing dislike and indifference in his eyes once more, caused a physical pain in her chest. The looks he’d given Astoria and Lavender, turned toward her …

“Hermione!” Ginny yelled. “Hermione!”

Hermione blinked and found herself standing, wand in her hand, magic crackling. She stared at Ginny wide-eyed. “What happened?”

“You went spare, that’s what happened.” Ginny jumped up and gently lowered Hermione’s arm. “Sit down, Hermione, before you spill your chocolate. Merlin, what a hair-trigger reflex. I promise I won’t say anything like that again. Sit down.”

Hermione sat down again. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s happening to me.”

“It’s peas in a pod, you two are,” Ginny said, sitting beside her. “Such intensity. Okay now? All right. Let’s breathe.”

They sat and breathed for a time, and Hermione recovered enough to ask Ginny about Blaise.

Ginny sighed. “It’s complicated. Not like you and Malfoy, thank Godric, but still difficult to navigate. He was quite upset with me earlier this week.”

“How could you tell?” Hermione asked.

“He frowned slightly and didn’t kiss my hand when he left.”

“Mercy,” Hermione said.

Ginny kicked off her shoes and turned her body to face Hermione, pulling her legs up under her. “Blaise wants me to spend Christmas in Italy with him.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped. “It’s barely Halloween.”

“When I explained that I couldn’t leave my family, that it was our first Christmas without Fred …”
Ginny sighed. “I think I was supposed to be overwhelmed by the honor or something.”

Ginny’s tone was a bit resentful; she had always borne her family’s limited means more gracefully than Ron, and as the only girl, she had suffered less from it. The Weasleys’ actions in the war had advanced Arthur’s career considerably, and with only Ginny at Hogwarts now, Arthur and Molly were in solid shape. Still, it wasn’t like the family had villas on the Continent, and Ginny was understandably sensitive about some aspects of dating an indecently wealthy Slytherin.

Now she was fingering a diamond earring and frowning. “That’s not the problem, though,” she continued. “Visiting his castle over Christmas sounds real, but Blaise doesn’t feel real. He always says and does the perfect thing, hides all his feelings. I can’t get at him.”

“I haven’t heard of Blaise with anyone else this year,” Hermione said.

“Neither have I, but then he’d make sure of that. He never pushes, but he’s always there, somehow, fully in control of every situation.”

Hermione sighed. “Draco does that, too. The always there part, I mean.”

Ginny snickered. “Your Draco’s a hot mess with a thin veneer of Slytherin coolness. The only time Blaise shows any heat is when we’re shagging.”

“Ginny,” Hermione asked, “what is it that you want?”

“I need him to open up to me, I guess,” Ginny said. “I need to know there’s something in there, something worth fighting for, the way you fight for Malfoy. Look at Fleur, for example. She was so beautiful and confident and shining that we all doubted she really cared for Bill beyond his looks. We didn’t think there was anything else to her. It took Bill’s werewolf bites to show how wrong we were.”

The two women sat in silence, listening to the fire crackle. “It’s on Blaise, then,” Hermione said finally. “You’re not a Lavender or Astoria, caring only about the surface. He’ll have to show you the real man, or you’ll have no reason to stay.”

“What if he can’t?” Ginny whispered. “What if this is all he has to offer?”

Hermione took her hands. “Then at least you’ll know. And you’ll find someone better.”

“Do you think there’s more to him?”

“Perhaps.” Hermione looked down at their clasped hands. “He claims to care about Draco. According to him, he and Pansy have been working behind the scenes for him.”

“Maybe I should—” Ginny began, when a noise at the portrait hole made them look up. A long leg came through, followed by the rest of Neville, who tottered a bit as he straightened.

“Neville?” Hermione said, jumping to her feet. Her friend was completely disheveled, his hair stuck up in all directions, his robes unfastened and shirt untucked.

“Hello, devil,” said Ginny. “You and Lavinia Clarke get on well?”

“Ummm,” Neville said, attempting some dignity despite lipstick smears on his cheeks and collar, not to mention his still-heated hazel eyes. “What’s up with you two?”

“Hermione’s leaving Theo for Malfoy,” Ginny said.
Neville nodded. “They’re taking bets in Hufflepuff House. The First Years have a board.”

“Ginny might break up with Blaise unless he proves he’s a human being,” Hermione said.

“Quite sensible,” Neville said. “Well, if you will excuse me …” He edged toward the stairs. Hermione now noticed the lipstick stains streaking down his shirt. Dark red lipstick …

Hermione moved quickly, stepping between Neville and the stairs. “Have something to tell us, Longbottom? Perhaps I’m not the only one who’s reconciled with a former bully.”

Ginny’s eyes widened. “Who … no, it couldn’t be.” Neville groaned. “Parkinson?” she asked. “I saw you two at the raffle table, but—”

“All right, Longbottom,” Ginny said wickedly. “Tell us everything.”

“It’s mad, you are.” Neville tried to free himself, but growing up with brothers had made Ginny freakishly strong.

“Start talking,” Hermione said, grinning, “or I’ll tell you how Ernie saw my bra.”

“Yes, do tell,” Ginny said to her. “You still owe me that story.”

“Well, I was in the ground-floor storage space with Theo and he …”

“We started talking at the Festival!” Neville cried desperately, still struggling against Ginny. “Pansy said her potted gladioli kept dying! But she was sure I had the answer!”

“Gladioli,” Ginny said with zest.

“What do gladioli mean?” Hermione asked. That was it, she was memorizing that wretched “Language of Flowers” pamphlet Bluebell had forced on them.

“You can’t be serious,” Neville said to Ginny. “No, just no.”

“Gladioli symbolize infatuation,” Ginny said. “What color flowers did she say she had?”

“Red and white,” Neville said, flushing. “Can I get up now?”

“What?” Hermione asked Ginny, ignoring him.

Ginny’s eyes were sparkling. “Parkinson wants to take Neville’s innocence.” She stroked his neck. “She wants to sully that untouched …”

“I am not untouched!” Neville squeaked.

“Not anymore,” Ginny said. “How far down does that lipstick go?” she asked, tugging at his shirt.
“Hermione,” Neville begged. “Help me.”

“You’re right, Neville,” said Hermione, patting his leg. “It doesn’t mean anything. Slytherins always keep red flowers in their rooms.”

Neville scowled. “I’m not saying another word.”

“So Theo finally figured out he was being too agreeable,” Hermione started up again. “He grabbed my shirt and tore …”

“Don’t!” Neville cried. “I told her to make sure the bulbs weren’t too big and to put gravel in the bottom of the pots, and she said …” Neville stopped and flushed again.

“All my buttons were undone and Theo’s hand was just …”

Neville’s eyes were screwed shut. “She said that wasn’t the problem, she likely needed a bigger … oh, Merlin …” His face reddened further. “I need to transfer out of Hogwarts, preferably to an all-boys’ school.”

“Nonsense,” Ginny said bracingly. “Show a little Gryffindor courage. How did you end up like … this tonight?” She sniffed him. “I smell outrageously expensive perfume.”

“I left Slughorn’s party early so I could take her to see my Winkweed,” Neville said.

“Is that what the kids are calling it these days,” Ginny said.

Hermione was horrified. “You didn’t! You took her to see that monster?”

“It’s not a monster!” Neville protested. “It’s just protective!”

“It’s a holy terror,” Hermione snapped.

Neville sighed. “It didn’t like Pansy touching me.”


“Of course she’s alright,” Neville said indignantly. Ginny backed off and let him sit up. “I threatened it with an icy frost that would freeze its leaves and snap its branches. The poor darling lashed out at Pansy with its vines and I had to conjure icicles to pin them down. Don’t worry,” he added. “The vines were fine.”

“Nice, Neville,” Ginny said approvingly. “Take a witch to see a homicidal plant so you can protect her in a virile way. Well done.”

“Wendy is not homicidal!” Neville cried.

“It certainly is,” Hermione said. “All those Winkweeds should be Incendioed.”

“We’ve come far afield,” Ginny said. “What I want to know is—how did Parkinson show her gratitude?” Neville’s face was brick-red. “Tell Aunt Ginny now.”

“That’s it,” Neville snapped, getting up. “I’m not saying any more. Hermione can blab about her private life all she wants—and frankly, I’m surprised at you, Hermione—but I’m finished.”

“This isn’t over!” Ginny called as Neville practically ran up the stairs. Hermione huffed. Some Gryffindor he was.
“As for you …” Ginny’s gaze swung on Hermione. “I want to hear more about that storage room. And what you and Malfoy were talking about, all cozied up on that sofa tonight. And what the hell Astoria was wearing.”

Hermione groaned and put her mug aside. “Then we’ll need something stronger than chocolate.”

Chapter End Notes

Happy belated birthday, Callidora! Hopefully, this chapter was close enough. FINALLY, Hermione!

And once again you readers are too smart for me. At any rate, we've learned more about Lucius and Narcissa's marriage then I personally wanted to know (shiver).

NEXT UP: Draco and Lavender both cause trouble and Luna is educational.
Hello all! A few notes before we continue with our saga.

First, my Astute Readers have truly outdone themselves with the comments on the last chapter, especially the multimedia comments. I just love them and play them over and over. (Of special note is the little kid with the hairbrush and the woman pleading out a car window. Poetry in GIFs, these comments are.)

Secondly, my posting may slow a bit as I grapple with continuity errors, which obviously become more prevalent as the wordcount mounts and this whole thing lurches forward under the weight of its own complexity.

Finally, this chapter contains this story’s very first …

WARNING: This chapter refers to autoerotic asphyxiation. I know this isn’t really that kind of story, and I can’t begin to explain the context—just be aware that it’s there.

Have a great weekend,

ThebeMoon

Hermione had every intention of breaking up with Theo Sunday morning, when her courage was high and she was fresh off a marathon LOOP session. She couldn’t keep bleating, “I’m with Theo,” yet still allow Malfoy to flirt with her, touch her hair, hold her close when they danced, to kiss her on that broomstick. That needed to end—not the flirting, touching and kissing from Malfoy, she was quite on board with that—but the situation with Theo. The black-haired Slytherin had been nothing but considerate, kind and agreeable (see LOOP, page 43, chart D). He didn’t deserve to be left twisting in the wind. Hermione didn’t know what would happen with Malfoy, maybe it would work and maybe it wouldn’t. Maybe she’d end up with no handsome Slytherin at all, in which case she might actually have a decent chance of passing her NEWTs.

Either way, Hermione wrote in the pink light of dawn, the current state of affairs (pun intended) could not be allowed to continue. It wasn’t fair to Theo or herself, or even Malfoy. Malfoy might look all smug and confident now, but eventually he’d crack, and Theo would end up as just a smoking burn mark on the Great Hall floor.

Hermione flipped back to page 43, reviewing Theo’s pros-cons chart, but it was a sad waste of time. A whole other Theo lay beneath that suave surface, she just knew it. She wondered if she would like that real Theo better or worse. Well, it would be another witch’s job to crack that code. Theo would remain a beautiful, bound book, while Malfoy’s burned and tattered pages lay open to her touch.

So she was ready to act, but Theo wasn’t waiting in the corridor when she left the portrait hole, and he wasn’t at breakfast either. Malfoy was there of course, but besides a subtle wink and a positively indecent display of spooning his oatmeal, he kept to himself. Hermione headed to the library after
breakfast, hoping Theo would seek her out there, but another Slytherin turned up instead.

“Thought I would find you here,” Pansy said, perching herself on the table. She brought no books, of course, just a tiny seafoam green purse that matched her sweater dress. Her lips were painted a vivid pink.

“You can’t be here to study,” Hermione said, looking her over.

Pansy sneered. “Certainly not. I have a life.”

“Just because I study doesn’t mean I don’t have a life,” Hermione remarked. “If anything, I have too much life. What I need is a little less life.”

“I’m inclined to agree with you,” Pansy said, crossing legs encased in stiletto boots. “You’re rubbish with men, Granger.”

Hermione said nothing. She didn’t need Pansy Parkinson to tell her that.

“Draco might be whistling around the Slytherin dungeons these days,” Pansy continued, “but now Theo is brooding. He spent last night drinking in a corner of the common room, looking dark and dangerous, attracting every brainless twit in the House.”

Hermione felt even more wretched—she knew Theo resented his exclusion from the Slug Club, and now she’d left him drinking alone while she swanned around with Vasile and Malfoy. Mean.

“But I’m not here to talk about Theo.” Pansy leaned forward, and Hermione caught a strong wave of flowery perfume. “I want to know your plan.”

Hermione raised her eyebrows. “I plan to study.”

“Don’t act stupid. What about Astoria?”

“I’m still researching,” Hermione said. “These things can’t be rushed.”

Pansy rolled her eyes. “Only you could turn a revenge scheme into some swotty study group. If this is a trick to get me to join PORN . . .”

“Please, I know a lost cause when I see one.” Hermione sniffed. People had to want to be helped. “My plan is in the research phase. Take it or leave it.”

“Fine.” Pansy looked around the nearly empty library (honestly, Hermione thought, was there no work ethic at Hogwarts?) and lowered her voice further. “What do you want me to do?”

Hermione eyed the dark-haired witch for a moment, then pulled a scroll from her bag. “Sign this.”

Pansy looked over the parchment as Hermione mentally reviewed the contents:

"I, Pansy Parkinson (‘Receiving Party’) promise to tell no one about any plan that Hermione Granger (‘Disclosing Party’) chooses to share regarding Astoria Greengrass (‘Target’), either directly or indirectly, verbally or silently, through any physical, mental, emotional or magical means.

Any information that the Receiving Party uncovers on the Disclosing Party’s behalf becomes the confidential property of the Disclosing Party and is covered under this agreement."
The Slytherin gave Hermione a narrow look. “I am not signing this.”

Hermione plucked the contract out of her hands. “Then go away. I have work to do.” She turned her attention back to Arithmancy, but the other witch didn’t move. Hermione hoped Pansy would make up her mind; that perfume was giving her a headache. She was surprised Neville could stand it.

Pansy huffed. “Fine,” she said again. She swiped both Hermione’s quill and parchment and signed her name with a flourish. “I’d better not find myself covered in boils, Granger.”

“Well, that’s up to you, Parkinson.” Hermione smirked as she took back the quill and parchment. “Here’s your assignment.” She signed the contract herself and tucked it away, then drew out a piece of notebook paper. “Toy broomsticks.”

Pansy blinked. “Toy broomsticks?”

“This is a list of questions. The library’s Quidditch section should answer most of them, but you may have to go to Quality Quidditch Supplies as well.”

Pansy eyed Hermione thoughtfully from her perch on the table. “You’re going to curse Astoria’s broom?”

“Please.” Hermione looked pained. “Give me some credit.”

“Then why—” Hermione gave Pansy a look, and the Slytherin shut her painted mouth. “It will take ages to find all this out,” Pansy complained.

“I need it tomorrow.”

Pansy looked shocked. “I have a date.”

“Break it.”

The witch’s eyes narrowed again. “You want me to break my date with your precious Longbottom?”

Hermione sighed. No, she didn’t. She’d messed up enough people’s lives around here. “Fine. Get me the information before breakfast on Tuesday. I expect a thorough job.” Pansy nodded and tucked the parchment into her tiny purse. Hermione wondered if there was an expansion charm—many of the top-end luxury purses featured them. Did it include a weightless one as well, like her beaded bag, or …

“Focus, Granger,” Pansy snapped. “I asked if there was anything else you needed.”

Hermione started, then blinked at Pansy. “Yes, actually. Pigeons.”

“Pigeons?”

“A flock of homing pigeons is harassing owls at the owlry.” Owls had displaced pigeons as the wizarding world’s primary messenger birds in the 1800s, and some pigeons still held a grudge. Hagrid had told her over tea last week that an unusually large and vicious flock of pigeons had
arrived at Hogwarts after the war and was attacking owls and interfering with deliveries. Obviously, Hagrid was way too soft on them. Hermione wondered if pigeons had caused Brownie’s wounds—he wasn’t a very big owl.

“I’ll need at least three pigeons on … let’s say Thursday,” Hermione said. “Bring them to the Potions lab.”

Pansy’s expression was ludicrous. “You want me to trap some nasty pigeons? Are you brewing some kind of bird thing?” Her eyes widened again. “Are you going to turn Astoria into a pigeon?”

“What? No.” Now Hermione was rolling her eyes. “You’re rubbish at this, Parkinson. Leave the planning to me, alright?”

Pansy slid off the table and straightened her dress. “This had better be worth it, Granger.” Hermione just gave her a thin smile.

The rest of Sunday brought Hermione no nearer to her goal regarding Theo. He appeared at lunch, to her relief, and she managed a brief chat with him in the Entrance Hall before she headed off to an afternoon hike with Hagrid.

“I’d beg off, truly,” she told Theo, “but Neville has already canceled …”

“Pansy, I assume,” Theo said, green eyes amused.

“Oh, you know about that. What do you think?” she asked curiously.

“Pansy has always had terrible taste in wizards,” Theo said. “Longbottom is only a step up.” He smiled. “And who am I to judge her for dating a Gryffindor?”

“Maybe we can meet after dinner.”

Theo shook his head. “I have detention. Scrubbing cauldrons.”


He sighed. “I have to admit, this hasn’t been my best weekend.” He laid a cool hand on her suddenly flushed cheeks and his lips met hers. His kiss grew rougher, his hand holding her head in place, his tongue seeking to dominate until she pulled away sharply.

“Theo,” she said, looking around the Entrance Hall. They were attracting attention, and she thought she caught a flash of platinum hair out of the corner of her eye. “Theo,” she repeated more strongly. The hell with Hagrid’s hike, they were going to resolve this right now. Both Theo’s hands were on her shoulders and he was looking down at her intently. “Theo, we need—”

“Hermione!” Hagrid’s voice boomed through the hall, echoing off the stonework forming its high, pointed ceiling. “Yer ready?” His face brightened further. “Hiya, Nott, care for a hike? You’ll want some stout boots, quite muddy y’know—”

“Hello, Professor,” Theo said smoothly, letting his hands fall. “Thank you, but I’m afraid I’m too busy with schoolwork today.” He tried to sound regretful.

Hagrid nodded approvingly. “A right match for our Hermione, you are.” He beamed at her.

“Alright there, Hermione?”
She nodded, resigned. “Yes, of course.”

Theo bent to kiss her cheek. “We’ll talk tomorrow,” he said.

She could only nod again and follow Hagrid out of the castle. Pansy was absolutely right—she was rubbish with men.

***

Hermione woke up early on Monday absolutely determined this time. She skipped her LOOP (there was a time for writing and a time for action) and spent 30 minutes wrestling with her hair, trying for Astoria’s coiled style and failing utterly. She finally gave up and shook Ginny awake at 7:30 with a cup of tea in one hand and a hairbrush in the other.

“Whaaaaa …?” Ginny groaned and accepted the tea with bad grace. “No, I’m not doing your hair this morning.”

“You have to, Gin,” Hermione begged. “Look at me. I can’t end things with Theo looking like this. He’d be nothing but grateful.”

“Good Godric, what did you do? Can we use the Wonder Diamonds?”

“No.”

“We’ll braid it, then,” Ginny said, tilting her head and narrowing her eyes. “Get out the extra pins.”

Theo wasn’t waiting downstairs, which Hermione found ominous, although he smiled at her easily enough from the Slytherin table. She would do it after Potions—there was a half-hour break before Arithmancy on Mondays, and Theo had a free period. She’d even written up a little script for the occasion and was standing outside Ancient Runes reviewing her lines when a voice behind her made her jump.

“What’cha reading?” Malfoy asked in her ear.

Hermione immediately crumpled up the parchment and stuffed it in her bag. “Nothing. Just notes. Boring notes. About nobody.”

“You’re all wound up,” Malfoy said, eyes narrowing. “You’re planning something.”

She shrugged, trying not to blush.

Malfoy stepped closer. “You’ve laid out a little scheme in your LOON book, haven’t you? And now you have to execute it …” His smile suddenly vanished and all color left his face. He backed away slightly, his posture stiff.

“If you have something to tell me, Hermione, just say it,” he said firmly, eyes cold. “Say it now. I can take it.”
“No, it’s not you, it’s Th—” Hermione clapped a hand over her mouth, but it was too late. Malfoy’s eyes lit up and he opened his mouth to speak, but McGonagall and the rest of the class appeared in the corridor, to Hermione’s great relief.

McGonagall’s lecture that morning actually referenced the Elder Fubarks for the first time, but Hermione couldn’t even enjoy it. Malfoy knew what she was going to do now, she was sure of it; he was looking insufferably smug, even for him. He also looked quite handsome folded up in his little desk with his elbows sticking out. He was going to be revolting in Potions, she just knew it.

She was right. “You still look nervous,” Malfoy said as she dragged a stool over by their cauldron. “I’m fine, and it’s no concern of yours.”

“I know, I’ll help you practice.” Malfoy puffed out his chest. “So, sweetheart,” he said with a passable imitation of Theo’s lazy drawl, “what’s going on in that pretty little head of yours?”

“That is not how Theo—” Hermione began, but shut her mouth with a snap as Lavender slid onto her stool beside Malfoy.

“Hello, Draco,” was all Lavender said, but her eyes held a clear message for Hermione: “Mean.”

“Miss Brown!” Slughorn boomed, stepping up to them. “So happy to see you here! And I have another partner for you, now that Mr. Weasley has left us.”

He moved aside to reveal Theo, who nodded politely at Lavender, then slid onto Ron’s former stool with a smile for Hermione. Hermione concentrated on not looking horrified.

Slughorn clapped a heavy hand on Malfoy’s shoulder, causing everyone at the table to jump, except for Malfoy himself, who merely raised an eyebrow. It would take more than Slughorn to spook that man.

“I expect both you young men to behave like the gentlemen and Slytherins you are, eh?” Slughorn wheezed. “I expect nothing less than top marks from this table.”

Malfoy’s eyes twitched, like he was dying to roll them. Lavender eyed both Slytherin men nervously. Hermione just wanted to bury her head in her arms and weep.

Theo alone was unperturbed. “Certainly, Professor,” he said smoothly. “Might I ask what we are brewing today, sir?”

“Ah, yes!” Slughorn waddled to the front of the class and raised his voice. “Today we will be concocting a delightful little potion called Wrapsodi, which is commonly used in binding building materials such as marble. Our Headmistress says we are running low on the Wrapsodi solution, due to the castle’s many current construction projects, so I’ve offered the services of our Advanced Potions classes.”

Wrapsodi was anything but delightful, the class quickly found. Beginning early in the brewing process, the liquid would adhere to nearly anything, including cauldrons, spoons and students. Sean Finnegan stuck his nose to his cauldron; Neville pasted a ladle to his forehead. Soon nearly every student was stuck to something—Hermione had two bottles trapped in her curls and Malfoy couldn’t get his parchment off his robes. Separation or severing charms were useless; only an Unraveli antidote could counteract the potion, and it became quickly apparent that Slughorn had an inadequate supply.

“Now don’t crowd, don’t crowd!” Slughorn cried as students mobbed his desk, covered in potions
The class devolved into chaos, and the mood at Hermione’s table became increasingly tense. Malfoy happily stirred their potion at the correct intervals, keeping up a steady patter about demonstrating maturity and cultivating the fortitude to meet unpleasant situations head-on until Hermione wanted to hit him hard. Theo was narrowing his eyes at him and even Lavender was staring.

“You know, Draco,” Hermione hissed when he followed her into the supply cupboard, “it’s not too late for me to change my mind.”

“Nonsense,” he said serenely. “You’re in way too deep.” His hand brushed hers. “I saw you ogling me in Ancient Runes.”

“You are vile,” Hermione said, shoving kelp leaves into a jar. “Theo has been good to me, and I will consider his feelings for once. Now knock it off.”

She marched back to the table and began dividing the leaves into two piles. Malfoy looked inclined to protest when she gave the best leaves to Theo and Lavender, but she quelled him with a look. A loud clatter resounded through the dungeons as someone knocked over his cauldron, spilling the contents, and now three tables of students were stuck to the floor.

“This reminds me of Lockhart and the doxies in Second Year,” Hermione said, carefully closing the cauldron lid on her and Malfoy’s finished potion.

“I cannot believe Slughorn began this class with such a faulty methodology,” Malfoy was grumbling, tearing at the parchment stuck to his chest. “I’ll have to replace this robe.”

“That’s terrible, Draco,” said Lavender, who had a cauldron lid on her head like a hat. “Let me help you take your robe off.”

Malfoy shied like a nervous thestral, backing away. Theo snickered loudly. He’d managed to avoid the potion, for the most part, with only a small bit of gurdyroot on his elbow. Malfoy had his wand out and was waving it at his robe while dodging Lavender, and succeeded only in floating a large pink bow off Romilda Vane’s head and dropping it onto their table.

“Just leave your potions in your cauldrons, everyone!” Slughorn called. “Any students with stuck body parts remain after class and I’ll sort you out!”

Theo was still chuckling, and Hermione looked up from her notations to see Lavender slyly swipe a finger on a drop of Wrapsodi and reach out to Malfoy.

“Lavender, don’t!” Hermione cried, but she was too late. Malfoy was looking intently at Theo, his wand in his left hand, and didn’t notice Lavender touch his other hand.

“Oh dear,” Lavender said smiling. “We’re stuck.”

“Merlin’s balls!” Malfoy growled, trying to pull away from her.

“Lavender, how could you?” Hermione asked. “Theo, stop laughing!”

“This is all your fault, you know,” Malfoy told Hermione. He waved the hand now stuck to Lavender’s in the air. “You just had to meddle, didn’t you?”

“I don’t think I like your tone, Draco,” Theo said, frowning.
“I don’t like being stuck to a crazy bint!” Malfoy snapped. He turned to Lavender. “Just because I apologized, Brown, doesn’t mean we’re … anything. We are not friends, we are not a couple. Now we are going to wait for Slughorn and we are not going to talk. At all. Do you understand?” His voice was filled with icy hauteur, and Lavender quailed and nodded.

“And I don’t want to see any more nonsense like this,” Malfoy went on, “or you will be quite sorry. Understand?” Lavender nodded again, her eyes tearing. “Good.”

Malfoy then looked across at Theo, still channeling his inner Lucius. “And Theo, I don’t give a flying fuck what you think about my tone.”

The brass bell rang, signaling the end of class, and Theo cleared the messy table with his wand. Hermione eyed Malfoy and Lavender, sitting side by side with their linked hands on the table, Malfoy looking thunderous.

“Let’s go, Hermione, she’s fine,” Theo murmured, hand on her back as they left the table. _Wrapsodi_, she couldn’t help thinking, _easy to bind but tough to break._

Once out in the corridor, they leaned side by side against the corridor wall to recover. “Theo,” Hermione said, “we absolutely have to—”

“Hermione!” Luna had stopped to smile at them in approval. The Ravenclaw had a pair of Spectrespecs shoved into her blond curls and wore a string of beads that looked like eyeballs. Hermione barely suppressed a groan of frustration.

“Your hair is an excellent place to keep your bottles, Hermione,” Luna observed. “You might even catch some Nargles. And Theo, that is a lovely pink bow.”

Theo slapped a hand to the back of his head and began tugging. “Aagh!” he cried. “Where did that come from?”

Hermione did groan now, remembering Malfoy staring at Theo with his wand in his hand, and Romilda’s pink bow on their table, undoubtedly splattered with Wrapsodi. Theo’s face darkened; he’d obviously come to the same conclusion.

“Draco!” he shouted, storming back into the classroom, pink bow flapping. They could hear Theo’s curses as well as Malfoy’s sneering laugh, Lavender’s scream and the crash of what sounded like a cauldron hitting the wall, likely somewhere near Malfoy’s head. “Now, Mr. Nott, calm yourself!” Slughorn cried. The Potions door slammed shut.

“Oh dear,” Luna said. “Was that Draco’s bow? I’ve been telling him his wardrobe needed a spot of color.”

Hermione stared at Luna, unable to speak.

“Hello, Miss Granger,” said a deep voice. Hermione and Luna turned to see Pratt towering over them. The former Slytherin Beater’s square face was flushed under his bristly dark hair, and he held a Charms textbook.

“Ah, hello, Mr. Pratt,” Hermione said, slightly distracted by the muffled shouting that continued behind the Potions door.

“Call me Rupert,” Pratt said.

Hermione nodded. “How are you today, Rupert?”
“I’m tops,” Pratt said. “I have a Charms assignment,” he went on, “and I thought if anyone knows about charm, it’s Miss Granger.” He smiled widely, pleased with his little quip.

“Charms, did you say?” Hermione asked.

Pratt nodded. “I thought, Miss Granger, if you weren’t busy Saturday, you could help me. We could go to Hogsmeade.”

“Am I hearing aright?” asked an irritated voice behind Hermione. Theo had apparently escaped from Potions, leaving behind his pink bow as well as any trace of his usual poise. Luna looked disappointed.

“Pratt, did you just ask Miss Granger to Hogsmeade?” Theo demanded, face flushed. He stepped up beside Hermione. “How do you even know Miss Granger?” Pratt also turned red, either from embarrassment or anger.

“I supervised one of Rupert’s detentions,” Hermione said, trying to defuse the situation.

“Yes, and thank you for that, Miss Granger,” Pratt said. “Alf and me were right glad not to be scrubbing cauldrons that night and I just want to say, I don’t mind that you choked me—”

“You choked him?” Theo asked Hermione.

“Only a little,” Hermione said before she thought. Theo looked shocked. Merlin, she had a big mouth today.

“I know I deserved it,” Pratt said, “and if you want to do it again, Miss Granger …”

“You should, Hermione,” Luna put in. She smiled dreamily at Theo and Hermione’s aghast expressions. “Some men like a little choking.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say I like it,” Pratt said, “but if Miss Granger thinks I need it …”

“Do be careful, though,” Luna said, smiling at Pratt now. “It can be quite intense.”

Pratt blinked at Luna, confused, but Hermione had other concerns. Theo was striding forward, clearly eager to take his frustrations out on the younger—but larger—Slytherin.

“Thank you, Rupert,” Hermione said, stepping between him and Theo. “But I won’t be able to tutor you in Charms. Or go to Hogsmeade with you.” She thought quickly. “It wouldn’t be … ah, proper, me being your detention supervisor and all. But thank you for asking.”

Pratt nodded, accepting the excuse. “Alright, Miss Granger, but you can still choke—”

“Rupert!” Bloom dashed over and grabbed his friend’s arm. “Stop bothering Miss Granger! I’m really sorry, Miss Granger,” he said, hauling Pratt away.

“You’ll want a safe word, Hermione,” Luna continued placidly. “And I would recommend the presence of a third party to avoid unsafe practices.”

Hermione closed her eyes, wishing she could simply die of embarrassment.

“I would be happy to help,” Luna continued. “I have …”

“Hermione,” Theo said with dangerous politeness, “I’d like to know why you felt the need to choke Pratt.”
“Yes, Hermione,” said a voice behind them, imitating Theo’s tone. “We’d all like to know.”

Hermione opened her eyes, and now she was sure she’d die of embarrassment, because it was Malfoy, of course, leaning against the now-open Potions door and looking gleeful. Lavender walked past him out of the dungeon, not looking at anyone, and moved quickly away.

Pratt and Bloom had stopped a little further down the corridor, and Theo was looking at the two with narrowed eyes. “Wait … those were the Beaters thrown off the Slytherin team,” Theo said to Hermione. “I thought that was just a rumor. You choked them for …” his eyes cut over to Malfoy.

“Ah, the penny drops,” Malfoy said. “You’d make quite a good Beater yourself, Theo. All brawn and no brain.” He straightened and slung his bag over his shoulder. “Choking? Aren’t you the surprise, Hermione Granger.”

Malfoy winked at Hermione, who was summoning all her self-control not to hex him right there. Then he strolled off, leaving Theo looking positively murderous. Hermione could only pat Theo’s arm, her plans for a civilized breakup that morning gone up in Wrapsodi smoke. She’d have to wait until after lunch now.

Luna was sighing. “I wish I was in your Potions class, Hermione,” she said.

***

Hermione followed Theo out of the Great Hall after lunch with an eye to finally getting him alone, but lost track of him in the crowd. She should have packed the Marauders’ Map. She climbed up three sets of stairs in search of him, only to find Malfoy sitting on the fourth-floor stairs with two Squeaky Mice. The scene looked rather adorable until Hermione came close enough to overhear.

“You can’t show weakness to bullies, Percival,” Malfoy was saying. “A stinging hex is a useful response and it’s difficult to tell who cast it.”

Hermione strode up to them. “Mr. Malfoy!” she snapped, still peeved about his role in the scene outside Potions. She turned to Percival. “Percival, if anybody bullies you, tell a teacher.”

“But this bloke is the teacher’s pet!” Percival said, his little face scrunched up. “Can’t I just hex him? Or punch him?”

“Violence is never the answer,” Hermione answered, hands on her hips.

“Really, Miss Granger?” Malfoy asked, amused. He leaned back and crossed his long legs. “I seem to remember you had a mean right hook in Third Year.”

“You hit a bully?” Percival asked her.

She sniffed. “He deserved it.”

“No, he really didn’t,” Malfoy said.
“You certainly did! You insulted Ron and then you—”

“Wait,” said another Squeaky Mouse. “He was the bully?”

“Mr. Malfoy was a terrible, terrible bully and you shouldn’t listen to a word he says, and I would never behave that way now,” Hermione told the growing group around them. Where had they all come from?

“You held a wand to my throat just weeks ago,” Malfoy put in, eyes gleaming.

“You totally deserved that, too, and you still haven’t made that up to me, so I wouldn’t—”

“Miss Granger held a wand to Mr. Malfoy’s throat,” a Squeaky Mouse said loudly to Bertie, who had just arrived with Cupcake on his shoulder. “But I don’t think he deserved it.”

“What was he doing?” Bertie asked.

“Yes, Miss Granger, what was I doing?” Malfoy asked innocently.

Hermione flushed. He was pressing me against a blackboard, trying to start up a secret torrid affair, that’s what he was doing.

“Aren’t you a Slytherin?” she asked one of the First Years, trying to change the subject. It was the girl with the dark braids and the brother in Azkaban. “You shouldn’t be here. These students are a bad influence.”

“They’re Hufflepuffs!”

“Yes, but they’re talking about hexing people and you shouldn’t do that!” Hermione said desperately.

“But Miss Granger, you’ve hexed me. Petrificus Totalus,” Malfoy pointed out. He waggled his eyebrows. “Tell them what I was doing.”

“He was …” He was walking toward me, while I was half-dressed …

“He was … being himself,” Hermione finally snapped and stalked off, resigned to finding Theo after his Care of Magical Creatures class.

“I think she’s the bad influence,” Percival said.

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: Angst. So much angst.
Hello everyone: It's time to tuck in for a big helping of angst in this chapter, following Hagrid's Care of Magical Creatures class. The Squeaky Mice return because I simply can't do without them now. Actually, this chapter is full of cameos--hope you enjoy them!

I'll be flying from the West Coast to my home state in the Midwest for a family wedding, so my posting might be a bit erratic. I'm so grateful for your patience and loyalty to this wacky story.

Hermione was becoming unglued. It was mid-afternoon on Monday and she was no closer to breaking up with Theo. She couldn't believe it; she'd begun her day so decisive and well-organized, with a script and a plan and even a scheduled time after Potions. Then Slughorn—who had officially morphed from Irritating Dodgy Codger to Eighth-Year Personal and Educational Nemesis—ruined everything with his last-minute partner switch and yet another daft potion. She couldn’t break up with a wizard who’d just shed a pink bow slapped on him by his rival, a rival who had decided to take his own Bad-Boy-Slytherin-Asshole quality to a degree that Hermione considered excessive and taunt her soon-to-be ex-boyfriend mercilessly about choking during sex. She just couldn’t do it.

So it was all Malfoy’s fault, as usual. Slughorn’s and Lavender’s, too, but Malfoy’s most of all, Hermione concluded as she headed to the Entrance Hall. Honestly, Hogwarts should develop a correspondence program to keep annoying blond wizards at home instead of forcing them to return to school and distract everybody. Now instead of concentrating on her NEWTs this year with the help of a supportive—if rather mysterious—boyfriend who actually followed her study guides, she was running all over the castle to find said boyfriend so she could break up with him. She was not just encouraging bad behavior, she was rewarding it. This was not how Eighth Year was supposed to go. She had come to Hogwarts determined to shed her prim bookworm persona, and now she yearned for the days when everyone considered her a swottish harpy. Two months into the term and she was a violent loon with man-hating jewelry who would soon be—if she continued her current mad trajectory—carrying on some sort of open relationship with the former Death Eater who betrayed the school and almost killed Dumbledore. It didn’t bear thinking of.

Worse yet, she was proving entirely incompetent at implementing phase one of her dastardly plan. She’d missed her allotted time windows after Potions and lunch, so now she was heading to Hagrid’s hut during her free afternoon period (no DADA today) to catch Theo before he left his Care of Magical Creatures class. She would not be thwarted again.

She arrived at the hut to see Hagrid still teaching, his huge back to Hermione, the students in front of him practically catatonic. Some of them were actually asleep. This was unusual, especially this time of year. The half-giant usually brought in a monster or two around Halloween, and this year he’d arranged to ship in three baby Hydras from Greece—just four feet tall but very dangerous, each one with three fire-breathing heads. Hermione had helped Hagrid with the import paperwork, hoping to Godric someone at Magical Customs in Dover would have the sense to forbid them
entry. Her prayers were somewhat answered, with the little Hydras detained at the Customs House, not because they were deadly dangerous, but because each Hydra was considered three individual monsters rather than a single unit (part of a new creature standardization metric), and thus requiring three separate certificates per hydra. Hermione had been torn between irritation at the inadequate instructions on Magical Customs forms and relief that the horrid creatures were someone else’s problem down South.

Still, Hermione soon learned, if the hydras had been allowed to arrive at Hogwarts, then Hagrid wouldn’t have brought out a few trays of flobberworms to study instead. And then Theo wouldn’t have gotten bored and wandered off to the lake and gotten himself caught by Ernie Macmillan. Ernie was, of course, thrilled to run across Theo on Hogwarts grounds without a prefect. The Hufflepuff sent a student to inform McGonagall, who sent back word that Theo was to go immediately to the Slytherin dungeons.

Hermione heard the whole story from the Squeaky Mice, who she found fooling around in Hagrid’s pumpkin patch. The First Years had heard the whole exchange between the two older wizards while searching for more Squeaky Flowers by the lake. Bertie had been the student Ernie sent to McGonagall. Now the children wanted to know why the Head Boy disliked Mr. Nott so much and why Miss Granger’s name was mentioned. Percival wanted to know why Mr. Nott kept talking about tents and breasts.

“I can’t imagine,” Hermione lied coolly. “But I hope you’ve all learned what can happen when one is unkind to others.”

“Yes, it’s very sad.” Imogene piped up. “Poor Mr. Nott was just trying to give advice about using the storage room properly and now he has to stay in his room until dinnertime.” The rest of the Squeaky Mice agreed that Mr. Macmillan was very ungrateful.

Hermione could only sigh. She considered Theo’s punishment perfectly reasonable—none of this would have happened if he hadn’t bullied Ernie so much or wandered off during the flobberworm lesson or dueled Malfoy in the bloody first place. No, what Hermione objected to was that Theo’s little escapade meant she had to walk back to the castle and brave the Slytherin dungeons and that horrid Snake Charmer if she wanted to break up with him in a timely manner. A disillusionment charm wouldn’t fool the portrait.

Undaunted, Hermione headed to the dungeons, stopping by a girls’ bathroom on the way to set herself in order. Her hair, so beautifully braided that morning by Ginny’s talented fingers was now a bushy mess and her clothes were rumpled and dirty from her time in the pumpkin patch with the Squeaky Mice. She put her clothes to rights with her wand, but emerged from the bathroom still feeling ruffled; she hated taking decisive action with unstyled hair.

Her appearance certainly didn’t impress the Snake Charmer or his snake. The Charmer sniffed at Hermione disdainfully, again refusing to send word to Theo, and wouldn’t let the snake go either. That gave her no other option but to loiter around the Slytherin entrance, praying that a somewhat friendly face would come by instead of Astoria (shudder) or even Malfoy. The gods for once took pity on her, offering deliverance in the form of Pansy.

“Merlin, Granger,” Pansy said, letting her in. She had changed out of her school uniform and wore a frilly, low-cut dress with a matching cloak embroidered with her signature flower. Her black hair was held back with a pink ribbon, and she looked very pretty despite that narrow-eyed, beady stare of hers. “I don’t know how you did it, but you’ve managed to make everything worse. Draco is getting cranky, Astoria is wearing a chandelier around her neck, and Theo won’t come out of his room.”
“I know,” Hermione said.

Pansy crossed her arms. “And Loony Lovegood is telling everyone you’re into choking. I’m reluctantly impressed. Does Draco know?”

Hermione covered her face with her hands. “I really hate this school.”

“Do you happen to know Longbottom’s stance on the subject?”

Hermione lowered her hands and glared at Pansy. “That’s a hard NO on that. If you’re going to keep chasing poor Neville, there will be no choking. Or orgies,” she added.

“You’ve discussed orgies with Longbottom?” Pansy asked, arching an eyebrow. “Still waters.”

“Where … is … Theo?” Hermione ground out, fists clenched.

Pansy shook her head. “What they see in you, I’ll never know. Just go on down.” She waved a manicured hand at a flight of stairs leading further into the dungeons. “Boys dormitories are on the left; Theo’s is the first door on the right.”

The Slytherin dormitory halls looked much like Gryffindor’s, except for the green-and-silver tapestries depicting smarmy-looking wizards and witches ruling or fighting or plotting or backstabbing or whatever. Hermione knocked on Theo’s door rather tentatively, her courage ebbing, and at Theo’s bored “Come in,” she took a deep breath and entered, praying he was fully dressed.

He was, but only just—nobody could look more sinful than a Slytherin stretched out on a sofa. Theo’s white uniform shirt was untucked and unbuttoned, revealing thick dark hair down to his belt. His shoes were off, and he held a glass of what looked like sirenscotch in one broad hand. His head was tilted back slightly, revealing a five-o-clock shadow and a muscled neck. His eyes were closed. “I say, if you’re back for—”

“It’s me,” Hermione said hurriedly, trying not to look. It didn’t seem right to ogle Theo when she was about to … and then there was his …

“Hermione!” Theo sat up, green eyes wide. “How did you ever get in here?”

“I-I needed to talk to you,” she stammered, “but I can—”

“No, no, come in!” Theo was on his feet now, setting his scotch on a jade coaster. He strode forward and suddenly she was staring at that chest close-up, his musky scent surrounding her. She heard the door shut behind her and felt her bag slide off her shoulder.

“This is brilliant,” he said in her ear, his voice impossibly deep. “You are brilliant.” He bent his head and gave Hermione a warm kiss that sent gentle ripples through her. How did she get herself into such situations?

“We have to talk,” she breathed against his mouth.

Theo’s hands covered hers, drawing her palms up his chest, into that soft hair, and his lips moved to her throat. “Why don’t you talk,” he rumbled, “and I’ll …”

“We have to talk,” she breathed against his mouth.

“Theo,” Hermione repeated. She shouldn’t be here. This was a terrible idea. How could they have such a conversation alone in his bedroom? Malfoy would go spare if he saw her! “Theo, is there somewhere else we could go?”
“Afraid not, Hermione,” Theo said with a smirk. “I’m confined to quarters. If you want to talk to me, you’ll have to stay.” He released her and padded over to his desk, pouring another drink. “Here,” he said, handing it to her.

Hermione gulped down half the glass. It was only 2 in the afternoon, but frankly, she needed it. The room was furnished in dark wood and the expected silver and green, with two large, underwater windows looking out at the Great Lake. She edged over to Theo’s desk, admiring his neat scrolls and parchments, his quills neatly lined up in a row. A photo in a silver frame displayed a fairytale castle in high mountains, flags flapping and trees stirring.

“My grandmother’s castle,” Theo said beside her. A smaller frame held the oval picture of a young witch with black hair, who smiled sweetly at Hermione. “My mother.”

“She’s beautiful,” Hermione said, finishing her drink in one gulp and placing the glass on a silver tray.

She looked down at the desk again, mostly to keep her eyes off Theo, and noticed a third framed picture. It was the photo of herself and Theo at the Spangled Veil. Without thinking, Hermione picked up the photo and stared down at it. That damnable Gloriana hairpin sparkled like a constellation against her smoothed, dark hair.

She glanced at Theo, who had backed away slightly, a faint flush to his cheeks. Then she flushed as well—he kept this on his *desk*? She looked down again at their profiles, endlessly kissing, diamonds sparkling. No wonder Narcissa went spare.

Theo cleared his throat. “It’s a very nice picture,” he said, a bit weakly.

Hermione smiled as she set the photo down again. “Yes, it is.”

“I haven’t seen you wear them since,” Theo went on, apparently eager to change the subject. “Those diamonds.”

Her face warmed even further. “No,” she said, trying to sound light. “I don’t wear them.”

Theo’s eyes took on a Harry-like sharpness, and it took all of Hermione’s fortitude to raise her chin and meet them.

“She gave you those diamonds for your birthday?”

She clasped her hands to keep from wringing them. “Malfoy did,” she admitted. Theo stared at her, his mouth set in a hard line.

“I’m very sorry, Theo,” she went on. “It was wrong for me to wear them that night.”

Theo’s looked at her intently, obviously choosing his next words with care. When he did speak, his voice held that dangerous, deceptively soft tone that most Slytherins apparently learned in their cradle.

“Do you have any idea how insulting that is, to wear another man’s jewelry on a date?” he asked. “Your friends at the restaurant clearly believed those diamonds came from me.”

Hermione sighed. “I know, it was thoughtless and stupid, but I didn’t mean to insult you.” Gods, what a dumb move that was. Maybe she should make a T-shirt: I’M SORRY I WORE THE DAMN DIAMONDS. “My hair that day was such a *disaster.*”
Theo didn’t smile, just splashed more sirenscotch into his glass. He didn’t offer her any.

“That was no simple gift,” he said. “I know goblin-make jewelry when I see it.” Theo eyed her up and down and his lip curled. “Obviously your … relations … with Draco have gone further than I had supposed.”

“Yes, but not in the way you mean,” Hermione said, glaring slightly. “I haven’t shagged him, if that’s what you’re implying.”

Theo eyed her over his glass as he leaned against a wardrobe. “It’s quite a nice little setup you have going on here, Hermione,” he said. “And I’ve had just about enough of it. The question is: Who are you trying to make jealous, myself or Draco?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Hermione snapped. She took a deep breath and tried to calm herself. Theo had been putting up with Malfoy’s shit for weeks and he did not deserve to be snapped at. “I’m sorry it looks that way, Theo, but I haven’t been trying to use anybody. I’ve just been … confused.” The last word was delivered in a meek, wavery tone that sounded strange to her ears.

Theo was unmoved. “It’s Draco, then. I never thought Hermione Granger would fall for his lines. You don’t think I’ve noticed his predatory looks, your little blushing? Am I your counterstroke to Astoria?”

“No, no, of course not,” Hermione said. This whole conversation was skidding out of control. She hadn’t been able to use one word of her script. She took a deep breath and tried to remember the lines.

“I sincerely like you, Theo,” she began. “You are charming and polite and wonderful, but I …”

“Yes, yes, I am plainly a paragon,” Theo said, walking back to the sofa. He dropped onto the cushions and looked up at her coldly. “But that perhaps pales compared to Draco’s caustic comments and complete disrespect for you, not to mention years of horrible insults and bullying.” He took a sip of his drink. “Remember, I shared his dormitory for years. I know how he spoke of you.”

Hermione pulled Theo’s desk chair over to the sofa and sat in it, facing him. “He’s changed,” she said earnestly, hands clasped on her knees, legs clamped together. “I truly believe that.”

“Nobody changes that much,” he growled.

“You weren’t here,” she said. “You don’t know what we’ve been through.”

And there it was, she realized, it was out. Theo hadn’t been in the war, he didn’t know. What would Theo have done, had he stayed? a little voice asked. She knew the likely answer, he had admitted it himself at the Spangled Veil. He would have followed his father, a man as evil and corrupt as Bellatrix or Lucius Malfoy, and if those Snatchers had dumped her and Harry and Ron on the floor in front of Theo at Nott Estate, what would he have done? She remembered the basilisk stare of the elder Nott’s eyes, could imagine his broad, hairy hand on the back of Theo’s neck, forcing him to look. “Is it them?”

For an instant, the late afternoon sun filtering through the lake and smell of sirenscotch receded, and she was back in the drawing room at Malfoy Manor, hearing Draco’s soft voice, so uncertain, although she’d seen the flash of recognition: “I don’t know … maybe,” he’d said. Not exactly heroic, but it had been enough.

“Hermione?”
She blinked, and she was back with Theo once more.

“Hermione, are you all right?” Theo was sitting up, looking at her with concern.

She took a deep breath and tried to steady herself on the chair. “Draco’s changed,” she repeated. “You don’t know all of it.”

Theo shrugged, indifferent. “Perhaps.” He threw back his drink and set down the glass. “Perhaps. But it’s more likely he thinks you can repair his reputation.” The wizard grimaced. “He couldn’t be more wrong.”

At first, Hermione was too rattled to listen to his words, but then pieces began to fit together in her mind. She looked back at the *Prophet* picture on the desk. It really was a perfect photo, so well framed … Hermione looked at Theo thoughtfully, and he looked back with the same measuring eye. The only sound in the room was the faint tick of a clock on the mantle and the soft plink of melting ice in a scotch glass.


Theo frowned. “Hermione has every right to be here,” he said. He picked up Hermione’s hand and kissed it, never taking his eyes off Astoria.

Astoria remained in the doorway, looking down at them as if she smelled something nasty. She’d taken off her tie, and her shirt was half-unbuttoned, the better to display the Malfoy choker. Pale blue eyes flickered between Hermione and Theo. “Have you seen Blaise?” she asked Theo.

“No,” Theo said shortly, retaining Hermione’s hand.

“Probably off with his Weasel slut,” Astoria sneered. “Blood traitors, Mudbloods … next I expect Gregory to turn up with a hag.”

“Why is that, Dolores?” Hermione asked. “Are you chasing Goyle, too?”

Theo snickered and slipped an arm around Hermione, drawing her onto the sofa beside him. “Take your ill-humor somewhere else, Astoria. Hermione and I have … plans.”

Astoria’s eyes were tight with rage, and Hermione slipped a hand into her robe pocket. She could feel Theo’s mouth against her ear and hoped he didn’t plan to take this too far. She was getting the same crawly, not-quite-right feeling she had when Ron touched her, actually a bit darker. Hermione couldn’t help stiffening slightly, and Theo’s arm tightened.

“Yes, anything is better than watching this … affront to nature,” Astoria snapped. The slam of the door made Hermione jump, and she used the movement to pull away from Theo.

He leaned back on the sofa again, frowning. “I’m sorry you had to hear that.”

Hermione just shrugged. *She’ll pay for that crack about Ginny.*

Another silence fell, but instead of staring, Hermione and Theo avoided each other’s eyes. Then Hermione gathered her Gryffindor courage and spoke.

“Theo.” She turned to face him, one hand on the sofa back. “Did you tip off Rita Skeeter about our dinner?”
It was a shot in the dark, but looking at Theo’s face, it was a good one. Hermione had given some thought to Skeeter’s presence at the Spangled Veil on that particular night. Again, she didn’t believe in coincidences.

“I thought the tone of that Prophet piece was a little off.” Hermione continued, her eyes holding Theo’s. “The headline and lead were sensational enough: war hero and Death Eater’s son. But let’s discuss the last paragraph—that little aria to the redemption of Theodore Nott, a selfless philanthropist rejecting his family’s past prejudices.”

Theo leaned forward. “Now Hermione, I can explain …”

“Don’t bother,” she said. “Perhaps I was using you, although Godric knows I wasn’t doing it on purpose. But you were trying to use me as well, for my muggle blood, my hero status, my brains.”

“I really do admire you,” Theo said. “But I wouldn’t be a Slytherin if I didn’t take advantage of opportunities.”

“And I wouldn’t be a Gryffindor if I didn’t despise you for it,” Hermione said baldly.

A muscle twitched in Theo’s jaw. “Strong words there, Hermione.”

They were strong words, but she didn’t regret them. “That was no spur-of-the-moment, this-might-look-good decision, Theo,” she said. “You planned this, and took me there, and served me up to that vile woman …” Hermione turned away and clenched her fists. “I’ll never——”

“Oh no,” Theo said sternly. He rose to his feet, his dark brows drawn. “Don’t you dare, Hermione. If you want to end this because you think you’re in love with Draco, that’s one thing. But don’t you dare try to end this in a fit of Gryffindor morality. You can’t forgive one man for years of horrific treatment, not to mention an attack on the entire school and your own torture in his home, then turn around and cast me out because I owled a fucking reporter.”

Hermione also stood, stepping closer and crowding him a bit. Theo didn’t back away, but he did look wary. “This isn’t about him, Theo. This is about you and me. We’ve been together for what, a month? You say I’ve fallen for Draco’s lines. Well, right now all I have are your lines, plus your bullying of Ernie and scheming with Skeeter, and your little vanishing act Friday night. What Theo Nott Fabulousness am I exactly missing here? Have I seen you do anything that didn’t directly benefit you?”

Theo’s face was red with anger. “You’re right, you don’t know me, and you obviously don’t care to do so. And I’m beginning to know you too well, and it isn’t entirely pretty.”

“Well, I wasn’t put on this earth to be fucking pretty,” Hermione spat, her temper fully ignited. “I’m here to change this world, not decorate it. Go find another muggle-born to fix the name your father trashed. The fact that you think you can put on your fancy ring and sweep through the wizarding world like nothing ever happened just shows you don’t understand the war at all!”

Theo’s glare deepened and for an instant Hermione was in the Department of Mysteries again, but she brutally pushed the memory down. Theo was not his father.

“None of us are the same,” she went on in a gentler voice. “We’re all trying to piece ourselves back together, and I’m telling you, the war changed him.”

Theo moved away and began to pace. He stopped near one of the bedposts and turned to face her. “From what I’ve seen, he hasn’t changed enough,” he said. “I’ve known Draco all my life. Yes, I’ll admit, I’ve seen some differences this year. But a few First-Year groupies and a sudden obsession
with a muggle-born do not a redemption make, and it concerns me that you can’t see that.”

Hermione blinked at him. Theo’s face, a mixture of distaste and worry, looked so much like Harry’s, and his words were Harry’s words as well. And how did the sincerity of Malfoy’s possible redemption become the central topic here, anyway? It wasn’t anywhere in her script.

“I know, and I understand,” she said, touched by Theo’s obvious concern. He brightened, and stepped closer, running a hand lightly on her arm. Hermione cleared her throat. Was he ever going to button that bloody shirt?

“Hermione,” he said in that rumbling tone. “You were never just an opportunity to me. I was captivated when I first saw you on that sofa at the Gryffindor party.” Both hands were on her arms now. “You were a vision in gold. I couldn’t see anyone else. I couldn’t think of anyone else.” He smiled softly, pulling her closer. “You felt something too, I know it.”

“Yes, I did,” Hermione said, but she was stepping away, sliding out of his arms and nearly falling over the chair she’d been sitting in. “But that isn’t enough. I can’t be with you anymore. What you and I have, it isn’t real.”

“But it’s real with Draco?” Theo’s face was all harsh lines now.

“Yes,” she repeated softly. Images fluttered behind her eyes: Draco the sneering boy, the gaunt ghost in Sixth Year, the Death Eater staring into Harry’s swollen face. But she also saw the man on the Hogsmeade platform, lowering his wand and rolling his eyes at the sight of her; the brilliant scholar counting seconds in Potions; the fallen angel in the infirmary; the reluctant mentor to his Hufflepuffs; the glamorous rake; and finally, Draco’s pale, perfect, pining face in that dim second-floor corridor.

She focused again on Theo, trying to imagine him pleading brokenly with her as Draco had (“Don’t be angry. Don’t shut me out”), but she couldn’t.

Hermione swallowed. “Yes, it’s real with Draco. It’s so real it hurts.”

Theo shook his head. “You may think so,” he said, “but I refuse to believe that you’re so twisted now that only a Death Eater can understand you.” He stepped closer. “Hermione, let me help you.”

“I don’t need help,” she said steadily. “As I told you the night of the party, I don’t need another Ron in my life.”

“You just might,” Theo said. “Because where you see love, I still see obsession, and Draco’s obsession with you is dangerous, possessive. Weasley is frankly an idiot, but his instincts were spot on.” His eyes met hers. “I’ve made mistakes, but Draco has done worse. He will do worse.”

“You’re wrong,” Hermione said stubbornly. “I can’t tell you everything—it’s not my story to tell—but he’s taken risks. He’s earned my trust. He’s proven to me that his future will be very different from his past. Draco has changed.”

“You keep telling yourself that, Hermione,” Theo said, returning to that soft, cold Slytherin voice. “But Draco Malfoy will break your heart.”

Hermione backed away, picking up her bag and moving toward the door. She put her hand on the doorknob and turned to face Theo, looking into those green eyes that still gave nothing away.

“Maybe he will,” Hermione said. “But I have my own instincts, and here’s what they tell me: You would break my heart, too.” Her voice cracked slightly. “I’m sorry, Theo.” She turned the knob
and left the room.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Hermione gets tangled in red tape.
Hello all: My family wedding went well, but the six bridesmaid dresses weren't finished! The ceremony was an hour late! I thought my sister was going to murder the seamstress! I was literally sewing a dress on one poor girl at the last minute and I'm a TERRIBLE sewer, it was a real Frankenstein job. But they all looked lovely going down the aisle, and it was a beautiful ceremony.

So here's today's chapter with the usual angst and weirdness, as Hermione deals with friends and Slytherins and plans a little outing.

Hermione fled the Slytherin dungeons to hide in the library’s Goblin History section, the same narrow aisle where Theo had first found her with Draco. (“I'll kiss you if you tell me …”) She settled on the floor with her back against a shelf, heedless of the tinny, screeching curses emanating from “The Gory Book of Goblins.”

The numbers in her Arithmancy book swam before her eyes and Theo’s voice played on a continuous loop: *Nobody changes that much ... his obsession with you ... dangerous, possessive ... Draco Malfoy will break your heart ...* She could hear the emotion in Theo’s voice, the concern, but she also heard bitterness and injured pride, a baffled anger that nothing he could say would get him what he wanted.

And Hermione still believed her final words: If she had been so unfortunate as to fall in love with him, Theodore Nott would have broken her heart. Not right away, not through cruelty or anger—or worst of all, indifference. No, Theo would have been all attention and courtesy, with a sure hand and an easy smile, and she would have dashed her heart to pieces on that cool shell.

As for Draco, well, she had already drawn up a LOOP chart on the subject (with a probable future timeline, see Appendix A). He could break her heart. He could also wreck her reputation. He could be masterminding an elaborate setup to gratify his evil lusts and schemes.

The last option had Hermione snorting aloud. *Come on.* If Draco’s pursuit of her was part of a diabolical plan, it was the most badly conceived and ineptly executed plan since Voldemort’s Horcrux Road Show. Draco had undermined himself at practically every turn, frequently denying himself, in Hermione’s opinion, the luxury of rational thought. The man was a bit of a mess, and this only strengthened Hermione’s belief that Draco really had changed. Change was messy and painful and unpredictable. He was nowhere near redeemed—too many demons—but to her way of thinking, he had earned the opportunity to try, despite what Theo or Ron or that bloody LOOP plan said.

Hermione stretched out her legs on the stone floor and transfigured a handkerchief into a thick green blanket. It was freezing in the library, but one couldn’t risk a warming charm around so many books. She pushed Slytherins out of her mind and focused on her Arithmancy text. The formulas for calculating the epicycles and deferents for Mars were fascinating, and Hermione had been exploring their implications. Ptolemy’s geocentric model might be clunky and ridiculous, but the formulas held great magical power. Hermione had even drawn up a similar system using
Jupiter as the center in her spare time, and was soon covering the floor of the Goblin History section with complicated number charts. It calmed her nerves. A fit of inspiration had her wadding up bits of parchment and floating them in the air to mimic the sun and planets’ movements around Jupiter—in this case, Jupiter was an inkpot she’d painted orange and suspended in mid-air. It would be a great accompaniment to her next Arithmancy presentation: “What if Ptolemy Was an Alien?”

The success of her floating model so energized Hermione that she decided to go down to dinner, striding into the Great Hall with her arms full of Arithmancy scrolls. Draco cast her a quick, concerned look from his seat beside Blaise, and she gave him a tiny nod. Theo was on the other side of the table, flanked by his former Potions partners, who tried to tempt him with fruits and candies, among other things. Theo appeared more tempted by his goblet, which by his flushed cheeks, Hermione guessed didn’t hold pumpkin juice.

She turned quickly away, dumping her scrolls on the Gryffindor table and sitting with her back to the Slytherins. But any hopes of a quiet meal were quickly dashed. Many NEWT-level courses had exams that week, and most of the table was in full panic mode. It was times like these she wished she’d been sorted into Ravenclaw—then she wouldn’t have to deal with stupid questions about material presented weeks ago.

“Read the textbook,” she said for the umpteenth time, tearing off a bit of bread and mopping up some stew gravy. “It will tell you exactly how to counteract excessive stirring in the Fiducia potion, Romilda.”

“Can you explain the tomato circles again?” Seamus asked.

“Ptolemaic circles,” Hermione said through gritted teeth.

“Bugger that,” Dean Thomas said. “I need to learn these bloody nonverbal spells. Hermione, can you—”

Hermione sighed. “Dean, you have to practice.” She broke off another chunk of bread but dropped it into her stew, uneaten. She would take her scrolls back to her dormitory, where she could draw her circles in peace. Perhaps McGonagall would approve a transfer to Ravenclaw in the name of inter-House unity.

***

Hermione overslept Tuesday morning after staying up too late with her Jupiter formulas. Theo’s pain had been obvious at dinner, no matter how much he’d tried to hide it, and Hermione was feeling a bit wretched again. She arrived at Ancient Runes tired and hungry to find Draco standing outside the classroom door.

“You weren’t at breakfast,” he said with a frown.

“I’m fine.” She took a spot against the opposite wall, feeling oddly shy.
“You don’t look fine,” he said, stepping closer. “And Theo still looks furious. I’m guessing your talk went poorly.”

“Rather.”

Draco smirked. “You should have practiced with me.”

Hermione glowered back. “Not funny. Take your gloating somewhere else.”

He looked slightly chastened and Hermione sighed. Draco wasn’t trying to be annoying, he was just being … him. Her shoulders drooped. “I’m sorry, I didn’t sleep well.”

She expected him to take her hand, perhaps even try to kiss her out of her mood, but Draco remained where he was, arms at his sides. “I’m glad you’re no longer with Theo, but I don’t like to see you unhappy,” he confessed.

“I did like him, you know.”

“He liked you, too,” Draco said. “It wasn’t all a …” he trailed off, looking uncomfortable.

“I know very well that Theo was using me,” she said coldly.

A short silence fell, then Draco spoke. “Hermione, whatever Theo said, don’t take it to heart. He’s angry and—”

“It’s worse than that. Theo feels sorry for me.” Hermione’s voice was bitter. “Apparently, I’m the victim of a Death Eater’s sick obsession and too stupid to know it.”

Draco’s body stiffened. “How dare …” he growled.

“Don’t take it to heart,” Hermione parroted. Draco glared.

Hermione rubbed her temples. The lack of breakfast had given her a slight headache. “Look, Theo has every right to speak his mind,” she said. “You’ve treated him like dragon shit for weeks for the terrible sin of dating me and treating me well. Why would he think any differently?”

“Splendid,” Draco said, “now you’re defending him. Who’s next? I know, let’s take you to Azkaban and you can defend my father for a while.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Hermione said. “I don’t think they’re doing enough to protect prisoners from that magical virus.”

Draco scowled. Hermione gave him her best innocent look, and he dropped the scowl, the corners of his mouth turning up slightly. “Mean,” he said.

“I am,” Hermione agreed. Then she sighed. “Theo will be fine. I likely hurt his pride more than anything else.”

That brought out a full grin. “A little humility will do him good.”

“That’s a bit rich, coming from you, Draco.”

He looked at her sternly. “I have taken numerous hits to my pride for your sake.”

“I know,” she said, reaching out to take his hand. His warm skin sent a tremor through her.
He leaned closer. “How grateful, hmmm? Can I expect some reward for my sufferings?”

“Sufferings, indeed,” she said. “You’d think I’d sent you out to sleep in the rain.”

“In some cases, the rain would have been preferable. Yet here I am, still at your service.” Draco raised her hand and kissed it, grey eyes on hers, and her heart thudded as she felt the brush of his lips on her skin, and perhaps the slightest touch of tongue, a tiny taste.

The brisk click of footsteps broke them apart. It was Pansy, mincing toward them in short heeled boots that definitely pushed Hogwart’s dress code.

“Well isn’t this sweet,” Pansy said with a sniff. She tugged a thick, red-ribboned scroll out of her tiny black purse. “Here are your Charms notes,” she said, handing the scroll to Hermione.

Hermione was impressed to see that Pansy had wrapped her toy broom research in actual Charms notes that resembled her own handwriting. Plotting with Slytherins did have its advantages. “Thank you, Parkinson,” she said coolly. “Don’t expect me to bail you out next time.”

Pansy glared but said nothing, just stalked off as best she could in those boots. She was going to break an ankle on the castle floors one day.

Draco looked at Hermione with mounting horror. “You two are scheming together. Whatever it is, please warn me beforehand so I can hide.”

“Nonsense,” she said airily. She tucked Pansy’s scroll into her bag as McGonagall and the rest of the class entered the corridor. “I’m just a kind and forgiving person.”

***

Potions class was canceled that morning, thank Merlin, as somebody (or somebodies, likely little Hufflepuff bodies) had sealed the dungeon door shut with Wrapsodi. Renegade bottles of the stuff were spreading through the castle; Justin Finch-Fletchley had been stuck to his bench at breakfast. Wrapsodi even worked on ghosts, which no one could have predicted, and the Bloody Baron was found hanging upside down in the Entrance Hall, bellowing curses. “How did someone even get the potion up there?” people whispered.

Slughorn had posted a note about the postponement that clearly stated “DO NOT TOUCH DOOR” before heading off to his private office to brew more Unraveli. But a few students were stuck anyway, including poor Neville.

“Somebody shoved me,” he told Hermione, pulling fruitlessly at his trapped elbow. “Can you check on Wendy for me before lunch? Just give her a few drops of ink if she looks droopy.”

Hermione pursed her lips. “On one condition. Do you know where I can find some Virgin Earth?”

“Virgin Earth?” Neville’s eyes widened. “You’ll have to dig for it. By moonlight. With a silver shovel.”
“Can you help me?” Hermione asked.

Neville looked around and lowered his voice. “Is this part of whatever you’re doing with Pansy? Because I don’t believe for a second you two are studying Charms.” Hermione shrugged and Neville sighed. “Alright, meet me at Greenhouse Four after dinner. There’s an early half-moon tonight.” Many magical plants reacted to moonlight, so Neville regularly tracked the moon’s movements.

“So you have a silver shovel?” Hermione asked.

He looked uncomfortable. “I do, actually. The Ministry presented it to me in honor of my … uh, deeds.”

Hermione beamed. “Lovely.”

“Whatever you two are doing, I don’t want to be anywhere near it,” Neville warned.

She laughed and patted his arm, keeping her hand well away from the door. “You sound just like Draco.”

***

The day’s DADA class featured an absolute travesty of an exam. One section required students to sketch their favorite flowers. (Hermione drew a Winkweed from memory and labeled it.) But at least it was quiet; Draco behaved himself and Theo ignored her completely. Hermione spent the entire class fretting, but not about either wizard. Flower drawings were not proper preparation for NEWTs. Perhaps she should develop her own DADA exam and pass it around, just to ensure the class properly understood NEWT-level material. Hermione was mentally outlining appropriate exam questions when a Squeaky Mouse popped out from behind a statue.

“Miss Granger!” It was the little Slytherin girl.

“You seem quite easily startled,” the girl said as Hermione fought to catch her breath. “Are you sure you’re a war heroine?”

“Can I help you?” Hermione asked, trying not to glare.

“Oh no,” the girl said. “My grades are quite good, and you seem a bit flustered in all other aspects of your life. I’m trying to get a boy to notice me, but you don’t seem like the best role model there either.”

Hermione couldn’t help but grin. “What’s your name?”

“Leila Durant,” the dark-haired girl said. “Still, you must have something going on, if Mr. Malfoy is willing to tolerate your grumpy ways. Percival says it’s your breasts—”

“That little monster,” Hermione muttered.
“I agree—the monster bit, I mean,” Leila said. She held out the scroll. “I’m supposed to deliver this to you from Professor Hagrid.”

“Were you all in his pumpkin patch again?”

Leila looked offended. “I have Care of Magical Creatures on Tuesdays.”

Hermione flattened the parchment and read it quickly. The baby hydras had arrived in London and Hagrid was worried about their condition. Hermione was more concerned about the Magical Customs officials’ condition.

“Are you going to rescue them?” Leila asked.

Hermione frowned. “You shouldn’t read other people’s notes.”

“It wasn’t sealed,” the little Slytherin said. “Are you going to go? Professor Hagrid says hydras are really quite delicate.”

Hermione snorted. “He also says dragons are misunderstood and hippogriffs are harmless.” She reread the note. Hagrid appeared to be quite distressed; the parchment had a few tearstains like the note he’d sent about Buckbeak so long ago. She sighed. “I suppose I’ll have to go—my name is on the paperwork.”

Leila trailed her back to Hagrid’s hut, where the half-giant was pathetically grateful when Hermione agreed to rescue the little hydras from quarantine. “Yeh goin’ tonight, right?” he asked.

“No, Hagrid,” she said with a smile. “These are customs inspectors. Strict 9-to-5 hours.”

Hagrid was shocked. “But my hydras! They’re just babies! They won’t last another night!”

“Of course they will,” Hermione answered, riffling through the stack of parchment he’d handed her. “These custody logs say the hydras ate eight tins of canned tuna and six beef stew bones in the last 24 hours.”

“Not nearly enough for growin’ youngsters,” Hagrid grumbled.

If Hermione had her way, the little menaces wouldn’t grow at all, but she couldn’t say so, not with Leila’s bright eyes watching them. Hagrid reluctantly conceded that the hydras would likely survive until Wednesday, and wrote Hermione passes for Potions and Arithmancy classes.

Leila badgered her all the way back to the castle about coming along, but Hermione was adamant.

“Trust me, this is a dull little errand, nothing interesting about it,” Hermione said as they stood in the Entrance Hall. “I won’t have you missing classes.”

Leila hung her head in disappointment, and Hermione sighed. “I’ll let you visit the hydras after I return—only you, mind, only in my presence, and only after you give me a 6-inch scroll on the history and proper care of hydras. I’ll tell Hagrid to give you extra credit.’

The little girl smiled thinly—Slytherin children were kind of creepy—and nodded. “Thank you, Miss Granger. You are quite useful sometimes.”

Again, Hermione couldn’t help grinning back. “So I’ve been told.”
Dinner that night was much like the night before: Draco gave her a quick glance and seemed reassured when she nodded back. Theo ignored her completely, deigning to accept a few grapes from his admirers. Hermione again sat with her back to the Slytherins and tried not to listen to what passed for academic discussion among Gryffindors.

“I think that’s a butterfly,” Seamus said turning his teacup. He and Dean were dumping out everyone’s cups and trying to read the leaves in preparation for their Divination test.

“No, it’s a Grim with a book,” Dean said. “Oh, no, mate—you’re going to fail all your exams!”

After dinner, Hermione and Neville hiked to some remote hills outside the castle gates for some Virgin Earth. Her friend’s silver shovel looked more ceremonial than useful, engraved with a quote from Dumbledore about Neville: “It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends.”

Hermione felt bad about using the shovel to actually dig, but Neville only grinned. “I’m just happy to find a use for the thing,” he said. “Usually I just stick it in a planter in my room.”

It took nearly two hours of tramping around hillsides to find a vein and the two friends were mostly silent, enjoying the cold, clear night. The half-moon seemed to smile down on them, turning the whispering grasses silver. Neville didn’t mention Draco and Hermione didn’t mention Pansy; they both seemed to crave a quiet night of gathering a rare magical substance for some dodgy, secret purpose. They dug up enough Virgin Earth to fill half-a-dozen jars, which Neville stuck in a canvas bag.

“Keep it in a dark, cool place,” Neville said, discreetly handing her one of the jars after they returned to the Gryffindor common room. “Away from direct sunlight.”

“Thank you, Neville,” she said. “I wish I could tell—”

“No, no.” Neville clutched the canvas bag to his chest as if anything she’d say wasn’t fit for his little jars of earth to hear. “I don’t want to know why you need magical soil, any more than I want to know why Pansy’s been hanging around the owlry. Just keep me out of it. And be careful.”

Hermione just rolled her eyes. Everybody always acted like she was reckless or something.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Hermione takes a ride on the Hydra Express.
Chapter Notes

So this is a shorter chapter, but fun, and packed with stuff. I took the day off and spent part of it in a cafe, finishing this revision. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Getting the hydras out of hock on Wednesday took half the morning. Hermione had planned to Apparate into London's Magical Customs House, sign some forms and pop away again—an hour, tops. But the customs clerk insisted that she take custody of the hydras at Kings Cross Station and personally place them on the Hogwarts Express for delivery to the castle. The train was making a fast supply run that day, reaching Hogsmeade at 4:20 p.m.

The Customs House had an owl post, so Hermione sent one owl to Hagrid, telling him to meet the hydras at Hogsmeade Station, then another to Harry, asking if he’d like to have tea before she saw the little monsters off. Harry turned up almost immediately in front of Kings Cross, wearing a dark muggle coat and hat. Hermione wore a blue wool coat over her uniform, with her robes and books packed into her pink beaded bag.

Harry hustled her to a tiny, grimy muggle teashop nearby. Hermione was alarmed by her best friend’s appearance—Harry’s face was pale and his eyes hollow behind smudged glasses.

“No, I haven’t been sleeping much,” he admitted, downing three cups of strong tea. “We’re close to capturing a Death Eater cell, but they keep moving.” He looked around sharply, then lowered his already-low voice even further. “Watch yourself, Hermione, one of them’s not.”

Hermione leaned forward. “Not what?” she whispered back.

“No, Nott.” A faint gleam of amusement crossed Harry’s face, reminding her of Theo, and then she gasped, understanding. Harry nodded. “Regis Nott. We thought he was in Germany, but he’s been sighted. He’s probably been here the whole time.”

Hermione stared at him wide-eyed over her teacup.

“Regis is the youngest brother, pretty small potatoes,” Harry went on, finishing his fourth cup, “but he’s still a Nott. Tell your boyfriend to be careful. I’d advise Theodore not to leave the castle.”

“Harry, Theo and I—”

Harry made a tiny shushing sound and Hermione stopped speaking immediately. They drank their tea in silence, careful not to make the smallest clink of spoon against saucer. After ten minutes, Harry nodded and straightened in his chair.

“A ministry official just left,” he said. “I’m supposed to be in the field. Kingsley would be furious if he knew, but I had to warn you. That Prophet article links you to the Notts.” Harry’s green eyes were sharp, if slightly bloodshot. “Hermione, what’s wrong?”

“Harry,” she began again. “About Theo—”
“What, have you seen something? Has he said something?” Harry suddenly looked hungry, his hand tightening on his teacup.

“No,” Hermione said calmly, while inside her mind screamed, “What are you doing? This is Harry! Tell him about the owl! Tell him!”

“I’ll warn Theo,” was all she said.

Harry nodded. “Alright then. How is your creepy blood potion coming along?”

“Still simmering,” Hermione said. “I need a few more days.”

Harry downed the rest of his tea. “I have to go.” He took her hand and stood, drawing her into a hug. “Owl me if you hear anything,” he whispered.

Hermione felt wretched. *Tell him! You stupid bint, tell him!*

After Harry slipped out of the shop. Hermione sunk back into her chair and took a few moments to hate herself. Why didn’t she tell him? But that look in Harry’s eye … the aurors would be all over Hogwarts in a heartbeat, demanding to interrogate Theo. Ugh, what was it about these Slytherins that brought out her protective instincts?

Hermione brooded over her stupidity as she made her way to Platform 9 ¾, where a Magical Customs inspector nervously waited with a large cage of thick iron mesh. Small licks of flame spurted out the top and sides, almost setting fire to the paperwork the sweating, terrified official thrust at her.

She thought she was finished then (if she hurried, she could still make Arithmancy), but the custody forms she’d signed required her to accompany the hydras to Hogwarts, and the train conductor refused to accept responsibility. So Hermione had to ride in the train’s single passenger compartment with three hydras (or nine officially certified hydra heads). Even worse, the compartment held a second passenger: Sybil Trelawney, who still wore enormous glasses and draped herself in colorful scarves that hung off her thin frame. She was returning from a Seer conference in Athens and practically jumped out the window at the news that the smoldering cage contained hydras.

Hermione tried to reassure Trelawney while spraying the cage with *Aguamenti* water spells, but it did little good. The former Divination teacher moaned about “omens of death” and “fiery immolation” while cowering under her umbrella. When that palled, she extolled Hermione’s future sufferings due to a tragic lack of an Inner Eye.

“Your stubborn blindness shall be your doom,” Trelawney pronounced, swaying in her seat.

Hermione thought the crazy old bat might be right, but she wasn’t telling her that. Instead, Hermione “accidentally” miscast an *Aguamenti*, allowing the hydras to set fire to Trelawney’s umbrella. Hermione felt a little bad about that, but not much. The scare silenced Trelawney for the rest of the trip, allowing the baby hydras to fall asleep, emitting little smoky snores from the cage.

This gave Hermione a chance to look at the *Prophet* she’d picked up in London, glad to see no mention of the Notts. She’d have to read up on the family, though, and, she reluctantly concluded, she’d have to talk to Theo. He needed to be warned. Brownie, her only link to that mysterious message last Friday, had vanished from the owlry.

The train puffed to a stop at Hogsmeade Station a few hours later, and Hermione levitated the cage and followed it out of the compartment without another look at Trelawney. Hagrid enfolded her in
a grateful hug, then fell on his hydas, sobbing with happiness to see them safe.

The platform was just as she remembered it from her last arrival at Hogsmeade Station: the painted wooden benches and stone building, the creaking sign. Only a little over two months ago, but it felt like a lifetime. Hermione sat on a bench just as before, turning her face up to the weak sunlight …

Then he appeared. It was like her thoughts had manifested him, the train’s clouds of steam parting to reveal his tall figure. He wasn’t, however, the thin, raggedly breathing man who had pointed a wand at her with wild, startled eyes. This Draco strode purposefully toward her, black cloak billowing behind him. His frame had filled out after months of Hogwarts food, and he crackled with decisive energy. Draco stopped a few feet away, eyeing her severely, and Hermione jumped to her feet.

“How … how did …” she stammered.

“Slughorn said you were off helping the gamekeeper,” he said. “When you didn’t turn up to Herbology, Longbottom and I went to find out what fool’s errand he sent you on.”

Draco transferred his severe look to the other side of the platform, where the hydra cage was nearly wreathed in flames. The hydas were apparently excited to see Hagrid, too. Or maybe they were excited to see the sausages Hagrid was poking through the mesh. The platform was beginning to smell like a summer barbeque.

“It was certainly a fool’s errand,” Draco continued. “And dangerous.”

“It was fine. Just a bit of red tape. I had to escort the hydas on the train.”

Draco was suddenly closer, and black-gloved fingers tilted her face up to his. “You were mad to go,” he said. “A hydra’s breath is poisonous and its blood is deadly. And you went to fetch three of them?”

“They’re just babies,” Hermione said, sounding uncomfortably like Hagrid. “At this stage they’re fire-breathers, they won’t emit poisonous clouds for at least another three months—”

“Four-foot, fire-breathing babies with deathly poisonous blood.” Draco released her and glared over at Hagrid, who was poking bare fingers at his new pets. “Their blood is probably all over that cage,” he said. “Let me see your hands.”

Hermione held them up, palms out, and he sighed. “Take off your gloves.”

She did so. Really, Draco was so bossy. “See?” she said. “I’m fine.” He was looking into her eyes now, but not with any romantic intent. He was checking her pupils, she just knew it.

“I suppose you’re all right,” Draco said reluctantly. “You Gryffindors have no sense of self-preservation.”

“Says the man who volunteered to take Veritaserum.”

A tiny shrug. “I knew you would protect me.”

“Well, then you can protect me, too,” Hermione said.

His eyes took on that unblinking basilisk stare. “That’s right, if you let me,” he said quietly.

Hermione stared up at him, hypnotized, her heart suddenly pounding. Then she stood on her tiptoes
and kissed him softly. It seemed right to kiss Draco here, on the platform where they had met again for the first time, the day she had stayed with him against Ron’s wishes. They had been hurtling toward this moment since Draco put his foot against hers in the carriage.

He responded immediately, wrapping her in cologne and his heavy, rich cloak. Draco deepened the kiss, his tongue meeting hers, and it was utterly theirs, their moment, free of past fears and desperation. *Mine,* Hermione thought, *oh gods, finally mine.* She had denied herself for so long, denied herself the feel of his hands, his mouth, the taste of his skin. He was hers, completely hers, her very own stubborn, arrogant, dangerously beautiful and half-redeemed wizard, kissing her passionately, and she …

A loud clearing of a throat brought them back to their surroundings, and Hermione and Draco broke apart to see Hagrid standing about five feet away, his broad face red. “Yeh might want to take that elsewhere, unless yeh want the whole world to know,” Hagrid said. “’Nother train comin’ in a few minutes.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” Hermione managed. She pulled herself out of Draco’s arms, but he kept a hand at her back. “Thank you, Hagrid.”

“Thank yeh, Hermione,” Hagrid said, still flushing slightly. “I thought that might be the way of it, with this one bustin’ into me hut, demanding to know yer whereabouts.” He lowered his voice to what he fondly considered a whisper. “Never took t’ the other one, I must say. Always frettin’ about mud on his shoes.”

“Thank you, Professor Hagrid,” Draco said. “I apologize for my … heated words before.” Hermione stared.

Hagrid stepped forward, clapping Draco on the shoulder, nearly sending him into the platform. “No need, there, lad. Heart in the right place, but it’s as I told ya, Hermione loves hydras.”

Draco gave Hermione an eloquent look, and she couldn’t help smiling. Men. Hagrid had every reason to hate Draco after the Slytherin’s terrible treatment of him and his animals over the years. Yet the half-giant was looking at Draco with near approval now, under the fond delusion that the blond didn’t care about his shoes.

“Maybe we should get back to the castle,” she said. The school’s largest carriage stood nearby, hitched to two thestrals and containing a single hunched figure.

“Yeh! The poor babies mus’ be starvin’!” Hagrid lumbered back to the cage, belatedly pulling on his dragonhide gloves. He picked up the cage with a grunt and headed toward the carriage.

“We are not riding with them,” Draco pronounced.

“Nonsense,” Hermione said. “It’s perfectly safe.” She took his hand and led him toward the carriage. “And I assume you remember Professor Trelawney?”

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Theo voices his displeasure. Ernie begins planning a new event.
Hermione couldn’t blame Draco for being a bit surly after their long carriage ride with Hagrid, Trelawney and three hydras. Hagrid had instructed the thestrals to walk slowly so as to “not jostle the babies.” Hermione was seated between Draco and Trelawney, the latter bug-eyed with fright, and it was a toss-up which scared the Seer more: the fire-breathing monsters or the former Death Eater.

After the third or fourth moan of terror from Trelawney, Draco sighed and slipped an arm around Hermione, which she allowed, reasoning that it would only help his mood, and even if Trelawney noticed she wouldn’t believe it, and if she did believe it, hardly anyone would believe her. Plus, it had been a long day, and it was nice to lean against his luxurious cloak, breathe in that rich cologne and close her eyes. She felt Draco relax as well, and she was nearly asleep when the carriage stopped at the castle entrance. Draco removed his arm and stepped out, turning to help her down. He even extended a gloved hand to Trelawney, who accepted it tremblingly and then dashed into the castle, scarves flapping. Hagrid thanked Hermione again and gave Draco a jovial slap before departing with his hydras.

“We need to talk,” Hermione said to Draco as they entered the castle. “Privately.”

“We certainly do.” Draco glanced around the Entrance Hall, furtively rubbing his shoulder. “Why don’t we …”

“Dray-co,” called a fluting voice—Astoria, dressed in Quidditch gear, stood by the House Hourglass cabinet with her team. The Slytherins crossed the Entrance Hall toward them, practically in formation, and Hermione could see the diamond choker ringing the round collar of Astoria’s jersey. Astoria swayed up to Draco, broom in hand, the team stopping a few feet away. They were certainly well-trained. “We have practice, dear,” she cooed.

The “dear” earned her a raised eyebrow. “I’ll be along presently,” Draco said, bored.

“We need this practice, Draco.” A hint of sharpness crept into Astoria’s voice and she didn’t drawl his name at all. “We play Hufflepuff on Sunday.”

Draco smirked. “If we’re playing Hufflepuffs, I doubt we need to practice at all.”

Blue eyes flickered over to Hermione. “Graaaaanger. Tired of Theodore already? You two looked cosy enough a few days ago, cuddling in his bedroom …” her lips curved, “… half-undressed.”

Hermione was hardly listening; she was stripping off her gloves and estimating Astoria’s height—about 5’10”, she’d guess, about 5 inches taller than she. Hermione nodded in satisfaction, then focused on Astoria’s smug face and Draco’s sudden frown. “What?”

“Care to repeat yourself, Astoria?” Draco asked. “I’m afraid you’ll have to say something more interesting to capture Hermione’s attention.”

Astoria’s eyes narrowed. “We have the pitch until six o’clock,” she snapped, and swept out the castle’s front door, her team trailing behind.

“This way,” Draco said shortly, shrugging off his cloak and heading toward the Divination
corridor. Hermione followed him to a very familiar alcove behind Everard the Evil. Remarkable tapestry, really, she could swear the wizard’s tentacles were moving slightly …

“If you would, please,” Draco said, brushing the tapestry aside.

Hermione hesitated. “Actually, I’d prefer to—”

“I’m well aware you likely know this alcove,” Draco said with a slight curl of the lip. “Nevertheless, I’d be grateful if you would see yourself clear to entering it.”

Hermione blinked up at him. He didn’t look angry, but if the formal grammar was any indication, something had set him off. She entered the alcove, trying to remember what Astoria had said. She needed to pay better attention to conversations, even when they sounded stupid.

Draco followed, instantly dominating the small space. Hermione found herself backed against a stone wall with the Slytherin blocking the tapestry. A stained-glass window in the pointed ceiling captured light from the Divination hallway, casting red-and-white patterns on the floor. Hermione unbuttoned her short coat, feeling suddenly warm.

“As gratifying as it is that you had your talk with Theo,” Draco was saying, “I’d like to know why you felt the need to have that talk in his bedroom.”

Hermione was disappointed. That was the exact same sentence structure Theo used when asking about Pratt. Wait, how did Draco … the disjointed words she'd picked up suddenly fell into place. Astoria. That bitch.

She sighed. “Because the hydrams were detained in London.” Draco raised his eyebrows, silently urging her to continue. “So Hagrid used flobberworms in Monday’s Care of Magical Creatures class, and Theo wandered off and got caught by Ernie and was confined to his bedroom.”

“And somehow you became half-undressed,” Draco said in that soft Slytherin tone.

“Not me—Theo was half-undressed.” That didn’t seem to help much. “Well, his shirt was unbuttoned. Draco, that’s it. We were glaring at each other and Astoria came in and Theo was taunting her, that’s all.”

Draco nodded his acceptance, and Hermione blinked again, surprised. She thought he would take more convincing, but Theo probably sat around with his shirt unbuttoned all the time, the vain thing, and Draco knew better than anyone how annoying Astoria could be.

“Very well,” Draco said, dismissing any irritation with the wave of a hand. “What would you like to talk about?” A tiny smirk. “This does seem quite private.”

Hermione rolled her eyes at such high-handedness. Always on his terms. So spoiled. Then she sobered. “It’s about the Death Eaters still at large,” she said.

Draco stiffened. “Tell me.”

“I saw Harry in London and he said aurors are very close to capturing a Death Eater cell.” Her chest ached a little: Not only was she keeping Theo’s activities from Harry, but she was running straight to a former Death Eater with confidential information. Harry would be furious.

Draco’s eyes were icy. “How close?”

“Close. The Death Eaters keep moving, though,” Hermione said. “Draco, do you know anything
that might help Harry?"

He looked at her, his mouth a thin line of distaste—either for the Death Eaters or for Harry, or both. “No,” he said. “Those Death Idiots want to kill me, not recruit me. I haven’t heard anything.”

“What do you know about Regis Nott?”

Draco’s eyebrows lifted. “Regis? He’s here? I thought he was in Germany.” He sighed. “Not much. He was pretty low-level. Saw him in a raid once, he …” He looked away. “I’d rather not say.”

His face was bleak now, and Hermione regretted asking. She leaned closer, looking up into his eyes. “That part of your life is over,” she said.

“Is it?” he asked, trying to smile.

“Yes,” Hermione said. “You’re here with me, aren’t you?”

“Well, so I am.” Draco’s still-gloved fingers touched her jaw and his lips brushed hers. Hermione tilted her face up, lightly biting his full lower lip, her hands linking around his neck. Draco deepened the kiss and suddenly it didn’t matter where they were, they could be in the Great Hall or Theo’s bloody bedroom … all that mattered was Draco’s mouth on hers and the feel of warm leather on her skin.

Draco’s hands left her face to grasp her hips and his lips moved to her throat. Just like that day in the Charms classroom. She could almost smell the chalk. Her head fell back against the stone. Draco set his teeth and tongue against her pulse, he was going to leave a mark, she wanted him to leave a mark, the very thought made her tremble. One hand slid over her tights and under her skirt, practiced and lethal, while the other crept under her shirt, finding bare skin, and somehow his black gloves made it even hotter, dangerous somehow, to be trapped against a wall by this dark Slytherin, now growling unintelligible words against her throat.

He pressed even closer, one hand tugging at her tights. Hermione moaned loudly, and at the sound, Draco tore himself away with a gasp. His face was flushed, white-blond hair falling over his eyes. “Merlin,” he panted. “I could …”

Hermione very much wanted him to finish that sentence, but Draco stepped back instead and retrieved his cloak from the floor.

“I should get to practice,” he said, running a hand through his hair. “Astoria will go to the Headmistress if I’m not there, and I’m trying to stay on McGonagall’s good side.”

Hermione frowned. In her opinion, quality alcove time with Draco was much more important than sodding Quidditch, but then Hermione thought almost anything was more important than Quidditch. She was also irritated to see that Draco was once more immaculate, while her shirt was rumpled and her hair likely standing on end.

“Good luck winning over McGonagall,” she said, tugging ineffectually at her clothes.

“Oh, I will. I’m an excellent role model, haven’t you heard?” Batting her hands away, Draco smoothed her shirt and coat in seconds. “Unlike a certain Gryffindor siren,” he continued, “who chokes idiot Beaters and then seduces them with her bossy ways.”

He kissed her lightly. “So twisted, Hermione,” he murmured. “I look forward to it.” He gave her a
small wink and slipped out of the alcove.

Ernie caught her before she’d even left the Divination corridor, and Hermione glanced down to make sure her shirt was in order. It was—Draco had even straightened her tie.

“Hermione! So glad I found you!” The Head Boy beamed. “We’re having an emergency prefect meeting tonight about Dumbledore’s birthday!” The late headmaster’s birthday next week was now a ministry-mandated holiday, with no classes that day.

She looked at Ernie with some regret. Who knew what mad schemes they’d come up with without her. “I’m sorry,” Hermione said. “I’m busy tonight.” She hoped she was, anyway.

Ernie’s ears practically drooped in disappointment. “We’re planning a big event for inter-House unity,” he said. “We could really use your input.”

Hermione was intrigued. Perhaps the prefects could assign a special academic project, setting up groups of students from all four Houses. Educational and unifying. “I’ll write out some ideas before dinner,” she promised, and Ernie was appeased.

She left the Head Boy and scaled staircase after staircase to Gryffindor Tower, stopping occasionally to jot down notes on possible birthday projects. Back in the Gryffindor common room, she nicked a few biscuits off a side table and gulped down a cup of hot chocolate. All she wanted to do was curl up on the sofa by the nice, crackling fire and doze until dinner, but some things couldn’t wait. Instead, she headed to her bedroom, where she shed her coat and pink purse and dug out the Marauders’ Map. She still needed to warn Theo about the Death Eaters and she only hoped he wasn’t in his bedroom.

He wasn’t, thank Godric. Theo was pacing in a third-floor classroom, his tiny footsteps appearing and disappearing. Hermione’s face heated at invading his privacy so—he certainly wouldn’t want to talk to her—but he had to know.

She approached the classroom, finishing her last biscuit, to find it locked. Hermione easily dispelled the lock and slipped inside. She immediately wished she hadn’t.

Theo was now sitting in the teacher’s chair with one of his former Potions partners straddling his lap, his broad hands practically covering her slender back. The couple turned their heads to see Hermione, who immediately clapped her hands over her eyes.

“I’m sorry!” she squeaked. “Oh, Merlin, I’m so sorry!” She tried to leave the room, hands still over her eyes, and bumped into a desk, knocking it over with a loud crash. Why hadn’t she checked the Map again before entering? Why did she unlock the door? When would she learn not to charge into situations like a mad Erumpent …

Hermione’s feet slid on the stone floor, forcing her to open her eyes or fall down. She groped for a chair back to steady herself, trying not to look, but Theo and the girl were standing now, both
justifiably furious as well as fully dressed, thank Godric.

“I’m sorry,” she babbled. “I wanted to talk to you, Theo, but it can wait—”

“You knew I was in here?” Theo snapped.

“You can’t have him back,” the girl sneered, obviously a little Astoria in the making. Hermione sniffed. Theo could do so much better.

“That’s enough, Belinda,” Theo said coldly.

“You said so yourself, Theo, you said she was a prize bitch—”

Get out, Belinda,” Theo said, his face even redder now.

“But I haven’t even—”

“You’re a disgusting little slag and I was a fool to meet you here,” Theo snapped. “Get out.”

“You’re not looking any better, Theo,” Hermione said, crossing her arms. “You know what’s disgusting? Meeting a girl in an empty classroom, letting her rub all over you, then snarling at her for telling the truth and calling her a slag.”

“See? Bitch,” the little ingrate said. Theo stepped toward the girl, his face mottled with fury, and Belinda squeaked and ran out the door.

Hermione’s own face was red-hot. “I’m sorry for breaking in here,” she said, letting her arms fall. “But I needed to talk to you, I thought you were alone.”

“That door was locked!” Theo still looked furious, and his shirt was untucked and unbuttoned again.

“I thought you just didn’t want to be disturbed,” she said in a small voice.

“Sweet Salazar!” Theo rolled his eyes to the heavens. “Yes, I didn’t want to be disturbed! That’s the purpose of bloody locks!”

Hermione just nodded, feeling abysmally stupid. Belinda would probably run straight to Draco and tell him that Hermione was in a classroom with a half-undressed Theo and then she’d have to deal with Draco’s icy grammar again.

“So what is it, Hermione?” Theo sounded suddenly tired, and the lines around his mouth looked deeper. “What is so important you have to chase me down and bust through doors to find me?”

“Your uncle,” Hermione said.

Theo blinked. “My uncle? Which uncle?”

“Regis,” Hermione said, watching him carefully. Theo’s face was now perfectly blank, and she had been around enough Slytherins to know what that meant.

“Regis Nott has been sighted in Britain,” she went on, hands now clasped behind her back as if she was reciting a lesson. “He’s been spotted with a Death Eater cell.”

Theo’s face didn’t change. “And what could that possibly have to do with me?” he drawled.
“That owl you received, was it from—”

“That message,” Theo said, looming closer, “is my business. You had no right to know about it on
Halloween night, and you certainly don’t have the right to know anything now.”


“Are you going to tell McGonagall?” Theo went on in his soft, dangerous voice. “Are you here to
pump me for information to tell the aurors? Or at least Harry Potter?”

“No, Theo,” she said. “I’m here to warn you.” Theo’s eyebrows rose. “Harry advises you not to
leave the castle. I’m begging you, Theo, stay here. Don’t do anything suspicious. The aurors would
be on you in an instant.”

Theo’s green eyes narrowed. “You told the aurors about that owl.” Hermione shook her head and
he looked surprised.

“And I won’t,” Hermione said. “But if I find you’ve left the castle …”

“Are you threatening me, Hermione?”

“I’m protecting you, you idiot,” Hermione snapped. “Or perhaps I’m the idiot, for not telling Harry
everything. I’ve lied to my best friend for you!”

Theo’s lip curled. “I don’t need your protection. Save your smothering attentions for Draco. He
may enjoy being nagged and mothered and ordered around, but I do not.”

Hermione’s cheeks heated, but she refused to show how his words had hurt her. Ron had accused
her of the same thing repeatedly over the years. Does Draco think I …

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” she said, clenching her fists. She kept her lower lip from trembling
through sheer force of will. “I just thought you should know.”

Theo just looked down at her, his face blank again.

She took a deep breath. “You say you want to restore your family name, Theo,” she went on, her
voice growing stronger. “Well, words won’t do it. Pictures in the newspaper won’t do it. Only
actions will do it. I only ask you to consider those actions.”

Hermione turned and strode from the room, past the now-blurry torchlights in the third-floor
corridor. Her pace increased until she was practically running back to Gryffindor Tower. “Cherry
Pops,” she told the Fat Lady, and climbed through the portrait hole, ignoring the exam questions
her housemates called out to her as she passed.

She didn’t stop until she reached her bedroom and threw herself on her bed. “Prize bitch …
smothering attentions … ordered around …” Hermione burst into tears, blindly clutching
Crookshanks, who had jumped on the bed beside her. It wasn’t true. It wasn’t. She was just tired. It
had been a long day, what with the deadly monsters and Slytherins and news of Death Eaters and
all.

Hermione didn’t go down to dinner; she told Ginny she didn’t feel well, and no, she didn’t want a
plate from the kitchens. She was going to bed early. Ginny was headed to a SMUT meeting (she
really had founded a NEWT study group) after dinner and then planned to meet Blaise.

“What should I tell Malfoy?” Ginny asked, sitting on the bed and stroking Hermione’s hair.
“I’m fine, just a little tired,” Hermione said. “Tell him not to worry and I’ll see him tomorrow.”

“Did you two have a row?” Ginny asked. “Neville said Malfoy was right harsh with Hagrid, although I really can’t blame him. Hydras, Hermione? Really?”

“No, Draco’s been … lovely.” Hermione couldn’t help smiling a little. “Please don’t let him think I’m angry at him.”

“He’ll want to talk to you,” Ginny persisted. “He’ll probably storm the tower again.”

“I know. I just can’t see anyone tonight.”

“Hermione.” Ginny took both her hands. “What happened? Was it Astoria?”

Hermione shook her head. “Everything’s fine. Please, Ginny, I don’t want to talk about it. Here.”

She handed over her list of Dumbledore’s Birthday ideas. “This is for Ernie. I’ve marked down some action items for each idea.”

Ginny nodded reluctantly and left the room. Hermione changed into her penguin pajamas and crawled into bed, determined to sleep. Everything was always better in the morning, her mother always said. The sun would rise again, and perhaps words said in anger would lose their power in the light of day.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Ginny is disappointed.
Hello all: Thank you again for your kind comments and insightful questions! As I oh-so-slowly wind the threads of this tangled story, your thoughts continue to deepen both characters and plot.

One note: Like many of you, I sort of wish Hermione would just march up and deliver an awful hex on Astoria and be done with it. Hermione, however, refuses to make it a top priority, and so it will be many chapters before Astoria gets hers. There are some big things coming up and the blood potion is very nearly done, and don't forget all the Dramione, so we'll be busy enough.

The story continues with poor Hermione, all alone and still very upset ...

The rattling of metal casements woke her from a restless doze. Hermione blearily opened her eyes to see a shadow pass by her window. She scrambled out of bed and stood in shock, for Draco was hovering just outside on his broom.

“Draco!” she cried, opening the large, hinged window. “Are you mad? Get in here!”

He leaped over the desk and landed in the room, shivering, broom in hand. Draco’s cloak dripped with icy sleet and his cheeks and nose were blue with cold. Hermione stripped the cloak from his back and hustled him over to the small fire, which she ignited into a leaping flame with her wand.

“What were you thinking?” she scolded. “It’s freezing out there! Here give me …” She stopped, remembering Theo’s words, and backed away.

Draco propped his broom against the wall and stripped off his gloves, holding his hands out to the fire. Crookshanks growled, jumping onto the sofa back. Slytherin and cat glared at each other for a moment, both obviously holding grudges from the carriage ride into Hogwarts. A lifetime ago.

“You weren’t at dinner,” he said, turning from Crookshanks with a slight sneer. He looked Hermione up and down from bushy head to thick wool socks. “I wanted to check.”

“I’m fine, thank you,” she said calmly. She cleared her throat. “Would you like some tea?”

“Yes, thank you,” he said, giving her an odd look.

“Extra sugar?”

“Why are you being so polite?” Draco demanded. “Why aren’t you laying me out for riding in sleet ing rain?”

“It’s your choice,” she said, heating a pot of water with her wand. “You’re a grown wizard.”

He snickered. “As if that ever stopped you before.”
Hermione was adding tea leaves to the strainer when an icy hand covered hers. Draco stood behind her, his breath in her ear.

“The wind is quite strong out there, you know,” he said provocatively. “I could hardly stay on my broom. I was riding one-handed. At an excessive speed. And I didn’t even wear a hat.”

Hermione spun around to face him. “Draco Lu—” She shut her mouth and swallowed. “I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

Draco put his other hand on her forehead. “You must be ill. Either that or …” He stared at her, that spooky Slytherin sense at full power. “Something happened. You didn’t come to dinner and neither did … Theo.”

“Please, Draco, stop. It was nothing.”

“What did he say? Tell me.”

Hermione sighed. “I made a mistake. I shouldn’t have spoken to him. I wanted to warn him about Regis, but it went all … wrong.” She felt a tear on her cheek. “He thinks I’m an interfering …” she couldn’t say it. “He thinks I smother you and order you …” She clutched Draco’s arm. “You’d tell me, wouldn’t you? If I go too far? If I start driving you away because I …”

“What drivel is this?” Draco demanded. “When have I ever held back on you? Do I look like the type to suffer in silence?” He glared down at her. “You’re pissing me off right now, if you must know, with all this nonsense.”

“But I’m so bossy …”

“Yes, you are,” Draco said. His lips quirked. “I look forward to you bossing me around in all kinds of ways. No. 6, perhaps?”

Hermione blushed fiery red. “Draco!” He was grinning wickedly, and she couldn’t help smiling back.

“That’s better,” Draco said, walking toward the fire again. He began peeling off his shirt. “You wouldn’t happen to have an extra blanket, would you? I’m freezing.”

“No less than you deserve, riding on such a night,” Hermione grabbed a thick blanket off her bed and draped it around him. She smiled again at the sight of the Slytherin prince wrapped in a red blanket with an embroidered gold lion.

“Really, Granger?” Draco asked, looking down at himself. “Does this have to be so … Gryffindor?”

“Feel free to freeze without it.”

They curled up on the sofa together, and Draco produced some wrapped jacket potatoes under a warming charm and some crusty bread. Hermione felt much better after eating the food and drinking a few cups of hot tea.

“You can’t come rushing up here every time I miss a meal,” Hermione said. “Sometimes I just want to study.”

“I spoke to the Weaselette,” Draco said. “She seemed concerned.”
Hermione looked into the fire. “I was upset.”

Draco’s arms tightened around her. “I should have told you not to warn Theo,” he said. “When we Slytherins are hurt … well, we go for the jugular.”

“You certainly do,” Hermione said. “But I had to tell him about Regis.”

“Hermione.” Draco looked into her face, his eyes serious. “You need to consider the possibility … he might be working with those Death Eaters. I know the signs. He’s withdrawn from everyone, even Blaise and Pansy.”

“No.” Hermione shook her head. “Never.”

“With such a father, you never know.”

Hermione sat up straight, pulling away to face him. She couldn’t believe Draco was saying this. “That’s what they said about you.”

“And they were right,” Draco pointed out. “Theo might not understand what it means to be a Death Eater. I didn’t understand what it meant.”

“No.” Hermione shook her head. “I don’t believe it.”

“I don’t want to believe it either.” Draco sighed. “Fine, let’s say you’re right. At the very least, they’re trying to recruit him.”

“That’s why he can’t leave the castle,” Hermione said. “He’ll be the mercy of the Death Eaters and the aurors. Draco,” she took his hands, “Theo received a message Halloween night and ran off. He wouldn’t tell me anything. I think he tried to leave the castle—that’s why he’s serving extra detentions.”

Draco’s face was sober. “That doesn’t look good for him. Did you tell Potter?”

“The aurors would be all over Theo if they knew.”

He groaned. “You’re taking a big bloody risk here to protect him.”

“Theo’s not a Death Eater,” Hermione insisted. Honestly, she spent half her time these days defending Draco to Theo and Theo to Draco.

“You can’t take care of him,” Draco said. “You can’t take care of everyone.”

She leaned against him. “I know.”

“Aren’t I enough to take care of?” he whispered.

“More than enough,” Hermione said, smiling again. “Too much for most, I’d say.”

Draco kissed her for that, and she ran her hands over his now warm skin, his muscles so smooth to the touch, except for the silvery ridges from past Sectumsempra. Her hands slid down his arms, over the Dark Mark, she could feel its roughness under her fingers. Hermione broke the kiss and brought the branded skin to her lips, causing Draco to gasp.

“Hermione,” he groaned. He shifted, pressing her gently down on the sofa cushions, his body on hers. She stared up at that perfect, pointy face, his fair hair falling into his eyes, those full lips. Then those lips were on hers again, his hands moving up from her waist, under her cotton pajama
shirt, rough palms against her breasts, thumbs brushing her nipples. Hermione moaned against his mouth, her hands tangled in his hair. Her pelvis rocked up against his and Draco groaned again in his throat. Suddenly he slid off of her and Hermione felt herself being lifted up as if she weighed nothing.

“Ginny,” she gasped as he set her down on her bed. “Ginny will be back soon …”

“Not if Blaise has anything to say about it,” Draco said. He withdrew his hands, however, and stood over her bed, his eyes serious. “This isn’t the Charms room, Hermione, and I won’t be that idiot again. You’ll have to tell me what you want.”

Hermione sat up straight. “I want you, Draco … but I’m not ready. Not tonight.”

He nodded. “I’ll go, then,” he said, “but don’t worry, we’ll have …”

Hermione’s hand shot out to stop him. “Would you stay?” she asked. “For a while, anyway?”

His mouth quirked up again. “You’re really asking?”

“No,” she said bossily. “Get in this bed, Draco Malfoy.”

“Much better.” Draco peeled off his trousers and socks, settling in beside her like they did this every night. Hermione turned off a lamp with her wand and reveled in his warmth. She felt utterly safe, in a way she hadn’t felt since she was a small girl, before she had ever heard of Hogwarts or the wizarding world. The only sound was the clattering of Crookshanks knocking over objects on her desk, his way of protesting the unwanted visitor.

“Don’t doubt me like that again,” Draco said after a time, his voice soft in the darkness. “And don’t listen to sodding Theo. Or Astoria. Or that barmy gamekeeper. And certainly not your pet Hufflepuff with the ears. That man couldn’t plan a hot cup of tea.”

“Now who’s giving orders,” she said, her cheek on his bare chest, her arms around his waist. “Whom can I listen to, then?”

“Me, of course.” He considered a minute. “And the Weaselette. And I suppose Longbottom and your precious Potter, if you must.”

“And Ron,” she said yawning. “Sometimes.”

“If you must.”

“What about Luna?”

“Only about sex,” Draco said. “I don’t want to hear about Niggles.”

“Nargles,” Hermione said, yawning again. She felt his lips against her hair, and warm arms tightening around her, and she wanted to thank Draco for being so nice, just to hear him huff in irritation at being called nice, but she was just too tired. She’d have to taunt him about his niceness tomorrow.
Draco was gone when Hermione woke Thursday morning, but he’d left a little box on the pillow beside her, wrapped in silver paper. She slid out of bed and sat cross-legged on the sofa, the Gryffindor blanket around her, holding the box and thinking about the day before. Theo’s words still hurt, but it was a distant, muffled ache. Theo was mixed up in something, she knew it, and he was determined to go it alone.

“You can’t take care of everyone,” Draco had said, and she knew that was true, but still … she couldn’t give up on Theo just yet. Maybe she could—

“What’s that?” Ginny asked, popping out from her bed hangings. Her legs looked impossibly long under the hem of one of Harry’s faded red-and-gold Quidditch jerseys. “Brrrr!” It looked like another cold day ahead. Winter in Scotland never arrived quietly. Ginny dragged the duvet off her bed and sat beside Hermione, yawning. The redhead never started her day early if she could help it, and it was barely seven o’clock.

“It’s a present from Draco,” Hermione said, turning the box over in her hands.

“So he came, did he?” Ginny’s eyebrows rose. “Maybe in more ways than one? I nearly fell over his broom last night.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “We talked. Mostly.”

“Aren’t you going to open it?” Ginny asked, bunching the duvet closer around her.

Hermione pulled at the ribbon holding the silver wrapping, then opened the box. Inside was a silver ball stuck to the bottom by a sticking charm, its tiny wings fluttering in vain. Hermione touched her wand inside her pajama pocket and whispered its release, catching the snitch in her hand as it shot upwards. She raised it up to the lamplight. It was the same snitch she had nicked from Malfoy outside her window. Crookshanks jumped down from her now-jumbled desk, watching the ball with wide yellow eyes.

Ginny’s face was awed. “It’s so beautiful.”

Hermione pulled a note from the silver wrapping and shook it open. It was written in runes:

A proper snitch for your flying lessons.

LDLM

Hermione’s hand tightened around the fluttering snitch, and the last ache from Theo’s words melted away. What he said about Draco didn’t matter. Theo was angry. He didn’t know. Nobody knew, really. Hermione herself couldn’t explain it. How did Draco know exactly what to do and say? Was it his upbringing? A Slytherin talent? Or was she the only one who …

“I’m surprised he bought you a snitch, of all things,” Ginny said. “It must have cost a fortune.”

“It’s his snitch from home,” Hermione said, handing it to her. “See, he changed the engraving from
his initials to the rune for ‘H.’"

“It’s his snitch? That’s incredibly significant. For a Seeker to give his snitch to …” Ginny’s eyes were wide. “Now we’re talking serious.”

“It has sentimental value,” Hermione said. She took back the silver ball and stroked it fondly. “I tried to blackmail him with it.”

“You two have a very odd relationship.”

Hermione couldn’t deny it. “I know, I can use it for my Arithmancy presentation,” she said, jumping to her feet. “How is Blaise?” she asked, putting on her robe.

Ginny was stretched out on the sofa now, the duvet covering everything but her face. “Much the same. Sexy. Charming. Irresistible.” Her voice was full of disappointment.

“Have you been talking to him?” Hermione asked.

Her roommate nodded. “I’ve told him about Fred. I’ve told him about the Battle of Hogwarts. Last night I spoke of Seventh Year—he looked a bit sick whenever I mentioned the Carrows. He followed them, you know, both he and Astoria.”

The two women exchanged a look, then Ginny sighed. “He won’t share anything with me. I asked about his mother and …”

The air in the room seemed suddenly heavier: Caprice Zabini had a rather unsavory reputation, although purebloods flocked to her extravagant, globe-trotting parties involving illegal portkeys. Rumors swirled around the mysterious witch, about the fates of her multiple husbands and the dark spells she’d used to preserve her incandescent beauty.

“Blaise just wanted to talk about her jewels.” Ginny sneered, a rare expression for her. “Her jewels. As if I cared.”

Hermione walked over and stroked her hair. “Just give him some time. He might come around.”

“And he still keeps going on about Christmas at Zabini Castle,” Ginny continued. “Apparently, it must be seen to be believed.” She frowned. “I don’t care if the place is made of plum pudding—I’m not leaving my family.”

“Maybe Blaise would come to the Burrow,” Hermione said.

Ginny laughed outright. “Could you imagine? Ron would go spare.”

“So would Harry,” Hermione said mischievously. Harry had already made plans to spend Christmas with the Weasleys and host a New Year’s party at Grimmauld Place.

“That would almost be worth it.” Ginny’s eyes were sparkling again, and Hermione gave her a hug before heading off to shower and dress.

Ginny sat in her bedding nest on the sofa and watched Hermione twine her curls around her fingers as she dried them with her wand, then tie them at the back of her neck with a wide black ribbon. Hermione had just straightened her tie by the wardrobe mirror and was applying lipstick when Ginny spoke.

“Are you humming?” she asked.
“Certainly not,” Hermione said, tucking her lipstick away.

“It was something classical, I think.”

“Probably from Slughorn’s party,” Hermione said. She had been thinking about that night, about the candelabras, and …. She flushed slightly. Dancing with Draco after meeting Vasile, Draco’s hand on her bare back, and Hermione trying to keep space between them ...

“Yes, that’s it, you were humming the waltz,” Ginny said, grinning. “You are going to be revolting all day, aren’t you?”

Hermione waved the last of her books into her bag and grinned back. “Probably.”

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Hermione tries to be discreet. Luna hunts Love Diggles. Some people are very bad at silencing spells.
Secret Torrid Affairs

Chapter Notes

It's the six-month anniversary of "The Gloriana Set"! I first posted this fic on Dec. 3. To celebrate, I'm posting a fun chapter today. This fic originally clocked in at 125,000 words—we're obviously way beyond that now and I haven't wrapped up much of anything. So who knows?

Thank you, everyone, for all the kudos and encouraging comments—you have been so encouraging and patient with this slow-burn, slow-mystery, slow-revenge story. Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if we ended up with a 5,000-word chapter titled "Hermione Checks Out a Library Book." I read all your comments and consider all suggestions, and yes, Hermione and Draco will someday discuss snails.

Anyway, on we go, and as frothy as this chapter appears, it does help advance a few plotlines. Happy Anniversary!

When Hermione arrived at the Potions lab Thursday morning, she was pleased to see three pigeons squawking in a cage beside the door. Slytherins truly were resourceful, although it seemed like Pansy had gone out of her way to procure the dirtiest, scruffiest birds possible. Hermione brought the cage into the lab and placed it on the wooden cabinet Draco had repaired. She’d work with them later in the day.

Draco was at the Slytherin table when she entered the Great Hall for breakfast and they did their usual routine: He’d give her a look and she’d give him a nod, this time with a small smile. Theo appeared absorbed in his textbook at the other end of the table, flanked by Goyle and a skinny Slytherin boy. Hermione was happy not to have Potions that day.

She left breakfast early, hoping for some quiet time to study for Friday’s Transfiguration exam, and had nearly reached the Great Hall doors when two Squeaky Mice blocked her way.

“I’m busy, Percival,” she said, resisting the temptation to pull her bag over her chest.

“Have you forgiven him, Miss Granger?” he said. “Mr. Malfoy, I mean. I have a bet going.”

“Forgiven him for what?” Hermione asked.

“He’s very handsome,” said the red-haired girl, Imogene.

“Forgiven him for what?” Hermione asked.

“For being himself,” said the red-haired girl, Imogene.

Hermione smiled. “I don’t know. That’s a lot to forgive.”

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“For being himself,” said the red-haired girl, Imogene.

Hermione smiled. “I don’t know. That’s a lot to forgive.”

“He’s very handsome,” Imogene said. Percival scoffed. “You’re just jealous,” she told him. They began arguing, and Hermione took the opportunity to slip away.

She was leaning against the wall outside Ancient Runes, reviewing the limitations of the Inanimatus Conjurus spell, when footsteps prompted her to look up. Draco was striding toward her briskly, his face unreadable, black robe flapping. He walked straight up to her, and for a mad instant she thought he was going to shake her hand, he looked that businesslike, but instead he
placed a hand on the wall beside her head and brushed her lips with his.

Hermione couldn’t help responding to that light, now familiar touch. It was stupid to do this here, in the hallway where they’d argued so many times before, where McGonagall and her flock could turn up any minute. She needed to stop this and she would, in just a minute …

It was Draco who pulled back; he looked down at her, one hand still on the wall. “Good morning,” he said quietly. “Sleep well?”

“Very well,” she said, trying not to blush. “Thank you for the snitch. I’m using it in my Arithmancy presentation today.”

“Of course you’d find some swotty purpose for it.” He looked around the empty corridor, then fixed her with those eyes again. “Meet me tonight. In the old Charms classroom.”

Hermione raised her eyebrows. “It depends. Are you bringing the Codex Runica?”

“Are you bringing your LOON plan?”

“It’s LOOP, and certainly not,” she said. “Some people manage to start up secret torrid affairs without a blueprint.”

Draco brushed a thumb over Hermione’s lower lip and her breath hitched. “You think I need any help?” he whispered in her ear. His thumb left her mouth and traced lightly down her throat. He was barely touching her, and her heart was pounding.

“A secret torrid affair,” he repeated thoughtfully. “Certainly an affair. Hopefully not secret for long.” His thumb was tracing her cheekbone now. “How torrid it becomes is entirely up to you.”

The echo of feet further down the corridor warned them of McGonagall’s arrival, and the Slytherin stepped smoothly aside. Hermione felt heated and disheveled, but Draco was all cool perfection, standing a proper distance away with a superior look. So this was how it was going to be. She could weep for her own stupidity.

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The rest of Hermione’s morning went without incident. Her Jupiter-centric model was very well received, although people seemed more interested in the ornate snitch representing Jupiter than the movements of the paper wads circling it. She had prepared answers for 27 likely questions about the presentation, and only two were asked, both by Professor Vector. Everyone else just wanted to hold the damn snitch. She should have used a flipping ping-pong ball.

Theo ate little at lunch, sitting hunched over slightly with a furrowed brow. Hermione couldn’t help being concerned; perhaps she should approach Blaise. Or ask Ginny to ask Blaise about Theo. She sighed and took a bite of her bacon sandwich. Or, she supposed, she could just butt out.

Sitting next to Draco in Advanced DADA was excruciating since he insisted on wearing cologne
and, well, *breathing*. Theo was looking right at them, and she couldn’t bear his cold eyes. Luna was watching them, too. Bluebell floated in the center of the circle of beanbags, holding a carved wooden box.

“All of you are familiar with cursed or spellbound objects,” she said. “Personal objects infused with magicks can be incredibly powerful—and dangerous.” Hermione felt Draco shift uneasily beside her. “Add enough magic to an object and it becomes almost sentient, able to sense its surroundings and delve into the person holding or wearing it.”

Now Hermione was shifting, thinking of the black velvet box in the bottom of her trunk.

“Some magical objects respond differently to the different wizards and witches who possess them,” Bluebell continued. The entire class was silent, avidly listening to every word. “Some respond to the power of the wearer or user, while others reflect the power of the witch or wizard who created or presented the magical object.”

The fairy smiled at the class. “I know many of you encountered the most evil of magical objects—horcruxes,” she said as if she were speaking of her favorite cotton candy flavor. “But there are also magical objects of love, of protection, objects so meaningful that to give them to someone is to give them a piece of yourself in the best way.”

Hermione blushed under Ginny’s meaningful look, and she felt Draco stiffen slightly. Now was not the time to think of—it wasn’t. But there were other objects ...

The fairy giggled. “Now, Miss Granger, there’s no need to raise your hand! Quite unnecessary.”

Hermione tried not to glower. A raised hand was a mark of a civilized society. “Professor Bluebell,” she began.

“Bluebell, please, dear girl.”

“Professor Bluebell,” Hermione repeated stubbornly, “is it possible to remove a harmful spell from an object, even when that spell has been part of the object for hundreds of years?”

“A powerful spell, I assume, dear? Cast by a powerful witch or wizard?”

“Yes,” Hermione said.

“Presented by a powerful witch or wizard?”

“Yes.”

“A difficult task, then.” The fairy’s blue eyes shone. “Objects passed through generations are often layered with different spells—or curses—to the point where it’s difficult to know where the magic ends and the object begins. It would be almost impossible to remove the magic without destroying the object.”

“What of another spell?” Theo spoke up, sounding interested. “Could another spell be added to the object to counter the original curse—or spell?”

Hermione couldn’t help but look directly at the Slytherin for the first time. The Notts probably had vaults filled with magicked objects, just like the Malfoys. Theo’s green eyes remained fixed on Bluebell.

“Risky and possibly lethal,” Bluebell said, a slight crispness in her tone. “The object is merely a
receptacle or conduit for the magic. Two conflicting spells could tear the object apart.”

There was a silence as the entire class absorbed this, and Hermione could feel Draco’s eyes on her.

“Today we will practice identifying and removing spells from objects. This is extremely advanced magic, so we’ll begin with simple items.” Bluebell opened the box, revealing a handful of small crystals. “Jewelry is very receptive to curses and spells, which is why it’s such a popular choice.”

The fairy handed crystals to Luna, Theo, Neville, Pavarti and Draco. “Each of these crystals is imbued with a simple spell—harmless, of course. You will divide into pairs, determine the spell on your stone and attempt to remove it.” She waved a hand at the blackboard and writing appeared. “These spells might be helpful.”

Hermione thought back to Borgin and Burke’s, to Borgin’s complicated wandwork as he appraised her diamonds. She’d thought she’d heard him mutter a few …

“Hermione,” Draco whispered in her ear, “The Gloriana Set … you wouldn’t actually remove …”

“Oh course not,” she whispered back, brushing his hand with hers. “I’d hex anyone who tried.”

Draco nodded, looking relieved, then held out the crystal pebble from Bluebell. Her hand came up slowly and took the pebble, her fingers brushing over that rough palm. She held the stone up to the light, and it shone palely.

“Luxa,” she said, tapping it with her wand. It as a simple light refraction spell that should have divided the light into a rainbow of colors. The stone was unchanged.

Draco had his own wand out, casting a seeing spell: “Videre.”

Again, no response. The pair took turns working through all the spells on the blackboard, with no additional words between them. When Bluebell’s list failed, they began trying their own spells, but found no clue to explain the stone’s glow.

“The light comes from inside the stone,” Hermione said. “It’s not reflected.”

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “Obviously.”

“I think this is a simple light, placed inside the stone.” She pointed her wand at it. “Intermisa,” she said, a breaking spell.

A crack appeared and the stone cleaved in half, releasing the light, which dissipated into the air and left the crystal pieces behind.

“A clever move, dear Miss Granger, but it won’t earn you full marks,” said Bluebell, floating beside them.

“Why not?” Hermione said, surprised. “I identified the spell and removed it.”

“But you broke the object,” Bluebell said. “Do you always break things just to see what’s inside, Miss Granger?” She drifted away, leaving Hermione open-mouthed.

A hand slid over hers and tightened. She could feel the edges of the broken quartz pieces scrape her palm. “Well, dear Miss Granger?” Draco whispered in her ear. Her chest suddenly felt tight.

“Would you break me to look inside?”

Hermione turned to look at him. “Will I have to?” she asked.
“No,” he said. “Apertus.” Open.

She was suddenly aware of their surroundings again, the curious looks from the rest of the group, Theo’s icy stare. “We need to stop having these discussions in class,” she said, pulling her hand away. Draco just leaned back in his beanbag, legs crossed at the ankles, looking indolently sinful.

Bluebell’s wind chimes rang softly, signaling the end of class. Hermione immediately marched over to protest the day’s grade. The fairy was kind, of course, and wonderfully sympathetic, and it wasn’t until Hermione had left the classroom and was halfway down the corridor that she realized that Bluebell had never agreed to give her full marks for the crystal exercise.

She was stalking toward the first floor, grumbling under her breath, when Draco appeared at her side. Startled, Hermione bumped into an open classroom door.

“You can’t be walking me through the halls,” she told him. “We have to be discreet.” She glanced around quickly.

He snickered. “It’s quite fortunate we never conducted an actual secret torrid affair. You are rubbish at this.”

“I am very secretive,” Hermione snapped.

“Do yell that a little louder.”

“Fine,” she said, keeping her voice low. “When do you want to meet?”

“I have to supervise a Squeaky Mice detention tonight,” Draco said. “Your pet Hufflepuff caught them throwing crumpets into the lake, trying to draw out the Giant Squid.”

“Ernie Macmillan’s title is Head Boy, not Pet Hufflepuff,” Hermione said as they descended the stairs.

“Well, he’s pathetic at his job.”

“I’d argue that assigning detentions to your pack of delinquents is precisely his job.”

“Then he should oversee the detentions,” Draco insisted. He gave a group of staring Slytherin girls blocking their path a sharp look and they scattered immediately. “Instead, I’m the one inconvenienced.”

Hermione couldn’t help smiling. “That’s because the Squeaks are unholy terrors with everyone else.”

“They’re fine with you.”

“Are you saying I should supervise their detention?”

Draco sighed. “No, that would defeat the purpose.” He lowered his voice. “Can you meet me at nine o’clock?”

Hermione nodded. It was perfect, really; she’d have time to work with Pansy’s pigeons.

“Alright, then.” Draco swooped in as if to kiss her, but swerved away at the last minute. The action, however, prompted Hermione to lurch backward into a suit of armor, which fell with a crash.

“Quite discreet there, Granger,” the Slytherin said with a grin as he strolled away.
Hermione glowered as she repaired the damage with her wand and entered the library corridor; obviously, kissing Draco Malfoy only made the man more impossible.

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Hermione was approaching the Potions dungeon, a copy of “So You Want To Weave a Magic Carpet” under her arm, when she caught a faint whiff of something. She entered the dungeon and nearly gagged as she opened the door to the Potions lab.

The smell of rotting meat steamed from the blood potion, which bubbled gently in its cauldron. Hermione frowned; the potion should be barely simmering, not outright boiling, and there shouldn’t be an odor. The solution probably needed more clover blossoms, which had the effect of tempering the brewing process as well as neutralizing the smell. Unfortunately, she and Draco were out of clover blossoms, and the plant didn’t exactly bloom widely in November. What to do?

The answer came immediately: Neville. He might have some clover or know someone who did. Scowling, Hermione trudged up to Gryffindor Tower—she’d hoped for some good pigeon time before dinner and instead she was solving a potion crisis. Neville wasn’t in the common room or his bedroom, so she dug the Marauders’ Map out of her trunk.

Oh no. Neville was in the Everard the Evil alcove with Pansy. Hermione was apparently doomed to interrupt every snogging couple in the castle. She stuffed the map into her skirt pocket. Don’t just charge in this time, she reminded herself as she returned to the ground floor. Respect his privacy.

The Divination corridor was deserted and that was a good thing, too, because Hermione could hear the murmur of voices before she even approached the faded tapestry. She checked the Map again for good measure: Yes, it was Neville and Pansy in there, behind the heavily warded alcove entrance.

“Neville,” she hissed loudly. “Neville, it’s Hermione! I need to talk to you!”

“Now, Parkinson.” It was definitely Neville’s voice, but Hermione never heard it pitched so low. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were trying to corrupt me.”

Pansy sniffed. “What, corrupt Goody-Goody Longbottom? I know a lost cause when I see it.”

“Uh, Neville?” Hermione didn’t think she should be hearing this, certainly she shouldn’t be standing out here in helpless fascination. Neville was her friend. “Neville, it’s Hermione, I’m sorry to interrupt, but—”

“And you always hold tutoring sessions in secluded alcoves,” Pansy said breathily.
“My Belladonna doesn’t like sunlight. It’s very dangerous, you know.”

A rich laugh from Pansy. “Dangerous? It doesn’t look like much to me.”

“Really?” Neville drawled out the word in a way that would make Astoria proud. “It might appear sweet and unassuming, but looks can be deceiving.”

“How deceiving?” Pansy purred.

“You might want to think twice before … touching it.”

“NEVILLE!” Hermione said loudly. “Neville, you know I’m out here, stop this nonsense and—”

“What if I want to touch it?” Pansy asked. “What if I’ve been waiting to touch it, but it chooses to rattle its little leaves and try to act all dangerous …”

“Don’t be so sure it’s an act,” Neville said, a smiling quality in his tone. “You might …”

Oh Merlin, this had to stop. Hermione was feeling a little warm now and this was Neville. “Neville, Pansy, you get out here this instant!” she smacked her hand against the tapestry, but it was solid as a rock, tightly warded.

“Oh, Neville,” Pansy moaned loudly.

Hermione clapped her hands over her ears, but she could still hear Neville say, “You silenced this alcove, didn’t you, Pans?”

“Yes,” Pansy gasped.

“NO!” Hermione shouted. “NO, YOU DIDN’T, YOU PAINTED IDIOT!” While most older students could cast Muffliato on an area or Silencio on a person, the spell for silencing an area was less well-known. And apparently Pansy had cast the spell backward—she and Neville couldn’t hear noises in the corridor, but Hermione could hear everything.

Hermione pulled out her wand and did in the last place what she should have done in the first place: She cast a Patronus, which slipped immediately through the tapestry. “NEVILLE AND PANSY,” she heard her otter intone, “HERMIONE IS IN THE CORRIDOR AND CAN HEAR EVERY WORD.”

Pansy’s moans cut off as if she’d been choked and there was dead silence. Hermione backed up, her face hot. The ward vanished and Neville stepped out from behind the tapestry, lipstick streaks in his hair and a spot of more natural color in each cheek.

“Hermione …” he cleared his throat. “Can I help you?”

“Yes,” Hermione said. “My blood potion is overheating.”

“Is it now,” Pansy said, stepping out to join Neville. Hermione glared.

“That can happen when you skulk around alcoves,” Pansy continued. The Slytherin looked entirely proper, her stockings straight and her pink lipstick impeccable.

Hermione ignored this. “The potion needs more clover blossoms, Neville. Do you have any idea where I could get some?”

“Yes, yes, of course.” Neville tried to smooth his jumper but only succeeded in smearing the pink
paint further. “Hagrid keeps a few bushels as a treat for the thestrals. They won’t be very fresh, though.”

“Thank you,” Hermione said formally. “That will do nicely.”

Neville cleared his throat again. “Happy to help.”

Hermione turned to go, then turned back again. “And Neville? I’d advise you to cast the Silencing spell next time. Parkinson’s rubbish at it.”

“I certainly agree,” Neville said, a roguish glint in his eye. Now Pansy glared.

Hermione found Hagrid in his garden and he handed over two bushels of clover without hesitation. He wanted to show her how well the baby hydras were doing—“One is growin’ another head already!”—but Hermione begged off, claiming she had no time for a “nice visit.”

“Yeh can hold ‘em if you want,” Hagrid said. “They like it when yeh sing ‘em lullabies.”

Hermione fled with her bushel baskets at the very idea, running back to the lab to stabilize her potion. The leftover clover stems she fed to the pigeons, who seemed less than enthusiastic, but Hermione had no sympathy. “Better get used to grass and bugs, boys,” she told the birds.

She left the lab to go to dinner, sitting opposite a faintly embarrassed Neville, then returned there afterward. The work with the pigeons was slow going—much more difficult than working with a snitch—and required her entire jar of Virgin Earth. She was going to have to get more from Neville when he wasn’t … occupied.

Hermione finally succeeded in her efforts just before eight o’clock, feeling quite satisfied as she tossed the horrid birds out the Potions lab window. She barely had time to get out of her uniform (now covered in pigeon feathers and droppings) and take a shower.

She then dressed carefully, unsure of the Secret Torrid Affair dress code. Heels were out of the question; they’d be a dead giveaway to anyone who knew her. Instead she slipped on more sensible shoes and buttoned up a cardigan against the cold November night. Neville wasn’t the only Belladonna in this castle.

Hermione crept down the stairs to the common room at ten minutes to nine, hoping to keep a low profile. No such luck: Seventh- and Eighth-Year students filled almost every chair and sofa, cramming for Friday’s exams. Desperate pleas followed her all the way to the portrait hole:

“Hermione, can you explain how to transfigure wood grain into fish scales?”

“Hermione, do you know the seventeen uses for powdered Bicorn horn?”

“Hermione, please.” Dean and Seamus blocked her way, looking desperate. “We’re absolutely lost with this Protean charm!”

She glared at them. “Dean, I just covered that last week. You two need to look at your PORN!”

Now the whole room was staring. All the Eighth Years rolled their eyes. Hermione growled and opened the portrait hole. Alright, maybe she was a little on edge, what with Neville carrying on behind inadequate silencing spells and her housemates being idiots and …

“Oh, Hermione,” said a pompous voice. Oh, just what she needed right now. Ernie was blocking her way, a clipboard in hand. “I was just coming up to find you. We’ve settled on an inter-House
event for Dumbledore’s birthday. Do you have a spare hour? I’d like to review some logistics …”

Hermione strove for calm. Poor Ernie had spent thirty minutes after dinner stuck to Peeves, both Head Boy and ghost the helpless victims of Wrapsodi. Slughorn couldn’t brew Unravelli fast enough these days, and the severing potion was so volatile that students were banned from making it. Slughorn had asked Hermione to cook up a few cauldronfulls, but she had shaken her head, trying to look regretful. “I’m terribly sorry, Professor, but it’s against the rules,” she’d chirped. Slughorn could do his bloody job for once, and he deserved any amount of grief for introducing Wrapsodi to the classroom in the first place.

“I’m sorry, Ernie, I have plans,” Hermione told him. “What’s the event, anyway? I hope it’s the Dumbledore Quiz Game: We can create inter-House teams and give out prizes …”

“Ah, no.” Ernie looked uncomfortable. “We’re holding an inter-House Quidditch match.”

“A what?” Hermione couldn’t believe it. “That’s not educational at all!”

“Well, that was kind of the point,” Ernie said. “People wanted to have fun.”

“Quiz games are fun!” Hermione insisted.

“Yes, I like a bit of trivia myself,” Ernie said, which mollified Hermione slightly. “But the prefects, they …” He trailed off, looking helpless.

Hermione grunted. “Well, then I guess you’re planning a Quidditch match. Who are the captains?”

“Madam Hooch volunteered, and Slughorn promised us the Keeper from the Holyhead Harpies,” Ernie said, brightening. “We’ll have two teams made up of a mix of Houses. Ginny and Draco Malfoy will be the Seekers, and the Keepers will be Ravenclaw’s Arthur Fleet and Slytherin’s Astoria Greengrass.”

“Interesting,” Hermione said. And it was. “What about Hufflepuff?”

Ernie looked dejected. “Our team is pathetic this year. Billy Froom hasn’t caught the snitch once this season.”

“Well, this is fascinating, really,” Hermione said, edging away, “but I must …”

“Can you spare just ten minutes?” Ernie begged. “I’ve reserved the pitch, but I don’t know what to do about jerseys—should we let players wear their house colors and maybe add rosettes or sashes, or use all-new colors like cream and purple? And McGonagall’s agreed to make a little speech—should I ask her …”

Hermione relented and spent ten minutes in a third-floor classroom with Ernie going over colors and banner placement. She sternly vetoed the prefects’ suggestion that all the players dress like Dumbledore, complete with hats and beards.

Ernie looked quite satisfied as they stepped back out into the corridor. “Thank you, Hermione,” he said, beaming. “I knew a little quiet time alone with you would sort everything out.”

“Oh, were you in there with Ernie?” Luna was standing near the door, holding a curvy pole with a silver net hanging from a heart-shaped frame. “That must be what attracted the Love Diggles. I was hoping to catch a few. Could you stand nearer each other?”

“Love Di—” Hermione began, while Ernie flushed.
“That was very kind of you, Hermione,” Luna said. “Ernie’s been quite tense lately. I hope you enjoyed yourselves.”

“I did not enjoy myself with Ernie!” Hermione snapped. Ernie looked hurt. “I mean, of course I did, but not …” She stammered on as passing students stared and began whispering. She distinctly heard the word “porn.”

Hermione huffed in frustration. Now on top of being a violent, incompetent lunatic, she was apparently a sex fiend (not that she wasn’t trying). She didn’t know why she worried about an open relationship with Draco; it seemed almost tame in comparison.

Ernie’s deep blush made everything worse. They had finally gotten over the whole storage room debacle, and now this. Hermione gave Luna a ferocious glare, then turned to Ernie.

“Ernie,” she said loudly. “I was very glad to help you with the logistics for Dumbledore’s Birthday. You’ll do a fine job of organizing the inter-House unity event.”

With a final glare for Luna, she stalked off toward the secret staircase to the fourth-floor corridor, checking her watch. 9:17. This was ridiculous. For years, Hermione believed that she never had a secret torrid affair at Hogwarts because she wasn’t attractive enough. Now the reason was clear: She’d never had the time.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Back in the Charms classroom. Hopefully things will go better this time.
Hermione’s heart was pounding as she picked through the rubble toward the cracked stone arch. Last time she was outside the old Charms classroom, she was running from Draco, wand in hand. Now she was walking straight into his coils. She truly had no sense at all.

She found him once again lying on the teacher’s desk, his long legs hanging off the edge, drawing on the ceiling with his wand. Hermione looked around the familiar room, the warm glow of the lamps, the long tables, the shelves stuffed with books and knick-knacks. Her rune writings were still on the blackboard, the white lines trailing off crookedly. (“Have you been thinking of me?”) The smell of chalk brought back the feel of his body, his voice in her ear: “Admit it, Granger, you want me . . .”

Draco sat up on the desk, the movement startling her. “You’re late,” he said.

“Yes, I know.” Hermione felt suddenly awkward. “Ernie’s planning an inter-House Quidditch match for Dumbledore’s birthday and he—”

“You’re helping him with that daft plan?”

Hermione sniffed. “I suggested an inter-House Quiz Game.”

“At least we were spared that.”

“Quiz games are fun and educational,” Hermione said.

Draco ignored this, his eyes raking her up and down. “Come here,” he said softly.

Hermione stepped forward, then halted a few feet away. She crossed her arms and tilted her head. “What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?” she asked.

Draco blinked. “You’d create the Draught of Living Death.”

Hermione took another step forward, arms still crossed, looking at him challengingly, and Draco’s lips quirked.

“What law explains the conjuration of a frog-rabbit hybrid?” Her face heated slightly but her voice was steady.

“The Principle of Artificianimate Quasi-Dominance,” Draco answered promptly. Hermione moved closer; she was only one step away now. With him sitting on the desk, they were nearly eye level.
“Why did you first show me the Codex?” she asked. She really wanted to know, had asked this question before in this very room. They had been little better than enemies then. Why did he bring the Codex and rune stone to her, extending that thin olive branch?

Draco became very still. “When we began speaking outside Ancient Runes,” he finally said, “for the first time in my life … I wanted to share.”

“With me?”

He rolled his eyes. “Who else?”

“It’s pleasant to be right,” Hermione said, taking that last step. “Quiz games are fun and educational.”

“I’m still waiting for my prize,” Draco said.

She reached out a trembling hand, smoothing his white-blonde fringe back from his face, then leaned in to kiss him. Draco slid his arms around her, pulling her between his legs, his body hard against hers. *Mine.* Her fingers ran through silky hair. She broke the kiss, tugging his head back slightly to run her lips along the roughness of his pointed jaw. There was no injury or school matron this time, nothing to stop her from tracing the long muscles of his throat, lost in his warm skin.

Draco gently pushed her back, causing Hermione to frown, but she understood when he began unbuttoning her sensible cardigan. “Well, well,” he murmured, for underneath she wore only the green bra from Ginny. Hermione’s hands were under his jumper, trying to pull it upwards, and Draco released her to strip it off. Hermione stood captivated by the sheen of lamplight on his bare skin.

Then she leaned in again, and for a time they were both lost in kisses that started out warm, then grew increasingly desperate. Hermione moved to join him on the desk, hardly knowing what she was doing, just needing to be closer, and Draco pulled her onto the hard surface and rolled over her. The wood was cold on her back, and she looked up at the wizard’s shadowed face, his hair backlit by a lamp.

“Here we are again,” Draco said. He propped himself up on one elbow, his left hand sliding a bra strap off one shoulder. Grey eyes gleamed as he looked down at her. “Once again in the old Charms room, and you with your shirt off, those lovely …”

“I was trying to make a point,” Hermione reminded him.

“You certainly did.” Draco groaned softly at the memory. “Standing there, looking like a goddess, with that prim look on your face. Fuck. I almost fell to my knees, begging you to touch me.”

Hermione snorted lightly. “Like that would have gone over well.”

A smile touched his lips. “We’ll never know.” The smile widened. “Ever wonder what might have happened? If you hadn’t gotten away?”

“Perhaps,” was all she would admit.

Draco bent to whisper in her ear. “It must be on your person, Granger,” he said, his voice exactly the same as it was that night. His lips moved to hers, and Hermione gave a low moan against his kiss.
“Where is my snitch, Granger?” he asked against her mouth.

“You must look everywhere,” she breathed.

“Oh, I will.” Warm hands moved over her stomach and ribs, then tugged down the other bra strap as his lips brushed across her collarbone, then lower. A single touch on her spine released the clasp, and her breasts were bare to him. “So beautiful,” Draco murmured, his mouth on her, and Hermione moaned again, hands clutching his hair.

“Draco,” she whispered, and he looked up at her, releasing her breast, his face so open and young—a brief flash of innocence, before Astoria, before the Mark, before the war—that she wanted to cry. She reached up and touched his cheek, not knowing what to say, but something must have shown on her face, because he kissed her sweetly.

“I must keep looking,” he said, a hint of a smile in his voice. His hand moved up her thigh and he paused, surprised to encounter bare skin—she was wearing thigh-high, lacey tights. Thank you, Pansy. Then his mouth was on hers again and Hermione was lost in the taste of him, so lost she didn’t notice her knickers being teased inside. Draco’s fingers were on her, and she pulled her mouth away, startled.

“You’ll tell everyone,” he whispered. “You’ll tell everyone you’re mine. Mine alone.”

“Yes,” she breathed. “Yours alone.” She would have said anything at this point. His lips brushed her ear. “So wet for me, Hermione,” he whispered. “Such a good girl you are. You deserve it all, everything you want. You deserve to come from me, don’t you? My lioness defending everyone. So good …”

He continued to murmur, his voice cracking with desire, his words broken and incoherent. Hermione began to whimper, rocking against his hand. He was attacking her throat now, biting the skin then licking it. Hermione was devoid of all thought, just feeling, her hands clutching his bare back. “Draco,” she begged. “Please …”

“Now,” he said, and she nearly screamed, her body shaking and her walls trembling. He held her tightly, breathing heavily himself. They lay on the desk, entwined together, dazed by what had just happened. His face was buried in her hair and she had her leg wrapped around him.

When she came to herself again, she opened her eyes and there was that face, watching her a bit apprehensively as if she would bolt out the door again. She wasn’t the only one taking risks here; Draco was laying it all on the line, rejecting his family and turning to the Wizarding World’s most notorious muggle-born.

She brushed shaky fingers against his lips, and he kissed them lightly before rolling away slightly.

“I’m going to take you in every possible way on this desk,” he said serenely, as if that was the only possible use for the piece of furniture. He looked at the wooden surface with a measuring eye.

Hermione frowned; she didn’t bring their list.

“But not tonight,” Draco said.

“No?” Hermione said, blinking up at him.

He chuckled and sat up, drawing her up as well. “Meet me again tomorrow night.”
“He-here?” Hermione asked, still stammering a bit. Draco had pulled her onto his lap.

“No, not here.” Draco’s fingers trailed down her bare spine, making her shiver. “You’ll have to discover where. You seem to have a way of finding people.”

He was right, of course. “You can’t hide from me,” she said.

“We’ll see,” he murmured and she could feel a rough palm on her breast.

“Why aren’t we there tonight?” she asked, her eyes sliding shut.

“Because,” he said a bit smugly, “I wanted you here.”

“Prat,” she said without heat. She felt boneless, her eyelids too heavy to open, her head on his shoulder. It felt strange, being so quietly intimate with a man, especially this one. With Ron, their moments were stolen trysts, rushed and panting, trying to elude the ever-prowling Molly Weasley. Arthur’s shack was the only good place, since Molly refused to set foot in it, but it hadn’t been a place to linger topless and talk. She couldn’t imagine Ron just sitting around half-naked and chatting anyway.

Draco, on the other hand, always seemed to have all the time in the world. There had always been a timeless quality to their moments together: on the sofa at the Gryffindor party, the dance at Slug Club, the scene in Slughorn’s office.

He continued to stroke her back. “Ego aperta,” he whispered. *I am open.*

Hermione looked up into grey eyes shining like the crystal pebbles from Bluebell’s class. She smiled. “Tomorrow night will be nice,” she murmured, “with all the exams finished … *exams!*” She stiffened. “I have three exams tomorrow morning!”

“Yes, and I’m sure you’ll do wonderfully,” murmured Draco into her throat.

“But I haven’t reviewed the sentient and non-sentient chapter in Transfiguration and … oh no!” Hermione swung her legs off the edge of the desk. “My flashcards!”

“Your what?” Draco sat up as well. “Where are you going?”

Hermione had found her bra and was scrabbling around for her cardigan. “I made twenty flashcards on human-to-animal transfiguration and I haven’t reviewed *any* of them! The size-to-size differentials are very tricky!”

“Oh, come now,” Draco scoffed, trying to capture her hand, but Hermione had fastened her bra and was picking up her cardigan.

“And I haven’t reviewed my Ptolemaic systems!”

Draco was frowning now. “Hermione, haven’t you already used a very valuable snitch as some sort of nefarious study aid for that very purpose?”

His grammar was getting a little intricate, so Hermione tried to soothe him with a quick kiss as she buttoned her cardigan. “Yes, but that was a Jupiter-based system, the regular formulas are Earth-based.”

Draco sighed, but reluctantly retrieved his own jumper and pulled it over his head. “Fine, fine, but I don’t want to hear any of this piffle tomorrow night.”
“Of course not,” she said, kissing him again. “I’m all yours after a little PORN.”

Draco sighed again. “I wish that was meant the way it sounded.”

He cheered up a little bit after she’d buttoned her cardigan and pronounced herself ready to leave, not bothering to hide his amusement. “Really, Granger,” he sneered slightly, “try to show a little decorum.”

Hermione pulled at her ponytail, grumbling. “Just because three strokes of your fingers and your hair looks perfect …”

His response was a throaty chuckle as he ran his hands over her curls. “There, that’s better,” he said, giving one curl over her ear a tweak.

She looked up at him suspiciously. “You just made it worse, didn’t you?”

Draco just smiled mockingly as he waved her toward the door. “Ladies first.”

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“Well, don’t you look deliciously rumpled,” Ginny said in a low voice as Hermione entered the Gryffindor common room and joined her and Neville on the sofa. “Can I assume you two are now —”

“Yes,” Hermione murmured, trying to discreetly straighten her skirt. Draco had pulled her into three alcoves while walking her back to Gryffindor Tower. She was lucky she wasn’t topless. “But I’d rather not spread it around. I have to talk to Harry and Ron, and he has to write his mother.”

“It’s a toss which side will kick up nastier,” Neville said.

“Are you seeing him tomorrow night?” Ginny asked. “Blaise and I are having drinks in Hogsmeade. You should both come.” Her smile widened. “Nev here could bring Pansy.”

Neville flushed slightly. “I don’t think we’re ready for that.”

“Thank you, Ginny,” Hermione said, pulling at her tights. “But I’m meeting Draco.”

“Some secret place, hmmmm?” Ginny asked wickedly. “Do tell.”

“I couldn’t if I wanted to,” Hermione said. “He wants me to find him.”

Ginny’s eyes lit up. “Ooooh, a scavenger hunt. You’ll track him down and capture—”

“I really don’t want to hear any of this,” Neville said.

Hermione sniffed as she tugged at her skirt again. Neville was awfully queasy for someone who’d recently broadcast his own goings-on to the entire Divination corridor. She caught sight of Ginny’s open Arithmancy book and groaned.
“My study schedules are a disaster,” she said. “I’ll need two hours tonight to review for exams.”

Ginny was still grinning. “Don’t tell me you cut short a snogging session for—”

“I can’t function with my study guides in disarray!” Hermione cried. “And I’ve completely neglected my PORN!” A few passing Fourth Year boys stopped and stared.

“Perhaps some visual aids would help,” Ginny said loudly, “and explicit instructions.” Neville groaned.

“What’s wrong with them?” Hermione asked, tilting her head toward the now open-mouthed boys.

“Nothing,” Ginny said, leaning forward to pat her hand. “I’m proud of you, not letting a few orgasms compromise your education.”

“Hello? Still here!” Neville objected.

“I can’t imagine why,” Hermione told him. “You know how she gets.”

“What’s the problem?” Ginny wanted to know. “We’re all dating Slytherins now. We could compare notes. In fact, Hermione,” her dark eyes shone, “you could take notes tomorrow night and we could review them …”

“I am not taking notes!” Hermione snapped, tamping down a faint quiver of interest at the idea. Private notes, perhaps.

“And I am not reviewing them,” Neville said, standing. “I’m going to bed.” He gathered his books, still flushing slightly, and stalked off without another word.

Ginny watched him go, smiling evilly, then turned back to Hermione. “Come on,” she said, gathering her own books. Then she grabbed Hermione’s hand.

“What is it?” Hermione asked nervously as Ginny towed her up the stairs to their bedroom. “I have to study …”

“Oh yes, yes,” Ginny said, her smile widening. “But first, you’re telling me everything.”

Chapter End Notes

Hi all: A big thank you to everyone for all your kudos and wonderful comments. This is another “Follow Hermione Throughout Her Day” chapter. Hogwarts teachers, like muggle teachers, like to schedule all their major exams on the same day just to make students crazy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione woke Friday morning to near darkness and scrambled to her knees to look at her watch. 6:28. Excellent. Two minutes early. She flopped back onto her pillow, dressed only in knickers and a tank top, indifferent to the morning chill. She had a full day today, with three exams and double Herbology, but she made no move for her textbooks. She didn’t even want her LOOP. She just lay in bed, rubbing her left foot over her right calf, thinking about … nothing.

Her eyes closed. The Charms classroom. Finally, a scene there with Draco that she could remember without cringing or growling. His hand up her thigh, up to her … Ron had never done that, never moved his hands over her with such sure confidence, focusing on giving, not taking. Who would have thought Draco Malfoy of all people would touch her in such a way? No wonder he had such a reputation. Just thinking about it made her warm; she tried to remember exactly what he did and said, but it was difficult, she’d been so overwhelmed …

Hermione blinked and sat up. 7:15. Had she fallen asleep again? No, she certainly hadn’t, but there was no more time to waste. She rushed through her morning routine, hoping to win an extra 20 minutes to review her Transfiguration flashcards again, then wasted that time staring out the window. Honestly, she scolded herself as she pounded down the stairs to breakfast, you’re worse than Lavender.

Draco gave her a wink when she entered the Great Hall, and she couldn’t help smiling back before tripping and falling into a bench full of Ravenclaws. Smooth, Hermione. She limped over to the Gryffindor table and pulled out her Transfiguration notes.

“Here, Neville.” She shoved the parchment at him. “You’ll quiz me, won’t you?”

Neville looked appalled. “Oh no. Never again.”

“Maybe Malfoy will quiz you,” Ginny said slyly as she joined them.

Hermione started at the name. “N-no. He’s a terrible quiz partner.”

“But an excellent partner in other ways, perhaps?” Ginny asked.

“Seamus!” Hermione called out in desperation. “Didn’t you have some questions about the Protean Charm?”

“Never mind,” Seamus said glumly. Many Gryffindors went through distinct phases when confronted with major exams. Looking down the table, Hermione could see that her housemates had passed Denial and Panic and were now mired in Hopelessness. Soon they would be
Bargaining.

Ginny followed her out of the Great Hall. “Well, look at that,” she said, grinning. “Hermione Granger showing up to exams with a poorly cast glamour spell on her neck.”

Hermione slapped a hand to her neck without thinking. “Aaagh!”

“This is the best school year ever,” Ginny said.

Hermione blushed fiercely: The sight of her bare neck in the bathroom mirror that morning had shocked her and any attempts at healing had been fruitless. She had never allowed Ron to mark her so, and Theo had been too much the gentleman.

“Come now, Hermione,” Ginny crooned, pulling at her collar. “Let me see the ferret bites.”

“Keep your voice down!” Hermione snapped.

Ginny whined all the way to Ancient Runes, where Draco stood outside the door, looking pristine as always, reading a scroll with a green wax seal. Ginny peeled away with a saucy smile and Hermione walked up to the Slytherin.

“Draco,” Hermione said, attempting a cool tone.

“Hermione,” he parroted back, pocketing the scroll.

“Ready for your exams?”

“I’m a bit distracted today,” he said, amused.

“Yes, Potions exams can be quite nerve-wracking,” Hermione said.

“Not for me. I have an excellent partner.” His eyes smiled at her. “You’re staring.”

She was. She couldn’t help it. This relaxed, pleasant Malfoy was mesmerizing. Had he always been this way to family and friends, and just sneering to everyone else, or was this a new side to him, or was he only like this with women he was …

“I wrote Mother last night,” Draco said, drawing her out of her slightly hysterical reverie. “Here’s a copy.” He pulled out a small scroll and handed it to her.

“Dear Mother,

I hope this message finds you well. I am courting Hermione Granger. Console Father as well as you can.

Love,

Draco

The word “courting” raised Hermione’s eyebrows, but she merely handed it back. “Pithy. Did you receive a response?”
“Almost immediately.” Draco vanished the note and produced the heavy parchment with the broken Malfoy seal. This message was written in an elegant, feminine hand:

“My dear Son,

I am well, thank you. Pray inform me if you require any other priceless family treasures to be placed at Miss Granger’s disposal.

Love,

Mother

Hermione handed the parchment back. “And here I thought you inherited your sharp tongue from your father.”

“Mother is very amusing,” Draco said, looking at the scroll fondly before tucking it away. Then he fixed her with a stern eye. “When are you telling your lot?”

“I’m having breakfast with Harry on Sunday.” Harry was scheduled for a rare weekend off. “And I’ll tell Ron after my flying lesson that morning.” She was heading straight to the joke shop after Harry’s breakfast. Best to do it all at once.

“Wish I could be there.” Draco leaned toward her, then seemed to recollect where they were and stepped back. Just in time, too; McGonagall was arriving, trailed by the rest of the class.

She spent most of the next period mentally reviewing Arithmancy problems while Draco drew a large dragon in his textbook, using his wand to make it move. Interesting how he made all the runes on the page flee in terror like little stick-figure villagers … Hermione leaned over to see better.

“So can anyone give an example of a carved rune with a horizontal slash?” McGonagall’s voice rang out. “Anyone? No? Miss Granger …” Hermione sat up. “Would you be so good as to give an example?”

“I can’t,” Hermione said.

Murmurs rippled through the class. Hermione Granger can’t answer a question? Only Draco appeared unperturbed as he waved his wand and his dragon ate three fleeing runes. The others tried to escape to the next page, but were trapped in the center crease. She thought she could hear faint screams.

“And why is that, Miss Granger?” McGonagall asked.

“Because carved runes had no horizontal strokes,” Hermione said, pulling her eyes from Draco’s book. “Such runes were often carved into stone or wood, and a horizontal stroke would be along the grain, more difficult to see and likely to split the wood.”

“Yes, carved runes had many distinctive properties …” McGonagall continued, and Hermione sighed. Without Draco’s rune stone, there was little to explore on this topic. She felt a tug on her robe and looked down to see a tiny scroll pulling on the cloth with the ends of its green bow. The message was in runes, of course:
Miss Granger,

Please lecture me about strokes. At length.

LDLM

Merlin help her. Draco was leaning back in his seat, oozing smug satisfaction. Hermione sent him her best McGonagall glare, which he countered with a heated look that made her shift in her seat. *I am a frozen pond in Norway … no, on Pluto …*

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Theo was alone at the Potions table when Hermione arrived and didn’t look up from his book as she took her seat. Seamus and Dean were two tables over, begging Slughorn to postpone the test until Monday.

“Now, boys,” Slughorn said heartily. “Surely that isn’t necessary! You will all have the opportunity for a little extra review before the exam today.”

It was uncomfortable sitting so close to Theo, their arms were practically touching and she could smell that familiar, musky cologne. Her stomach twisted from nervousness, or maybe it was anger. Or shame. Maybe it was pity—Theo had been looking drawn and reserved, he hadn’t been eating. No, she wouldn’t feel pity. *He won’t let me help.*

Her hands clenched tighter and tighter. *Anger. Definitely anger.* Anger at Theo for his words to her. Anger at him for refusing help. Anger at herself for continuing to worry about and protect him. She should go straight to Harry and …

“Mr. Nott, Miss Granger!” Slughorn was standing by their table now. “Ready for my little exam, I hope?” He beamed at Theo. “You are fortunate in your seatmate, Mr. Nott.”

“Yes, truly blessed,” Theo said dryly.

“Well, you mustn’t squander such good fortune!” Slughorn gave Theo a jovial slap, not as hard as Hagrid’s, but still enough to push Theo forward. “Miss Granger, why don’t you quiz Mr. Nott a bit?”

It took all of Hermione’s self-control not to glare at the interfering Potions professor. “My pleasure, sir,” she said icily. She picked up her textbook and Slughorn moved away, satisfied.

“Don’t bother,” Theo sneered, sparing her the tiniest of glances. “I’m sure you’d rather quiz Draco.”

“Godric, no.” She’d quizzed Draco exactly once and he’d challenged every question. Some people
had no respect for the process. Hermione flipped a few pages. “What are three primary uses of lacewing in advanced potions?”

Theo clasped his hands on the table, looking straight ahead. “As a thinning agent, a heat catalyst and a coloring agent.” His voice was toneless.

“That’s not quite correct,” Hermione said. “Stewed lacewing flies also have cooling properties in the Polyjuice Potion.”

Another brief glance. “The question only asks for three uses,” Theo said.

“Yes, but one could argue that lacewing’s coloring agent is most suitable in the Boiling Cure, which is a First-Year potion.”

“But isn’t it a vital ingredient in the Shrinking Solution, which is not only advanced but bright green?”

“Yes, but I always add a codicil to answers on this topic, stating that the Shrinking Solution’s green color is a result of—”

Draco slid onto his stool. “And what do we have here?” His vowels were pure Lucius.

“I’m quizzing Theo,” Hermione said.

Draco snickered. “Better him than me.”

Theo was silent, his mouth a thin line of irritation. Lavender took her seat, looking anxiously between Draco and Theo. Hermione wondered how the last Potions class had gone while she was fetching the hydras.

“Hello, Lavender,” she said brightly, trying to cut the tension. “Would you like me to quiz you for the exam?”

Lavender looked horrified. “You? Never!”

An evil smile slid over Draco’s face. “Would you like to quiz me, Brown?” he asked.

Her smile was pitifully eager. “Sure!” Lavender flipped pages. “Uh, why is flobberworm mucus superior to pond slime in thickening the Wiggenweld Potion?”

Draco frowned. “There’s a problem with that question. Did you read it correctly?”

Lavender cringed. “Y-yes, it’s right here.” She held up the book, placing a hand over the answer.

“I’m not answering a flawed question,” Draco said haughtily. Lavender looked crushed.

“Yes, it’s definitely flawed,” Hermione agreed.

“Thank you, Hermione,” Draco’s smile was smug. “It’s nice to see someone understands the correct use of pond slime.”

“Oh, no,” Hermione said, “flobberworms are clearly superior.”

Draco scoffed. “Pond slime offers twice the thickening qualities of flobberworms …”

“But you have to use six ounces of slime versus only an ounce of mucus,” Hermione sniffed.
“Impractical.”

“A tad inconvenient perhaps, but one shouldn’t compromise quality …”

“I’m confused,” Lavender said. “What’s wrong with the question again?”

“The question is flawed because neither flobberworms nor pond slime is required to complete the potion,” Hermione said. “If you just monitor the fire carefully it will thicken …”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Now that’s just semantics—”

“Wacky Faint.”

He held up a finger. “Don’t start.”

Slughorn gave the class twenty minutes to review for the exam, but it was a wasted effort at Hermione’s table because she and Draco squabbled the entire time over the practice questions. Theo had his hands clamped over his ears as he tried to read, and Lavender just stared, baffled.

Finally, the exam began and quiet reigned. Hermione was writing out her answers and underlining phrases (for future explanation, if time allowed) when she felt a warm, firm leg against hers. She often stood in Potions class, the better to reach the cauldron, but today she was sitting, a circumstance, she suddenly realized, put her legs in close proximity to Draco’s longer ones.

She looked up, and Draco was looking at her with a hint of that open expression. Her own expression didn’t change but she leaned into his leg slightly. She could feel his body heat through his trousers and her tights and it calmed her somehow. The frantic yammering of her pulse she usually felt while taking exams faded; she felt only soft encouragement. She wondered what it would be like to study with him, leaning up against his body, his naked … she blushed suddenly. Concentrate. She looked up and saw him watching her again, looking a bit smug. The properties of the Polyjuice Potion …

Theo stalked out of the dungeon immediately after the bell, and Draco left with the rest of the class. Hermione stayed behind to dispute a few exam questions.

“Now, Miss Granger,” Slughorn said in the same hearty tone he’d used with Dean and Seamus, “I’m sure you explained your reasoning quite well in your answers, no need to discuss it further!”

Hermione was leaving the dungeons, muttering about professors with no sense of nuance in their supposed fields of expertise, when an arm shot out of a half-open classroom door and pulled her inside. Draco locked the door, looking pleased with himself, as usual.

She huffed. Still Draco Malfoy, wanting what he wanted when he wanted it. “What are you playing at?”

He began stalking her around the desks, silver eyes on hers. “I want to know what you were thinking of, in Potions.”

“I have Arithmancy in twenty minutes and I need to review …” The back of her legs hit the teacher’s desk.

Draco was in front of her now, pulling her bag to the floor. His arm snaked around her waist. “Tell me,” he whispered, and promptly made telling him anything impossible by kissing her. She felt him lift her up and set her on the desk, his lips on her throat.
“You were driving me mad in there,” he said against her skin. “I could barely take my exam. Tell me what you were thinking. When you blushed.” He lifted his head and looked at her, a spoiled boy wanting his treat. “I’ll kiss you if you tell me.”

She knew the answer to that. “You’ll kiss me if I don’t.”

Draco smiled but didn’t move, just waited, arms around her.

“This is just rewarding bad behavior,” she said.

He gave her a slow blink with long lashes.

“Fine,” she huffed, “I was imagining us studying together.”

“No, really …” Draco stopped and considered. “Were we wearing anything?” He saw her suddenly heated face and his smile widened. “No? Intriguing.”

Hermione could have wept. She imagined the rest of the school year with his notes and his whispers and random meetings and she shivered, either in pleasure or trepidation, or both. She expected Draco to demand another explanation, but he was busy kissing her aggressively and probably expected a fair amount of shivering.

Twenty minutes later she was dashing to Transfiguration, buttoning up her robe because she’d spent the last ten minutes getting her hair in order and didn’t have time to fix her shirt or skirt. Obviously, they were going to have to establish boundaries; Draco might be used to sleazy bints dropping their knickers between classes, but that didn’t mean Hermione had to live that way. She’d gotten some revenge, however, with a suckling bite on his jaw that she had refused to heal. Let him look less than perfect for once.

The Transfiguration practical exam went well, and the class included a Ravenclaw almost as obsessive as she. The two of them enjoyed a discussion of the stickiest portion: turning a classmate into a duck. Hermione was upset that her duck (a Transfigured Luna) was a bit too large, and the Ravenclaw was practically hysterical because the transformed Neville looked more like a goose.

Hermione left the room reassured that her duck’s size differential was small enough for full credit and rather pleased that Luna still sported a few feathers (she still held a grudge over the Ernie fiasco). Then she snuck into a bathroom to repair the damage from her run-in with Draco. She wasn’t Lavender—damned if she was walking around the school looking like she just rolled out of bed. Yes, ground rules were definitely needed.

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Hermione put on her sniftiest expression when she entered the Great Hall for lunch. Draco was seated between Pansy and Blaise, and looking smug again.

“Trouble in paradise?” Neville asked in a low voice.
“Not at all,” Hermione said. She couldn’t expect it to be easy. In fact, she was curious to see what he would do next.

But he made no effort to approach her, even during her free hour in the library. By the time Double Herbology rolled around, she was frankly a little put out. The man had no concept of time management; they could have traded a rushed fifteen minutes after Potions for a leisurely forty-five minutes after lunch.

Hermione was headed for Sprout’s small greenhouse, snogging schedules spinning in her head, when she heard a riot of flapping and squawking. A flock of pigeons was swooping close to the ground, chasing a single owl. The owl was big and strong but hampered by the heavy package it carried. The pigeons’ squawks rose, sounding like screams, and Hermione drew her wand. Hagrid was right; This renegade flock of pigeons was getting out of hand.

“Bullarum pelta!” she shouted, and a bubble appeared around both owl and package. She had slightly modified the Bubble-Head Charm, and the pigeons’ beaks couldn’t pierce the clear barrier. The pigeons screamed again and wheeled away as the owl continued its flight. Hopefully, the recipient could dispell her charm.

The pigeons made her a bit late to Herbology, where Sprout was leading the last day of Winkweed lessons (thank Merlin). All the specimens had thrived: Draco and Neville’s plant, Wendy, was the biggest of all, a 5-foot monster whose leaves shone a glossy black from the ink it had absorbed. Draco looked properly wary of it, but Neville crooned over the horrid thing and stroked its flower petals. Truly they were going to find her friend dead one day, strangled by homicidal vines.

Half of their Winkweed grade was determined by what Sprout called their Cultivation Compendium, a journal of “Adventures in Gardening.” Hermione usually rolled her eyes at the phrase, but it was admittedly an accurate description of their recent activities. The final session was to be used to review, revise and organize their compendiums, time that Hermione heartily appreciated. Now that she had read the entire Winkweed textbook, she wanted to annotate some earlier entries that were not as precise as she would have liked.

Hermione was absorbed in this task, happily minding her own business, when Astoria started up another round of “Who Wants To Be Lady Malfoy?”

“You can’t keep him, you know,” she said in a low voice.

“Are we talking about a wizard or a library book?” Hermione asked at a regular volume. “How about a loan with the option to renew?”

Draco and Neville glanced over. Hermione gave them a bright smile that only made them frown. Some people were never happy.

“He will always return to me,” Astoria said serenely.

“Maybe he will,” Hermione said. “I don’t pretend to understand the man. If that’s the life he wants …” she shrugged and resumed writing.

Astoria touched the diamonds peeping out of her shirt collar. “I am what he really wants.”

“Very nice,” Hermione murmured absently. She was trying to organize her Winkweed notes by subject and a few pages fit multiple categories. Did pruning guidelines go under “Care” or “Potential Disasters”?

“Our betrothal remains,” Astoria said.
Hermione finally put down her quill and looked at Astoria. The woman was like a mechanical doll, spouting phrases like “He only needs me” and “I am his destiny” after you wound it up.

“Did you say something?” Hermione asked.

“I am his true betrothed.”

“That dog collar you’re wearing doesn’t mean anything, Greengrass,” Hermione snapped.

Her voice rang out in the small greenhouse. OK, maybe that was a little loud. Neville looked up, concerned, while Draco smirked in approval.

“So prim and proper,” Astoria hissed. “But I saw you running through the halls today buttoning your robes. Sneaking around with him. You’re a slut for him like the rest of us. He’s had us all, you know … Pansy, Daphne, Eleanor … he’ll never settle until it is time to continue his legacy. With me.”

Astoria’s voice had risen a little now, her eyes wild, and Draco was no longer smirking. His face darkened and he started to stand, but Neville spoke in a low undertone: “… can handle it …”

Hermione looked at Astoria, head tilted, eyes narrowed as if the other woman was a particularly interesting object to Transfigure.

“I don’t know what you want me to say, Greengrass,” Hermione said. “If you’re right, then Draco will most certainly hound around on me, leave me, pick up your betrothal again, and go live the noble pureblood dream.”

She didn’t bother to lower her voice, and Draco was standing, restrained only by Neville’s—good, loyal Neville—death grip on his arm.

“So why not let it play out?” Hermione continued loudly. “I’m hoping that you’re wrong, of course, that he has more integrity than that. But that’s his choice. So, no, I’m not going to flaunt his diamonds and pour poison in his ear and scheme with his friends and follow you around with nasty little insinuations. It’s his life—not yours, not mine, not his parents’—his. And if there’s one thing I fought for in the war, it’s for every wizard and witch’s right to make his or her own decisions, regardless of background and blood.”

“Hear, hear,” called Neville. He released Draco, who strode over to their table.

“Astoria,” Draco said sternly, “whatever arrangement you have with my mother, you need to stop.”

“Draco,” Astoria said, moving closer. She was trembling. “I cannot believe you’d settle for that.”

“Are you joking?” he asked harshly. “If anybody is settling here, it’s Hermione. She’s better than all of us. We’d all be crushed under Voldemort’s thumb somewhere if not for her.” Hermione stared at him, dumbstruck.

“Now, Astoria,” he went on more gently. “I’m saying this to you as a friend: If you keep wearing those jewels and chasing me, it will damage your reputation. Do you think my mother cares about that? If you hurt your chances for a good marriage, that won’t matter to my mother. She’ll only know that you failed.”

“I won’t fail,” Astoria said. “I know you. I know you.”

today. And you two …” He waved a hand at the Slytherin boys. “Show’s over. Get back to work and keep your mouths shut.”

Hermione swept her things back into her bag and let Draco pull her over to his and Neville’s table.

Draco grimaced. “If I were a better man, I’d break it off with you right now. You’re in for worse than Astoria.”

“Don’t you dare,” Hermione said. “Nobody tells me what to do. I’ll see who I want, when I want and where …”

“Fine, fine,” Draco said. “If I break it off, it’ll be to chase women and marry some Sacred Twenty-Eight bitch and not out of a displaced nobility. I promise. Are we good?”

“We’re good,” Hermione said, smiling at him.

Draco looked her up and down. “Hmmm. So. Let’s talk about my note in Ancient Runes.”

“No, no, no,” Neville broke in. “Malfoy, there will be no use of that tone around me. Keep that up, and you can go sit with Greengrass.”

Draco eyed him lazily. “Hermione would never allow it.”

“I’d encourage it, actually,” Hermione said, picking up her quill. “Then I could finish my Compendium.”

“Perhaps Longbottom would like to sit with Astoria,” Draco said.

“I think she’d like you better,” Neville said with a grin.

The two men spent the rest of the class arguing loudly over who had to sit with Astoria while Hermione placidly finished her Compendium. She could only see Astoria’s back, but her posture was rigid, her hands were clenched, and the two Slytherins facing her looked terrified. When the class ended, Astoria flounced off her stool and out the door. Neville looked at Hermione and Draco, shook his head, and left.

Draco edged closer. “So, what shall we do before dinner?”

“PORN in the dungeons,” she said crisply, packing up her bag. “I know it’s Friday, but we’re behind schedule. You received my Owl this morning, I presume.”

“And a very disappointing Owl it was, too,” Draco said. “Just nonsense about NEWTs. You should pattern your notes after mine …” He continued on this obnoxious vein all the way to the dungeons, suggesting increasingly risqué topics for future messages, while Hermione fought her blushes.

Draco obviously didn’t expect anybody else to show up and began proposing alternative activities in the dungeon. But it turned out that some Eighth Years actually cared about their futures, even on Friday afternoons. Padma Patil, for example, was anxious to join the healing program at St. Mungo’s and needed strong scores in Potions and Defense Against the Dark Arts.

“So now he’s glaring, and you look smug,” Neville said to Hermione after the meeting as Draco stalked off. “Do I even want to know?”

“Never underestimate the power of education,” Hermione said with a smile. She lowered her voice.
“Neville, I need a favor. I’m having breakfast with Harry on Sunday and …”

“Oh no,” Neville said. “No, no, no …”

“I haven’t even asked you yet!” Hermione raised her wand to clear the blackboard. Her hand froze—someone had drawn a large number 8 to the right of her outline.

“Hermione, are you listening?” Neville was hissing. “I am not telling Harry about you and Malfoy.”

“I’ll tell him, you only have to be there,” Hermione said, clearing the board. “I can’t ask Ginny to do it, not with her history with Harry. You’re the only other person who gets it.”

“I sort of get it, although the whole Greengrass situation makes me nervous, but that doesn’t mean I want to defend you two to Harry.”

“Then just come for support.”

“How about I write a reference letter?” Neville pretended to write on parchment: “I have had the pleasure of watching Hermione and Malfoy quarrel relentlessly for months and crush anyone who gets between them, and am therefore convinced …”

“Please,” Hermione begged as they left the dungeon and walked to the Great Hall. “Look how effective you were today with Draco. I think he likes you.”

“Godric help me, Hermione,” Neville breathed. “You are delusional. The bastard may have feelings for you, but if you think he sees me as anything other than a crybaby who happened to trip over a snake while holding a sword, then you have lost your grip on reality.”

Hermione did not agree, however, and continued her efforts in an undertone as they joined the Gryffindor table for dinner. Neville obviously counted on Ginny’s support, but her roommate thought bringing Neville along to see Harry was a great idea. Neville repeated his reference letter joke, and Ginny wrote one on the spot.

“Don’t worry, Nev,” she whispered, placing the sealed scroll in Hermione’s hand. “Harry will go spare for a while, but my advice is to ignore everything but blood.”

“Blood?” Neville turned pale.

“You’re such a good friend,” Hermione said, giving him a kiss.

“I haven’t agreed to anything, Hermione, and now I’ve got Draco Malfoy glaring at me,” Neville said, wiping his cheek. “When did you start wearing so much lipstick?”

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Draco tells a story.
Here's a bit of sweetness before the plot of this story takes our characters by the scruff of the neck and shakes them furiously. Thank you all for the wonderful responses to the last chapter and the thoughtful questions.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

At 7:47 p.m. on Friday, Hermione ducked into the chilly alcove near the Gryffindor common room and tapped the Mauraders’ Map with her lit wand. “I solemnly swear I am up to no good.” Draco thought he’d outsmarted her, but she’d prove him wrong. Confidently she scanned the Slytherin dungeons, the classrooms on the upper floors, likely alcoves and the ground-floor storage room.

But no Draco. Hermione hunched over the parchment, checking and rechecking dots. Where was he? How did he do it? It must be someplace the Marauders never found. A Slytherin hideout? Someplace new, perhaps, created during the renovations this summer? Hermione bit her lip. Maybe she should …

Wait. There he was, in the fourth-floor corridor that linked Gryffindor Tower and the Owlry. Draco’s dot lingered near a bit of wall opposite a balcony and then … disappeared.

Hermione stared at the Map in disbelief. He was there and then gone, just like in their Sixth …

She shoved the parchment in the pocket of her cardigan and left the alcove, walking briskly to the fourth floor. The corridor was lined with pictures of the Scottish moors; flickering torchlight reflected off the floor-to-ceiling windows on her left. Draco was nowhere in sight.

Hermione pulled out the Map again, but there was no dot but hers in the corridor or the balcony. She looked curiously at the bit of wall where she had seen that dot. Draco was nearby, she was sure of it.

She tucked the map back into her pocket, prepared to wait him out, when the stone wall shimmered slightly and a small, low door appeared, painted green. The door opened and she stood amazed as Draco ducked through.

He spotted her immediately, even before he’d straightened to his full height, and his smile held a hint of triumph. “You’re late,” he said.

Hermione was still staring at the door. “Is that what I think it is?”

“Yes, come see.” Draco took her hand and she smiled, for he looked a bit excited, his usual hauteur completely gone.

He pulled her into a small, rectangular room with a flat ceiling and no windows. The only furnishings were a thick, luxurious brown carpet, a few large cushions and two standing lamps. Draco’s black suitcoat was draped over a cream-colored cushion.

But the walls were the real wonder: Hermione stood agog, mouth open, for runes danced across walls the color of parchment, the figures shifting color as they moved. A tree appeared, its leaves
rustling silently, followed by a longship with square sails moving across the wall. Her gaze turned to Draco and he silently gestured upward, where more runes spun in a slow circle.

“The Codex,” she whispered, hardly daring to speak or it would all disappear. She squeezed Draco’s hand. “The Room of Requirement. You asked it to show you the Codex.”

“I found the Room last week,” Draco said. “I needed a place to hide from …” he stopped and cleared his throat.

“Who?” Hermione couldn’t help asking. She couldn’t imagine who could drive Draco Malfoy into hiding.

“Luna Lovegood,” he confessed. “She’s developed a renovation plan for the Malfoy cellars. She thinks the underground spaces would make an excellent meditative retreat.” Draco suddenly looked drained, and Hermione bit her lip to keep from laughing. “The daft witch has been hounding me for weeks. She thinks we can tap into a groundwater source to create a … a Spring of Renewal, and that the positive meditative energy could chase away any lingering Dark spirits.” He swallowed and shook his head.

No wonder he was hiding. “And so the door appeared?” she asked.

“Yes. Here, sit down.” Draco settled them both on cushions and loosened his tie. He was in all black, as usual: from tie and dress shirt to trousers and polished shoes. His hair reflected the golden light from the lamps and moving lines of runes. A flick of Draco’s wand and a silver tray holding a matching tea set floated over, gently landing on the carpet before them. The teapot began to fill the cups, followed by lumps of sugar and a tiny silver pitcher of milk leaping into action.

Draco produced a flask and waited for a nod from Hermione before adding a dollop (a rather large one) of sirenscotch to each cup. Hermione noted the engraved ‘M’ on the teapot and tray, but said nothing, noting that another matching tray held fruit, nuts and toast. She darkly suspected a house elf had been involved but said nothing. See, she could restrain herself.

The late-night snack was a good idea, since she’d been too busy arguing with Neville to eat much dinner. Draco just might succeed where Ron and Harry had failed for years: getting Hermione to eat regularly.

“So, the door appeared,” Hermione prompted as she munched her toast.

Draco nodded. “I was walking back from the Owlry when I heard Lovegood singing. But I couldn’t see her and I panicked, thinking, ‘I need somewhere to hide’ and … there it was.”

“What did the room look like?” Hermione asked, curious.

“It was small—little more than a closet.” Draco’s eyes were wide. “I thought it had been destroyed. The Room of Requirement.” He looked around, saying the last three words almost with reverence.

Hermione covered his hand with hers. The Room stirred up painful memories for both of them; she was surprised Draco would even enter it. His friend had died in the Room of Hidden Things, and Draco himself had been saved from Fiendfyre by Harry. They sat quietly for a time, hands linked, both thinking back to that terrifying scene: The Fiendfyre spreading out of control, Hermione and Ron on a broom, flying toward Draco, who was hauling an unconscious Goyle up a tower of charred desks. The heat had been nearly overwhelming and she remembered Draco’s eyes, nearly mad with horror and fear. Had it only been months ago?

“Healing,” she finally said, finding her voice.
“What?” Draco asked absently. He had been clutching his teacup, lost in thought.

“The castle is healing,” she said. “‘Hogwarts: A History’ describes an attack by giants in 1343, led by dark wizards. The giants tore down an entire tower, but the castle rebuilt itself slowly over decades, stone by stone.” She tugged on Draco’s hand slightly, drawing him closer. “McGonagall told me that parts of the castle are healing these days; sometimes builders will arrive to repair a wall or turret and find it already half-finished. The Room of Requirement must have healed as well, moving to another floor.”

“It’s smaller.” Draco set down his teacup to slip an arm around her. They leaned back against the wall, watching the dancing runes. “This is the biggest I could make it. And it can’t provide furniture, only cushions and rugs.”

“Is the … is the Room of …” Hermione couldn’t finish.

“I tried. I asked for the Room of Hidden Things.” His voice was steady. “But no door appeared. He swallowed. “Just a faint smell of … smoke.”

Hermione leaned against his shoulder while nibbling an apple slice. His body felt warm through the smooth, rich fabric of his shirt. “I’m sorry your friend died,” she said.

“He deserved it.” Draco’s voice was cold. “He tried to kill you.”

“You can still be sorry.”

“I led him to it. Vince wasn’t smart enough to think for himself. I did the thinking for him. I taught him to hate.”

“Yes, you did,” Hermione said. There was no denying it; without Malloy’s poisonous influence, Crabbe and Goyle might have turned out more like Bloom and Pratt, thick but harmless. Mostly harmless, she corrected herself, remembering Draco’s Quidditch injury.

Hermione ate the last apple slice and started in on the walnuts. She hoped Draco wasn’t too hungry; she’d already finished the toast.

Draco added a bit more scotch to their teacups. “I cannot wait to graduate. Every stone of this place is haunted.”

She couldn’t help but agree. It was time for a new generation, free of old prejudices and war wounds, to shape Hogwarts anew. She thought of the Squeaky Mice and McGonagall’s efforts for inter-House unity. Maybe it had already begun.

“What will you do after Hogwarts?” she asked.

Draco gave her a sideways look. “My plans are in … flux.” he said. “I know what I won’t be doing: I won’t hide away in Wiltshire, mingling only with pureblood society. I won’t live my parents’ life.” He sighed. “But it’s hard to imagine a different future for a Malfoy.”

“You’re already living that future,” Hermione said. “You found this place because you hated what happened in the Manor.” She set down her teacup, looking regretfully at the now-empty snack tray. “It will take more than a Room of Requirement to escape Luna, though. She’s relentless.”

Draco looked mischievous. “Maybe I’ll send her to Mother.”

There was a brief silence as they both pictured Luna having tea at the Manor, telling Narcissa her
plans for the cellars. Hermione started to giggle, and Draco’s smile widened. But then his eyes clouded over, recalling a dark memory at the Manor, most likely. The Room seemed to darken with the Slytherin’s mood, despite the dancing runes.

So Hermione dropped his hand and slid off her cushion onto her knees. Before Draco could react, she was straddling his outstretched legs, scooting forward until she could put her hands on his shoulders. His eyes widened.

“Come back to me,” she said, looking down at him.

“Always,” Draco said. His hands moved to her waist.

Their lips met, and Hermione melted into him, once again forgetting their surroundings, her senses filled with his warmth and his touch. Then she pulled away slightly, unbuttoning her now-Official Secret Torrid Affair Cardigan. She heard Draco’s sharp intake of breath at the sight of the dull gold halter top, the cardigan falling to the carpet.

Rough palms moved up her bare back. “You wore this at the Gryffindor party,” he murmured.

“Yes,” was all she said, her eyes sliding shut as he kissed a shoulder.

“You were so beautiful that night,” Draco said in her ear, hands still roaming over skin. “I could only watch you, wondering if I was mad to aspire to such heights.” He swallowed. “I still wonder.”

Hermione opened her eyes, surprised. For seven years Draco Malfoy had looked down at her with scowls and sneers, but now she remembered him watching her at the Gryffindor Party, face upraised in a yellow ring of light.

“One week,” she said, still hardly believing it. “We had been back at school for a single week. And you were staring at me. I didn’t know what to think.”

“Who else would I stare at?” Draco wanted to know. “You were everywhere that week, writing in your notebook at breakfast, yawning in Ancient Runes, fighting with me in Potions …” his hands were moving again. “Sitting at my side in Defense Against the Dark Arts, your curls brushing my shoulder, your skirt riding up, those long, lovely legs, your left knee so close …” his hand stroked the knee in question. His words were breathy in her ear. “All of it, it drove me mad. I became obsessed.”

“Obsessed.” Theo’s words floated through her mind: *Draco’s obsession with you is dangerous, possessive.* Perhaps Theo had been right—once.

“Entirely obsessed.” Draco’s voice was matter-of-fact, although his hands hadn’t stopped moving. “Since the first day. You outshone every other witch in this school, brilliant, powerful, with that roving eye …”

Hermione blinked. “Roving eye?”

Draco withdrew his hands and leaned back against the wall again, looking a bit stern. “Oh yes. I saw you looking around, Hermione, during that first breakfast. You were finished with the Weasel, that much was obvious, although he couldn’t see it. I watched you consider, and rightfully reject, one Gryffindor after another. You passed over Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws without a second glance.” He smiled slightly. “I saw you watch Blaise walk by. And I saw you watching me, and flushing when I winked at you.”

Hermione couldn’t deny it. She had said as much to Ron on their failed date at Hogsmeade.
“I didn’t survive a war to go back to being a prim little bookworm,” she said, beginning to pull at his tie. “I wasn’t going to play that role anymore. I was going to do what I wanted, where I wanted, when I wanted …”

She unspooled the tie easily—years of fixing Ron and Harry’s ties had made her adept—and began unbuttoning his shirt, unfastening the silver cufflinks. He was like a wrapped present: black on the outside and so pale beneath.

Draco was quiet now, head tilted slightly back, watching her through half-closed eyes. “Go on with your story,” Hermione ordered, “or I’ll stop.”

He lips curved upwards. “I was going to make my move, that night of the party,” he said obediently. Hermione tried to listen and not just watch the light from the runes play across his features. He gave a low chuckle. “One week back at school, barely out of Azkaban, hated by the entire student body, and I turn up at Gryffindor Tower on a Saturday night, determined to seduce Hermione Granger.”

It did sound mad, Hermione had to admit. She had unbuttoned enough of Draco’s shirt to reveal a deep slender V of pale skin. She ran a single finger down the center of his chest. “What were you going to do?” she couldn’t help but ask, her usual desire for knowledge almost overcoming other desires.

He said nothing as she unbuttoned the shirt entirely and pulled it off. He was so perfect, even the thin silver scars from spells and hexes and Godric knew what else were perfect. Not even the Dark Mark, still vivid but unmoving, could detract from those lovely long lines of muscles and veins.

She had almost forgotten what they …

Oh yes, the story.

“Go on,” she said, tossing the shirt aside and putting her hands on her hips.

Draco sighed. “I’m rather ashamed to tell you.” Hermione raised her eyebrows. “Do keep in mind that I’d barely known you a week,” he said, “I mean, as the different me, knowing a different you, than I knew before, when I …”

Hermione’s eyes widened. Merlin, the man is babbling. Draco pulled himself together and continued. “On the night of the party, my plan was to lure you out of the common room, get you into an alcove, probably.” His gaze became hooded and dangerous. “Fuck you against the wall.”

“Really,” she breathed. Draco looked at her significantly, and she remembered: I promised not to stop. Her pulse began to race as she unbuckled his belt. She didn’t know what she was doing, just that she didn’t want him to stop talking.

“I knew there was something between us,” he continued. “I felt it in the carriage, and it only grew stronger. Thoughts of you in the Charms classroom, stripping for me, were driving me mad. Keeping me awake. I thought perhaps a one-time thing, hot sex between enemies, would take care of it. Then we would …” he cleared his throat. “We would go our separate ways. You would find someone else. Someone more suitable.”

She rolled her eyes. “Lovely plan.”

“So I show up at Gryffindor Tower with sirenscotch … I had it all planned, and you weren’t even there.” Draco looked annoyed, an echo of the irritation he’d felt that night.

“I was out with Ron,” she said, not even trying to hide a smile. She reached for the back of her neck, her fingers fumbling with the halter’s tiny buttons.
“Yes, you were.” He gave her a kiss, then looked at her reproachfully. “‘Splendid,’ I thought, ‘she’s back with the Weasel after all.’ But then the Weasel comes back without you, left you there alone at the village.” His face darkened. “I gave him a piece of my mind and stormed out, vaguely thinking of marching to Hogsmeade to find you.”

They were both silent a moment: Draco apparently brooding over Ron’s ungentlemanly behavior, and Hermione considering what would have happened if he’d showed up at the Leaky Cauldron. She’d been furious with Ron; Draco just might have gotten some revenge sex against a wall.

Draco’s voice brought her back to her surroundings. “I’m not seeing a lot of progress here.”

“Carry on, then,” Hermione said, now working on his shoes.

“Instead, I came across Daphne in the halls,” he went on. “She said she saw you stomping toward the Potions dungeons looking ready to kill somebody, so I talk to Slughorn, then go back to the party …”

Hermione was giggling now, imagining the high-and-mighty Draco Malfoy wandering the castle looking for her, trying to salvage his big seduction plan.

“Enough talking,” Draco said, pulling his shoes out of her hands and casting them aside. His eyes threatened the burn the halter top off her body.

“No,” she managed to insist. “Finish the story.” She pulled the golden silk over her head and shook out her hair.

Draco stared, then shook his head as if to clear it. “So I returned to the party,” he went on a bit hoarsely. “And there you were, standing on that sofa, so beautiful, almost shimmering, your magic …”

He pulled her to him, rolling his body, and Hermione found herself on her back, his face looming above her. His hands pulled her wrists above her head, holding them there.

Draco kissed her lips, roughly, desperately. “I was ready to do anything,” his voice cracked as he looked down at her. “Hate sex against a wall wasn’t enough anymore. I wondered if I could get you to a classroom, even to my bedroom …”

Hermione began to tremble. She’d had no idea. She’d been recklessly drinking and dancing that night, and if Draco had gotten her alone outside the Gryffindor common room …

Draco rolled off her suddenly and sat up, and Hermione propped herself on her elbows, looking at him curiously. He was frowning now.

“Then, of course, you met Theo.” Draco’s voice was suddenly cool. “And we had that charming scene with Creevey, and Theo leaves, and you stop dancing. And I think, ‘finally’ …” He looked down at her reproachfully. “And then you fall asleep on the sofa.”

“It had been a long day,” Hermione admitted.

“Well,” he sighed. “At that point, I knew I was beaten. I couldn’t leave you, though. You were alone in the room, alone and sleeping. I’m not the Weasel, I had to stay until you woke.”

“And so you did.” She reached an arm toward him, and he came to her, kissing her with that old desperation, his tongue deep and aggressive. Hermione didn’t know how long they lay there, exploring each other’s mouths, but it almost felt like they were on that sofa at the Gryffindor party
again, with all former distrust and insecurities falling away. She’d wanted Draco so badly that night, even if she wouldn’t admit it.

Draco stripped off his trousers, and Hermione cast off her skirt, and they came together again, their touches becoming rougher, almost hysterical. He seemed to glow in the light of the runes, his eyes most of all.

“I’m not demanding anything,” Draco whispered, moving his mouth on her throat. “I’ll take whatever you’re willing to give.”

Hermione was trembling “I … I want this,” she stammered, “but it’s all so much.” She hoped Draco would understand. And if he did understand, then maybe he could explain it to her.

But he surprised her again. “I know, I’m not used to any of this either.” He raised his head and gave her a wry look. “All this sharing.”

“It does seem very un-Malfoy,” Hermione agreed.

He sighed. “You have no idea.”

She ran her palms up his jaw and into his hair. “I think you’re doing quite well.” Better than Blaise and Theo, certainly. She pulled his lips toward hers. “But now it’s time to stop talking.”

Draco groaned as her hand slid underneath black silk to grasp his cock. Then there were no more stories, no sentences, not even words as he explored her with mouth and hands, and she moved her own hand until he came, which felt a bit like a desecration of the Room, what with the mess all over those nice carpets and cushions. She banished such thoughts immediately— “Are you a witch or not?”— and cleaned everything with a wave of her wand.

He was murmuring brokenly into her hair, and Hermione’s mind recalled where they were, far from their assigned beds, and it must be getting late …

“Shhh,” Draco said as she tried to sit up. “We’re alright.”

“It’s after curfew and …”

“We’re alright,” he repeated in that soothing tone. “We can get to our rooms tomorrow morning.” He breathed in her ear. “Stay.”

Hermione knew she shouldn’t, but she didn’t have the strength to move. She shivered, and suddenly felt the weight of a heavy, soft blanket over both of them. The Room still worked.

“Sleep, darling,” he said in velvet tones, and there was no resisting that. Hermione felt him shift slightly so his chest was to her back, his arm around her. “Sleep,” he repeated, and she obeyed, although she didn’t want to, because in this moment, dreams could never surpass the reality of Draco.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Potions Lab, Squeaky Mice and Diagon Alley.
This chapter shifts the entire story to a higher gear as the plot revs up. Questions will be answered, and new questions raised in the following chapters. More romance ahead, but also danger and surprises. Hang on to your shorts.

It had become a distressingly familiar dream for her, ever since he first leaned close in the library, whispering “I’ll kiss you if you tell me, Granger.” That alluring scent of warm sunshine and cologne, the fresh, light smell of his hair. As their interactions continued, the dream added the silky feel of said hair, and the smoothness of warm skin interposed with rough stubble along his sharp jaw. Soon the dream added the feel of his hand on her waist, his lips on her throat …

Now the dream was back, more vivid than ever, and she could feel softness brushing her cheeks and lips and it was so real she actually opened her eyes and turned her head …

And he was there. Really, truly there, beside her in the semi-darkness lit only by glowing blue runes on the walls. She lay on her back on the soft carpet and he on his side, looking down at her, and his eyes shone blue like a cat’s. He was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen, and she raised a hand to stroke his cheek and confirm he was really there.

It was his lips on hers that finally convinced her this was no dream. She had found him; Draco couldn’t hide from her after all, and they were in the Room of Requirement.

This was the first time she’d woken up with anyone, unless you counted the months in the tent during the war, which Hermione certainly did not. Her fingers ran down his back, his hands ran up her thighs. They both felt a little frisky, open to a little exploring, and it was a long time before either of them had anything to say.

Finally, Draco pulled himself away, sitting up with his back against the wall again. “We should go to Diagon Alley today,” he said casually, as if they were chatting outside Ancient Runes.

“Knockturn Alley, too?” she said hopefully, scooting over to join him.

He sighed and put an arm around her. “If we must.”

Hermione’s face lit up. “We can meet Vasile there!”

“And we can test the blood potion in the morning before we go. It should be finished today.” Hermione inched away to face him, excited by the prospect. “Just think of it, Draco. After we figure out the ‘Die Mudblood’ letters …” Draco rolled his eyes, “… we can consider our next project, perhaps a screaming …”

Draco rubbed a hand over his chin. “Yes, yes, we will certainly discuss experimental potions ad nauseam, but not right now.” He yawned. “Not before my morning tea and pastries.” He looked around expectantly. “Not before my tea,” he repeated significantly, then sighed. “Of course, the
“Room.”

“It’s nearly eight o’clock,” Hermione said, who had located her watch and was scrabbling about for her halter. Draco gave another regretful sigh and gracefully rose to his feet, pulling on his trousers.

With the help of a full-length mirror the Room provided and some smoothing and tailoring spells, Hermione thought they both looked quite respectable in a short amount of time. “If we hurry, we can still make breakfast,” she said.

“You must be joking,” Draco said. “I could never appear in the Great Hall in this condition.”

“You look fine,” Hermione said.

Draco sniffed. “Malfoys do not look fine. The rumpled I-slept-the-bloody-floor look may pass muster at the Gryffindor table, but some Houses have standards.” He fussed for a moment with his left shirt cuff, glared at it, then gave it up as a bad job. “I will see you at the Potions Lab.”

“You are definitely not a morning person,” Hermione observed, amused.

“Eleven o’clock.” Draco stepped up to her, and his warm kiss belied his snooty tone. “Don’t be late this time.” He ran his knuckles along her cheek and left the room, obviously anxious to get to the dungeons before anyone saw him in such a state.

Hermione just shook her head, taking a minute to admire the runes on the walls a bit longer before leaving herself. Draco might need the next three hours to primp, but she was going to breakfast. She was starving, and if Gryffindor’s Saturday morning standards were a bit lax—Ron had turned up in his bathrobe one morning and no one even noticed—well, she could only be grateful.

After breakfast she returned to her room, showering and dithering about her clothes for London. Ginny hadn’t been at breakfast and wasn’t around to consult. Her favorite jeans and jumpers were rejected, as was anything red and gold. She thought about transfiguring a blouse green, but transfigured colors were a tricky business and often caused streaking. Finally, she chose a dark purple blouse with a shortened black skirt and knee-high boots, then tussled with her hair until she remembered the Gloriana Set. Surely it was all right to wear it now. She thought of Narcissa and Lucius and almost quailed, then shook her head. They weren’t the Malfoy that mattered, so she used the large clip to pull her hair off her face, allowing the curls to tumble down her back. There.

She arrived at the Potions lab twenty minutes early. The blood magic potion looked perfect, definitely ready, with puffs of pink steam swirling clockwise up from the cauldron. She could test her blood now, but wanted to wait for Draco, so she began reviewing her list of other experimental potions. There was a curative potion for cursed scars she literally itched to try …

“Hermione.” Draco stood in the doorway, apparently groomed to his satisfaction. He wore black trousers and a green cashmere jumper so dark it was almost black.

“Good morning,” she said, feeling awkward as she always did when they had polite exchanges like normal people.

He stepped forward with a smug smile, and Hermione leaned into him, feeling his fingers brush the diamond clip in her hair. “Is it ready?” he asked, looking over her head at the cauldron.

“Yes.” She turned away and fastened black robes over her clothes. Draco slid his arms into his robes and hooked them together while Hermione got out the vials.
Using the tongs, Draco carefully dipped the vial into the potion and set it into a wooden holder. Then he produced a small silver knife and handed it to her. “DLM” was engraved on the sheath. These Malfoys and their monograms.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“Seventh birthday present,” he said.

*Of course. What small boy doesn’t need his own engraved silver knife?*

“It’s not cursed, is it?” she asked. Draco scowled. “Too soon?”

“Yes,” was all he said.

Hermione pulled the knife from its sheath and ran its edge along her finger. The silver blade was wicked sharp—beads of red instantly appeared and she held the finger over the vial. A few drops of blood fell into the potion.

Draco handed her a handkerchief and they both watched the vial anxiously. 1 … 2 … 3 seconds, and the potion in the vial turned clear.

“We did it!” Hermione cried. “We did it!” She beamed up at him.

“Yes,” he said. He ran his wand over her finger, healing it instantly.

“Now your turn,” she said excitedly. She dipped another vial into the potion with the tongs and placed it in the holder. Draco cut his palm with the knife and dripped blood into the vial.

There was no reaction at first. Hermione had begun counting as soon as his blood hit the potion. When she got to 30 seconds, she and Draco exchanged confused looks, then looked down at the vial again and gasped. The small sample of potion was swirling, changing color.

The potion was now pale purple.

Draco flinched back from the vial, crashing into the shelf behind him. Not even the sound of glass bottles striking the stone floor could pull Hermione’s eyes from the vial, its damning purple color shining clearly.

“It can’t be … there must be some mistake.” She wondered to hear her voice, so calm and confident. “Let’s try it again.”

She looked at Draco now, and his eyes were wide and confused. “All right,” he said hoarsely.

Hermione set up another vial, and Draco viciously sliced at his palm, crossing the previous wound, making an X. He thrust the hand over the vial and the stream of blood (he’d cut the skin rather deeply) poured into the vial. Then he dropped his hand, not even bothering to bind it, as Hermione counted the seconds.

Thirty-six seconds, and the vial turned pale purple again.

“Fuck!” Draco shouted, fisting his bloodied hand and slamming it on the table. The vials and cauldron shook and Hermione held her breath, but nothing spilled.

“Give me your hand,” she said. He ignored her, panting. She moved closer and put her hand on his fist (the knuckles were now bleeding as well). “Draco.”
He slowly opened his fist, blood running between his fingers. She cast a quick healing spell, then *tergeo* and he put the hand on the table. She could see it was trembling and put own hand over it.

“Look at me, Draco,” she said. He did, his grey eyes full of pain. “There’s an explanation. And it’s not that you wrote the message.”

“What other explanation could there be?” he asked. “Was I possessed? Imperiused? Did someone get hold of my blood somehow? There were some Death Eater rituals …”

“Maybe the potion is flawed,” Hermione said. “It is experimental. There could be factors …”

He laughed bitterly. “The potion is perfect and you know it. How could it not be? You created it.”

“I’m not perfect,” she said. “Just practically perfect.”

He didn’t smile, just looked down, his white-blond fringe hiding his eyes. She didn’t like that, and reached up to brush it away, but he flinched from her touch. “Are you going to tell Potter?” he asked.

“The question is, are we going to tell Potter,” she said. “We decide together.”

He raised his head and looked at her. “What do you think?”

Hermione took a moment to consider, and he watched with that endearing patience he often displayed while she was thinking. She tilted her head and squinted at the cauldron, the lazy pink steam still rising.

“We need time,” she said finally. “It’s a complicated potion, something could be affecting its performance. We’re also meeting Vasile today, and he might have an insight.” She looked at Draco again. “But yes, we will have to tell Harry at some point. He knows about the potion, he knows we’re testing it. I was going to send an owl to him today, but I can delay a day or two.”

“Hermione …” His voice was hoarse. “With that information, Kingsley could drag me in for questioning or …”

“Nobody’s dragging you anywhere, Draco,” she said briskly. “The good news is that Harry never told Kingsley about the potion. Officially, he knows nothing.”

He sneered. “Saint Potter is not going to withhold vital information in an auror investigation. And once he finds out about this, he’ll run straight to Kingsley.”

“No, he won’t,” Hermione said stubbornly. “This is my potion, I conceived it, we brewed it, and I have some say over how the information it yields is used. If Harry did such a thing—and I don’t for a minute believe he would—I would testify to the unreliability of this blood potion and its inadmissibility as evidence. And that would be the truth. I wouldn’t turn in anybody on the strength of this potion alone.”

Draco sat heavily on the stool, his head in his hands. “I wish I understood what’s happening.”

“So do I.” Hermione stood in front of him and slid her hands over the back of his neck. He put his arms around her waist, leaning his head on her shoulder. She could feel the weight of his head through her robe. Finally, Draco lifted his head, releasing her from his arms and straightening on the stool.

“All right, Hermione,” he said, his eyes brighter. “I’m not locked up yet, and I don’t intend to be.
It’s just …” He shook his head. “I feel like my future is like the edge of that silver knife. It could go either way—success or failure, freedom or … Azkaban.”

There wasn’t much to say to that, so she tugged at his hands until he stood up. “Come on,” she said. “You’re taking me to lunch. Did you bring a cloak?”

They had agreed that hooded cloaks were best when going to Knockturn Alley after lunch, and Malfoy produced a black cloak that Hermione immediately rolled up.

“Careful there,” he objected, “that cloak’s expensive …” His voice trailed off as she easily slid the rolled cloak into her little beaded bag.

“Cork those purple vials, please, and hand them to me. Drat,” she said, looking inside the bag. “I never took out Luna’s fishing poles.”

“What are you going to do with these?” he asked, handing her the vials.

“I don’t know, but I’m not leaving them around for any random person to find.” They shed their robes, and Draco watched interestingly as Hermione locked the Potions Lab door and cast a string of complicated wards. Then Hermione spent some time silently demonstrating her continued confidence in Draco’s character on one of the Potions tables.

“I have to admit, I’m not used to this,” Malfoy said, looking down at her. He ran his lips along her collarbone, then drifted lower. Hermione’s shirt was now unbuttoned and her bra had vanished entirely.

“From what I understand, you’re quite used to this,” she said breathily. “Slytherin bad boy, right? Oozing trouble and sex?”

“Not this kind of trouble,” he said against her skin. “Not this kind of sex.” She shivered at the feel of his tongue. “You’re so sweet … the way you look at me, with wonder, but you’re the wonder …” his words trailed off into incoherent murmurs as he worked his way down her torso.

“Hermione,” he breathed, and she felt a hand under her skirt, tugging at her knickers. “Let me—”

“Let’s look in here!” cried a voice.

“Not again,” Draco groaned, looking up. “Let me guess, there’s a Pygmy Puff on my head.” Hermione giggled, she couldn’t help it.

“Mr. Malfoy?” piped another voice, sounding like Percival.

Draco groaned again and stood, brushing a hand over his hair and jumper to achieve perfection. Hermione, on the other hand, struggled to button her blouse and find her shoes.

“Alohomora,” said a girl’s voice, and Hermione nearly fell off the table at the sound of the opening door lock.

“That Leila is entirely too smart,” Hermione muttered, hopping off the table and wiggling uncomfortably. Her knickers were now, well, wedged. Draco grinned at her mockingly.

“Mr. Malfoy! Miss Granger!” The entire Squeaky Mice contingent was in the hallway.

“They’re in the Potions dungeon!”

“What are they doing in there? Did she hex him again?”
“I think he hexed her—she’s a mess!”

Malfoy was outright laughing now, and Hermione’s glare only made him laugh harder. “What are you all doing here?” she asked, hands on her hips.

The Squeaky Mice hung their heads. “We have detention,” Bertie said.

“Again?”

“It wasn’t our fault,” Imogene said. “We didn’t know it would follow him around.”

“Who?” Hermione asked.

“Professor Slughorn,” Percival said. “He keeps making us fetch his silver flask for him. So I asked Leila to cast a tethering spell.”

“I thought the flask would stay in his leather satchel,” Leila said, looking a little abashed. “But I made the spell a little too strong.”

“It kept following him around,” Imogene said. “Floating behind his head and nudging him.”

“It was a very needy flask,” Percival said. “Worse than a Pygmy Puff.”

“Hey!” Bertie said. “Cupcake can hear you!”

“Professor Slughorn couldn’t get away from it,” Leila said. “And if he ignored it too long, it would pour its drink on his head.”

“It was a really strong spell,” Percival said admiringly.

“It was a really strong drink, too.” Leila waved her hand in front of her nose.

Draco was still laughing, and therefore useless, so it was up to Hermione to shoo them all out of the dungeon to wait in the corridor for Slughorn. She couldn’t be angry with them, though; Slughorn had deserved what he got. The Squeaky Mice’s antics had also returned Draco to his earlier lighthearted mood, although he looked a bit sour when she opened the secret passageway from the castle to Honeyduke’s cellars.

“You three had all kinds of secrets, don’t you?” he asked.

“You have no idea,” Hermione said with a smile.

It was Draco who chose their lunch spot in Diagon Alley, turning up his nose at many nice cafes and pubs. Instead, he led her to the top floor of a tall, impossibly thin building, up a spiral staircase to a landing. Hermione saw no exit, just large paintings of Parisian scenes. Undeterred, Draco went up to the closest picture, that of an outdoor café by the Eiffel Tower, and spoke to the fat waiter in a white apron.

“Martine’s, Monseur, si vous plait,” he said.

“Ah, tres bien, Monseur, Mademoiselle,” the painted waiter tucked a tray under his arm and bowed. “Ouvrir!”

A hole in the ceiling appeared and spread, and the spiral staircase extended higher, curving like a corkscrew through the opening.
“After you,” Draco said. Hermione climbed the stairs and emerged on the building’s top floor, which only had room for five tables surrounded by glass walls. She stepped to the nearest window, amazed—she could see all of Diagon Alley, the columns of Gringott’s Bank and a dark slash that was likely Knockturn Alley. Muggle London loomed in the background, hazy and gray.

A man in black led them to a table. The only other patrons were two white-haired wizards with long beards murmuring in … Danish? Norwegian? Hermione couldn’t tell.

Their table barely had room for two folded napkins and a low pot of roses. Malfoy smoothly slid into his chair as the waiter seated Hermione. “There is no ordering here,” Draco told her. “They just bring you food and wine and expect you to love it.”

Hermione nodded as a server placed wine and bread before them. “I’ve never heard of this place. How you know about it?” she asked.

“My mother. She hasn’t been here in years—fell out with Martine one day when she didn’t like her table, but Mother brought me here once before I came to Hogwarts. It’s very discreet; there’s a ward of confidentiality on the dining room.”

She touched her wand in her skirt pocket, trying to sense the ward. “That’s very difficult magic.” Confidentiality wards prevented anyone leaving the protected area from discussing anything they’d seen or heard there.

“A Gringott’s goblin did it for Martine, according to Mother,” Draco said, buttering a roll.

“So anything we discuss here … “

“Is strictly confidential. For example,” he gave her a wicked smile, “I can tell you that Slytherin House has a charmed quill that writes the correct answers to any test. Any Slytherin can reserve it three times a year. I used it for my last Muggle Studies exam.”

“That’s cheating!” Hermione cried, aghast. “Wait, you take Muggle Studies?”


“I can’t believe no one knows about this quill, it should be confiscated! I should——”

“You can’t,” Draco smiled mockingly. “By the way, I told Brown yesterday that Theo is in love with her.”

“Draco!” Hermione cried. “You didn’t!”

He winked at her. “Better him than me. And now you can’t tell Theo.”

Hermione groaned. “I hate this place already. You’re going to sit there and tell me all the nefarious things you’ve been up to this year, aren’t you? And I thought we’d have a nice lunch.”

Draco reached out and took her hand. “It is a nice lunch,” he said. “I’ll tell you what else is nice—how my family’s French house elf brings tea and fresh pastries to my bedroom every morning.” His smile widened. “If you’re there, you can have some as well.”

“I don’t believe you …” Hermione pulled her hand back. “How could you——”

“Her name is Aimee,” Draco went on. “Quite useful, really. Healed me of that stinging hex Theo
“gave me like that.” He snapped his fingers.

“You had a house elf heal you that night?”

“Of course.” Draco looked smug. “What would you have me do, suffer?”

“Yes! I mean, no! I thought …” Her throat was suddenly tight.

Draco took her hand again. “Aw, you were worried, weren’t you?” His eyes glittered. “You wanted to sneak down to my room and heal me, didn’t you?” He kissed her hand. “I wish you had,” he murmured, his lips on her wrist. “It would have moved things along.”

Hermione blushed furiously and pulled her hand away as the waiter set down two plates of snails. “Bon appetite.” She turned her attention to her plate, just to look at something else.

She had eaten snails before, but had a little trouble with the tongs, while Draco gracefully ate all of his and rest of hers while she struggled with the first shell. Then he poured another glass of wine while Hermione dipped the first tiny shred of snail she’d excavated into butter sauce.

“You know,” he said with hooded eyes, “feeding your dining partner is considered very romantic. We may have to consider it if it’s the only way you’ll be able to eat today.”

“I don’t know why the French even eat snails …”

“Escargot.”

“… They might as well serve slugs, put them in little pitas or butter rolls.”

“What?” Draco looked revolted.

“They’re the same thing, after all,” Hermione went on, waving her tiny snail fork. “What are slugs in French?”

“Limace,” he said with a frown.

“See? Limace in lettuce wraps. Sounds lovely, and no tongs.”

“It is of infinite comfort to me,” Draco pronounced, “that our lunch setting prevents you from raising this appalling topic with anyone else. Although that doesn’t help my present situation.”

Hermione just smiled as the waiter whisked away the plates and brought lobster bisque.

“I know,” Draco said, “why don’t you tell me something not limace-related. Confidentiality guaranteed.”

She thought for a moment. “Ginny thinks Blaise is too perfect,” she said.

Draco shrugged. “Blaise has always been perfect. Even as a child. His mother made sure of it. If the Weaselette is hoping he’ll open his heart to her, she’ll be waiting a long time.”

“She’ll probably break up with him, then,” Hermione said sadly.

“I don’t know. Most women are incurably optimistic,” he said, pointing his spoon at her. “Case in point.”

Hermione was happy to see the main course arrive, duck lettuce wraps with anchovy cream sauce.
Finally, something solid to eat.

“On Wednesday, I saw a Slytherin boy add emeralds to the House point hourglass,” she said brightly. “I’ve been watching for signs of tampering, and apparently, it’s a regular thing, so I’ve enchanted the hourglass. Now every time a Slytherin tries to add emeralds, twice as many will be lost the next day.”

Draco nearly dropped his fork. “You can’t do that! Pansy was going to add another ten points today!”

“Then twenty will be lost tomorrow.” She leaned forward. “And nobody will know why.”

Draco looked horrified.

“You’re right,” Hermione said. “This is a very nice lunch.”

His eyes narrowed. “I honestly thought that regular snogging would make you less insufferable.”

“Now who’s being incurably optimistic?” she asked.

They had no time to finish their dessert, since Vasile awaited them in Knockturn Alley, so they left Martine’s with boxed eclairs in Hermione’s beaded bag. They hadn’t walked a block, however, before stopping to open the box on a park bench behind a mass of moonflower vines.

“We’ll have to hurry,” Hermione said, taking a large bite of eclair.

“Yes, it simply wouldn’t do to keep a vampire waiting,” Draco said.

“It’s not safe for him to just hang around,” she said.

Draco snickered. “You mean upside down?”

“Not funny.”

He leaned forward. “Hold still, you have chocolate on your face.” She held still, and he kissed the side of her mouth, licking the bottom lip. “Delicious.”

“We shouldn’t—not here—” she began.

“Hold still, there’s more,” he said, and kissed her again.

“Hello, dear,” said a soft voice. Draco and Hermione broke apart instantly and jumped to their feet. Standing before them was Narcissa Malfoy.

Hermione couldn’t speak. Did the woman have Hermione-alert wards set up around Diagon Alley? And did Hermione still have chocolate on her face? She looked over at Draco and saw that her boyfriend (she supposed he was her boyfriend, Merlin help her) was flinging his limbs about in an odd little dance.

At first Hermione thought Narcissa had actually hexed him, but then she realized that Draco had moved to kiss his mother, then thought better of it, decided to shake hands, changed his mind again and finished with a bow, all practically at the same time. Hermione and Narcissa watched his antics for a time, but the fun was over all too soon.

“Miss Granger,” Narcissa purred. “So nice to see you. I beg you to excuse my son for a moment while he has a word with his mother.”
“Of course,” Hermione said.

“No, Mother,” said Draco, who had gotten himself under control. “Hermione can stay and hear whatever you need to say to me.”

“I would not advise it,” Narcissa said.

“Neither would I,” Hermione put in.

“Nonetheless, I insist.” Draco’s voice was silky now, pure Lucius.

“Fine,” Hermione said, glancing at her watch. Narcissa moved to sit on the bench, which placed Hermione and Draco standing before her like misbehaving children.

“Draco,” Narcissa said, her voice icy. “Your father was very disappointed by the lack of respect in your response to his letter.”

“And I was disappointed by the lack of respect in his letter,” Draco said. “Also, to my understanding, he is no longer my father, since, as you can see,” he waved a hand at Hermione’s curls, “I have not acceded to his request.”

Hermione didn’t miss the formality of Draco’s last sentence, and by Narcissa’s look, she was going to answer her son in High Chant.

“He will always be your father, Draco,” she said. “And he would be very displeased to see a Malfoy engage in such unseemly behavior as I have seen here.”

“Well, unless I take Hermione into Azkaban and snog her there, he won’t have to worry about it,” Draco said.

“Draco, you’re being rude in front of your … friend,” Narcissa said blandly. “Nevertheless, your actions do no credit to your family or to your betrothed.”

Draco gritted his teeth. “Mother, Astoria is not my betrothed. I have every right to see Hermione.”

Hermione sighed. As riveting as Draco’s family drama was, she couldn’t stay any longer. “Lady Malfoy,” she said. “I hope you will excuse me, but I am late for an appointment.”

“That’s right,” Draco said. “Mother, you’ll have to excuse both of us.”

“I can go on my own,” Hermione said.

Draco turned on her. “You are not meeting that … appointment … alone. You promised!”

“It’s perfectly safe.”

“I am sure that Miss Granger is quite capable on her own,” Narcissa said.

Draco ignored this. “Hermione, you are not going anywhere near that … appointment without me.”

“It’s a very nice appointment and will be no trouble, and I am leaving now, so you can either accompany me or not,” Hermione said.

“Surely, Draco, you can spare a little more time for your loving mo—” Narcissa began.

“No I cannot,” Draco said, grabbing Hermione’s hand to keep her from leaving. “Hermione and I
have serious business that cannot wait.”

He stepped closer to Narcissa. “I know you don’t understand what I’m doing, Mother. I know you
don’t like it. You listened to Lucius during the war. I’m asking you to listen to me now. I certainly
can’t do worse. Now I have to go with Hermione, and I will try to visit soon.”

“Your father is very angry, Draco,” Narcissa said.

“I know. And I’m sorry, for your sake.” He bent down and kissed Narcissa on the cheek, then
stalked off, pulling Hermione along with him.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Draco gets handsy in Knockturn Alley.
Draco looked a bit grim as they neared Knockturn Alley, and Hermione couldn’t blame him. Accusatory potions, a run-in with his mother, now a meeting with a vampire—this hadn’t been his best day. They both pulled up the hoods of their cloaks as they passed through the alley’s shadowy entrance.

“Stay close to me,” Draco said.

“You stay close to me,” Hermione returned. She held her wand inside her cloak pocket and strode ahead into the narrow, winding street, forcing Draco to follow. He growled at this but he couldn’t pass her since hags and vagrants and decrepit stalls selling suspicious wares had narrowed the street further.

A large, tattooed wizard with yellow eyes and a bulbous nose stomped toward them from the opposite direction, flailing a long black whip. He slashed an old hag trying to scuttle away, prompting Hermione to draw her wand. Draco pushed Hermione’s arm down and shoved her back against the wall.

“Draco!” she hissed.

“Stop charging into trouble,” Draco said, hand still on her arm.

“I could take him,” she snapped.

“That’s not what we’re here for.”

“But that hag—”

“I know,” he hissed, “but if you start hexing every mean person in Knockturn Alley, we’ll never get to your bloodsucking friend before someone chases him off, and wouldn’t that be terrible?” Draco looked around. “Who knows how many chaps will come out of the woodwork if you face off with someone like that. You’re not invincible, you know.”

“But look,” she protested, pointing. The wizard’s whip had destroyed a pile of wooden crates holding a street vendor’s supply of disembodied hands. All the hands were getting out, clutching people’s cloaks and crawling up walls like cockroaches.

“Come on,” Draco said, releasing her arm and putting his own around her waist. “Let’s go. Merlin,
I can’t believe you came here last month without causing a riot.”

“We’ll need to talk about all this grabbing of hands and arms,” Hermione said as he pulled her further along the alley.

They made it halfway to the pub without mishap until Draco caused a small scene outside Borgin and Burkes. A stowaway disembodied hand had crawled up his leg, reaching his upper thigh before he’d noticed. Draco started tugging the hand off, but the fingers held fast to his trousers, and Hermione cast a tiny spark at the hand that hit the wizard’s leg instead, he was flailing so wildly. She could see Borgin’s pale face peering through his shop’s grimy window.

“Eeee!” Draco very nearly squealed as the green fingers moved upward again. Furious, he shoved his wand into the hand and exploded it, splattering hand guts all over the shop window and their cloaks. Borgin’s face vanished. By the time they reached the White Wyvern, Hermione was giggling and Draco was sputtering with rage.

“You should have seen your face,” she gasped, “when the hand got up near your …”

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence,” he growled. “Just look at my cloak.” He tried to shake the blood off the thick cloth.

Hermione looked at her own cloak and sighed. “Well, now we fit right in.”

They did three rounds of the Wyvern before they found Vasile, and that was only because the vampire came out of the shadows and almost stepped on their feet. The three of them quickly withdrew to a corner table, and what looked like a half-troll came by and slammed three foaming steins in front of them.

‘Don’t drink it,” Hermione said.

“Do I look stupid?” Draco retorted.

Hermione turned to Vasile. “I hope you weren’t waiting long.”

“I am honored you would deign to meet me, Prințesă,” the vampire purred.

Draco pulled Hermione’s chair closer to him. “Let’s get on with it.”

“Vasile, have you learned anything new about blood curses and messages?” Hermione asked.

“Yessss,” he answered. “I have spoken with a few … scholars … of these dark arts. Your school may be under some sort of blood spell. The spellcaster does not directly write the message, but casts a spell on the entire castle. If words appear on a wall, this is a very bad sign.”

“What, he’s making jokes now?” Draco asked.

Hermione ignored this. “But Vasile,” she said. “Hogwarts is the most protected and warded building in Britain. How could it be affected by a curse?”

“Magical buildings, they are the most dangerous,” Vasile said. “This spell, it twists the inherent magic in the walls.”

Hermione and Draco exchanged glances.

“More messages will likely appear elsewhere in the castle,” the vampire continued. “In your case, the message is aimed at those born of Muggles, those whom we call Comuns, the Ordinary. This is
not necessarily a curse, simply a manifestation of the blood used in the spell. The blood of a powerful witch or wizard with great hatred of Comuns.”

“What is the purpose of the spell, then?” Hermione asked.

The vampire shook his head, the light from the guttering candle behind him shining on his black hair. “There is no way of knowing, Prințesă. The spell itself may not be hostile, only the message.”

“How do we lift the spell?” Draco asked.

“The spellcaster must reapply the blood of the magical being used in the spell and cast the counterspell.” The vampire pulled a slim book from his cloak, a book so old it was practically crumbling. Vasile placed it on the table, and only when he had removed his thin white hand—a hand even paler than Draco’s—did Hermione pick up the book: “Curses of Home and Hearth.” A rather homely title, but the faded cover was bloodstained and the book fell open in Hermione’s hand, revealing an engraved picture of victims being crushed by rubble.

“Have you ever seen this book?” she asked Draco, handing it to him. Draco shook his head. Hermione turned back to Vasile. “May I borrow it?”

“Anything in my humble possession is yours, Prințesă,” Vasile said. Draco scowled.

Hermione nodded, then pulled out her beaded bag from under the table, tucking the book inside. “Vasile, I told you about my blood potion. The solution turns a deep purple when matching blood is dropped into it.” The vampire nodded.

She cleared her throat nervously. “This morning we tested it with blood from the messages. When we added my blood to a sample, it stayed clear. Not a match. But when we added Draco’s blood …”

She looked at Draco, whose mouth was a thin line. Then she pulled the vial out of the bag and placed it on the table. The pale purple color was obvious, even in the dim light.

Vasile became very still, dark eyes on Draco. His face shifted, thin black eyebrows drawing down to a V, and the red line of his mouth widening dangerously. The pointed tips of his fangs emerged. The vampire began to rise, spreading his cloak slightly. When he spoke, his voice was thick with dark intent.

“And you are convinced, Prințesă, that this man did not …”

“Yes, yes, Vasile,” she said, flinging her left arm over Draco’s chest. Shadows seemed to gather around the vampire, who bared his fangs further. His eyes glittered. Draco himself sat frozen.

“Vasile, I am certain he did not cause these messages,” she went on. “Draco told aurors under Veritaserum that he did not write the messages or cast a spell. I trust him. Please, Vasile.”

The vampire resumed his seat, but shadows still lingered and the smoothness of his face did not return. “Then this man’s blood may have been used somehow, as what you call a … set up?”

“Without his knowledge? Draco,” she said, turning to him. “You mentioned some Death Eater rituals …”

Draco’s face was stone as he considered. “Yes, enough could have been spilled. A few members became fond of … sectumsempra.” Hermione stared at him in horror, then took his hand and squeezed it hard.
Vasile was still looking at the vial, holding it to the torchlight in his long, impossibly thin fingers.
“You say the potion turns purple when the matching magical blood is used …”

“Yes,” she said, “it turns a …” her eyes opened wide.

Vasile nodded. “Blood will tell. It is not, yet it is.”

“Will somebody kindly share what is going on?” Draco asked with dangerous politeness.

“The message on the wall wasn’t written with your blood,” Hermione said. “The blood likely came from Lucius.”

Draco stared at them with amazement. “That’s not possible!”

“It’s very possible,” Hermione said. “A close relationship of blood, so the potion turned purple—not the deep purple a perfectly matching sample would create, but close enough.”

“Does that mean my blood can cure the curse?” Draco asked.

Vasile shook his head. “Your blood is diluted by that of your mother’s. Better it is that the donor’s blood is used.”

“How are we to get blood from Lucius?” Hermione asked.

“I have some ideas,” Draco said darkly.

“No great amount would be needed,” Vasile said. “You must find the spellcaster, who will place the blood on the castle wall. The building’s very walls would absorb the power, just as the castle absorbed the original spell.”

“So this spell could have been cast anywhere, anytime at Hogwarts, but the message turned up on a Gryffindor Tower wall,” Draco said.

“Yes. The stronger the curse, the more quickly the message would reveal itself,” Vasile said. “A few days, perhaps. I would say the spell … sensed … young Lord Malfoy and was drawn to him.”

Hermione turned to Draco. “We have to tell Harry,” she said. “We have to tell him now.”

Draco nodded and stood. Hermione did as well and smiled at Vasile.

“Thank you,” she said. “You have been a true friend to us.”

The vampire bowed. “It has been an honor, Prințesă.” He walked into a shadowed corner and disappeared.

Draco stepped forward, looking into the corner, but the vampire was gone. “I do NOT like him,” he said.

“We need to talk to Harry,” Hermione said. “He can help us.”

“How?” he asked as they re-entered Knockturn Alley. “How can your precious Pot-head—”

They stopped suddenly; there was a scream and a crash and splintering of wood. A fight had broken out between two hooded figures pushing carts of mud. Hermione halted and Draco stepped in front of her.
“Move,” she hissed. “I can’t see.”

He glared at her. “Haven’t you had enough entertainment today?”

Hermione, peering over Draco’s arm, saw one figure draw out a long object. “Oh no, he’s got a wand, Draco—” She dragged him down just before curses began ricocheting off the stone walls. “Come on,” she snapped, crawling into a nearby shop. Draco followed.

It was a very small shop and quite deserted. Cobwebs covered the shelves, and when Hermione and Draco stood, their cloaks were covered in dirt, dust and rat droppings as well as hand guts.

“Charming,” Draco said, looking around.

“You know,” Hermione said, pushing back her hood, “I’m not convinced having you with me makes me any safer. My last visit to Knockturn Alley was quite uneventful.”

Draco gave her a dirty look as he tried to brush off his cloak. Hermione peeked out the shop’s tiny window. “They’re still fighting out there,” she said. “We should just go to Harry’s now.”

He sighed. “Very well, but first—” his voice cut off as Hermione grabbed his arm and Apparated to 12 Grimmauld Place.

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“What are you doing?” Draco shouted, pulling his arm away. “You could have splinched me!”

“Nonsense, I side-Apparated Harry and Ron all the time during the war, under an invisibility cloak, too,” she said.

He glared down at her. “If that’s true, I just want to go on record saying that you deserve any amount of arm grabbing.”

“It wouldn’t kill you to be a little more trusting,” she said.

“Yes it could!” he cried. “It almost did!”

She squinted up at him. “You’re still upset about that disembodied hand, aren’t you? It’s not like it touched your—”

“Um, guys?” Harry was standing in his open doorway. “Would you like to come in?” Hermione and Draco glared at each other, then followed him into the house.

Harry shuffled down the hallway, past the now permanently silenced portrait of Walburga Black, then led them into the wide, bright kitchen that Hermione and Ron had helped him paint yellow over the summer.

“Tea?” he asked. “Sorry, Mi, no coffee.”
“Potter,” Draco drawled. “Do you intend to stay dressed like that?”

“What?” Harry ran his hand through his spectacularly messy black hair, glasses sliding down his nose. He was wearing boxers, socks and a too-tight Weasley sweater with a big H on the chest. “Why not? It’s my weekend off.”


Draco looked at over at Harry, who was dunking a tea bag into his mug. “Hermione and I lived together in a tent,” Harry said with a wide grin. “Alone. For months.”

“Actually, I think that’s my sweater,” Hermione said, looking him over.

“Probably,” Harry said, smirking at Draco.

“Perhaps I should leave the two of you alone,” Draco said icily.

“Sounds great,” Harry said. He turned to Hermione. “What are you doing running around with him?” He looked them both up and down. “Where have you two been? Is that blood?”

“Knockturn Alley,” Hermione said, taking off her cloak.

Draco continued to stand stiffly still, looking down his nose at them. “Oh for Godric’s sake, Draco, there’s nothing between me and Harry,” she snapped. “Take off your cloak.”

With bad grace, the Slytherin peeled off his filthy cloak before seating himself at the table. Harry just leaned against the counter and sipped his tea, still grinning. It was up to her, as usual, to be the adult and pour herself and Draco some tea and sit down. Draco still had a dirty streak down one cheek and his hair was ruffled and dusty, but what he didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him.

Harry then took a seat at the table as well, yawning. “You two still haven’t explained why you’re at my house, together, looking like you’ve come through a war zone.”

“Which part should we tell him first?” she asked Draco.

“It’s your meeting,” Draco said, sounding bored.

Hermione reached out and took Harry’s hand in both of hers, which made Draco glower again. “Harry, Draco and I are … together.”

Harry looked between the two of them. “Together together?”

Hermione nodded. Draco gave a jerk of his head that might have been a nod.

“Aren’t you dating Theodore Nott?” Harry asked, confused. “Wasn’t there a picture of you kissing him on the—”

“She is not dating Theo Nott,” Draco rapped out. “She is dating me. Your auror skills obviously need honing.”

Harry freed his hand from Hermione’s and jumped to his feet, and suddenly his boxers and sweater weren’t funny anymore.

“What did you do to her,” he said in a dangerously soft tone.
Draco stood as well, as did Hermione, who couldn’t decide which one to talk down first. Draco was taller, but Harry’s muscles were defined from auror training, and both sets of eyes, grey and green, were equally cold.

She decided to answer Harry since it was his house. She’d planned to have Neville there, not Draco, but it couldn’t be helped.

“He didn’t do anything to me, Harry.” *Not much yet, anyway.* “We have feelings for each other and we are dating now. He’s already written his mother and I was going to tell you and Ron tomorrow.”

“Feelings?” Harry looked ready to have a stroke. “You turn up on my doorstep, snapping at Malfoy, covered in blood and dirt, just to tell me you have feelings?” He turned on Draco. “I saw the way you were looking at her in McGonagall’s office, but I told myself, ‘No, she can handle herself.’ Obviously, I was wrong and you are going to pay—”

“I’d like to see you try, Potter.”

“Maybe a stint in Azkaban can teach you to keep your slimy hands off—”

“Harry!” Hermione shouted, now holding her wand between them. “I swear I’ll hex both of you if you don’t sit down now!”

The two men looked at her with identical outraged expressions, then reluctantly sat down. Hermione remained standing, her wand pointed at them.

“Now,” she said. “Let’s discuss this calmly. Harry, Draco and I are now dating. It is very new, and neither of us know where it’s going to go.”

“But Hermione, he’s—”

“I know exactly who he is and who his family is. I know his past and I know what he’s trying to do with his future.” She sighed. “There are a thousand reasons not to be with him, and only one reason to do so: I want to be with him. We are happy, or at least we could be if we weren’t constantly dealing with blood curses and crazy people.”

“Hermione,” Harry pleaded, “this isn’t like you. This isn’t the Hermione …”

“Actually, this is exactly like me,” Hermione said. “You haven’t been at school with me for the last few months.”

“Ron mentioned that you’re a bit different, but we thought you were … I don’t know … stressed about NEWTs.”

“Oh, she’s squared that,” Draco said. “She’s got PORN.”

The edge of Harry’s mouth quirked upward, but he sobered quickly as he looked at Draco. “Yes, well, Malfoy, speaking of that, I’ve heard things about you and your Slytherin slags,” he said coldly. “You are one sick bastard, I’m told, and I won’t let you take advantage of Hermione. She has no experience with—”

Draco scoffed. “Oh, please. The first time I put moves on her, she Petrified me.”

Harry looked at Hermione. “You Petrified him?”
“A little bit,” she admitted.

“You left me frozen and helpless in a dark classroom for hours,” Draco snapped.

“You were walking toward me!” Hermione cried.

“You took your clothes off!”

“Hermione took her clothes off?” Harry looked shocked.

“He was going to search me,” she said. “Or it looked like he might possibly search me.”

“What was he searching for?” Harry asked.

“She stole a valuable snitch from me,” Draco said. “Silver. Embossed. Quite the little work of art.” He sniffed. “Anyone who would offer such an object as a gift deserves nothing but respect.”

Harry turned back to Hermione, his auror training compelling him to get to the bottom of this.

“Why did you steal his snitch?”

“So he would show me his family’s rune manuscript. Harry, it was the Codex Runica, a significant relic from the early …”

“I don’t believe this,” Harry said.

“I know,” Hermione said. “The Malfoys really should be more generous.”

“Did I or did I not give you hours with that Codex, even after you tried to blackmail me?” Draco asked her. “I practically had to pin a cup to your shirt so you wouldn’t drool all over the vellum. Then you put a wand to my throat.”

“Really, Hermione?” Harry asked weakly.

“He read my Life Optimization Organization Plan!”

Draco smirked. “Just the sexy stuff.”

Harry looked at her. “You have sexy stuff in your life optimization plan?”

“She truly organizes everything,” Draco said. “I found the pros/cons chart quite edifying.”

“Ewww,” Harry said. He looked stunned, but Hermione was relieved to see that veins were no longer popping out in his forehead. She pushed his mug of tea toward him and he drank.

Hermione and Draco looked at each other, but let Harry sit and process things a bit. In fact, they all felt better after a few quiet minutes sipping tea.

“Okay, I think I’ve got it,” Harry said finally. “You, Hermione, have gone mental and perhaps violent this year and have now taken up with Draco Malfoy. And you, Malfoy, are turning your back on everything your family stands for and are going out with Hermione.” He sighed. “I didn’t believe half of what Ron was telling me about Hogwarts this year, but I should have.”

Harry stood up and poured each of them another mug of tea. “But none of this is telling me why the two of you turned up here looking like hell and fighting like toddlers instead of off doing …” he shuddered. “Couple things.”
Hermione laughed. “Couple things?”

“Well, we’ve been trying all day, but all we’ve managed is lunch,” Draco said. He turned to Hermione. “That reminds me, we need to talk about those bugbears you juggled.”

“What?” Harry and Hermione both asked.

Draco rolled his eyes. “Just a conversation we had at lunch. You can’t keep those Slytherin bugbears the way they are.”

“I certainly can,” Hermione said. “You all deserve it for snorkeling. Ugh! We are never eating at that caboose again! What, I can’t even say ‘caboose’ in front of Harry? This is ridiculous!”

“What are you talking about?” Harry asked.

“You don’t want to know,” Draco said.

“In other news,” Hermione said, moving ahead with the agenda, “we tested the blood potion today—with Draco’s blood and mine.”

Harry looked alert. “You found something?”

“Draco’s blood turned the potion purple—Harry!” Hermione screamed. Her friend had lunged for his wand and was pointing it at Draco’s throat.

Harry’s face was cold. “Explain, Malfoy.” He shoved the wand a little harder against Draco’s skin.

“Harry!” Hermione cried. “The potion turned pale purple. The magical blood in the message isn’t Draco’s—it’s Lucius’ blood! Put the wand down!”

“Maybe you should lead with that next time,” Draco squeaked.

Harry didn’t move. “How do you know?” he asked Hermione while glaring at Draco.

“We still need to confirm it, but it makes sense. Vasile agrees with me.”

“Who’s Vasile?” Harry asked.

“A very nice vampire who—”

“A vampire?” Harry lowered his wand and stared at Hermione. “A nice vampire?”

“Yes. Kingsley sponsored him from Romania. Please, Harry, sit down. You too, Draco.” She sat them both down and pushed their tea on them.

“Really, Harry,” she scolded. “You shouldn’t threaten people with your wand like that.”

Harry and Draco exchanged looks of disbelief, then quickly turned away.

“Anyway, yes,” she went on, “Vasile is a very nice vampire and I wish Draco would quit threatening him. The magical blood in the potion doesn’t completely match Draco’s, but we think it was enough to turn the potion purple.” Hermione gave Harry a brief rundown of the spell on Hogwarts Castle.

“So we know a spell was recently cast in the castle, by someone who hates muggles, but we don’t know the spell’s purpose,” Harry summed up.
“A powerful spell like that requires blood from a powerful witch or wizard, and Lucius is the strongest dark wizard alive now,” Hermione said. “Somebody collected the blood and used it to cast the spell. Harry, we need a sample of Lucius’ blood and a list of Lucius’ visitor logs.

Harry’s eyes were cold. “Well then, the culprit is obvious. Let me guess, Malfoy, your mother dropped by this year to slip you some sweets.”

Draco stood, his wand out, and Harry leaped up as well, knocking his chair to the floor. Hermione huffed. Not again.

“Don’t you dare accuse my mother,” Draco snarled. “She saved your useless hide and she would never curse the school.”

Hermione was standing now as well, hand in her pocket. She gave Draco a significant look. “Maybe Lucius made her do it.”

He shook his head. “I told you, she doesn’t wear it.”

“Wear what?” Harry asked.

“None of your bloody business,” Draco snapped.

“It’s my business if your family is attacking muggles again,” Harry said. “You claim to care about Hermione while your—”

Draco’s face darkened with fury and his wand was up. “Expelliarmus!” Hermione shouted. She tucked both their wands into her pocket and kept her own raised. “Sit down, both of you.” Harry and Draco obeyed, their faces identically furious.

“See reason, Hermione,” Harry begged. “If your potion is right and it’s Lucius’ blood, then who else could it be but Narcissa?”

“I don’t know,” Hermione said, “that’s where you come in. We need Lucius’ visitors logs. The spellcaster has to be someone who visited both Lucius and Hogwarts.”

Harry said nothing, but his expression was clear: Narcissa.

“We also need a sample of Lucius’ blood,” she continued.

Harry nodded. “That won’t be easy to do without making him suspicious.”

“We won’t need much,” Draco said. “Just enough to test his blood against the potion and counter the spell.”

“Can you help us, Harry?” Hermione asked.

“I can get the logs,” Harry said heavily. “I’ll think about the blood.”

“And you won’t tell Kingsley about the potion yet?”

Harry sighed. “No, I won’t.”

“Thank you, Harry!” Hermione hugged him tightly, drawing a scowl from Draco.

“It’s all right, Mi, relax—ouch!” Harry had patted her head, and now had a streak of blood on his hand.
“Careful there now, Potter,” said Draco, looking smug. Hermione glared at Draco.

“How soon can you get the list, Harry?” she asked, handing him a napkin.

Harry shrugged, holding the cloth to his hand. “Aurors routinely check Azkaban visitors’ logs, so it shouldn’t be difficult. The logs are impossible to forge and visitors are checked for the Polyjuice Potion after the Barty Crouch incident, so they should be accurate.”

“Splendid,” Draco drawled. He stood up. “We’ll be running along then. Granger, surely there is something more interesting we can be doing this afternoon.”

“Ewww,” Harry said.

“I hadn’t considered that,” Draco said, “but now that you mention …”

“Get out of my house,” Harry said.

Hermione stood as well. “Thank you, Harry.” She kissed him on the top of his messy head and nodded at Draco, who left the kitchen looking rather surly.

“I’ll see you tomorrow for breakfast,” she said.

“Don’t bring him,” Harry said, slumping in his chair.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Hermione’s good study habits pay off.
Brace yourselves—things are going to get a little rough. WARNING: This chapter contains violence, a minor character death and an attempted sexual assault. It’s a dark chapter, but not without its lighter moments.

Thank you all for the kind comments—I’m glad you like the banter between Hermione, Draco and Harry. We’ll see a lot more of Harry in this story from now on.

“I told Blaise and Pansy about us yesterday,” Draco said. “They were quite relieved to hear it.”

Draco and Hermione were walking through the secret passage to Hogwarts, both feeling a bit sticky from the disembodied hand despite Hermione’s spells. She couldn’t wait to take a bath.

“Do you know where Blaise and Ginny are this weekend?” she asked.

He stopped and looked down at her. “Yes, but I’m not sure you’ll like it.” She waited, and he sighed and went on. “They’re at the Zabini castle in Italy.”

Hermione blinked. “All weekend?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t Ginny tell me?” she wondered.

“Blaise planned it as a surprise.”

Hermione pondered this as they resumed walking. Would Ginny get the chance to unearth the real Blaise? Ginny’s voice echoed in her mind: “Your Malfoy is a hot mess with a thin veneer of Slytherin.” Blaise was an entirely different matter.

They emerged from the tapestry by the witch’s hump and began walking toward the nearest staircase. Draco cast a quick look around, his face and hair shining in the sunlight from the corridor’s wide windows. “There’s a prefects’ bathroom on this floor,” he murmured, taking her hand. “What do you say we both go—”

“Mr. Malfoy!” boomed a familiar voice from the third-floor landing. “Just the one I want to see!” Slughorn strode toward them, moving surprisingly quickly for such a stout man, jowls wobbling. The professor wore bright yellow robes, round sunglasses and a broad-rimmed hat. “And Miss Granger! How are you this fine day?”

“Sir,” Draco said politely. “If you will—”

“We have another small situation with those First Years.” Slughorn chuckled. “Little scamps! Tried to break into the Potions Lab!”

“Are they all right?” Hermione asked.
“Why wouldn’t they be …” Draco began. His eyes narrowed. “What were those wards you set, Hermione?”

“Oh, no need to fret, lad! Your little friends are just fine! A nice rainbow hex, was it not, Miss Granger?”

“It should wear off in a day,” Hermione said. “A week, tops.”

“What did you do to the Squeaky Mice?” demanded Draco.

Hermione crossed her arms. “As the professor said, they’re perfectly fine. They’re just a bit … colorful.”

“Yes, quite a powerful hex!” Slughorn chortled. “Turns any trespassers one of seven colors! So clever of you, Miss Granger, to warn me!” He turned to Draco. “I’m afraid I need you, Mr. Malfoy, to oversee their additional detention. They’re writing sentences in the potions dungeon with Mr. Macmillan right now, but I worry he won’t be able to cope!”

“Surely such a serious infraction is best handled by yourself, Professor,” Draco began smoothly in his best Lucius voice.

“Oh, yes, of course, certainly,” Slughorn said. “But unfortunately, I have a prior engagement … a garden party at a very influential minister’s home. Simply cannot be missed!”

“I am clearly in no fit state to play such a role with the required…” Draco began, still in full Lord Malfoy mode.

Slughorn chuckled again. “Now, now, you look perfectly acceptable, my boy. More than sufficient for Hufflepuffs, I assure you!” The professor bowed to Hermione. “Miss Granger! Lovely as always!” He looked expectantly at Draco, who was struggling not to scowl.

“I’ll clean up and join you,” Hermione said. “I want to recheck my wards around the lab.”

“Damned Squeaky Mice,” Draco growled under his breath as he followed Slughorn.

Hermione was walking toward Gryffindor Tower, thinking that Draco was rather hot when he looked and sounded like Lucius, and wondering what that said about her, when a shrill hooting caught her attention. A small cream-and-chocolate owl was perched on a suit of armor by the third-floor landing.


Brownie flapped his wings, golden eyes fixed on Hermione. “Will you take me to him?” she asked.

The owl immediately flew off down the corridor. Hermione followed, wand in hand, pushing past startled students (“She’s mad, I tell you, I heard she planned an orgy with …”) and panting as she climbed the stairs to the fifth-floor landing.


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The owl immediately flew off down the corridor. Hermione followed, wand in hand, pushing past startled students (“She’s mad, I tell you, I heard she planned an orgy with …”) and panting as she climbed the stairs to the fifth-floor landing.

There she nearly crashed into Theo himself, holding his wand and dressed in all in black, his broad form wrapped in a black cloak. He stood alone in the wide stone corridor, looking entirely Slytherin and dangerous, his jaw set and his green eyes cold.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Hermione asked, hands on hips.

Theo’s eyes narrowed. “You don’t need to know.”
“I most certainly do. There is a Death Eater cell out there, your uncle is part of it and you’re trying to leave the castle again.”


Hermione sniffed. Typical pureblood, merely seeing other magical creatures as monsters or servants. “His name is Brownie,” Hermione said. She shifted slightly so she blocked his path to the stairs.

“I don’t have time for this,” Theo said through gritted teeth. “I’m sorry, Hermione, but …” he raised his wand, but Hermione was faster. “Expellimarus!” she hissed, and Theo’s wand slid smoothly into her hand.

“Damn it, Hermione!” Theo shouted. He moved toward her, then froze as Hermione pointed her wand at his throat. “Hermione,” he repeated more calmly, “you have to let me leave.”

“I’m not stopping you,” she said, not lowering her wand an inch. “Take me with you.”

“What? No!” Theo’s green eyes were wide.

“Fine,” she said. “Then I’m telling McGonagall.”

Theo looked like a panther ready to spring; his hands flexed slightly. Hermione stood straight, both wands out, feeling that knotty tightness in her stomach she remembered from the war. But she would not be intimidated. Theo was not leaving without her.

“Now Hermione, be reasonable,” he said, shifting tactics and adopting a low, rumbling, hypnotic tone. Images from the storage room came unbidden to her mind and sent shivers down her back. “This is family business and you have no place in it.” He stepped forward, hand outstretched. “My wand, please.”

“You’re not going alone,” she said. “I won’t allow it.”

“Very well, I suppose I have no choice.” He sighed. “I won’t go at all, then. Now give me my wand.”

Hermione didn’t move. “Swear on your family ring, Theodore. Swear you won’t try to leave me behind today.” Her recent research on pureblood noble family artifacts was paying off. Theo could never break a promise made on his signet ring.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” His eyes cast around, seeking escape, but the corridor and nearby staircase were deserted.

“Swear on your ring,” she repeated.

“I won’t,” Theo growled. He charged forward and a hard hand grasped her arm, pushing her against the wall. “You’re not coming.”

Theo was so much bigger than Hermione, blocking her on all sides, that she couldn’t move. Their eyes met, his body against hers, his breath in her face. He hesitated, and Hermione heard a gasp from the staircase and a flurry of footsteps. Theo turned his head and Hermione dropped both wands.

“Stupefy!” she snapped, fluttering her fingers to aid the wandless spell.
Theo fell to the floor in the heap, but he wasn’t Stunned, merely knocked down. Hermione scooped up the wands and stood over him, pointing both wands at his head.

“Don’t ever grab me like that again,” she said, “or I’ll cast a real Stunning spell next time. You won’t enjoy it.” She eyed him coldly. “Your father didn’t.”

Theo struggled to sit up, too furious to speak.

“Swear on your ring, Theo,” she commanded again. “Swear you’ll take me with you when you leave the castle.”

“Never,” Theo growled.

“Just for today. Swear it now, or you’ll wake up in McGonagall’s office with a splitting headache.”

Theo was still lying on the floor, glaring up at her. Hermione didn’t move.

“Alright,” he said thickly. “Alright.” Theo sat up, hands on his knees, and said in a somber voice: “I swear on the Nott sigil that I will bring Hermione Granger when I leave the castle—today. Ab ipso ferro.” His signet ring glowed green, then faded.

Hermione dropped his wand into his hand and Theo staggering to his feet. “You’re going to regret this,” he said in a voice dark with portent. “You shouldn’t go.”

“Show me the note from Regis.” She held out her hand. Theo hesitated, then complied with a glowering look at Brownie. Hermione unrolled the scroll—only two short lines:

Meet me at the shack. Bring the portkey.

“The shack?” she asked.

Theo looked uncomfortable. “A family place. In Wales.”

She handed back the scroll. “This way, then.” They had to start moving. Hermione turned and headed back to the statue of the humpbacked witch. Apparently, she was doomed to reveal the Marauders’ secret passage to every Slytherin in the castle. She opened the statue and led him into the passageway behind the tapestry. Brownie flew in behind them.

“Where does this lead?” Theo asked behind her as they moved through the passage, their way lit by their wands.

“Honeyduke’s cellars.”

“How do you know about it?”

“I can’t tell you,” Hermione said.

“I bet you know a lot of secret passages, you and your hero boys,” Theo said, sounding just like Draco.

Hermione ignored this. “When did Regis first contact you?”
Theo said nothing, and she stopped, turning to face him. Shadows lay heavy on his face, and the harsh lines were back, lit by his wand.

“You have to tell me,” she said. “I need to know what I’m walking into here.”

“Uncle Reggie first wrote me in September.” Theo sounded resigned. “He said he wanted out of the Death Eaters, to escape to Germany. He asked for my help—I’m head of the family now.”

Hermione turned and continued moving along the passage. The way was wide enough now to trot side-by-side—they were outside the castle. “And you have a portkey,” she said.

“Yes, a silver fork from my grandmother. The first time I went to meet him—”

“When was that?” she asked.

“The night of your birthday,” Theo admitted. “You were at the Slug Club party. I left the castle and Apparated to the shack, waited half the night, but he didn’t show. The second time was the day …” he swallowed, “the day we went to the Spangled Veil. My uncle’s note said he had trouble slipping away, but wanted to try again. I waited for two hours before leaving to get ready for our date.”

Hermione couldn’t help thinking back to their conversation over dinner that night. No wonder Theo had looked a bit dark when speaking of his family.

Theo gave Hermione a resentful look. “The last time was Halloween, of course, and I was prevented from leaving the castle.”

Hermione sniffed. He should be thanking her, really. “What’s this shack?” she asked, switching topics.

“It’s a … hunting shack.” Theo quickened his stride, refusing to look at her.

_He’s hiding something_, Hermione thought, suddenly highly aware that she was headed to Wales with a still-bitter Slytherin ex-boyfriend, and nobody knew where she was. Following the son of a Death Eater to meet a Death Eater in a Death Eater hideout … she thought of Draco and almost quailed, but there had been no time to fetch him.

“Did Regis tell you anything about this cell?” she asked briskly. “How many Death Eaters? What he’s been doing?”

“No,” Theo said. “He just wants out. And I won’t turn him over to the Aurors.”

They made the rest of the journey through the passage in silence, quickening their pace until they were nearly running. They skidded to stop at a wooden door, and stepped into the cellars, peeking around a shelf to make sure no one was nearby.

“Ready?” Theo asked. He hesitated, then held out his hand, and Hermione took it, clutching her wand tightly.

Theo twirled, Apparating them inside a small, one-room cottage. There was nothing inside the pine structure except a fireplace and two three-level bunks. The warped wood floor was covered in suspiciously dark stains.

Hermione gave the room a slow sweep with her wand. “It’s clear.”

“Stay away from the windows,” Theo said. They crouched down in a corner facing the single
closed door, the late afternoon sun shining weakly through dirty glass.

For a time, the two said nothing, just listened to the whistle of wind, the murmur of trees, and the creak of wood during stronger gusts. It reminded Hermione a bit of Godric’s Hollow during the war, but instead of her trusted best friend, she had Theo Nott. *I wish Harry was here. Or Draco.* She thought about sending the blond a Patronus, but he was likely with the Squeaky Mice.

“When?” Theo asked finally.

Hermione didn’t answer.

“When?” he repeated, turning to look at her. “When did you Stun my father?”

They were sitting on the floor, side by side. Brownie’s golden eyes shone from the shadows above a top bunk.

“The Department of Mysteries,” she said. Ignatius Nott’s huge, hulking shape and glittering green eyes flashed through her mind. “He was there with Voldemort. He grabbed Harry.” Her fingers tightened on her wand, tracing the vine engravings. “He *dared* touch Harry.”

Hermione didn’t know what happened then, but she blinked to find Theo staring wide-eyed at her wand, which was at his throat again. His face was white and Hermione immediately felt ashamed. Theo was *not* his father.

“I’m sorry,” Hermione said. She brought her wand down, trying to calm her pounding heart. Where was her self-control? Half a dozen Death Eaters could have strolled in just now. Theo was rubbing his throat with one broad hand so like … *Stop it.*

The two sat in silence just listening, until Theo spoke again, his voice hoarse.

“It killed him,” he said.

Hermione stared. “What?”

“That’s what the report said, from Azkaban,” Theo went on. “Father was buried in shelves of shattered prophecies that day—shards of magical glass slicing into his skin. Slivers of glass burrowing into his body to his heart. It was agonizing. He was executed, but he would have died anyway.”

Hermione felt a sudden pang, but it was for Theo, not Ignatius. “He shouldn’t have grabbed Harry,” she said quietly. She wouldn’t apologize.

Then Theo did the last thing she expected—he laughed. A bark of a laugh, pitched low to preserve their hiding place. “No, he shouldn’t have.” He looked at her, a strange gleam in his green eyes. “Is this the Granger that Draco knows?” Theo asked. “Terrifying, relentless— fascinating?”

*You mean ‘bossy and smothering,* she couldn’t help thinking. Theo’s gaze was making her face heat. She considered moving further away, but they sat in the only part of the shack that couldn’t be seen through the windows.

Instead, she cleared her throat. “You called this a hunting shack. What did your father and uncles hunt? Pheasant? Deer?”

Theo sighed. “They hunted muggles.”
“Oh.” Hermione swallowed, feeling a little sick. She frowned, then nodded to herself.

“What is it?” Theo asked. “What are you thinking?”

“People love to ask me that question,” she said. “They rarely love the answer.”

“Tell me,” he urged.

“I told Draco once how I flew on a thestral, acting as bait for Death Eaters,” she said. “He was angry that I’d risked my life for Harry, but I told him it was worth it, that I would have gladly died.”

She looked Theo in the eyes. “Just now, I was thinking my life would have been worth it, to keep men like your uncles from ruling the Wizarding World.”

Theo flushed. “We should leave. He’s not—”

Brownie gave a shrill, warning hoot and the door rattled violently. A thin, balding man burst in, panting. Hermione leaped up and raised her wand, cursing herself for being taken off guard. But the wizard held no wand, he merely slammed the door shut and half-collapsed against it, covered in sweat.

The new arrival had long, scraggly black hair and dark, beady eyes. This, Hermione had no doubt, was Regis Nott. He had Theo’s long nose and slashing eyebrows, but his unshaven chin was weak. A low-level Death Eater, Draco had said.

Regis hardly saw Hermione, just stretched out a greedy claw to Theo. “Did you bring the portkey, boy?” Regis asked. “Give it to me!”

“Wait,” Theo said. “Uncle Reggie—”

The wooden door flew off its hinges, and all the shack’s windows shattered. Two figures in black cloaks appeared in the doorway, wands held high.

“BLOOD TRAITOR!” the taller Death Eater shrieked at Theo, casting a Stunning spell that Theo barely dodged. The other Death Eater raised an arm to reveal the Dark Mark, pressing the tip of the wand on the brand.

“Expelliarmus!” Hermione shouted, pointing her wand at the second figure. The Death Eater’s hood fell back, revealing a middle-aged witch with purple hair.

The witch sneered at Hermione, her black wand still firmly on the Dark Mark. Hermione knew that face from the Ministry’s “Wanted” posters: Celeste Rosier, a vicious pureblood much like Bellatrix, but less bat-shit crazy, and therefore even more dangerous.

“Expelliarmus!” Celeste sang out, imitating Hermione’s tone, and both Hermione and Theo’s wands flew into the Death Eater’s hand. “Incarcerous!” Ropes shot out of her wand to wrap around Theo.

Hermione could only stare, shocked by the failure of her most reliable spell. Her go-to spell. So predictable. Bluebell would be disappointed. Regis, meanwhile, had retreated to a corner by a bunk.

“You’ve done well, Reggie,” Celeste praised him. “So. This is Iggy’s baby boy.” She ignored Hermione and stepped over to Theo. “Pretty,” she crooned, reaching up to tug his hair. “I’ll have
use for this one.” She smirked. “So like his father.”

Theo jerked his head back, horrified. “Don’t touch me,” he snarled. “I’m not joining you.”

The witch barked a laugh. “We’ll let you keep your famous little Mudblood if you cooperate.” She gave Hermione a dark, knowing look before turning back to Theo, her hand still in his hair. “But I rather hope you won’t cooperate, dear boy. More fun for me. And then we can keep the Mudblood here … as prey.”

“NO!” Theo shouted, struggling against the ropes.

Hermione remained still, thinking hard. Celeste’s wand had been on her Mark, tethering it to her arm. She must be able to call other Death Eaters using …

“Mudblood?” The other Death Eater edged closer to Hermione. “Potter’s Mudblood?” Eyes glittered from inside his hood.

“Yes,” Hermione said defiantly, refusing to back away. The large wizard was very close now, wand in hand.

“Leave her alone!” Theo shouted. “I won’t help you if she’s hurt!”

“I won’t hurt the Mudblood,” the Death Eater rumbled. “She might enjoy it.”

Hermione’s hand shot out to cast a wandless spell, but the Death Eater shoved her against the wall, her head hitting the wood and breaking her concentration. Everyone keeps pushing me against walls today, her mad mind noted.

“Honestly, Walden,” Celeste said, bored. “Have you no standards at all?”

“You think you’ve won the war, Mudblood?” the Death Eater hissed, a hand groping under her skirt. Hermione struggled, her elbow striking a rib, which caused her assailant to drop his wand with a clatter and grab her by the throat. The Death Eater’s hood fell back, and she could hear Theo shouting and Brownie screeching.

Hermione choked for air—a grimy, unshaven face was inches from hers, his bald head covered with a single snake-and-skull tattoo. Walden Macnair, Ministry executioner between stints of working for Voldemort. He’d obviously escaped after the Battle of Hogwarts.

Macnair’s huge hand was still at her throat, and his other hand tore at her skirt and blouse. The skirt fell, revealing her knickers—green, for Draco, she thought—and he cackled harshly. Hermione tried again to Stun him wandlessly, but spots filled her vision, and her hand fell again.

Theo was still shouting, until Celeste cast a Silencio. Brownie was screeching, but the noise seemed muffled and far away. Hermione was going to pass out if this continued much longer.

The Death Eater dragged her to a lower bunk and pushed her on her stomach. She could hardly breathe with her face pressed against the bunk’s mattress, but she kicked back blindly, feeling her boot heel hit something soft. Macnair cursed and a hand tore at her hair …

Suddenly a high-pitched shriek filled the shack, and the stinking weight was gone. Hermione flipped over, gasping for air, to see Macnair on the floor, screaming in agony, staring wild-eyed at his right arm, which now ended in a bleeding stump. Blood spread in a puddle on the shack’s warped floor. Hermione scrambled off the bunk and knelt to grab his wand.
Celeste was raising her wand straight at Hermione, the Death Eater’s face black with fury. Be unpredictable. Hermione’s hand closed around Macnair’s wand and a tiny flick sent the shack’s broken door sailing through the air, shielding her from Celeste just milliseconds before the witch cast her spell.

“Avada Kedavra!” Celeste screamed, and a jet of green light smashed the heavy door. The witch staggered backward, and Brownie swooped in, flapping at Celeste’s face. Hermione used the precious extra seconds to concentrate hard on her next spell. Macnair’s wand was surprisingly cooperative, likely stolen. Half-circles. Counter-clockwise. “Muto semper, semper furrure, purpura…” It was all in the wrist.

Celeste’s second Avada Kedavra went wildly awry, and then the witch seemed to vanish. But she hadn’t—her wand fell to the floor and a purple Pygmy Puff was bouncing on a collapsed black cloak.

Hermione stood for a moment, panting. It wasn’t a perfect job: The Puff was too large, more than a foot in diameter, and its eyes too small. But well enough. Thank Merlin for practical Transfiguration exams. And flashcards.

Brownie flew around Hermione, hooting in concern and hissing at the Puff. Hermione looked around: Theo was silently struggling against his bonds. Macnair writhed on the floor in agony, a stream of blood flowing from his nose as well. She must have hit it with her boot; with any luck, it was broken. Macnair also suffered deep scratches on his bald head—probably from Brownie. Regis lay nearby, his eyes blank and staring. Celeste’s final curse had found a victim.

Hermione aimed Macnair’s wand at Theo to release the ropes and restore his voice, then silenced the wounded Death Eater. Theo immediately ran to her.

“I’m all right,” she said, panting. “Nothing happened. I’m not hurt. See?” She pointed to the bloodied Death Eater on the floor.

Theo’s eyes were wide. “What did you do to him?”

“I didn’t do anything,” she answered, confused. “Well, I did do the nose.” Macnair was still screaming silently. “His hand was cut off, but—"

“Uncle Reggie!” Theo cried, suddenly distracted. He released Hermione and knelt by his uncle’s body. Tears ran down Theo’s cheeks, and Hermione felt a burst of sympathy. He looked so much like Harry when Dobby …

Hermione knelt down, too, and put her arms around Theo. “It’s not your fault,” she whispered. “You tried to save him.”

He wrapped his arms around her, his head on her shoulder, and they stayed that way until Hermione came to her senses. She gently disentangled herself and stood up. “We’d better leave,” she said. “More Death Eaters could be coming.”

Theo rubbed savagely at his cheeks. “Where do we go?” he asked distractedly, looking up at her.
“I can’t just leave Uncle Reggie here!”

“No, and we have the One-Handed Wonder to think about, too,” she answered, glaring at the bloodsoaked, now-unconscious Macnair. He looked deader than poor Regis. “And Celeste.” The large Pygmy Puff was trying to reach the door but kept bouncing backward. Hermione wrapped ropes around the Transfigured Death Eater and tucked Macnair’s wand into her beaded bag (the bag’s thin strap miraculously still slung across her chest).

“We’ll go to Harry’s,” Hermione decided. “I can side-Apparate you all. Brownie, please return to Hogwarts. And thank you. Watch out for that pigeon flock.” The owl hooted softly and flew out the window.

Hermione pulled her and Theo’s wands out of Celeste’s cloak. “Grab the Puff, will you?” she asked Theo, “and if you can bring Regis over here …”

Theo just looked at her, flushing slightly.

“Look, Theo,” she said kindly, handing him his wand. “I know this is hard, but we have to—”

“It’s not that,” Theo said, one corner of his mouth turning up. “It’s just … you’re sort of missing something.”

“Oh, thanks.” She picked up her cloak and stuffed it into her beaded bag. “All right, I’m ready.”

Theo had the struggling Puff under one arm and was pulling his uncle’s body closer to the wounded Death Eater with the other. “You’re really not,” he insisted, with a significant look at her lower half.

Hermione looked down at herself and gave a squeak. She was wearing a torn purple blouse, black boots—and green knickers.

“Are you sure—” Theo began, his face grim.

“I’m fine. He didn’t have a chance to do anything else,” Hermione said, with as much dignity as possible. She waved her wand, summoning her skirt, which wrapped around her and repaired itself. It was disturbing, how often she used that spell.

“I’m fine,” she repeated. “Let’s go. And keep a hold of that Puff.”

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Harry meets Theo.
Harry's House

Chapter Notes

WARNING: This chapter discusses an attempted sexual assault.

Thank you again for all the great comments and questions. I'm always glad to discuss the story, keeping in mind that I can only talk about my intentions, and perhaps the story itself has its own ideas. Words are an imperfect medium and often things happen that I did not expect. Usually, I just go with it and trust the story.

So now we arrive at Harry’s house. Oh boy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It wasn’t the most graceful side-along apparition Hermione had ever executed, and all four travelers (living and dead), plus the Puff, collapsed in a heap on Harry’s doorstep. Macnair rolled off the step and into some hydrangea bushes. Theo was pulling him out, and Hermione was straightening Regis’ body when Harry opened the door.

“Ye gods, Hermione!” Harry sputtered. He was thankfully dressed this time, in black sweatpants and a Gryffindor Quidditch jersey. He bent to help Hermione with Regis. “Why, this man’s dead!”

“Do shout it a little louder, Harry, your neighbors haven’t heard you yet,” Hermione snapped. “Let us in.”

Harry grabbed Regis under the arms and dragged him into the house. Hermione followed, a discreet flick of her wand repairing her torn blouse and buttoning it up to her chin. Harry and Hermione took a sharp left into a small sitting room, trailed by Theo, who was holding the Puff and dragging Macnair. Hermione transfigured a crumpled napkin into a plastic tablecloth.

“Here,” she said to Theo as she spread the tablecloth on the carpet. “Put him on this.”

“What’s going on, Hermione?” Harry asked, hovering by the door. “Why are you back with a different wizard and a pile of bodies? And why is that one bleeding? He looks familiar.”

“Walden Macnair,” Theo said, dropping the Death Eater on the tablecloth with a thump.

Harry’s eyes widened. “You’re Theodore Nott.”


“No I haven’t dumped Draco,” Hermione snapped.

Harry gave Theo the once-over. “This one looks much more reasonable.”

“In so many ways,” Theo said.

Harry nodded. “And I assume you two can explain why you’re at my house with a corpse and—Good Godric, where’s that one’s hand?”
“Back at the muggle-hunting shack,” Hermione said.

“The what?”

“The Notts had a shack in Wales where they hunted muggles,” Hermione said, kneeling beside Macnair. She summoned dittany and bandages from her bag and began treating Macnair’s stump. Hermione had helped Harry paint and refurbish this sitting room, clearing out the dusty furnishings and adding a blue velvet sofa and chairs. Plus a very nice oriental carpet. Macnair couldn’t be allowed to bleed all over everything.

Harry was rubbing his hands through his black hair, making it stick up wildly. “You need to stop hanging out with Slytherins.”

Hermione stood. “Harry,” she said, tucking the dittany bottle back into her bag, “that wizard there was Theo’s uncle. He was trying to leave the Death Eaters.”

“Regis,” Harry breathed.

“Yes,” Theo said, looking sadly at the body. “Uncle Reggie sent me an owl this afternoon.”

Harry slapped his forehead. “The Nott Shack! Of course, we should have known.” His eyes turned to Theo. “So you’ve been there, Nott. Have you ever …”

“No!” Theo snapped. “I mean, yes, I’ve been there a few times but I didn’t know what it was used for—until later.”

Harry glared at Theo, unconvinced, and Theo looked back at him steadily. Hermione was struck by how alike the two looked, with their green eyes, wild black hair and long noses. They even had the same flat expression. She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it, sensing that Theo needed to prove himself to Harry on his own. Instead she dropped onto the sofa, leaning back into the soft cushions with a sigh. She wanted nothing more than to curl up and go to sleep.

“Regis was the least cruel of my uncles,” Theo was saying composedly. “Sometimes, he was even kind to me.” He swallowed. “I had to try.”

“Did you have to drag Hermione into it? She ended up in a muggle hunting—”

“I made him,” Hermione broke in. “I disarmed him and made him swear to take me.”

Harry turned his glare on her. “That was a fucking stupid thing to do, Hermione!”

“Nonsense,” she said. “If I hadn’t gone with Theo, he would be in the Death Eaters’ hands, and now we have two captured Death Eaters.”

“Two?” Harry asked, starting to look a little wild-eyed. Hermione’s best friend was no stranger to sudden, bizarre situations, but this wasn’t wartime.


Harry stared at the tied-up purple fluffball rolling on the carpet. “That’s a Death Eater?”

“Celeste Rosier,” Hermione said calmly.

Harry turned pale. “You turned Celeste Rosier into a Pygmy Puff?”

“Advanced Transfiguration,” Hermione said. She frowned at Celeste. “I didn’t get the size right.
Or the eyes. I like the color, though.”

Harry looked from Hermione to Celeste, then back to Hermione again. “You learned how to turn vicious criminals into Puffs?” he asked. “That’s what they’re testing in NEWTs these days?”

“You’ll have to add it to your PORN, Hermione,” said Theo. He stripped off his black cloak and took a chair near the sofa. Clearly they were going to be here a while. Hermione wondered if Harry would calm down enough to offer them tea.

Apparently not—Harry had more questions. “And how did that happen?” Harry pointed to Macnair’s stump. “Did you curse his hand off, Nott?”

Theo shook his head, looking a bit regretful.

“We don’t know how that happened,” Hermione said, “I didn’t have my wand. Macnair was grabbing my …” she trailed off, eyes suddenly wide.

Harry looked ready to explode. “Grabbing your what?”

“My hair,” she said, clapping her hand to her head. “He grabbed my hair!”

She pulled the jeweled clasp out of her curls and held it up. Dark ringlets fell over her face and she pushed them back impatiently.

Theo grew very still in his chair, staring at the diamond clip in her hand. “Are you telling me …”

Hermione nodded, letting her hand fall back to her lap. “It’s uh, protective.”

Theo groaned. “I don’t believe this.” He held up his still-bloody palm. “Is that why my hand’s all cut up, Hermione? You didn’t think to warn me?” His mouth turned down. “That night outside Hogsmeade … when I cut my forehead …”

Hermione nodded, blushing.

Theo brought a large fist down on a chair arm. “Those fucking Malfoys.”

“Is somebody going to tell me what’s going on?” Harry demanded, looming above them now, an intimidating figure despite the mustard stains on his Quidditch jersey. Harry’s color was still high, and he had the look of a man determined to get to the bottom of everything.

Hermione shifted uneasily on the sofa cushions. “Draco gave me this hair clip… uh, for my birthday.”

“Malfoy gave you diamonds?” Harry asked. She flushed again and nodded. “And you’re saying that hair clip took off Macnair’s hand?”

Hermione’s flush deepened. “No man can touch it, except for Draco.” Harry looked rather sick. The words did sound quite intimate when said aloud.

“No, no. Just no. I can’t believe that,” Harry said.

“Ask Ron,” Hermione said. “He was cut too. And, uh, Cormac.”

“Just how many men were touching your hair this year?” demanded Harry, sounding like Draco. “Wait …” Harry looked at his own palm. “That smug bastard.”
“Now, Harry,” Hermione began, “don’t—”

“And so we all ended up with cuts,” Harry spoke over her, “but Macnair lost his hand.” Harry's eyes narrowed and he joined Hermione on the sofa. “Hermione,” he said in a low, dangerous voice, “What did Macnair do?”

She couldn’t say it. She couldn’t get the words out, just looked pleadingly at Theo, then down at the carpet.

“Macnair attacked her, Potter,” she heard Theo say. “He tried to rape her.”

There was a short silence. “Look at me, Hermione,” Harry said. She complied, looking up into green eyes colder than Theo’s ever could be. “Tell me what happened. Everything.”

Hermione glanced at Theo, who nodded encouragingly, so she described their wait at the shack, Regis’ arrival, the first flurry of curses and Celeste’s capture of Hermione and Theo’s wands.

“Celeste tied Theo in ropes and taunted him, saying she’d use me to force him to cooperate,” Hermione said.

“The crazy bat wanted to hunt Hermione,” Theo said hoarsely, his hands clenching. “Like an animal.”

“Go on,” Harry said, eyeing the Puff, which rolled helplessly beside Macnair’s still-unconscious body.

Hermione stiffened her spine. Anything was better than Harry dragging it out of her sentence by sentence. “He slammed me against the wall. I made him drop his wand, but he had me by the throat and I couldn’t … I couldn’t …” Hermione took a deep breath. “He tore my blouse, my skirt.”

“Go on,” Harry repeated softly.

“He pushed me on the bunk and I kicked him. That’s when he grabbed my hair, and …” She looked at Harry. “Macnair just started screaming. I turned over and he was rolling on the floor. It must have been the diamonds …” Hermione held up the Gloriana clip again and both Harry and Theo flinched back slightly.

Harry stared into her eyes a moment and apparently found reassurance, because he nodded. “Alright,” he said. “Put that damn thing away, will you? I’m going to hug you now, and I’d like to keep all my limbs.”

Hermione put the clip in her bag and Harry immediately pulled her close. “You’re a bloody moron,” he said into her now wildly loose hair. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Yes, Harry,” she said. “I’m quite fine. Really.”

Harry released her and glared at Theo. “Your family has a lot to answer for, Nott.”

“I know,” Theo said. The Slytherin sat stiffly, his fists on the chair arm. “I tried to keep her from going.”

“You should have tried harder.”

“Like you have, Potter?” Theo’s voice was equally sharp. “If half the stories are true, she’s risked herself for you a hundred times—”
“Stop it, both of you,” Hermione snapped. “We’re wasting time. I’m fine,” she repeated, “thanks to Draco’s diamonds.”

“What was Malfoy doing, giving you diamonds, anyway?” Harry asked with distaste.

“It’s an interest gift,” Theo drawled.

“What the hell is an interest gift?”

Theo’s eyes flickered with some of his old mischief. “The first step in the traditional betrothal process.”


“Theo!” Hermione cried, also standing. She tugged at Harry’s arm. “Harry, it’s not an interest gift, Draco didn’t mean it that way, calm down!”

“Oh, come now.” The old Theo was definitely back. He sat back in his chair, looking entirely at ease, while Harry fairly vibrated where he stood. “You honestly think a wizard like Draco, raised in ancient traditions, would carelessly give away an obvious family heirloom, goblin-make and infused with protective magicks?”

Hermione stamped her foot. “I am not marrying Draco!”

Harry groaned and rubbed his forehead. “So, guys? I’m still standing here with one dead, one wounded and one very fluffy Death Eater in my sitting room.” He sounded like a man desperate to change the subject. “Tell me the rest of it.”

Hermione and Harry sat on the sofa again and she continued her tale, describing her duel with Celeste, the Death Eater’s transformation and Regis’ death. Harry’s shoulders relaxed slightly but his face was grim.

“You two were very lucky,” he said, his voice cold. “You could both be dead right now, after being raped and tortured, of course.” Hermione and Theo both dropped their gaze.

“I’ve seen the file on Celeste Rosier,” Harry continued. “She worked behind the scenes with Ignatius Nott—she was obsessed with him. After he was wounded at the Department of Mysteries, she went on a number of muggle-targeted rampages.” He looked at the Puff, who was suddenly still. “She’s the only real brain outside Azkaban now.”

“She’s the leader, then,” Hermione said.

Harry nodded. “Most likely. We need to get them both to talk.” He looked down at the Death Eater on the floor and frowned. “Did the hair clip tear off his face, too?” he asked, as well he might. Macnair’s head was covered in smeared blood.

“I think I broke his nose when I kicked him,” Hermione said. “Brownie scratched him, too. And flew into Celeste’s face when she tried to hex me again.”

“Brownie?”

“The Death Eaters’ owl—”

“You have a Death Eater owl?” Harry asked.

“It was Regis’ owl, I think,” Hermione said. “I named him.”
Harry was standing again. “That’s it. I’m taking this entire mess to the Ministry,” he said with decision. “I’ll floo us all to Kingsley’s office, where you two can give statements. We’ll also send some aurors to that shack.”

Hermione looked at Theo, who nodded reluctantly. “Alright,” she told Harry, “but keep in mind that Theo is submitting to questioning voluntarily and he is not to take Veritaserum unless I am present.”

“Now Hermione …” Theo began.

“She’s right,” Harry said. “Don’t take a drop of Veritaserum without her, Nott. Hell, I wouldn’t take that potion without her.”

Harry seemed calmer now, now that he’d made his decision and all the Death Eaters would soon be out of his house. He drew his wand and cast his stag Patronus. “Kingsley Shacklebolt,” he intoned, “meet me at your office.” The stag bent its antlered head and bounded out the window. Theo stared after the glowing animal, amazed.

Her best friend’s action gave Hermione an idea, and she stood as well. A shining otter appeared. “Draco Malfoy,” she said, “I am safe and unharmed. I will be back soon.” The otter rolled head over tail and flew out of the room after the stag.

Harry rolled his eyes but said nothing, just dragged Macnair’s still-unconscious body toward the fireplace. “I’ll open the wards so you all can enter Kingsley’s office. Nott, bring your uncle, and Hermione, you take the Puff.” He gave the Transfigured Celeste one last wide-eyed look, then tossed a handful of purple powder into the fireplace. “Kingsley Shacklebolt’s office!” he shouted and disappeared with Macnair in a roar of green flame.

Theo stepped closer to Hermione and took her hand. “Listen, I just want to …”

“You don't have to ..."

"Hermione …”

The green flames leaped into life and Harry’s head appeared. “We don’t have all day!” he snapped, and vanished.

Theo looked irritated, but dropped Hermione's hand and pulled Regis to the fireplace. “Kingsley Shacklebolt’s office!” he boomed, tossing floo powder into the flames.

That left Hermione with the big Pygmy Puff. Alone for the first time since she’d left the castle. She stared down at the Gloriana clip in her hand, wondering what would have happened without it. Her face pressed into that mattress. She remembered something else as well, a tingling in her fingers. Something would have happened. If it hadn’t been for the clip, she might have exploded the bunk, burned down the shack, maybe even hurt Theo ...

Focus. Hermione inserted the diamonds back into her curls and tucked the once-again struggling Celeste under her arm. Then she stepped into the heatless emerald flames.

She emerged from an ornate stone fireplace too large for Kingsley’s small office. Glass windows looked out over the rest of the wide, underground space, divided into numerous cubicles. She could hardly move with Harry and Theo there, plus Macnair stuffed into a corner and Regis’ body laid out by the door.

A green flash and Kingsley stepped out of the fireplace, wearing colorful dress robes. When not on
duty, the dark, handsome wizard was a bit of a fashion plate. His eyes widened at the sight of his crowded office.

“Explain, Potter,” Kingsley said, looking narrowly at Theo. Clearly he judged the Slytherin the most dangerous person present.

“Hermione and Theodore Nott left Hogwarts this afternoon to meet Regis Nott at the family hunting shack,” Harry said crisply. “There they were ambushed by Celeste Rosier and Walden Macnair. Regis Nott was killed in the fight, and Hermione defeated Celeste and Macnair. She and Theodore brought all three Death Eaters to my house.”

“Where is Celeste?” Kingsley asked.

“Right there,” Hermione said, pointing. She had placed the Puff on Kingsley’s chair, adding a sticking charm to keep the Puff from bouncing around.

“Hermione turned Celeste Rosier into a Pygmy Puff,” Harry continued with a faint smile. “Celeste killed Regis and Hermione … wounded Macnair.”

Kingsley stared down at Macnair, looking rather shocked at the Death Eater’s grisly condition. “You cut off his hand, Hermione?”

“It was a … defensive spell,” Hermione muttered.

Kingsley’s gaze swept once more over all the dead, wounded and Transfigured Death Eaters and he shook his head. “Stay here,” he snapped, and left the office, returning quickly with two on-duty aurors. “Take Macnair and this Puff to the holding cells and get a Healer for Macnair. And take Regis Nott’s body to the Examiners’ Office.”

Theo sadly watched the aurors depart with Regis, then turned back to see the Head Auror eyeing him with suspicion.

“Headmistress McGonagall assured me that you were unable to leave Hogwarts,” Kingsley said to Theo. “I’d be interested to know how you broke through the castle’s wards.”

Theo just sneered. “I have my ways.”

“Oh for Merlin’s sake,” Hermione said. “I helped Theo leave the castle, Kingsley.”

Kingsley didn’t take his eyes off Theo. “I suggest you cooperate, Mr. Nott—”


Hermione almost groaned. Arrogant entitlement was not going to work with Kingsley. “Regis Nott wanted to defect,” she said. “He asked Theo for help, and—”

“So Lord Nott here met with a known Death Eater in a Death Eater hideout without informing the Aurors’ Office,” Kingsley said. “That is a serious crime and as such—”

“Don’t you dare try to arrest Theo for that,” Hermione said. “Unless you want to arrest me, too.”

“Hermione, be reasonable,” Kingsley pleaded. “He’s the son and nephew of convicted Death Eaters, traveling illegally to a Death Eater hideout on family property—”

“Nott came here voluntarily,” put in Harry. “He didn’t contact the Aurors Office because he didn’t trust us. We shouldn’t prove him right.”
"How could you go with him, Hermione?" Kingsley asked. "You could have been captured or worse!"

"It's a good thing I did," Hermione insisted. "If I hadn't forced Theo to take me—and I had to put a wand to his throat, Kingsley—he'd be in the hands of Death Eaters. Theo was the target all along."

Kingsley rubbed a hand over his head, suddenly looking drained. "Let's start at the beginning." He waved his wand and two straight-backed chairs appeared. The Head Auror bounced Celeste from his own chair and set out a Quick-Quotes quill and parchment. "I'll need statements from both of you."

Hermione and Theo took their seats and recited the events at the shack, being purposely vague about how they left the castle and omitting any mention of the portkey to Germany. Kingsley's face was impassive until Hermione mentioned Macnair's attack on her, but her manner seemed to reassure him.

"We have counselors on call, Hermione." Kingsley's deep voice was kind. "If you need to—"

"I'm fine, really," Hermione said for what felt like the umpteenth time.

Kingsley sighed after she and Theo finished their story, then shook his head in disbelief. "You both displayed a shocking lack of judgment," he said. "You could both be in the hands of Death Eaters right now. Celeste Rosier is ... merciless."

A look of pain touched his features. "And technically you have both broken Ministry law. I can grant the two of you limited immunity as Auror informants, but there may be a hearing." He sighed. "It depends on the information we get from Macnair and Celeste Rosier."

Kingsley slid the parchment to Hermione and Theo. "Each of you review the statement and sign it, and you're free to go. I'll send some aurors to the shack."

The Head Auror glowered at Theo. "And I advise you, Lord Nott, not to leave Hogwarts grounds, for your own safety, if nothing else. You are released into Headmistress McGonagall's custody. And Hermione ..." Kingsley looked at her with concern. "I won't try to limit your movements, but if you continue to consort with Death Eaters and relatives of—"

"You'll do what?" Hermione asked, jumping to her feet. "Don't you dare try to choose my friends. I'll consort with who I want, when I—"

'Hermione, please," Harry begged. "Let's not—"

"Hermione, you're taking this all wrong," Kingsley said. "I just—"

"You have no right to threaten me, or Theo," Hermione snapped, "considering we just went out and did your job for you—"

Kingsley's face was flushed. "Watch your tongue, Hermione."

"Watch my tongue?" Hermione's voice quickly hit its highest octave. "I'll say what I want, when I—get off me, Harry!"

Theo was standing as well, giving Kingsley a rather reptilian stare. "I hear you're running for Minister of Magic, Head Auror Shacklebolt." His voice was cold. "One hopes you're capable of more tact than this."
Harry groaned. “I take it back,” he said. “This one is almost as bad. Kingsley, can they go now?”

“Escort them personally back to Hogwarts, Harry, then return.” The Head Auror’s face was full of affronted dignity. “We have a long night ahead.” He began reading the signed statement, a clear dismissal.

Harry hustled them over to the fireplace. “Of course, sir.”

“I haven’t finished, Harry. Kingsley can’t just—”

“Honeydukes!” Harry shouted, grabbing both Hermione and Theo and throwing the floo powder into the flames. The three of them fell out of the sweetshop’s fireplace in a heap. Hermione immediately began wiggling out from under Theo, and he released her with a very Slytherin smile.

Harry gave Theo a glowering look, then marched them over to the Three Broomsticks. There they picked up some meat pies and butterbeers for the hike back to the castle. Harry stuck with Hermione and Theo until they all emerged from the secret passage on the third floor.

“Kingsley did you both a favor tonight,” Harry told them. “He could have booked you both—yes, even you, Hermione.”

“He should do us a favor,” Hermione insisted. “He’s got two Death Eaters in custody now, a feat, I might point out, his precious Aurors Office has thus far proved unable to achieve.”

“You are spending too much time with Malfoy,” Harry said.

“It’s alright,” Hermione said, pulling her hand away.

“Yes, yes. Now, Hermione—”

“And don’t tell anyone about that portkey. If Kingsley found out—”

“Hermione.” Theo’s voice was stern. “You have to let me thank you. You risked your life for me and my uncle and I can never repay you …”

“You can thank me by staying in the castle,” she said.
Theo nodded. “I feel lucky to be here.”

“Good,” Hermione said, turning and walking toward the staircase. Theo fell in step beside her. They stopped again on the landing. “Theo,” she said, looking up at him. “If you hear from any Death Eaters…”

“I’ll tell you right away, I promise,” he said. His smile turned mischievous and he raised his hand. “Need me to swear on my ring?”

Hermione shook her head, suddenly feeling awkward again. “I’m sorry about your uncle.”

Theo’s face fell. “He chose to join them, and stay so long.” He sighed. “At least it was quick.”

Hermione looked back at him sadly, wishing she knew what to say. She could hear students on the stairs, back from dinner and chattering about Saturday night plans. “I have to go,” she said.

“Hermione …”

“I’m sorry. I can’t stay,” she said. “Goodnight, Theo. I’m so glad you’re all right.” She gave him one last concerned look, then shook her head and hurried up the stairs.

Nobody stopped her, thank Merlin, on the way to Gryffindor Tower, and Hermione headed straight to the large bathroom in the girls’ dormitory. She still felt crawly from Macnair’s touch, not to mention the disembodied hand guts. Summoning a few things from her room, she bathed and washed her hair, then donned her pink terrycloth robe and fuzzy blue slippers and padded back to her room.

The sun was setting now, the bedroom suffused with red-gold light from both the window and the fireplace’s crackling flames. Crookshanks jumped off her desk, complaining loudly. A gleaming broom was propped against the desk, and Hermione was unsurprised to see a long, familiar figure stretched out on the sofa, book in hand.

“Hello, Hermione,” Draco said.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Draco is displeased.
Wow, as we get deeper into this sprawling story (honestly, I feel like I'm hacking through the jungle, trying to find a path out the other side), the comments just get better. I'm very touched that people are taking the time to not only read (and reread) "The Gloriana Set," but think about its characters and themes and share their thoughts. Hermione would approve. Then she'd tell me everything I'm doing wrong.

This chapter needs very little introduction—pure Dramione. And a new original character! Because why not, let's meet someone new in chapter 53.

WARNING: There is discussion of an attempted sexual assault in this chapter.

“Hello, Hermione.”

Silence followed Draco’s two icy words. Hermione placed her toiletries bag on a small table and walked toward the man on the sofa, stopping a few feet away. She looked down at him, her hands thrust deep into the robe’s pockets. Only the crackling of the fire and rattling of the windows could be heard.

The blond Slytherin appeared nothing but calm, placing his book on the cushion beside him and leaning back. But his eyes were pale, chipped slate, and a dot of color glowed on each cheek. His posture looked relaxed, but he was utterly still. This was bad.

Hermione felt like she was back in the Charms classroom, without magic, with Draco stalking her. She dared not show any weakness. Her muscles ached, the multiple scrapes and bruises on her body hurt, and she was so very tired. He deserved an explanation and she was happy to give it, but would any explanation be enough?

Still, she refused to stand before him like a disobedient child. She spotted a pot of tea on a table—still hot—so Hermione poured herself a cup. Draco must have prepared it for her; he himself was drinking sirenschotch.

She moved to the other end of the sofa and placed the book (Donalson’s new tome on the Elder Fubarks) on an end table. Then she sat, folding her legs beneath her, the pink, fluffy robe covering her from the neck down. She took a large gulp of tea, feeling the hot liquid course through her veins.

“When you didn’t appear at the Potions dungeons, I returned to my dorm to clean up,” Draco said, looking straight ahead, his aristocratic voice without emotion. “There I received an interesting report from a housemate. About you … entangled, I believe was the word … with Theodore Nott on the fourth floor.”

“It was true,” she said.

“Might I ask why?” His tone was all cold politeness.
Regis Nott wanted to defect from the Death Eaters, and Theo was on his way to help. I was … convincing Theo to let me go too.”

“Convincing him.”

“I took his wand and he shoved me against the wall.” Hermione was determined to be completely truthful. “So I knocked him down and threatened him until he swore an oath on his ring to take me along.”

Draco was silent, and Hermione gulped some more tea, ignoring the burning as it ran down her throat. The moment held, then stretched unbearably. Hermione couldn’t breathe.

“It is a testament to your behavior this year that I find that explanation entirely credible,” Draco said.

Hermione exhaled slowly, torn between relief and indignation.

“I can’t imagine how that Seventh Year could have so misjudged the situation,” he continued, still looking straight ahead. “What appeared to be you and Theo sharing a passionate embrace was obviously you bullying him into taking you into mortal peril.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Would you like to hear what happened?”

“I insist.”

“Theo and I used the Honeyduke’s passage to get to Hogsmeade, and then Apparated to Wales.”

Draco’s finally looked at her, his face dark. “Where in Wales?”

“The Nott Hunting Shack—” Hermione began, but Draco twisted in his seat and grabbed her upper arms, her teacup falling to the floor, his shocked face close to hers. His hands pressed on previous bruises, but she gave no sign of the pain.

“The Hunting Shack?” he repeated, his voice cracking. “You went to the Notts’ Hunting Shack to meet a Death Eater?”

“Ah, so you know the place,” Hermione said lightly.

There was something feral in Draco’s eyes. “Yes, Hermione, I know the place. I know what they hunt there. Do you?”

She nodded.

“Tell me what happened.”

“Unhand me and I will,” she said, raising her chin. She’d always wanted to say, “Unhand me.”

He didn’t, of course, but he did slacken his grip a little, which Hermione accepted for now. She was glad to have him touching her, although he seemed on the edge of violence. Her story might just tip him over.

“Regis arrived, followed closely by two Death Eaters,” she said in her best recitation voice. She couldn’t have him doubting her words. “Walden Macnair and Celeste Rosier—”

“Celeste Rosier?” Draco’s eyes widened. “Celeste, of course …” He nodded. “It was a trap. They wanted Theo all along.”
Hermione nodded. “She disarmed us and tied up Theo—”

Draco snickered. “I bet she did.”

Hermione paused, and Draco’s eyes narrowed. *Oh, he’s so not going to like this.*

She swallowed and decided to give it to him straight. “Macnair grabbed me. He—he tried to rape me.”

Draco stared at her in horror, and the hands on her arms tightened almost unbearably.

“I’m fine, Draco,” she said, repeating it much like she did at Slughorn’s party after she met Vasile. “I am fine. I am *fine*. You saved me.”

That threw him a bit. Draco blinked and his hands loosened again, but didn’t let go. Hermione brought her right hand out of her pocket, tugging out the hair clip. “Want to hear what it did to Macnair?” she asked. Draco nodded, looking a bit nervous.

She looked straight into his eyes. “He touched the clip and it *cut off his hand*.”

“Fuck all,” Draco breathed, staring at the diamonds.

“Yes, so Macnair’s on the floor, screaming, rolling in blood.” Hermione’s voice took on a classroom tone. “Celeste tried to kill me, but her curse hit Regis instead. Then I turned her into a Pygmy Puff.”

Draco’s jaw dropped. “You turned *Celeste Rosier* into a Pygmy Puff?”

“A purple one. Never say again that NEWT-level lessons aren’t practical,” Hermione said.

Draco started at her in wonder, clearly unable to believe what he’d heard. “You—you don’t know what she is, Hermione,” he said hoarsely. “She stayed at the Manor for a time while … you know.” He swallowed. “Even my mother stepped carefully around Celeste.” He shook his head slightly as if to clear it. “Go on.”

“I freed Theo and Apparated us, plus Regis’ body, Celeste and Macnair, to Harry’s house.”

Draco looked at her sharply. “Does Potter know what happened to you?”

“Yes, he took us all to Kingsley’s office, and Theo and I gave statements. Macnair and Celeste are in custody.”

“What about Theo? Is he in custody? He *should* be custody, endangering you and—” Draco’s arm tightened again, pressing against a bruise, but Hermione gave no sign.

Hermione shook her head. “No. It was a close thing, but Theo’s back at Hogwarts, released into McGonagall’s custody.” She frowned. “You Slytherins don’t make things easy.”

Draco stared at her, assimilating her story, and she let him, just looked at the firelight splashed across his face and breathed in his cologne. She was suddenly very aware she was naked under her robe except for her knickers.

“That scum didn’t *fucking* touch—”

“No. He tore off my skirt and … and … threw me on the mattress, that’s all.” Suddenly she was in his arms, her head tucked under his chin, his arms tight around her ribs, but she didn’t mind the
pain. She wrapped her own arms around his neck, near tears. “I kicked him. I broke his nose. I was so scared, Draco,” she whispered.

“I know,” he whispered back. “I know.” She could feel his heart pounding against her cheek. “Merlin, Hermione, you are so stupid. So brave and so fucking stupid.”

“I know,” she said, sniffling. “I can’t help it. I couldn’t let Theo go alone. You understand that, don’t you?”

Draco was still grumbling. “Risking your life for a pair of Notts, where’s the sense in that? Making it through the war, just to nearly get raped and killed in a shack? Less than an hour after leaving my side? You little fool…” the rest of his mutterings were unintelligible, since he was kissing her now, roughly and with increasing desperation. Hermione kissed him back just as desperately, eager to dull the memories of the past hours.

He suddenly hissed, pulling Hermione from her blissful daze. Draco had loosened the tie of her robe, and his hand had pulled the pink terrycloth away from her neck. The cuts and spreading bruises she’d noticed in the bath were now on full display in the firelight. Draco was staring in horror at her throat, where, she belatedly remembered, bruises from Macnair’s fingers were clearly visible.

“Hermione!” He jumped to his feet. “Stand up. Take off the robe,” he said crisply. “I said, take it off.” His tone brooked no objection. Draco tugged apart the tie and pulled the robe off her shoulders. Hermione looked down at her arms, legs and torso as if seeing the wounds for the first time. They hadn’t looked this bad in the bathroom. She should have had Theo heal her.

Draco had his wand in his hand now, and his face looked much like it had when she’d first entered the room. “Hold still. I’m not terribly good at this.”

Hermione tried not to move. Healing oneself was difficult, but obviously she should have tried. Draco circled her, passing his wand over her body, concentrating and muttering the spell repeatedly under his breath. The bruises and cuts faded significantly, but red spots remained.

“We should get you to the infirmary,” he said, eyes traveling clinically over her back. “There could be internal damage. Did anyone crucio you or…”

“No,” she said, shivering now from the cold and from his gaze. “Draco, I don’t need the infirmary. There’s no pain now.”

He picked up her robe again, arranging it around her and tucking the fluffy pink collar under her chin. Then he backed away, laying his wand on a table.

“You played me, love,” he said, eyes glittering. “Masterfully done, that, using the diamonds to appeal to my ego—‘You saved me, Draco,’” he cooed, mimicking her tone.

Hermione swallowed. He was right, of course.

Draco’s hands clenched into fists. “I can’t permit this, Hermione. There will be no more of your bloody hero—”

“You are not permitting anything,” Hermione snapped. “I made a judgment call and it was the right one. I could not reach you in time, and if I hadn’t gone off with Theo, he’d be in Celeste’s hands right now, being tortured or worse. So don’t you dare go all Lord of the Manor on me—”

Draco groaned. “This is intolerable. How can I live like this, knowing you could run off into
danger at any time? You have absolutely no sense of self-preservation!”

“Says the man with a bloody Dark Mark on his arm!”

“I was protecting my family!”

“I was protecting my friend!”

His eyes glittered again. “Friends again, hmm? So eager to lay down your life for Theo. Are you sure—”

“Don’t say it, Draco,” Hermione growled. “Theo was captured by Death Eaters today. He saw Macnair attack me and his uncle killed. Then he was threatened by Harry and nearly arrested by the Ministry. But am I with him right now? No, I left him alone in a corridor, just walked away, and came to this room, hoping, praying, you would be here.”

They stood staring at each other, just a few feet apart, Hermione’s head tilted back so she could look him in the eye. Draco cursed under his breath. The silence lengthened, tension stretching like a wire, until he spoke again.

“My family has an emerald brooch from the 10th century,” he said. “It’s a bit crude, but will repel any—”

Hermione sighed. “Draco, this can’t be solved with more magical jewelry. You could fit me out the first Lord Malfoy’s suit of armor and we’d still be having this conversation.”

“A suit of armor sounds just fine,” he said. “You may be all right now, but what about the next time you sneak off to get yourself—”

“Is that what you think?” Hermione cried. “I hated leaving without you—I wanted you there! Just like with the blood potion and Knockturn Alley. Just like I was there for you in McGonagall’s office. I wasn’t trying to wiggle free of you—I wanted you with me!”

She stepped up to him and grabbed his black jumper. “That’s what I want—the two of us, together.”

She stood on tiptoe and kissed him, and for an instant he stood frozen. Then he pulled her closer, desperate once again, his kiss deepening, his heart pounding, and Hermione couldn’t tell if the wetness on their cheeks came from him or her.

Finally he released her, his face damp and his lips red and shining. He pushed curls back from her face with both of his hands and looked her up and down.

“Merlin, Hermione,” he drawled. “What the hell are you wearing?”

She glanced down at the pink terrycloth. “What? It’s a robe.”

“You look like Cupcake.” Draco’s eyes touched on her fuzzy blue slippers and he shook his head.

“It’s very warm,” Hermione said, leaning her head on his chest. He probably had a green silk robe with a dragon embroidered on the back. She closed her eyes. Her legs felt wobbly and only his arms were keeping her upright. The room was nearly dark now, lit only by the fire and some magical torches on the walls.

“You’re exhausted,” he said softly. “Come on.” He led her over to her bed and yanked the covers
back, earning a disapproving yowl from Crookshanks, who jumped off the heavy quilt with a hiss.

“Come on,” he repeated. Hermione didn’t fight him, just crawled into bed with a heavy sigh. He stood by the bedpost, looking down at her.

She grasped his hand. “Stay.”

That was a nice thing about Slytherins—they didn’t waste time with “Do you really want that?” or “Are you sure?” If they wanted to do something, that was good enough. Draco simply nodded, stripped down to his black boxers, and slid into the bed.

“Go to sleep,” he said, wrapping himself around her.

She yawned. “I don’t want to sleep.”

“Sleep anyway.”

“I’ll sleep when I want, where I want …” She yawned again. “Um, how I want and — and …”


She could feel his lips in her hair and tried to remember where her clip was. Was it still in her robe pocket or did it fall onto the sofa? She should get up and put it away, it wouldn’t do to leave a priceless heirloom lying about. Crookshanks was male, what if he stepped on it? Did the clip differentiate between cats and people? Male relatives and non-relatives? There must be a way to test the boundaries …

“Stop thinking, Hermione,” whispered a voice in her ear. She was wrapped in terrycloth and magic and warmth and cologne, and finally, finally, she felt safe.

Draco was humming now, she realized, stunned almost awake again. Well, the man whistled, didn’t he? Why not hum, too? Hermione pressed closer, trying to hum along. She was still trying to identify the tune … a waltz, perhaps … when she finally stopped fighting her exhaustion and fell asleep.

***

Hermione woke in a fat beam of sunlight shining on the bed. She lay on her side, facing the window, and could feel a hard wall of warm muscle behind her and a heavy arm around her waist. She pulled away just enough to turn around and see Draco lying there, his face soft with sleep, his hair a golden halo in the sunshine. He murmured, eyes still closed, and blindly tried to pull her close again. She had lost her robe during the night, reassuring Draco that she really was fine, and his hand under her bare breasts was warm and distracting.

Hermione stretched an arm above her, muffling a groan as muscles complained, and plucked the watch off her canopy. “Merlin!” she shouted. “It’s almost nine!”
Draco opened his eyes then, looking dazed. “What?” he mumbled.

“It’s almost nine!” she repeated. “I have to be at Harry’s in an hour!”

He was unimpressed. “Blow it off,” he yawned, curling an arm around her again. “Trying to sleep here.”

She huffed down at him. “I can’t blow it off,” she said. “I need to talk to him about … this,” she waved a hand between them.

“How much more does Potter need to know?” Draco asked, waking up a little bit. No, definitely not a morning person. “Do you tell him details?” He frowned. “Not sure I’m on board with that.”

Hermione pulled away and rose up on her knees. “Ewww, of course not. That’s ridiculous.”

“Well, there you are.” Draco raised himself to a sitting position, grumbling slightly and running a hand through his hair. “Potter knows all he needs to know about us, ergo, you don’t have to go to his little breakfast. Consequently, you can stay here another hour or two and we can start the day properly.” He flashed her a wicked grin. “In fact, I suggest you cancel your lesson with the Weasel, too—I’ll teach you to fly—and that would give us a chance for some interesting—”

A loud crack resounded through the room, and Hermione nearly fell out of the bed at the sudden appearance of a visitor.

“Maître Draco!” cried the house elf, for a house elf it was, bearing an enormous silver tray that shone brightly in the sunlight. She was small, even for a house elf, with a large white ribbon tied around her flapping ears and tied in bow. The pillowcase she wore was a pristine white, with so many layers of lace that it looked like she was wearing a doily.

Hermione pulled the sheet over herself; Draco hadn’t been kidding when he mentioned his French house elf bringing tea and croissants every morning. The elf smoothed the bedcovers with a tiny gesture, then laid the tray atop the quilt and uncovered it. A silver-edged china tea set met the eye, including a large plate piled high with pastries.

“Maître Draco est avec un ami!” she squeaked. “Une paramour!” The elf’s eyes were wide with shock.

“Shouldn’t she be more used to this?” Hermione asked him. “Aren’t you some kind of Slytherin sex god?”

“You tell me,” he said with a thin smile. He looked back at the elf. “Thank you, Aimee,” he said. “This looks delicious. Now run along.”

“Maître Draco. Mademoiselle.” Aimee vanished with another crack.

“Does she always do that?” Hermione asked, accepting a cup from Draco and pouring milk into it. “Bring you tea and croissants wherever you happen to wake up?”

He shrugged. “It looks like it. I’ve never woken up in a witch’s bed before.”

Hermione nearly choked on her pastry. “Never? But all those …”

“Please.” Draco looked pained. “I never was the type for sleepovers.”

“Oh.” She set her tea down. “Well, it was good of you to stay … after.”
He looked at her with amusement. “Good of me? What are you on about?”

“Because of what happened at the shack,” she said. “That’s why you stayed, right?”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Since when do I do things to be good? And don’t forget the Room of Requirement.” He plumped up a pillow and leaned back on it, then picked up his teacup again. “Do I look like I’m going anywhere? You’re the one who wants to run out the door to your precious Potter.”

He did look perfectly comfortable, and not a drop or crumb fell to the silver tray, while Hermione had already sloshed a little of her tea and smeared butter on the coverlet.

“You said you aren’t the type for sleepovers,” she said.


Hermione refused to be distracted. “Not even with Astoria? You were betrothed!”

Again that pained look. “Don’t remind me. Would you want to deal with Astoria first thing in the morning?” He shuddered. “Plus, Pansy wouldn’t have taken that well, and she was always turning up in my dorm.” He smiled fondly in remembrance.

Hermione scowled. “You had both of them going at once?”

“Sure.” Draco shrugged. “They both knew the score.” He looked over at Hermione. “What’s that look for?”

“You are disgusting,” she said.

“Well, yes.” Draco put down his teacup and croissant and took her hand, twining their fingers. “But again, times change. I meant what I said, Hermione,” he said, looking at her intently as he kissed her hand. “Yours.”

She held his eyes with hers. “Mine.”

“That’s right.” Draco gave a pleased nod, and leaned forward slightly to give her a light kiss. Then he released her hand, poured another cup of tea with careless grace and settled back among the pillows, one leg bent. The morning sun picked out the golden hairs on his leg, which grew thicker and deeper gold further up his thigh.

“Anyway,” he went on as he sipped and she stared, “I didn’t go through all that trouble with you just to throw it over and run back to Astoria.” He shuddered dramatically. “Or Pansy.” He shuddered even more dramatically.

Hermione bit her lip to keep from smiling. “All right, then.” She sniffed. “You’re still disgusting, though.”

A warm hand slid under the covers. “Oh yes,” he said, with a smile.

She let the hand remain, even allowing it to travel upwards and linger for a time, until her eyes landed on her watch again, now on the tray. “Merlin!” she cried suddenly, startling Draco, who looked at her reproachfully. A single drop of his tea fell on the coverlet beside him and he tutted in annoyance.

“It’s 9:20!” she cried.
“Yes, yes,” he said irritably, plucking a pastry off his stomach and tossing it back on the tray. “Splendid. Now, where were we?”

“I am getting ready!” Hermione said, hopping out of bed and grabbing her robe. “I’m supposed to be at Harry’s at 10! Get up!”

“We resolved that,” said Draco, not moving an inch. “You will blow off Pot-head and the Weasel and stay right here with me until I leave for the Quidditch pitch.”

‘I certainly will not. Harry would worry,” Hermione said, tugging a brush through her hair. Draco sighed. “Fine, if you insist.” He clapped his hands twice and Aimee appeared with another loud crack. “Excellent as usual, Aimee, wasn’t it, Hermione?”

Hermione rallied, picking up her hair brush again. “Yes, Aimee. Thank you. It was lovely.”

“Would ze Mademoiselle like tea and croissants every morning?” Aimee asked eagerly. “It would be an honor to serve Maître Draco’s paramour, even when he is not in her bed!”

Hermione blushed. “That is not – I mean, I can’t – it wouldn’t be—” She sighed and tried to pull herself together. “Stop laughing,” she snapped at Draco.

“Thank you, Aimee,” Draco said, grinning. “Mademoiselle. Maître Draco.” Aimee vanished, along with all the tea things, with a loud crack.

“You should set her free, you know,” Hermione told him. “I have a few knitted socks in my trunk.”

“You’re welcome to try.” Draco slid out from under the covers and walked toward her, wearing only his boxers. “Let’s talk about it in bed.” He slid one arm around her waist and took her hand, steering her back toward the bed as if they were waltzing.

She shook her head regretfully. Merlin, those eyes. “I have to go,” she breathed. “And so do you. You can’t be seen flying out of my window.”

Draco objected, of course, insisting that nobody of consequence was about on a Sunday morning, but she bullied him into his socks and trousers and shoved his jumper over his head. He continued to linger as she picked out her clothes, criticizing her choices for the day and wincing at the Weasley sweater. Her wardrobe needed more green, she was told, and shorter skirts.

“That,” he said, waving a pale hand at her knobby red-and-gold top, “sends entirely the wrong message.”

“It sends exactly the right message,” she said, slipping his shoes on his feet just to move things and pushing him toward the window. Honestly, he was such a toddler. “It indicates that while I may be with you, I’m still a Gryffindor and part of the Weasley family.”

Draco shuddered at the very idea and stretched out a long arm to pluck her new Runes book off an end table. “I’m borrowing this,” he said, flipping through it as she vanished the window. “You mustn’t scribble in your books, Hermione. It’s very distracting for me.”

Hermione rolled her eyes and vowed to write on every page from now on. “Here,” she said, shoving his broom into his hand. “Bugger off.”

Draco looked down at her, suddenly serious. “Very well. Go see Pot-head and Weasel, then return
“Here again,” he said sternly. “I expect you back for the Slytherin-Hufflepuff match.”

“I promise,” Hermione said. After yesterday’s events, she supposed she could tolerate a little bossiness.

“And wear the Gloriana Set. All three pieces.”

“Constant vigilance!” Hermione shouted.

Draco frowned. “What?”

“Sorry, inside joke,” she muttered.

Draco’s arm was around her waist again, drawing her in, and she melted into him instantly, their lips meeting. She blinked, and realized they were by the bed again, her bra unclasped. How did he do that, with a broom in one hand and a book in the other?

Hermione practically shoved him out the window after that, and he immediately plummeted twenty feet before rising again, hovering outside her window as she looked out, pale and shaking.

“Don’t do that!” she shrieked. “You arse!” But she got only a wink in return, and he turned and flew away, leaving Hermione standing at the open window, hand shading her eyes, watching the flying figure until it was lost in the sun.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Hermione offers references. Winkweeds don’t like to wait.
This story has hit more than 1,000 kudos, which is so amazing to me. Thank you for reading!

Off Hermione goes again, back to Harry's house for breakfast.

“I thought you’d chickened out,” Neville said when Hermione finally appeared in the Gryffindor common room. It was well after ten o’clock now, and her friend looked hungry and a little surly. “I’m doing this as a favor, you know.”

“I do know, and thank you for coming with me,” Hermione said, kissing his cheek. She should’ve brought him a croissant.

“You look … happy,” he said after they’d stepped out of the portrait hole and were walking toward the humpbacked witch’s statue on the fourth-floor corridor. “All smiling and relaxed and rosy and …” He stopped and made a face. “Eewww. Don't tell me.”

“Never mind that,” she said, tugging on Neville’s cloak until he began walking again. “I want to tell you what happened yesterday.” She began the tale about her and Theo’s encounter with the Death Eaters (for the fourth time now, Merlin help her). Hermione kept talking as they entered the passage and walked toward Hogsmeade, Neville listening silently until she came to Macnair pushing her down on the bed.

“What?” he cried, grabbing her hands. “Are you all right?” He released a hand to tilt up her face so he could see her eyes.

“Don’t touch my hair!” she cried. She had the entire Gloriana set tucked into her braid this morning.

Neville backed off, looking horrified. “Hermione,” he choked. “If you need to see someone—”

“No, no,” she said. “I’m okay, really. It’s this hair clip.” She pulled it out and showed it to him. “Come on, we’re late.”

Hermione explained the clip’s magic, finishing the story of the Muggle Hunting Shack as they entered Hogsmeade. She left nothing out; Neville needed to know everything before they arrived at Harry’s. Neville stared down at the hair clip in her hand as they stood in Honeyduke’s cellar.

“Malfoy gave you jewelry for your birthday?” he repeated. “Enchanted family jewelry? Are we talking interest gift here?”

“Oh, you know about those.” Hermione had hoped to avoid that whole topic. But then, Neville was pureblood, raised by a very traditional grandmother. “Draco swears it isn’t.”

Neville looked skeptical. “Merlin, let’s hope not,” was all he said. “And thank you for telling me. I don’t fancy having a finger sliced off myself.”
The story about the Death Eaters and the bit about the hair clip had soured her friend’s mood again, and by the time they appeared at Harry’s door Neville was nearly scowling, which Hermione pointed out would not help her case with Harry about Draco.

“I’m rethinking my role in this,” Neville admitted. “These are very deep waters, Hermione. Speaking of which, I’m going to be late watering my Winkweed. She doesn’t like to wait.”

Hermione just barely restrained herself from rolling her eyes. She personally wished the plant would shrivel up and die.

“Why, hello, Hermione.” Harry’s dry voice made them both jump. “And here you are on my doorstep with yet another wizard.”

Her best friend looked terrible, pale and hollow-eyed, wearing only boxers, socks and an Order of the Phoenix T-shirt. (Yes, they had gotten T-shirts, enchanted so only other Order members could see the printing.)

Harry looked them up and down. “It looks like nobody’s dead or purple and/or covered in blood this time, so I count myself lucky. Hi, Nev, come on in.”

Hermione shot Harry a glare as she entered, but said nothing. She had a situation to smooth over.

“Are you all right?” Harry asked her in a low voice. Hermione nodded. “You weren’t alone last night, were you?” he asked. “Ginny was with you?”

“No, I wasn’t alone,” Hermine said, flushing slightly.

“You were with—” Harry also reddened. “Ewwww.” Then he frowned. “Where was Ginny?”

Neville, meanwhile, was plucking at the sleeve of Hermione’s Weasley jumper. “Blood?” he asked her as they followed Harry down the hallway. “Were you covered in blood, Hermione? Was it the Death Eater’s blood?”

“Oh, you know about that—good.” Harry led them into the dining room, where the table was loaded with bowls of eggs, potatoes, sausages and fried tomatoes. Kreacher’s work, Hermione knew, since Harry was a rubbish cook. It certainly wasn’t Harry who put out the china tea set and little pats of butter.

“Dig in,” Harry said, picking up his plate and waving his wand to create a third place setting. Hermione immediately sat down—she was starving. Neville and Harry created piles of food that would almost feed Ron and conversation was abandoned as the three friends steadily ate.

They had each cleaned two plates full and were sipping more tea and nibbling on muffins when Harry spoke up again.

“No, Neville, Hermione wasn’t covered with the Death-Eater’s blood,” he said as if there’d been no interruption. He was very difficult to distract from a topic, which would serve him well as an auror. “She was covered in blood and dirt the first time she visited yesterday. That time she was with Malfoy.” His mouth twisted.

“What?” Neville cried. “That’s it, I can’t support—”

“It wasn’t Draco’s fault,” Hermione said calmly, ignoring Harry’s wince when she said “Draco.” She went on: “It was my idea. Draco warned me not to interfere when that bully wizard knocked over all those disembodied hands.”
Neville groaned. “You were in Knockturn Alley.”

“Yes, Hermione,” Harry said. “Do tell Neville about your and Draco’s nice visit with the vampire in Knockturn Alley.”

“That wasn’t Draco’s fault, either,” she said. “He didn’t want to go. It was either accompany me or let me go alone.” She scowled. “I am perfectly capable of going to Knockturn Alley alone and Vasile really is nice.”

“A nice vampire,” Neville said, rolling his eyes. “The one from Slughorn’s party, right? I’m actually glad Malfoy gave you the man-hating diamonds.”

“Oh, you know about those, too?” Harry asked.

“I know more about all this than I ever want to,” Neville said, rubbing his face with the heels of his hands.

“And what do you think of her—and him?” Harry went on as if Hermione wasn’t there. She bit her lip to keep from speaking.

Neville sighed. “They work, in a twisted way. Keeping them apart certainly doesn’t work.”

“And the interest gift?” Harry asked.

“I can’t imagine he’s thinking that way,” Neville said. “But who knows with him … maybe the Malfoy vaults include a hex-proof vest.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, thinking of Draco and his 10th-century emerald brooch.

“Look at it this way,” Neville said. “You know how she is. Malfoy has great value as a bodyguard, if nothing else. You should have seen him with the vampire at Sluggy’s party. The poor creature was almost crying.”

“Malfoy wasn’t at the Hunting Shack, though,” Harry said. Then he finally turned to Hermione. “You could’ve used another wand there.”

“I know,” she said. “But there was no time to tell him. Draco was overseeing detentions in the dungeons, and Theo was leaving immediately.” She sighed. “Trust me, Draco was furious about the Death Eaters.” She couldn’t help but shiver slightly, remembering him sitting on her sofa with a book, and his cold eyes.

“Death Eaters,” she said suddenly. “Did you interrogate Celeste and Macnair? Did they talk?”

“Macnair talked,” Harry said as he broke apart another muffin. “We questioned him under Veritaserum and it was obvious Regis planned to defect. Regis wasn’t the brightest, you know. The other Death Eaters followed him, hoping to kidnap Theo.”

Hermione opened her mouth to ask about the Aurors’ procedures surrounding the use of Veritaserum on Macnair, but then the memory of her face against a smelly mattress flashed through her mind and she decided she didn’t care. She hoped the man choked on the stuff. “What about Celeste Rosier?” she asked.

Harry glowered. “Nothing yet. It’s rather difficult to interrogate a bleedin’ Pygmy Puff.”

“You couldn’t turn her back?” Hermione asked innocently. Neville chuckled.
“No, Hermione, we couldn’t,” Harry said. “She’s under heavy security at St. Mungo’s and the Healers are baffled. What did you do?”

Hermione shrugged. “Just a standard Transfiguration spell.” Which it was, with a little addition of her own. She’d developed a sticking charm in her spare time to make Transfigurations permanent and had despised of ever being able to test it. Life often did offer opportunities when one least expected them. She rather thought Celeste Rosier would make a very good Pygmy Puff. Fluffy. Harry looked at her suspiciously but said nothing.

“Did Macnair mention any other Death Eater cells?” she asked.

Harry shook his head. “He said theirs is the only one, and Celeste is—was—the brain.”

Neville wiped his mouth with his napkin. “Can we head back, Hermione? My Winkweed won’t water itself.”

“I’m seeing Ron next,” Hermione said. “Draco thinks I need flying lessons. Ridiculous, right?”

Eyebrows shot up on both men’s faces. “Why does Malfoy think you need flying lessons?” Harry asked, too casually.

“Well, he’s seen me on a broom,” Hermione said. She didn’t want to mention Astoria.

Harry and Neville both grinned. “Well, good for him,” Harry said. “I’m surprised Malfoy isn’t teaching you.”

“He wanted to, but Ron has been nagging me for years, and Ginny—Ginny!” Harry looked startled as she opened her pink beaded bag and stuck her wand into it. “Accio reference letter,” she said.

“Reference letter?” Harry asked.

“For Draco and me,” Hermione said, handing over the scroll.

“You always over-prepare,” Harry said, grinning fondly.

“Ginny wrote it to you.”

Harry eyed the scroll, clearly debating whether to open it, when Neville stood.

“OK,” Neville said, “so you have my thoughts on my whole Malfoy thing, plus Ginny’s letter, plus you’ve seen the two of them together anyway, covered in blood and all, so I think my work here is done.”

“Thank you, Neville,” Hermione said, jumping up and trying to hug him, but he just veered away, an eye on her hair.

Harry took Ginny’s scroll with him as he saw Neville out, and had apparently read it, because he returned to the dining room and took his seat, tossing the open parchment beside Hermione’s plate.

She gave him a quick look and picked up the letter:

Harry,
If you had asked me three months ago if Hermione and Malfoy would ever be friends, let alone anything more, I would have hexed you where you stood. But Malfoy is not the man I expected, and more importantly, Hermione is not the woman any of us expected this year either.

Hermione is more than powerful enough to handle Malfoy—in fact, I wonder if he can handle her. She has terrorized the school this year, and there are some who consider Malfoy a calming influence, if you can believe that.

If she wants him, as far as I’m concerned, she can have him. She deserves anything she wants. She deserves to grow. We all deserve that, Harry. Nobody deserves to be confined to a narrow role that they’ve long outgrown. You and I know that better than anyone.

Ginevra

Hermione read the letter twice, raising her eyebrows at the signature. She carefully rolled it up and returned it to Harry.

“Harry …” she began.

“Where is she, Hermione?” he asked, his voice soft, almost Slytherin soft. “Where is Ginny now?”

“I can’t tell you,” Hermione said. “She deserves her privacy.”

Harry’s fingers drummed on the table, his face grim. “I’ve heard talk about Blaise Zabini. He’s as bad as Malfoy with women. How can you allow it? You’re supposed to be her friend.”

“I am her friend,” Hermione said. “It would be pretty hypocritical for me to stand in her way, considering everything, wouldn’t it?”

“Fucking Slytherins.” Harry’s fingers curled into a fist. “Wish they’d stick to their own House.” His mouth was a bitter line. “But why would they do that, when beautiful, brilliant Gryffindors are just ripe for the plucking …”

Merlin, now is when I really need Neville, Hermione thought. “Nobody is any Slytherin’s for the plucking,” she said. “Except maybe Lavender.”

Harry didn’t smile. “Malfoy, Zabini, Nott—those guys are dangerous.”

“So am I,” Hermione said. “So is Ginny. What kind of sicko fantasy have you got going about the two of us, anyway? Do you think we just blushed and whimpered while those men corrupted us with evil promises of dominating sex?”

Harry looked pained. “Please. Stop. I’m begging you.”

She was glad to do so, because she was sort of turning herself on. Focus. “Harry.” She reached out and put her hand on his. He really didn’t look well. “Harry, has something happened?”

Harry sighed, looking down at his muffin, then back at her. “Chloe returned to France last week. Her parents negotiated an … intriguing … betrothal contract.”

“Intriguing,” Hermione repeated.
“That’s what she said.” Harry’s eyes were almost Slytherin cold now. “Some Duc de Trefle-Piques …” The French names rolled easily off Harry’s tongue with rare venom.

“I’ve heard of that family,” Hermione said. “Stories say that his ancestor escaped the Terror by casting a concealment charm on his neck and pretending that his head had already been cut off, and …” she trailed off at the look on Harry’s face. “But I’m sure this Trifle Duke is rotten to the core.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Harry’s fingers clenched around his teacup. “He’s pureblood, rich and titled, and apparently I was just part of Chloe’s fun little auror adventure.”

“Harry.” Hermione put her hand on his. “I’m so sorry.” Her best friend had rarely looked so pathetic: Exhausted, overworked, sitting alone in his ancient, half-renovated house with his messy hair and tattered T-shirt. “I doubt that was an easy decision for her.”

Her friend shrugged. “Looked easy enough.”

“Well, she’s a fool, then,” Hermione said. "To give up a brilliant, powerful wizard like you for—”

“Lovely words from you someone who’s been dating two rich, titled wizards,” Harry snapped. “You nearly got yourself killed for Nott, and wait until the public finds out you’re seeing Malfoy. You sit there covered in diamonds and—”

Hermione did her best not to glare. “I never expected any sort of jewelry. Do you think I care about diamonds and titles? Do you think Ginny cares about such things?”

“I know all about the Zabinis' glamorous lifestyle. His mother—”

“Is that all you think of Ginny?” Hermione was glaring now. “That she would aspire to the likes of Caprice Zabini?”

Harry shifted uncomfortably in his seat and looked up at his tall, mahogany clock. “You’re headed to Ron's now, right? You’re telling him about Malfoy?”

“Yes,” Hermione said, fiddling nervously with her napkin.

“I’ll come with you. Just let me take a shower and—”

“No, thank you, Harry.” Hermione shook her head. “Ron and I need to work this out together.”

“He’ll go spare,” Harry warned.

“I can handle it.” Hermione stood and Harry followed her to the sitting room fireplace.

“Thank you for breakfast, Harry. It was so good.” She gave him a quick hug, and Harry stiffened, glancing warily at her hair. "What will you do today?” she asked.

Harry shrugged. “Try to catch up on sleep. I’m expected for dinner at the Burrow.”

Hermione was pleased. She didn’t want Harry to be alone all day. “Oh, I almost forgot,” she said. “Any word on Lucius’ visitors, or getting his blood?”

Harry rubbed his unshaven jaw. ‘It’s hard to get Lucius’ logs without making it obvious, so Kingsley and I submitted a warrant for visitors’ logs for ten Death Eaters in Azkaban, using Macnair’s testimony as evidence. Kingsley still doesn’t know about the potion, though.”

“And the blood?”
“That magical virus is still running through Azkaban. They’re doing blood draws on top-level prisoners and I’m trying to get access to the lab. Best I can think of. But again, paperwork.”

Hermione nodded and stepped back. “Draco and I will keep working on our end.”

“Are you sure you don’t need me at Ron’s?” he asked.

Hermione smiled at him as she scooped up a handful of purple powder, preparing to floo to the Burrow. “We’ll be fine.”

“Be careful heading back to Hogwarts,” he said sternly. “Stay alert.”

“Constant vigilance!” Hermione and Harry both snapped out at the same time. They grinned at each other. Then Hermione sobered.

“Harry, talk to Ginny.”

His green eyes were cool. “Ginny won’t talk to me.”

“Maybe not,” Hermione answered. “But Ginevra might.”

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Ron has a relapse.
“I’m a Damn Planet, Ronald”

Chapter Notes

I’ve been waiting SO LONG to post this chapter. Hope you all like it.

Another Warning: There is some harsh language and a glancing mention of an attempted sexual assault.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I can’t believe it!” Ron shouted. “That was brilliant!”

They landed in an open field about a mile from the Burrow, about five feet apart, and Hermione was so excited she almost fell down getting off her broom. Ron steadied her.

“Did you see that?” she squealed. “Did you see me?”

“I saw you!” Ron’s freckled face looked ready to split open, he was smiling so widely. “A triple-loop!” He dropped his broom and grabbed her, spinning her around.

Hermione hugged him, then pushed at his chest gently, a silent signal to put her down. He took her hand, but she was too excited to notice. “A triple-loop!” she breathed. She’d been trying for a double-loop but had so much momentum, she completed a third loop by accident.

“You, Ron, are an excellent teacher,” she said. “Who knew?”

“You would’ve known, if you’d let me teach you sooner,” he said, his smile dimming a little.

“That’s right,” Hermione said seriously. She squinted up at him in the sun. “It was wrong of me. I guess I didn’t like not knowing something.” She sighed. “I am a know-it-all.”

“A cute know-it-all,” he said, lifting a hand to her hair. She veered away like a nervous colt and nearly fell down again. An hour of flying lessons hadn’t made her any more graceful.

Ron looked a little affronted now, and she sighed. It was time. “Come on,” she said, pulling at his hand. “I brought a picnic.”

Hermione summoned a carpet, a tablecloth and a basket of sandwiches from the Leaky Cauldron from her beaded bag. She was still stuffed from that enormous breakfast at Harry’s, but Ron could be counted on to clear the basket. They wrapped themselves in heavy cloaks against the November air and Hermione set out a few jars of blue fire for warmth.

Ron fell to the sandwiches like a starving man, giving Hermione plenty of time to twist up her windblown curls and fasten them again with Draco’s clip. Then she just sat and sipped her butterbeer and tried not to fidget.

“Mi,” Ron said finally. “What is it?”

She sighed. If Ron had noticed her agitation, she must be a nervous wreck. “I have something to tell you. Something you won’t like.”
He shoved the final sandwich into his mouth and nodded. “Kay.”

“I’m seeing Draco Malfoy.” There, she’d said it. She set down her butterbeer and clasped her hands on her lap to keep from wringing them.

Ron spit out chunks of leftover sandwich. “WHAT?”

“We are dating. Seriously.” She couldn’t believe how hard this was. “I … I like him.”

He drew a sleeve over his mouth, staring at her. “I thought you were dating Nott.”

“Theo and I are through, and I’m dating Draco now.” With Ron, it was always best to repeat things clearly, especially things he didn’t like.

“You mean …” Ron shuddered inside his heavy, dark blue cloak. A thread on the shoulder was frayed, Hermione’s crazed mind noticed. Molly would pounce on that in an instant ...

“You mean,” Ron repeated, “like romantically?”

Yes, Ronald, that’s what dating means. No, she needed to be patient. She’d never been upfront with Ron about Draco, and now she was paying the price. Ron hadn’t been at Slughorn’s parties or really anywhere with the two of them except Potions and DADA. From his point of view, Draco was an oily presence who leered at Hermione and made her uncomfortable. The two men had always brought out the worst in each other.

“Yes,” she said calmly. “I have feelings for him. And he has feelings for me. Apparently, I have a weakness for tremendous gits.”

Ron’s face darkened—so much for humor. “No, Hermione,” he choked. “No. He’s manipulated you somehow, convinced you he’s changed. He hasn’t changed. This is his revenge on you, on me, on Harry—Merlin!” His eyes widened. “Does Harry know?”

She nodded. “He is … resigned to it. Look, I know you haven’t seen us together in a positive way. I know this is hard to believe. Let me tell you some of the things Draco’s done—”

Ron leaped to his feet. A lock of red hair, longer now than it had been at Hogwarts, fell over one eye. He drew his wand. “I’m going to get Harry and we’re going to go hex the shit out of that ferret for …”

He stared down at her, looming in a way she’d never seen him look before. The dark cloak flapped behind him.

When he spoke, his voice was hoarse. “He’s touched you? You let him touch you?”

Hermione stood as well. “Now, Ron, let’s not get into …”

He moved closer, too close, blue eyes searching her face, and she couldn't help blushing.

“He has!” Ron staggered backward. “Merlin! You let him touch you with those filthy hands that tried to kill Dumbledore and that filthy mouth that called you Mudblood for years! That’s sick! Sick!”

Oh, Godric, she was a fool to think he’d accept this on her word alone, or that a little flying lesson would make any difference whatsoever. Ron wasn’t just her friend, he was her first lover, they had a sexual past that had ended like four months ago, and she had ignored that entirely.
Now he stood before her, looking devastated. She couldn’t meet his eyes.


Hermione looked up at him then, and the light in his eyes was almost mad.

“There’s got to be an explanation,” Ron said stoutly. "You just don’t know what you’re doing. He … he seduced you somehow. Did he force you? And you’re too ashamed to admit it? It’s OK, I’ll help you …”

Ron stepped forward again and now Hermione jumped back, appalled. This was so much worse than she’d expected. Ron didn’t just hate Draco Malfoy, he considered the man evil. Harry had seen Draco bleed, had seen him in despair, had listened to his anxious mother lie to Voldemort for his safety. Harry saw Draco as an unlikeable person, but Ron … everything was still black and white to Ron.

“Ron, no!” Hermione began to shake. “He never … never …” Ron’s casual mention of rape, coming so soon after the scene in the Hunting Shack, was drawing emotions to the surface. She clapped her hands over her eyes. “Don’t say that!”

“Something happened, I know. I can see it. Well, I’m going to help you,” Ron said. She could feel his hand gently grasp her arm and …

She heard a pop and felt the strange pulled-through-a-garden-hose feeling of Apparation. She opened her eyes. Ron had side-Apparated her to his bedroom at the Burrow. Chudley Cannons players stopped zooming around in their posters on the walls and looked at her curiously.

Ron was waving his wand, muttering under his breath, then he advanced on her. “It’s all right, you’re safe here,” he said. “Malfoy can’t get to you here. We’ll all take care of you.”

Oh, this was awful. Worse than anything she could have imagined. Hermione looked him straight in the eye. It was time to take control of the situation.

“Ronald, I am not in any danger from Draco,” she said. “Now, I’m leaving, and we’ll discuss this when you’re calmer …” Hermione twirled in place to Apparate and nearly fell over when she landed precisely where she began. She tried again. No result.

She stared at Ron, who had shed his cloak and was now sitting on his desk, looking smug. “You can’t Apparate out of here now,” he said. “Or even walk out the door. It’s an auror capture spell—”

“Fine, then,” she snapped and cast a Patronus charm: “Harry Potter,” she said. “I am trapped in Ron’s bloody bedroom at the Burrow.” The silver otter slipped through a wall and vanished. Hermione sighed—she should have let Harry come along in the first place.

“Listen, Ronald,” she tried again, crossing her arms, her wand sticking out on one side. “This is ridiculous. You can’t keep me in here because you don’t like who I’m dating—”

“But it’s Malfoy!” Ron cried, sounding like he had at the carriage into Hogwarts. “Malfoy!”

Hermione started to rub her forehead. She could feel a headache coming on.

“Be reasonable, Mi,” Ron said. “I know you. I know who you are. You’re not some Death Eater whore …”

“RONALD!” she screamed. “I can’t believe you called me that!” She whipped her wand at his face. “Pretrificus Totalus!”
Ron froze and fell with a thud. Heavens, she couldn’t believe she did that.

Immediately afterward she heard a loud pop and Harry was standing on Ron’s bed, wearing sweatpants, dirty sneakers and a tattered Quidditch World Cup sweatshirt. Messy black hair stuck out from under a red WWW ball cap and he still hadn’t shaved. His eyes bugged out when saw Ron laid out on the floor.

“What did you do?”

“Hermione!” he yelled. “What did you do?”

“What did I do?” Hermione yelled back. “What about what he did? I told him about Draco and he went completely mental! Ron’s convinced Draco raped me or fed me a potion or both and then he trapped me here!”

“So you Petrified him?”

“He called me a Death Eater whore!”

“I can’t believe that,” Harry said. “Wait a minute, didn’t you Petrify Malfoy too?”

“He was walking toward me—”


Hermione scowled and released Ron, who immediately leaped up. “Harry, thank Godric you’re here—we have to save Hermione!”

“I don’t need saving, Ron. Now let me out of here!”

“As soon as you see sense, Hermione …”

“Wait a minute,” Harry cut in. “Is she really trapped in here? What did you do?”

Ron raised his wand with a roguish smile. “I cast an Incanto Captionem on the room.”

“You didn’t!” Harry was aghast.

“What is Incanto Captionem?” Hermione asked.

Harry sighed. “It’s an auror spell that allows us to retain prisoners in the field. Stronger than an anti-Apparation spell. Ron, I told you that spell in confidence!”

“Why didn’t you tell me about it?” Hermione wanted to know. “I could have used that at the hunting shack.”

“Because it’s only for aurors,” Harry said.

“Well, last I checked, Ron is not an auror.”

“I was going to be one, though,” Ron said.

“Ron,” Harry said severely. “You could be prosecuted for using that spell. You have to release Hermione now.”

“Release her? She’s barmy, or under a dark spell or potion or something!” Ron’s face was flushed. “She Petrified me!”
“You called me a Death Eater whore!” Hermione yelled.

“I didn’t! I said you couldn’t be with Malfoy because I knew you weren’t a Death Eater whore!”

“Oh, Merlin!” Harry groaned, collapsing on Ron’s bed. “Ron, you didn’t!”

Hermione crossed her arms, her good humor inexplicably restored. “You said I’m a whore if I’m with Draco,” she said in a lecturing tone, “and I’m with Draco, so ergo, I am a Death Eater whore.” She had to hand it to Draco, the word “ergo” made for a nice turn of phrase. Who knew what other grammarly goodies were stuffed in that blond head of his. Just another plus to spending more time together.

“But that’s my point,” Ron said hopefully. “You aren’t a whore, therefore—”

Harry groaned again. “For Godric’s sake, can we please stop talking about whores? Ron, you have to lift the spell—it affects every person in this room, so now I can’t leave either.”

Hermione glared at him. “Oh, so it’s OK to trap me against my will, Harry, but if you get caught in the spell suddenly it’s all a big emergency …”

Harry glared back at her. “I bet you and Malfoy get along great.”

She grinned. “You want to hear details?”

“DEATH EATER WHORE!” Ron shouted, leaping up.

“Stop calling her that!” Harry shouted back, leaping off the bed. He looked at Hermione. “You had to get cute, didn’t you? You are definitely spending too much time with that—”

The door opened. “Why is everyone talking about whores—” Ginny began.

“DON’T COME IN HERE!” Harry and Hermione screamed, but it was too late, she was there, the door swinging shut behind her.

“I heard yelling,” Ginny said mildly. She looked decidedly out of place in the narrow, dusty room, her low-cut green sundress revealing much creamy, lightly freckled skin. Her red-gold hair was piled on top of her head and she wore shimmery lipstick and wide sunglasses. A straw sunhat with a green ribbon dangled from one hand. She looked stunningly beautiful, straight out of a magazine spread, and Harry’s jaw dropped. Ginny removed her sunglasses and eyed Harry up and down with amusement. Harry flushed, rubbing his unshaven jaw and tugging at his wrinkled ball cap.

“Where have you been?” Ron asked, frowning at her dress.

“The Italian Riviera,” she said. Harry shut his mouth and looked away.


“Yes.” Ginny settled herself into the room’s only chair and arranged her flowing skirt. Her bare legs—longer than Hermione’s—stretched halfway across the room, ending in green stiletto sandals. Harry gave said legs a quick glance, then coughed and looked away.

“So what are we all talking about?” Ginny asked with an indulgent smile.

“Whores,” Hermione said coldly.

“Hermione told Ron about her and Malfoy,” Harry said.
“And you called her a whore?” Ginny asked her brother, no longer amused.

“No!” Ron cried, happy to have another chance to explain. “I simply said I knew she couldn’t be with Malfoy because she wasn’t a Death Eater whore!”

Ginny stared at him for an instant, then burst out laughing. “Oh Ron,” she gasped. “You are priceless!”

“You won’t be laughing in a minute, Ginevra,” Harry said grimly. “Tell her what you did, Ron.”

Ron gulped. “You have to understand, Ginny, that Hermione needs to be somewhere safe, even though she doesn’t realize the danger—”

Ginny looked to Hermione for illumination. “Ron cast some sort of auror capture spell on the room,” Hermione said. “Nobody can leave until he lifts it.”

“Well, he’ll just have to lift it,” Ginny said. “Lift the spell, ickle Ronniekins.”

“But then Hermione will leave!” Ron protested. “And Malfoy … he’ll get her!”

Ginny raised her eyebrows. “Get her?”

“Yes,” Ron’s voice was ominous. “We have to keep her safe from him. He’ll take her, and … and …”

“And what?” Ginny asked, all innocent curiosity. Hermione bit down her smile.

“You … you know …” Ron said, turning red.

“Ron feels that I’ve been seduced by spells and potions,” Hermione said helpfully, “and that if he lets me out of this room, Draco will find me and carry me off to his Slytherin lair.”

“Sounds lovely,” Ginny said.

“Stop it, Ginevra,” Harry said.

Ginny ignored him. “Ron, you’re being ridiculous. I’ve been watching the two of them for months and seen nothing of the sort. And as much as I’d love to sit around and indulge your mental illness, Hermione and I need to get back to school for the Slytherin-Hufflepuff match. So, lift the spell before I bat-bogey hex you.”

“Nothing doing,” Ron said. “I’ve been watching the two of them, too.” He turned to Harry. “You weren’t at Hogwarts this year, Harry. You didn’t see how Malfoy’s been staring at her—stalking her, touching her, leaning close every chance the fucker got!”

Ron turned to Hermione. “I know you could never fall for his shit, he must have forced it somehow, but don’t worry, I’ll take care of it.”

Hermione shook her head, oddly touched. “I know you’re trying to help, Ron, in your weird, twisted, Ptolemaic geocentric way—”

“Tole-what?” Harry asked.

Ginny groaned. “You had to ask. It’s the current Arithmancy unit. Now we’ll be here all day.”

“The Roman thinker Ptolemy was convinced the sun and planets moved around the Earth,”
Hermione said, leaning against the door so she could lecture more comfortably. “But the movement of the planets in the sky didn’t match up with that. So, he dreamed up this complicated system of imaginary circles to account for the planets’ sometimes-backward movements.”

“Merlin’s pants, Hermione!” Ron cried. “What are you talking about? What does that have to do with bloody Malfoy?”

“Ron, you’re an idiot,” said Ginny, examining her pink-painted nails. “Don’t be a Ptolemy.”

“I’m Ptolemy?” Ron asked.

“And Draco is the sun,” Hermione said.

Ron’s eyes narrowed. “And what about you?”

“I’m a damn planet, Ronald,” Hermione said through gritted teeth. “You keep dreaming up circles to account for my behavior.”

“How come Malfoy gets to be the sun?” Ron asked.

Ginny was laughing again, and Harry was glaring. “Drop it, Hermione,” he said.

“Don’t snap at me, Harry,” Hermione said. “I’m an innocent victim here, along with Ginny. Ron’s the one casting spells to trap people, and you’re the genius who taught him the spell in the first place.”

Harry sighed and apparently decided to see sense. “Ron,” he said. “I don’t like this relationship either, but I’ve spent time with both of them, and I’m convinced that Malfoy doesn’t mean her harm.”

“But Harry,” Ron protested. “He’s … he’s had his way with her …”

“I certainly hope so,” Ginny said, winking at Hermione. Hermione made shushing noises.

“Malfoy has been working with both me and Hermione to investigate the blood messages at Hogwarts,” Harry continued, desperately trying to change the topic of discussion. “We’re getting close to a solution and—”

“He probably wrote those messages!” Ron shouted.

“Ron,” Hermione said. “Please believe me. I am choosing to be with Draco. He did not write those messages. I’m not under a spell or a potion or blackmail or anything else. I know he acts like a ferrety fink most of the time, but he is trying to change.”

A brief silence fell as everyone looked at Ron. Not even Ginny wanted to break it with a smart comment.

“This makes no sense at all,” Ron said. “The son of a Death Eater wasn’t good enough, you had to go for the real thing? He’s a Slytherin, Hermione, he’s going to use you and throw you away!”

Hermione had had enough. She straightened, her fist clenched around her wand. “Yes, yes, so I’ve heard, again and again and again,” she said, her pulse jumping. “Draco’s just slumming it with the Mudblood. Go ahead, Ron. Call me a stupid, desperate, naïve little bookworm. Shun me and call me a whore. And if he tosses me aside, then you can say ‘I told you so.’”

She advanced on Ron then, and he instinctively cringed back. “What you can’t do, Ron, is lock me
in a room and keep me away from him. I have had it up to here with people thinking they know best for me, and I swear to Godric, I am not tolerating it anymore.”

“That’s enough, Hermione,” Harry said, exchanging a nervous look with Ginny.

“Oh, it’s not near enough,” Hermione said, her magic crackling around her.

“You’re not being yourself, Hermione,” Ron said stubbornly. “This isn’t who you are. Stay here and I can help you …”

“No, Ron,” she said, “I’m not giving Draco up, no matter what you do. He makes me happy.” She smiled wickedly. “Keep me here, and I’ll tell you how.”


“Ron, listen to me.” Ginny was standing now, all trace of a smile gone. “You do not want to get between these two people. Malfy likely knows she’s with you. Do you honestly think you can keep him away from her? He’ll tear this house apart.”

“No Death Eater is entering this house!” Ron shouted.

Ginny sighed. “Well, Ronald, I tried to reason with you, I really did. I take no pleasure in doing this, but your actions have driven me to it.” Her voice was dark, ominous, and Hermione shivered. “Remember,” Ginny said. “You brought this on yourself.”

“Gin,” Harry said, his voice strained. “What are you—”

Ginny pulled out her wand and cast her Patronus, a horse that practically filled the narrow room. Hermione and Harry jumped onto the bed and Ron curled up on his desk. “Molly Weasley,” she said. “Mum, could you come up to Ron’s room, please?” The glowing horse galloped through a wall.

Ron turned white. “No,” he whispered.

“Lift the spell! Quickly!” Harry hissed, but Ron was frozen. They all were, listening to the heavy footsteps climbing the stairs closer and closer.

The door burst open. “Yes, dear? Why it’s Hermione! Harry!” Molly Weasley rushed to the bed to grab them both in a single hug.

“No Mum!” Ron shouted. “Don’t come—”

“What are you all doing in here?” Molly asked, beaming. She released Harry and Hermione, smoothing the bright pink apron over her house robes. “Can you stay for dinner? Ginny, dear, I thought you’d left! Feeling better?” Molly gave her daughter a kiss and stroked her hair. “Come downstairs, all of you!”

“I wish we could, Mum,” Ginny said as Ron gestured frantically behind their mother’s back. “But Ron cast an illegal auror spell to trap us in this room. We’ve been trying to get out for ages.”

Molly turned on her youngest son. “Ronald Weasley, is this true?”

“Mum, I had to! You don’t understand, Hermione is dating the—”

“RONALD BILIUS WEASLEY, IS THIS TRUE?”
“I just wanted to save—”

“RELEASE THEM AT ONCE!” Molly screeched.

“Yes Mum!” Ron waved his wand in a trembling hand and muttered the words.

“Come on,” Ginny said, grabbing her sunhat and glasses. Harry and Hermione jumped off the bed and followed Ginny out the door.

They made their escape as Molly began winding up: “HOW DARE YOU TRAP YOUR FRIENDS HAVE I TAUGHT YOU NOTHING HOW COULD YOU BE SO CRUEL AS TO HOLD DEAR HARRY AND DEAR HERMIONE AGAINST THEIR WILL TO SAY NOTHING OF YOUR OWN SISTER WHAT WERE YOU THINKING I DIDN’T RAISE YOU TO …”

The trio didn’t stop until they left the house entirely, running past Arthur’s muggle shed and out the crooked picket fence. There they halted, breathing hard and pressing their sides.

“Thank you, Ginny,” Hermione said. “You saved us. That was one threat about me and Draco I didn’t want to carry out.”

“None of us wanted you to carry it out,” Harry said, shuddering.

“Oh, I wanted her to,” Ginny said with a glint in her eye.

Harry scowled. “From what I’ve heard, Ginevra, you already know plenty about Slytherin sex.”

Ginny stepped forward until her pink-painted mouth was inches from Harry’s. In her stiletto heels, she was the same height as the young auror, who stood wide-eyed and frozen.

“You’d better believe it,” she purred.

Ginny backed away, putting on her hat and sunglasses and linking an arm through Hermione’s. “Come along, my little Death Eater whore.” She raised her wand and twirled, Apparating them before Hermione could say a word and leaving Harry standing alone, open-mouthed, outside the Burrow’s faded wooden gate.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Badger biscuits and another duel.
Well! That last chapter was quite the scene, wasn't it? I had the hardest time picking a quote to be the title. I confess to a great fondness for Ron's petulant "How come Malfoy gets to be the sun?"

The chapter was a bit unfair to poor Ron, of course, but so fun to write, that old trope of trapping four strong-minded characters in a tiny room. In my completed draft, I just leave him hanging out there, with a feeble written apology, but he deserves better than that.

Meanwhile, onward. The Squeaky Mice return in full force, and yes, there's a duel. There are a lot of duels in this story, aren't there? I actually added a tag for it. Anyway, enjoy, and have a great weekend!

Thebe

Hermione expected Ginny to immediately launch into a description of her weekend with Blaise, but her roommate was silent as they left Hogsmeade’s main street and began walking the path toward Hogwarts.

She was happy enough not to talk; it gave Hermione ample time to scold herself for handling Ron in such a ham-handed fashion (not that there was any excuse for the whole kidnapping-and-Death-Eater-whore thing). Ron’s goal, she was sure, wasn’t to trap her with him, with all the dark designs he’d ascribed to Draco. Rather, he just wanted to keep her safe.

Hermione sighed as she followed Ginny along on the cold, windswept road. Draco was right—she had no subtlety. She’d spent more time thinking about Harry’s feelings than she had about Ron’s. Ron was the one who needed the special breakfast and witnesses and reference letters. He was the one who saw the first woman he’d loved move on to the man he most hated. Ron had deserved to be treated with more care.

Still, that didn’t justify trapping her at the Burrow like a princess in a tower. Hermione shuddered at the specter of Draco turning up at the Weasleys’ at his most autocratic, demanding her instant release. After insulting everybody, and throwing curses, he would have probably searched the house and broken into Ron’s bedroom—Merlin, Ron’s bedroom, and—

“Look, Hermione,” Ginny said, slowing down. “The match is over.” She pushed back the hood of her green velvet cloak.

“Already?” They were in front of the castle now, and students were swarming off the pitch, too far away to see House colors. Many were shrieking with happiness, excitedly hopping around the grounds with a complete lack of dignity. Most unusual for Slytherins.

“Malfoy must have caught the Snitch already,” Ginny said.
“I’m not so sure,” Hermione said. A pack of tiny First Years was barreling toward them, black-and-yellow scarves flapping wildly. The boy in front was Percival, holding a large Badger banner. Hermione gasped: All the Squeaky Mice had bright yellow hands and faces, except a girl in the back, who was green.

“Miss Granger!”

“It’s Miss Granger!”

“Miss Granger, you missed it!”

“You should have seen it!”

“What happened?” Hermione asked. She couldn’t help but smile at the Squeaky Mice, who broke off from the rest of the pack to talk to her. They were all so thrilled, their chubby faces flushed. Leila was with them in her green-and-silver scarf, rolling her eyes.

“He caught it!”

“Caught it in the first five minutes!”

“It was a great catch!” Percival said, stopping to push his banner's pole into the grass. “He … he … just snatched it right up!”

“Puh-leasee,” Leila said. “The Snitch buzzed around his head and hovered in front of his chest. It practically fell in his lap!”

“You’re just bitter!” Imogene said. “It was a brilliant catch!”

“BADGER POWER!!!” Percival shouted, and the others took up the cheer. “BADGER POWER!!!”

“Wait a minute,” Ginny said. “Are you lot saying that the Hufflepuff Seeker caught the snitch in the first five minutes?”

All the Squeaky Mice nodded.

“Billy Froom, the Hufflepuff Seeker?”

“That’s right, Miss Weasley,” said Bertie. Cupcake was on his shoulder, wearing a tiny yellow scarf. Bertie started jumping around, pretending to ride a broom. “Billy went like this, and the snitch went like that, and then Billy went like this …”

“There wasn’t anything Mr. Malfoy could do,” Leila explained. “Mr. Froom dropped a glove, and was hovering down near the pitch looking for it, and Mr. Malfoy was higher above the hoops. The Snitch flew right at Mr. Froom’s face, and he still almost missed it!”

“You’re just a sore loser!” Percival yelled. “BADGER POWER!”

“BADGER POWER!” shouted all the Mice except for Leila.

“I like the yellow coloring,” said Ginny, who had been inspecting the children more closely. “How did you do it?”

“It was Miss Granger!”
“That was brilliant!”

“Thank you, Miss Granger!”

Ginny turned to Hermione. “You turned them all yellow?”

“We’re not all yellow,” Leila said.

“It was a rainbow hex.” Hermione looked at the children sternly. “You lot were trying to break into the Potions Lab again.”

“You and Mr. Malfoy spend a lot of time in there,” Imogene said. “We wanted to know what you were doing.”

“I told you what they were doing in there!”

“You are a pig, Percival.”

Ginny burst out laughing. “Yes, Hermione,” she choked. “What do you and Malfoy get up to in that little Potions Lab?”

It took all of Hermione’s self-control not to blush (“terribly desperate”). Instead she glared at all of them. “We are brewing a complicated and dangerous experimental potion,” she said in her best McGonagall voice. “For a very serious purpose. If any of you disturbed it, you could have wiped out months of work and suffered severe injuries.”

“So you turned them all yellow?” Ginny asked. Leila opened her mouth. “And green?”

Hermione frowned. “No, they should be all different colors.”

“We were!” Bertie cried. “I was purple, and Percival was red and Imogene was—”

“We get it, we get it,” Ginny said, grinning.

“It was Leila’s idea, actually,” Percival said, giving the little Slytherin a reluctant nod of approval. “It was brilliant. She got us into the Potions dungeons with an Achoo spell—”

“Aloharah,” Leila and Hermione corrected.

“I researched the Rainbow Hex,” Leila went on, “and discovered that the colors change every time you—”

“So we went back to the lab and kept hitting the door and changing colors until we were yellow!” Imogene yelled.

“Or green,” Leila said.

A crowd of older Hufflepuffs ran by, waving more black-and-yellow banners. “Party in the Badger Common Room!” crowed Justin Finch-Fletchley.

“BADGER POWER!” the Mice yelled. “PARTY!”

“Bye Miss Granger! Miss Weasley!”

“Come on, you too, Leila!”
“I hope we get biscuits!”
“Badger biscuits!”
“Lemon badger biscuits!”
“BADGER POWER! …”

The Mice ran off to the castle, screaming at the top of their lungs. Ginny was still laughing.

“They’re brilliant,” she gasped. “I can see why you and Malfoy adopted them.”

“They like him much better,” Hermione said sourly.

“Well, they seem to like you, too.” The Mice had put Ginny in a cheerful mood again, and she linked her arm around Hermione’s. “Come on, I want to hear about your weekend.”

“I want to hear about yours,” Hermione answered quickly, allowing herself to be towed along. “The Italian Riviera?”

Ginny bit her lip and her bright face dimmed slightly. “Yes.”

Hermione gave her a quick hug. “Tell you what,” she said. “Ron gave me flying lessons this morning before he went mental. How about we fly to this great place I found hiking with Hagrid?”

“Really?” Ginny’s eyes lit up. “You’ll fly with me? Today?”

Hermione nodded. Really, with all her own drama, she’d been a bit of a rubbish friend. “Just not too high, okay? Or too fast?”

“Great!” Ginny’s smile widened. “I’ll meet you in the Entrance Hall. You can ride my spare broom!” She clapped her wide sunhat on her head and ran toward the castle as quickly as her stiletto sandals would allow.

Hermione pushed upstream against the crowd, passing happy Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors as well as sour Slytherins. The Slytherin team was still on the pitch, getting reamed out by Astoria, but Draco was not among them. So she jogged back to the castle, wondering if she’d have to brave the Slytherin dungeons to find him.

I can’t just fly off with Ginny without a word, she thought, passing through the castle’s giant oak doors into the Entrance Hall and pulling off her cloak. He’s probably annoyed I missed the match, and when he finds out about Ron …

A subtle clearing of a throat, not unlike Umbridge’s hem hem, stopped her in the center of the Entrance Hall. Hermione turned to see Draco leaning against the House Hourglass Cabinet, still in his Quidditch gear with his broom propped up beside him. His arms were crossed and his hair still ruffled from the match. Hermione’s breath caught. He had no right to look like that, all scowly and irresistible …

“Looking for someone?” Draco asked coolly.

“I am, actually,” she answered, walking across the hall toward him. “I have a boyfriend around here somewhere, a snarky git who can’t catch a snitch. Have you seen him?”

“ Likely hiding from you, if he’s smart,” Draco said.
“Oh, he’s anything but smart,” she answered. She dropped her cloak and reached up to frame his face with her hands, and if the touch of her cold fingers startled him, he didn’t show it.

His gloved fingers wrapped around her wrists. “Can I assume the Weasel—”

“Yes, Ron knows about us,” Hermione said. *Does he ever …*

“Excellent.” He pulled her into a quick, hard kiss, then gently pushed her back again, hands still on her wrists. They might be public now, that didn’t mean they could be snogging in the Entrance Hall.

She craned her neck to look behind him, noting a decided lack of emeralds in the Slytherin Hourglass, and clicked her tongue. Draco’s jaw tightened.

“My, your House has had some bad luck,” she said.

“Dirty tactics,” he growled.

Hermione smiled brightly. “I agree. Students shouldn’t sneak in to drop more jewels.”

Draco glanced around the hall, then back at her, sliding his hands off her wrists to capture her hands and pulling her closer. “Lift the enchantment, Hermione,” he whispered. “I’ll make it worth your while.”

“Stop the cheating,” she whispered back.

His head dipped closer. “This is your final warning.”

“Do your worst.”

“I will.” He released her and pulled out his wand, holding it by his side and giving it a lazy wave. Immediately a cascade of rubies tumbled into the lower bulb of the Gryffindor Hourglass.

“Draco!” she hissed, horrified. “Stop it!”

“Lift the enchantment,” he repeated as rubies continued to fall.

Hermione groaned. She couldn’t lift the spell off the Gryffindor Hourglass without clearing the Slytherin one since the House Hourglasses were all connected. She glared at Draco and gave her own wand a quick pass, muttering the spell too low for him to hear.

Draco leaned against the Hourglasses’ gilded cabinet, looking smug. “Don’t worry, I’ll still make it worth your while.”

“You’d better.” Hermione said in a surly tone she didn’t really feel. Draco must have added thirty rubies to the Gryffindor glass, and they were now there to stay.

Draco began slowly stripping off his leather gloves, his eyes on hers. Hermione swallowed and looked away. “I’m sorry I missed the match,” she said.

“It was probably for the best.” Draco tucked the gloves into his cloak. “What happened?”

“When?” Hermione asked, stalling.

“With the Weasel. He made you late, didn’t he?”
“Yes,” she admitted. “Before I tell you, I just want to say that it was partly my fault. I handled it badly.”

Draco crossed his arms again. “What did he do?”

“And keep in mind what an enormous git you’ve been in every interaction you’ve ever had with Ron in your entire life,” she said.

His eyes hardened. “You’re not answering me.”

Hermione clenched her hands together to keep from wringing them and looked around the hall. Students glanced over at them curiously as they passed through the doors and moved up and down the marble staircase.

“And keep in mind that Ron is just as protective as you are,” she continued. “and if there’s something I don’t need, it’s a pair of hair-trigger lunatics thinking they know—”

“Granger,” Draco said dangerously.

Hermione straightened her spine and looked him in the eye. Acting neurotic wasn’t helping the situation. “I told Ron about us, and he decided you’d cast a spell or fed me a potion, which if you think about it, is a perfectly reasonable assumption, considering how you’ve consistently—”

“What did he do?” Draco asked again.

She sighed. “He took me back to the Burrow for safekeeping, and cast a spell to keep me there.”

“He trapped you.” His eyes were cold. “He tried to keep you from me.”

“Yes, but I still had my wand,” she said. “So I Petrified him.”

“Of course you did,” Draco said, beginning to smile, then stopped. “He didn’t try to—”

“No, honestly, no,” Hermione said. “He just kept ranting about …” She trailed off. She didn’t want to tell him. But hiding things from Draco to protect his delicate sensibilities would hurt them both.

She hardened her voice. “Draco, I want to be honest with you, I really do, but if you go spare and turn up at the Burrow, flinging curses, I will want a conversation about what we’re doing here. Do you understand?”

He gave her an irritated look. “Of course I do,” he said. His tone implied she was mad to think he’d do anything at all impulsive or misguided.

“You’d better,” Hermione said, not the least bit convinced. “Ron called me a Death Eater whore and I—Draco! What are you— Expelliarmus!”

Draco had leaped away from the Hourglass cabinet, but now his wand was in Hermione’s hand, and which she pointed straight at him.

“Give me back my wand,” he growled. “I’ll show that—”

“You can’t just—” Hermione’s hand suddenly turned icy cold, and she dropped Draco’s wand, which clattered to the stone floor. “How dare you!” She pulled her own wand out, furious. “Pet—”

A sharp crack sounded above, and a stone block fell from the high ceiling above them, shattering the glass cabinet and knocking over the Gryffindor hourglass. Draco pushed her out of the way as
the block crashed to the floor. They stared at the cracked stone in horror, then at each other.

“Did you—”

“No!” he cried. “You’re the one holding a wand!”

“Are you two **dueling**?” asked a voice from above. Draco and Hermione looked up to see Ginny descending the marble staircase, holding two brooms. She wore Quidditch leathers and a long-sleeved black shirt and her hair was still piled in its glamorous Italian Riviera style.

“Is this foreplay?” Ginny asked brightly. “Looks like you’re losing, Draco, but maybe you like that.”

“Ginevra,” he said with crystal politeness, “we’re just having a little discussion, so if you will excuse us …”

“A discussion.” Ginny rolled her eyes and looked around the Entrance Hall. Students stood frozen, staring terrified with wide eyes at the three of them, the shattered cabinet and the chunk of stone on the floor. Hermione looked down at the wand in her hand and almost groaned. Great, now half the school would think she tried to kill Draco. This wouldn’t do her violent reputation any good.

“You’re talking about Ron, aren’t you?” Ginny went on, clearly determined to keep the drama going.

“Ginny …”

“How much have you told him, Hermione?” Ginny’s eyes were dancing. “Have you gotten to the part where yours truly saved the day?”

“You were there?” Draco asked.

“Oh yes,” Ginny said happily. “So was Harry. Poor Harry, trying so hard to be masterful, and **utterly** failing.”

“I fail to see the humor, Ginevra,” Draco said. He stepped toward her, every inch the disapproving Slytherin prince. “Your wretched brother insulted her, and trapped her, and vowed to keep her from me …” His voice was rising, and his wand was back in his hand.

“Draco,” Hermione said, “Be reasonable. You can’t just go to the Burrow and duel—”

“I can take the Weasel,” he sneered.

“It’s not Ron you’d have to worry about,” Hermione said, trading a smile with Ginny. “It's Molly.”

He hesitated. “Remember Molly?” Hermione went on. “The witch who killed Bellatrix? She knows what Ron did, and he’ll likely be washing dishes for a week and only let out of his bedroom to go to the joke shop.”

Draco glanced at Ginny, who nodded cheerfully.

“I wouldn’t care to duel Mrs. Weasley,” he allowed.

“Of course you wouldn’t,” Ginny said briskly. “Come on, Hermione, say goodbye to His Lordship. We’re losing light.”

“We’re going out to fly a bit,” Hermione told Draco.
“Excellent,” he said drily. “I recommend the Forbidden Forest so you can return with yet another tale of an attempted kidnapping. Just to round out the weekend.”

“We’re actually headed that way,” Hermione said. “I’m showing her one of Hagrid’s favorite places.”

“You are not—” Draco began.

“Another tale?” Ginny asked curiously.

“What is going on here?” asked a booming voice. Slughorn appeared beside them, mopping his sweaty forehead with a green silk handkerchief. He stared down at the cleaved stone block and around at the still-horrified students. “That crash rattled the dungeons, while I was brewing a very tricky—”

“The stone came loose, Professor,” Draco said in a bored tone. “Apparently, Wrapsodi is only effective in binding spoons and idiot students.”

“Now, don’t be impertinent, Mr. Malfoy,” Slughorn said, wagging a finger. “Make yourself useful and run along to Professor Hagrid. He’s on the second floor, helping repair the East Wing.” Slughorn looked up. “Shoddy repair work. We’ll need all those blocks inspected again.”

Draco glowered, not moving an inch. Hermione stepped up to him and touched his wrist. “I need to talk to Ginny about Blaise,” she whispered. “The weekend didn’t end well.”

He nodded, but still looked disgruntled, giving Hermione a final warning look before stalking off in search of Hagrid.

“I must admit, Miss Granger, I’m disappointed,” Slughorn said, chins wobbling as he shook his head. “I had hoped you’d be more of a calming influence on Mr. Malfoy.”

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Ginny's weekend.
Ginny was impressed by Hermione’s improved flying, although they stayed just a foot above the trees and flew at a creeping pace. But Hermione’s hands were steady, and her broomstick didn’t wobble or tilt upwards.

They landed on the bare hill in the western end of the Forbidden Forest, and Ginny brought out two butterbeers she’d stowed in her cloak pockets. Hermione set out her one remaining jar of fire (the rest were back on the hill outside the Burrow). The friends settled against two rune-inscribed rocks that Hermione vowed to study later and just sat quietly until Ginny was ready to begin her story.

“It was a surprise, of course, this trip to Blaise’s family castle,” Ginny began, wrapping her cloak around herself. “Called Castello di Zabini. Dates back to the fifth century—you’d love it. Those early Zabinis were pirates, and the castle was fortified in the fifteenth century. Blaise had regaled me about it the night of the Gryffindor party, and then again the following weekend when I met him at the Leaky Cauldron, and then again the following weekend when I met him at the Leaky Cauldron.

She grinned suddenly. “It was funny, actually, that night in September. There I was, sitting with a virtual stranger in a grimy rented room, waiting for a shag and instead getting long tales of princely riches. How better to impress a poor little Weasley girl, right? Bet those Slytherin slags love that shit. I practically jumped him just to shut him up.

“So, anyway, last Friday night I was having drinks with Blaise in Hogsmeade and he said he had a ‘small surprise.’ The man’s last small surprise was chartering the Hogwarts Express to take us to dinner in London last month, so I was ready for anything. He produced a dented can of beans, which turned out to be a portkey to Italy, and we ended up standing on medieval battlements in the middle of an island overlooking the sea. Violin music and candles floated around us, and we were suddenly waltzing under this giant moon.

“‘Blaise, what are you up to?’ I asked, and he gave me some long speech about a romantic scene with a beautiful woman and hair shining like a sunset over the Mediterranean until I’m fidgeting...
with boredom. I mean, it couldn’t be just about sex, since he’d been getting plenty of sex from me without whisking me off to the Continent, so I was hoping the weekend was about more than shagging and pretty words.

“‘In that, I was disappointed, because all he had to offer was amazing sex in exquisite surroundings, inside an opulent castle. The meals became more and more extravagant, the entertainment progressed from violins to dancers to private concerts to fireworks above the water, and I just got crabbiest and crabbiest until I was snapping like a Hermione Granger on a bad hair day.

“Finally, on Sunday morning, as we were drinking mimosas on some Godric-damned yacht on the Riviera, I’d finally had it.

“‘What the hell’s going on, Blaise?’ I asked. ‘Why are we here?’

“‘You said you wanted to know more about my background. I’m showing you my life,’ he said.

“‘No, you’re showing off your life. This tells me nothing about you I didn’t know before.’

“‘This castle—’

“I slammed down the champagne flute. ‘I don’t give a flying fuck about your castle, Blaise.’

“I stood, and he did as well, per his poncy etiquette, and I pulled out my wand. ‘Give me one reason to stay here, Blaise.’

“‘Are you going to hex me, like Hermione hexes Draco?’ he asked, amused.

“‘No, although a nice bat-bogey hex would do you a world of good,’ I told him. ‘Maybe it would wipe off that smarmy look of yours, Blaise, like I’m some feisty kitten here for your entertainment.’

“‘It works for Draco,’ he answered, smiling as he sipped his drink.

“‘That’s because he can’t keep it going,’ I told him. ‘Malfoy starts out under complete control, but after five minutes with Hermione, he starts fraying at the edges, and suddenly he’s blushing or yelling or threatening vampires, or all three at once. Merlin knows I don’t want that—I like a little stability in a man, I don’t have Hermione’s energy—but damn it, I can’t love some pretty shell!’

“Well, then it was out. I could’ve smacked myself for saying the Big L first, but every move he’d made recently screamed serious intentions, and if he was going to raise the stakes, then so would I.

“His smile was wider now; he’d obviously taken my words as some sort of confession, and he put down his drink and reached for me, but I backed away.

“‘Don’t be afraid, cara,’ he said. ‘I share your feelings, and we—’

“‘You don’t even know my feelings!’ I shouted. I sounded just like Mum, to my own cringing embarrassment, but hell, I’m a Weasley—we have tempers.

“Blaise looked pained and affronted at being interrupted. ‘The only time you care about my feelings,’ I went on, ‘is when I’m getting off, and that’s the only time you show any emotion either. What the hell do you want in life, Blaise, other than your next fuck?’

“He looked even more pained now, almost bored. ‘I want what everybody wants, cara,’ he said. ‘Love, happiness, family, a life rich in beauty and adventure.’ He took my hand. ‘Don’t you want that as well?’
“I felt like crying. It was all cracking apart before my eyes.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I want all that, too. But real love, happiness, family … it’s not about great sex … it
doesn’t come from all this …’

“I waved my other hand at the incredible island vista. ‘It’s from looking at another person and
being stripped down to nothing, then built right back up again.’ I was feeling the tears on my face
now. ‘It’s not playing the role of the perfect boyfriend with the perfect castle and the perfect
feelings.’

“Blaise’s face was cold, like it was when you and I climbed those Quidditch stands to invite the
Slytherins to our party. ‘You’d prefer me to moan about my problems?’ he sneered. ‘Like Potter?’

“I laughed at that. ‘Are you kidding?’ I asked. ‘Harry, open up to me? I was too young, too sweet,
too good to fight with him during the war, or hear about his struggles afterward or even fuck. He
treated me like a child and you treat me like a doll, and you can both go to hell!’

“‘His face darkened. ‘You don’t want to hear about me, Ginevra. You don’t want to hear about the
sick, twisted underside of life as a Zabini. You, who grew up in a loving family bursting with
feelings, with no sense of propriety or discretion. I refuse to revisit that darkness just to indulge
your curiosity.’

“‘Then you will be alone, Blaise,’ I told him. ‘You can be with scores of witches, but you will
always be alone. I fought in a war. I saw death. I was possessed by pure evil at 11 years old. I
won’t be with a man who sees me as a child or a pretty picture.’

“I don’t know how Blaise looked then, my vision was blurred, the sunshine running into the
shadow under the umbrella. I could hear my breathing loud in my ears and the smooth wood of my
wand in my palm. I closed my eyes and twirled, thinking of the safest place I knew.

“I opened my eyes again, and there I was, standing in the kitchen of the Burrow, and there was
Mum, holding a platter of cauldron cakes, her eyes wide and delighted. And I started crying.

“‘Ginny!’ she cried, putting down the platter and enfolding me in her arms. ‘What is it, love?’

“‘It’s Blaise,’ I sobbed, falling into her arms. ‘He’s just like Harry.’”

Ginny began sobbing for real, her story finished, and Hermione held her tightly, shocked by the
tale. Blaise had made his move, he did care, but he’d misread and mishandled the situation on such
an epic scale …

“I’m so sorry,” Hermione murmured. She wanted to smack Blaise. And Harry. Merlin, would
anyone take this woman seriously? ‘I’m so, so sorry. You did the right thing, getting out of there
…”

Hermione soothed Ginny as best she could; then the two women flew back to Hogwarts in near
silence. Now it was Hermione’s turn to get a dinner plate from the kitchens and bring it back to the
dorm for her friend. Ginny’s story certainly explained how the redhead had turned up at the
Burrow, looking quite brittle, in a sundress and stilettos.

Ginny was now blaming herself, feeling no man could ever open up to her, that something was
wrong with her. She thanked Hermione for dinner in a colorless tone, ate the food without looking
at it, then closed her bed hangings and announced she was going to sleep at 8:30. Hermione didn’t
hear any sounds of crying but was not reassured.
It was only then that Hermione noticed a small piece of parchment, folded into the shape of a mouse with a long tail, bouncing around her bed and taunting Crookshanks. Her cat’s fur was twice as bushy as usual and he was nearly beside himself, hissing in frustration, leaping from one side of the bed to the other, fruitlessly pursuing the little paper mouse. Hermione rolled her eyes and held out her hand, and the note immediately leaped onto her palm and flattened itself.

The note was from Draco, of course, asking her to meet him at the Room of Requirement. Hermione cast a concerned look at Ginny before deciding to go. She couldn’t stay long, though. She tried to fix her hair, but even the Gloriana Set struggled to contain her curls after all that flying. Hermione checked on Ginny one last time, but her roommate was just a lump in the quilts.

Hermione exchanged her Weasley jumper for her Official Torrid Affair cardigan and applied lipstick, then tucked her wand in her pocket and left the room. Blood potions, Knockturn Alley, Theo, the Hunting Shack, Harry’s breakfast, Ron’s lunacy, the Squeaky Mice, the duel with Draco, and now poor Ginny. … Merlin, what a weekend. No wonder she didn’t get any studying done.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Draco and Hermione discuss weasel classifications. The Squeaky Mice share the Froom Move.
Hi all, a bit of a delay before this posting, but we should be back on a regular schedule now. We have some Draco and Hermione time, and the Squeaky Mice return. This chapter also sets some groundwork for the upcoming Inter-House Quidditch Match, which should be ... something.

Thank you all again for your lovely comments and insights!

Thebe

Hermione was near tears herself as she walked down to the fourth-floor corridor and stopped at the bit of wall. *I need Draco.*

The wizard stood in the center of the Room, watching the walls’ dancing runes. He turned and saw her face, and opened his arms. She rushed to him and put her head on his shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” Draco said into her hair. “I shouldn’t have pulled my wand earlier.”

“I’m sorry I tried to Petrify you. *Again.*”

“You’re so predictable. Bluebell would be quite disappointed.”

*He’s right.* Hermione didn’t know how long they stood there, wrapped around each other. It was like Draco had cast his own containment spell, and she didn’t want to be freed.

“I can’t stay long,” she said. “Ginny’s devastated.”

She felt Draco nod. “Blaise returned after dinner. He won’t speak to anyone.”

Hermione looked up at him. “This thing with Blaise was supposed to be a fling—Ginny was so angry at Harry when she returned to Hogwarts …”

“Yes, just a torrid affair,” Draco said with a slight smile. “That was all Blaise wanted too, at first. But you Gryffindors, we just can’t stay away …” She felt soft lips on her ear.

“Are you saying he truly cares for her?” she asked.

Instead of answering, Draco led her over to one of the Room’s big cushions and settled her with him on his lap, his back against a wall. His hand ran softly over her knee. Hermione lay against his chest, listening to his heart. A line of runes traced a winding trail on the wall before her, a runic riddle: *What is the bark of rivers and roof of the wave and destruction of the doomed …*

“Blaise had plans for Ginevra, I know that,” Draco finally admitted.

“Ah, he had *plans,*” Hermione grumped. “High praise from a Slytherin.”

“The highest, actually,” he said serenely. “We rarely incorporate others into our plans.”
“Do you have plans for me?” she couldn’t resist asking.

Draco’s hand on her knee stilled, then resumed its circles. “Yes,” he said. “But I prefer to keep them to myself for now.”

Hermione nodded, understanding. Their future seemed impossibly murky, fraught with traps and blood messages. Treacherous ground to build any plans on. Her own half-formed plans seemed thin and spindly and easily crushed.

She sighed. “You warned me about Blaise. You said he wouldn’t open his heart. And you were right.”

“It’s his upbringing. His mother trained him to deny all feelings,” Draco said.

“And yours didn’t?”

“Quite the opposite.” His voice was cool. “My parents certainly encouraged me to feel: feel hatred of other creatures and Muggles; feel superiority to all other wizards; feel contempt toward those who pretended to care about others, for they were surely lying. And I was taught to express those feelings early and often, constantly proving myself a true Malfoy.”

Draco laughed shortly. “I could never prove myself worthy. For a family who so worshiped blood, you’d think blood alone would have been enough.”

Hermione didn’t know what to say, so she just pressed against him until his rigid muscles relaxed. Draco was so passionate, and his parents had twisted that passion, but at least he could express it. She tried to think of Blaise storming off in a huff, or glaring at other men, or scolding Ginny for meddling, or risking himself to win her trust. Inconceivable. But then, she would have considered Draco’s behavior over the last months inconceivable if she hadn’t witnessed it herself, so what did she know?

“Blaise told Ginny she didn’t want to know the real him,” Hermione said into his black silk shirt—no tie, for once. “He didn’t even give her a chance.” She looked up at him again. “Either he doesn’t have feelings for her, or he’s incapable of expressing them. Either way, that’s it.”

“Oh, he has feelings. You don’t invite a so-called blood traitor to your ancestral home without feelings. I think Blaise hoped the gesture would say it all. A typical pureblood witch would be over the moon.”

Hermione wondered where an official visit to the family seat fell in the sequence of pureblood courting rituals: Before the interest gift but after the first date? Did ritual torture in the drawing room count as an official visit?

She sighed. “The castle, the violins, the magical fireworks, that wasn’t what she wanted,” Hermione said. “It hurt her, Draco, the idea that she could be bribed to love him. You should have seen her at the Burrow, all glamorous and overstrung.”

“Glamorous and overstrung,” Draco repeated. “You’ve described the perfect pureblood witch. It’s a fatal mistake to treat a Gryffindor so.”

Hermione considered this, relaxing against the warm, hard body beneath her. Another Slytherin had made the same mistake not long ago, she thought. Theo had also presented a glittering shell of a man, hiding his danger and his fear while planning his and Hermione’s future advancement in the Ministry.
“Did Ginevra really free you from the Weasel’s spell?” Draco asked, apparently deciding a change of subject was needed.

She nodded. “It was a good thing Ginny showed up or the three of us would still be there, arguing.”

Draco frowned. “How did you escape?”

“Ginny sent Molly a Patronus.” Hermione grinned. “You should have seen Ron’s face.”

But Draco didn’t grin back; instead, he withdrew his arm and looked down his nose at her.

“What is it?” she asked.

“You sent me a Patronus yesterday,” he said. “It was a weasel.”

“An otter,” Hermione corrected. “Which is technically a weasel, I suppose. Part of the weasel family.”

“Don’t you think it’s significant, that your Patronus is a weasel?” Draco asked.

“It’s a big family, Draco. It includes badgers, minks ...” she smiled mischievously, “and ferrets.”

Draco glared slightly, but his body relaxed, his arm sliding around her once more.

“Can—can you cast a Patronus?” Hermione asked a bit timidly. It seemed unlikely, but she couldn’t help thinking of Snape’s glowing doe.

Draco shook his head. “Snape tried to teach me in Sixth Year. I couldn’t produce anything, not even a cloud.” His face was suddenly bleak, his mouth a tight line.

Hermione wasn’t surprised, considering all that had happened that horrible year. “I could teach you.”

“Thank you, but no.” Draco’s voice was cool again. “Let’s discuss something else.”

Hermione huffed. Draco was a great one for introducing topics, then dropping them when it suited him.

She watched the rune riddle on the wall twist and repeat itself: *bark of rivers and roof of the wave and destruction of the doomed ...* Cheerful, that. If the river was a tree and the wave a house and what would a bunch of Nordic scribes fear most ...

It came to her suddenly: *Ice. Break the ice.* Hermione twisted around in Draco’s lap and brushed his lips with hers. “This has not exactly been your weekend,” she said.

It really hadn’t. Saturday had been bad enough for Draco, with the potion and the vampire, the visit to Harry’s and the long wait in her room, her harrowing story. Then Hermione kicks him out Sunday morning and misses his five-minute match, returns with another upsetting story, nearly gets killed by a stone block and runs off *again*. Honestly, it was a wonder the man wanted to meet her at all.

“No,” was all Draco said. His hands on her hips felt stiff and unmoving.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered in his ear. “Forgive me.” Her lips touched the sensitive skin beneath his earlobe.
“I don’t know.” Draco’s voice was a bit breathy. “I’m still quite miffed.”

“Oh dear,” Hermione said. She straightened and began unbuttoning her cardigan, revealing only a black strapless bra. The cardigan fell onto the carpet. “Whatever can I do?”

Now Draco’s hands were moving, leaving her hips to travel up to her breasts.

“There’s plenty you can do,” he said darkly. “Appease me, Hermione.”

The hint of steel, of danger, in his tone, sent Hermione’s pulse racing, and her fingers tightened on the black silk of his shirt.

“Yes, Draco,” she whispered, and watched his pale eyes dilate until they were almost entirely black.

She unbuttoned his shirt, feverishly and a bit clumsily, and ran her hands down smooth skin and the faint ridges of old scars. She shifted down on his lap, between his legs, and her lips followed the path of her hands. Draco gasped softly as she began unbuckling his belt.

“Hermione,” he groaned as her intention became clear, “Hermione …”

She looked up to see Draco staring down at her, black eyes wide. Then she turned her attention downward and slowly peeled apart his trousers and boxers to reveal his cock, now flushed a deep pink in her hands.

Draco swallowed noisily. “Take it, Hermione,” he said. It was an order, but his voice wavered at her name, a subtle plea.

He gasped again as her mouth closed over him. She wasn’t very experienced, and the angle was awkward, but she managed. He had been so good to her, despite the danger and the worry, and now it was just Draco, the warmth, the feel, the taste of him …

His hands moved over her bare shoulders and into her curls, one large palm covering the Gloriana clip, and now he was touching her hair and his diamonds as she knelt before him—so possessive, the moment touched by Malfoy darkness. Hermione found it unbelievably arousing.

It wasn’t long before Draco groaned, sounding agonized. “I’m going to … going to …”

Hermione tried to handle it, but just ended up with an epic mess again, and she couldn’t help giggling a bit as she waved her wand to clean everything up. Draco was no help; he had rolled onto the carpet, looking like he’d never move again. He lay there flushed and panting, his hair in disarray, one shoe off, his clothing wrinkled and half-undone. A far cry from the polished wizard who’d first greeted her in this room.

“Come here,” Draco whispered hoarsely, and Hermione joined him on the carpet. He shifted over her slightly, capturing her lips in a searing kiss until she was gasping for air. Then he raised his head. “You are forgiven,” he said softly. “So very, very forgiven.”

Hermione reached up to brush back his white-blond fringe, but it only fell into his eyes again. She looked up at him pleadingly.

Draco frowned. “You have to leave again, don’t you?”

Hermione’s hand dropped. “Ginny needs me.”
He said nothing, but the look in his eyes was clear: *I need you.*

She looked up at him, feeling torn. Then Draco sighed and awkwardly sat up, still flushed. Hermione sat up as well, watching as he rearranged his clothing.

“I’m a spoiled git, Hermione,” he said. He picked her cardigan off the carpet and helped her into it, deftly fastening the buttons. “But even I know you’re right. Ginevra’s been a friend to both of us.”

She kissed him for that, and they both stood, Hermione slipping on her shoes and Draco buckling his belt. He looked down at her soberly.


“Maybe it’s not his fault,” Hermione said. “Maybe Gin just isn’t the one.”

“Maybe,” he repeated doubtfully. “But Ginevra is … compelling. If she can’t breach Blaise’s defenses, I can’t imagine the witch who can.”

***

Monday morning came too early, as it always did, and Hermione groaned as she blinked in the early sunshine. She dug an elbow into the warm body beside her: “Gettup,” she said, sitting up. “We’re late.”

No response, so Hermione pulled a pillow off her bedmate, revealing a messy head of auburn waves. Ginny gave a muffled groan of her own, and grabbed the pillow back, slapping it over her head. Hermione had returned the night before to find Ginny hadn’t moved at all, but Hermione had heard her roommate crying a few hours later and moved to Ginny’s bed to comfort her.

“Gin, it’s almost eight,” Hermione said, swinging her legs onto the floor. Ginny didn’t move. Hermione rushed through her shower, dressing quickly and shoving her hair into a ponytail, sticking a single Gloriana pin into her curls. Then she dragged Ginny onto the floor and forced her into the bathroom and got them both to breakfast with time to spare.

Ginny took Hermione’s usual seat at breakfast, sitting with her back to the Slytherins, The snakes looked the same as ever, except that Leila was still green. Certainly Blaise looked completely unperturbed. Beside him was Draco, who smirked wickedly at her and touched his tongue to his porridge spoon suggestively. Hermione felt her face heat and quickly looked away.

Ginny ate little, just sipped her tea with downcast eyes. Hermione hurried through her breakfast and offered to walk Ginny to Charms. They’d almost escaped the Great Hall when a row of Squeaky Mice blocked the doors.

“Please turn us back, Miss Granger!” they all cried at once.

“We’re tired of being yellow,” Percival said.
“Madam Pomfrey thinks we have juice dice,” piped up Imogene.

“Jaundice,” Hermione corrected.

“That’s what I said. She won’t let us have sugar.”

“Or beef,” Percival said. “Or anything fried. Our table won’t give us sausages!”

Hermione tried not to look smug, but it was hard. She’d dashed off a note to Pomfrey the night before, mentioning that a few Hufflepuff First Years looked peaky. Hermione was never one to make light of liver disease, but at the same time, she felt that the Squeaky Mice had eluded proper punishment for a dangerous transgression. The yellow color would fade by the end of the day anyway, and a little less sugar could only benefit their dental health.

Ginny’s wide grin, however, softened Hermione’s heart a little toward the children. “You all have a free period after breakfast today, right?” Hermione asked them. The Squeaky Mice all nodded.

“We’re going to the pitch to practice our Froom Move!” Bertie shouted.

“Froom Move?” Ginny asked, intrigued.

Immediately all the Squeaky Mice weaved to the left, then right, then raised their arms and clutched their chests. Ginny’s laughter rang through the hall, just as Blaise and Draco were crossing toward the doors to leave. Blaise’s mouth opened slightly, which in any other man would be equivalent to bugging out his eyes and dropping his jaw. Even Draco blinked and halted for an instant. Hermione’s heart softened further toward the First Years.

“Very well,” she told them. “If you appear at lunch with a one-foot essay on the dangers of entering experimental Potions labs without permission, I will turn you all to your original skin tones. A full foot, mind you,” she went on, ignoring Draco’s amused look. “If I find your essays inadequate, I’ll turn you all green … or red,” she said with a nod to Leila. Madam Pomfrey had sent the little Slytherin an anti-nausea potion and prescribed thin gruel for meals.

“Thank you, Miss Granger!”

“I wanna try the Froom Move!”

“Do you want biscuits with lunch or not?”

The First Years ran off, still chattering, and Ginny linked her arms with Hermione’s, wiping tears of laughter from her eyes.

“I love those kids,” she said, leading Hermione out of the Great Hall without a glance at Blaise. “The Froom Move!”

Ginny calmed down a bit as they sat together in a big windowsill opposite Flitwick’s classroom, her long arms around her knees.

“How are you doing?” Hermione asked. She bent one knee and let her right leg dangle over the sill. Lovely, the day had just started, and already she had a ladder in her tights from here to Glasgow …

“I’m alright, really,” Ginny said, looking out the window over a courtyard. “I mean, it’s Blaise’s life, it’s his past. He doesn’t really owe me anything.”
Hermione looked at Ginny’s profile, lit by the weak morning sun. “Do you think he’ll ever change?”

Ginny turned to look at her, and her dark eyes were hard. “You mean the way Draco did? Unlikely. He’ll probably find a girl who truly doesn’t want to hear about it.”

“A girl like Astoria,” Hermione said. “I don’t mean Astoria herself, but—”

“I know what you mean,” Ginny said. “Yes, someone just like her. Neville told me what you said to Astoria in Herbology. Yes, Blaise will live that life.”

Hermione was silent, determined not to ask the obvious question. She couldn’t fool Ginny, however; those almond-shaped eyes were still on her.

“Go ahead,” Ginny said. “Ask.”

Hermione swallowed. “What about Harry?”

“What about him?”

“Do you think he will change?” Hermione asked doggedly.

Ginny shrugged and looked out the window again. “Maybe. Someday.”

“Harry’s quite angry,” Hermione said. “About Blaise. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“Not angry enough to do anything about it,” Ginny said, her eyes once more meeting Hermione’s. “And I’ve chased him enough, waited for him enough. Making Harry jealous was no answer—that was a kid’s move, and utterly stupid if my goal was to make him see me as an adult.”

“So what will you do?” Hermione asked.

“Grow up. I like being Ginevra.” Ginny slid off the window sill and twirled, looking a bit like Luna with a dreamy look in her eyes. “Win the Quidditch Cup. Sit for my NEWTs—I’ve got eleven people in SMUT. Make sure Neville’s psycho plant doesn’t kill him. Practice for that silly inter-House Quidditch match.” She smiled her first true smile of the day.

“I can’t believe we’re celebrating Dumbledore’s birthday with a Quidditch match,” Hermione grumbled. Her ideas were so much better. “From what I hear, Ernie just threw together the teams.”

“It has been rather hastily done,” Ginny admitted. “I’m on Lavinia Clarke’s team, which is fine, but Astoria is the Keeper and I don’t fancy playing with her.”

“No,” Hermione said. “I don’t like it either.” She swung her legs off the windowsill and faced Ginny, who was now acting out little Quidditch moves in the corridor, hopping about like a Squeaky Mouse. “Tell me, Gin, what is Astoria’s practice routine before a match?”

Ginny stopped on one foot to stare at her. “Astoria doesn’t have one.”

“She doesn’t practice?”

“Not on match days. Astoria always develops a new special move before each match.” Ginny rolled her eyes. “Doesn’t want to give it away.”

“Interesting.” Hermione hopped down from the window. “I have to get to Ancient Runes.”
Ginny suddenly hugged her fiercely. “Thank you,” she whispered, releasing her.

Hermione smiled and stroked her hair. “I didn’t do anything. It’s all you, Ginevra. You can do anything you want to do.”

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Harry gets sneaky. McGonagall holds a grudge. Luna goes hunting again.
Happy Wednesday, and we’re all about the plot today. Very busy chapter. Nearly every encounter advances the story’s plot, even when it doesn’t seem like it. Prepare for Squeaky Mice, suggestive plant imagery, the return of an old adversary, mention of a very fun friend … and Harry (!). Lots of Harry. And Love Diggles. Draco seems quite chipper in this chapter, despite the circumstances, back to his old mischievous ways.

So pour yourself some pumpkin juice and let’s get started!

Hermione found Monday classes very trying. News of the fallen stone block was all over the school; half the student body thought she wanted to marry Draco and the other half thought she wanted to murder him. Any day they’d see the headline in the *Prophet*: “Is She Kissing Him or Hexing Him? Answers, Page 6!”

Amused, Draco just made things worse, kissing her sweetly outside Ancient Runes and acting afraid of her in Potions. “Watch, she’s going to try to poison me,” he whispered hoarsely to Romilda. Theo looked at Draco disapprovingly but said nothing. He had quite enough to do fending off Lavender, who had taken Draco’s shameless lie to heart.

“Don’t you think Theo is shredding his fluxweed wonderfully?” Draco asked the witch sitting beside him.

“Oh yes,” Lavender said, looking at Theo with shining eyes. “Would you like me handle your gurdyroot, Theo?”

“I don’t think you even need to ask, Brown,” Draco said. Lavender giggled. Hermione and Theo glared.

Draco’s antics continued throughout the morning; he saw Hermione coming down the corridor after Arithmancy and stepped behind Leila. “Save me, I’m about to be hexed,” he intoned as Leila rolled her eyes.

“Poisons, hexes—just keep it up, Draco,” Hermione told him in the Great Hall after lunch. “You’re only giving me ideas. And stop tormenting Theo. Hasn’t he suffered enough?”

“Certainly not,” Draco said, suddenly cold. “I’ve made myself very clear to him; he is to stay the hell away from you and—”

“Draco, you can’t—”

“Mr. Malfoy!” The Squeaky Mice raced into the hall and between the tables, skidding to a stop before the couple. Then they began jostling each other to be in front. Hermione eyed them with a slight frown. Out of their “Why I Won’t Break Into Potion Labs” essays, only Leila and Bertie’s had been truly adequate, although she’d lifted the Rainbow Hex on all the Mice anyway.
“Yes?” Draco asked coolly.

“Can you oversee our detention tonight?” Imogene asked.

Draco raised an eyebrow. “Another one? What did you do this time?”

“We offended a portrait,” Bertie said. “He ah, didn’t appreciate being called a bat.”

“In our defense, he does look like a bat,” Leila said. “We didn’t know it was a former Headmaster.”

Hermione and Draco exchanged looks. “What was the portrait’s name?” Hermione asked, almost afraid to hear the answer.

“Snoop,” Bertie said.

“No, Snipe,” said Imogene.

“Sneep?”

“Snurp?”

“That’s a stupid name.”

“I wouldn’t talk, Percival.”

“Excuse me,” Draco said in glacial tones. “Am I to understand that you are speaking of former Hogwarts Headmaster Severus Snape?”

The Mice stilled immediately, looking rather red. “Yes, Mr. Malfoy,” Leila said.

“And you called him a bat?”

“Draco,” Hermione said, putting a hand on his arm. She turned to the Squeaky Mice, who were watching wide-eyed. “Where is this portrait?”

“In the Divination corridor, Miss Granger,” Percival said.

Hermione fought down a smile. McGonagall and Snape must have had words in her office, and she’d moved the portrait out.

“That simply won’t do,” Draco said sternly. “Headmaster Snape’s portrait will be treated with respect. And as for your detention with …”

“Mr. Macmillan,” Bertie said.

“You will treat him with respect as well, even if he is an i—”

“Draco!”

“… an inspiring example of student leadership,” Draco said. “Why, Miss Granger, what did you think I was going to say?” Hermione huffed, and Draco turned back to the Mice.

“Neither of us is available to oversee your detention tonight,” he continued haughtily. “I have Quidditch practice and Miss Granger has an essay due in six weeks, plus a set of major exams only 200 days away. You lot will behave yourself with the Pet—Mr. Macmillan. Understand?”

The children nodded, slightly chastened, and ran off chattering: “I don’t see what all the fuss is
about.” “Yeah, that Snorp was very unpleasant.” “You were the one who called him a bat!” “How was I supposed to know?” “Do you think his nose really looked like that?”

Draco and Hermione entered the Great Hall, with Draco grumbling, “Severus hated Divination.” Hermione was a little annoyed as well. How could they slip into the Everard the Evil alcove with a painted Snape glooming all over the corridor?

They paused by the Hourglass cabinet, now magically repaired with all the House jewels restored to their proper levels. Draco was still frowning toward the Divination corridor. Thin velvet ropes ringed the fallen stone block, which had been in shadow all morning. Hermione stepped closer, curious, for something seemed different …

As if on cue, the grey clouds outside parted, and the noontime sun shone through a high window. A sunbeam fell directly on the fallen block, highlighting the red words on its cracked surface: “DIE MUDBLOODS.”

***

The scene in McGonagall’s office was tense. Once again, Kingsley and Harry stood before the fireplace in their aurors’ robes, glaring at Draco. This time, however, both Hermione and Draco were seated in the armchairs before McGonagall’s desk.

“We have to stop meeting like this,” Draco drawled.

The tension in the room stemmed from Exhibit A, a photograph presented by Kingsley of Hermione and Draco in the Great Hall the day before. The moving picture portrayed Draco shoving Hermione and the stone block smashing the Hourglass cabinet.

“This picture was shot by a student and slated for the front page of tomorrow’s Daily Prophet,” Kingsley said. “I’ve managed to suppress it on legal and Ministry security grounds, but it will get out.”

“You can’t think, Kingsley, that Mr. Malfoy—” McGonagall began.

“Mr. Malfoy is very fortunate he was not holding his wand in that picture, or he’d be in custody already,” Kingsley said, his dark eyes boring into Draco’s.

“By that logic, Miss Granger would be locked up immediately, as she is holding a wand,” the Headmistress said.

“I highly doubt Hermione would write … those words.”

“‘Die Mudbloods.’ Fear to say a thing only increases the fear itself,” Hermione said. Harry and Draco rolled their eyes.

“I understand that Mr. Malfoy is adept at wandless magic,” Kingsley continued, “and he is shown here assaulting Hermione.”
“He was pushing me out of the way!” Hermione cried, jumping to her feet. Draco also stood, looking furious.

“Kingsley,” Harry said, “I’m no friend of Malfoy’s, but he would never—”

“Then explain this!” Kingsley boomed, slamming his hand on the picture on McGonagall’s desk. “Mr. Malfoy looks anything but calm in this picture and Hermione is raising her wand!”

“Well, she often does that,” Harry said.

“You’re saying Hermione goes around hexing people she likes?” Kingsley asked.

“Sometimes,” Harry admitted.

“And it’s a very bad habit,” Draco said, looking at Hermione reproachfully.

“Are you trying to say that this,” Kingsley held up the picture, “is some sort of …” he looked pained, “… lover’s tiff?”

Hermione and Draco both nodded energetically and Harry groaned.

“You know how provoking he is, Kingsley,” Hermione said.

“I am, rather,” Draco agreed.

Kingsley glanced at McGonagall, who seemed to be suppressing a smile, then he glared at Hermione and Draco. “What exactly was happening in this picture?” he demanded.

Harry looked at Hermione pleadingly. She glanced at Draco, who nodded.

“Very well,” she said in a lecturing tone. “Draco and I were discussing my visit with Ron Weasley. I told Ron about our relationship, and Ron called me a Death Eater whore.”

“Hermione,” Harry groaned, “must you always say every damn—”

“Fear of a thing only increases fear of—”

“Nobody fears a Death Eater whore!” Harry yelled.

“POTTER!” Kingsley boomed. McGonagall fixed Harry with a disapproving stare.

“What, she can say it, but I can’t?” Harry asked.

McGonagall rapped her wand on her desk. “May we please return to the matter at hand?”

“Draco was quite angry to hear what Ron called me,” Hermione continued serenely. “He pulled out his wand, planning to storm the Burrow and hex Ron.”

“Was Malfoy actually going to do that, or was it another case of him moving in a possibly threatening way?” Harry wanted to know.

“Oh, I was going to do exactly that,” Draco said. “That Weasel was going to be well and truly named, if you know I mean.”

“So I took Draco’s wand …” Hermione began.

“And I used a wandless freezing spell to make her drop it …”
“So I pulled out my own wand to Petrify him—”

“Miss Granger!” McGonagall cried. “How could you attempt to Petrify another student?”

“Yes, it’s quite shocking,” Draco said.

Hermione ignored this. “As I began to cast the spell, a stone block fell from the ceiling, nearly hitting me and breaking the bugbear cabinet.”

“Excuse me,” Kingsley said, “the what cabinet?”

“Wonderful,” Hermione said to Draco. “I can no longer say ‘bugbear’ in front of other people. And it’s entirely your fault.”

“You shouldn’t have juggled them,” he said.

“Does anybody know what the devil they’re talking about?” Kingsley demanded.

“I almost never do,” Harry said.

“Nonsense,” McGonagall said briskly. “Miss Granger obviously means the House Hourglass cabinet.”

“So, you expect me to believe these two were having a … discussion,” Kingsley asked, “which turned into some sort of duel? Then a stone block randomly fell from the ceiling? And is later painted with a message in blood? And this is all coincidence?”

“Yes,” Harry and Draco said.

“No,” Hermione said.

The entire room stared at her. She sniffed, casting her Headmistress, two Ministry aurors and her own boyfriend a look of contempt. “Of course it isn’t a coincidence. There is a pattern to the ‘Die Mudblood’ messages, we just don’t know it yet.”

“And you claim Mr. Malfoy here has nothing to do with it,” Kingsley said.

“I don’t claim that at all,” Hermione said.

“Hermione,” Draco growled.

“I didn’t say you did it, but obviously you’re involved in some way.”

Draco’s eyes narrowed. “If you’re getting tired of me already, surely there are other ways …”

“Hermione,” Kingsley cut in, keeping his temper with difficulty. “You say there is a pattern to these messages, and Mr. Malfoy may be involved in some way. Is that correct?”

“Yes,” she said. “This all makes him look very bad.”

“You are a terrible girlfriend,” Draco said.

Kingsley rubbed a hand over his bald head and sighed. “So you’re saying, Hermione, that someone could be framing Mr. Malfoy.” She nodded. “And took advantage of your little … spat … to do so.” Hermione nodded again.
“I’m inclined to agree,” McGonagall said. “Aside from his possibly justified resentment toward Mr. Weasley, there is no evidence that Mr. Malfoy means harm to anyone.”

The rest of the room gave a murmur of agreement, except for Kingsley.

“That said, this is a very serious situation,” McGonagall said. “This is the third message to appear, and I’ve been getting owls and letters from parents of muggle-born students. I now expect more. A number of students have already left Hogwarts. We have the Inter-House Quidditch match in three days and I expect a large number of guests.”

The Headmistress looked at all of them, her face grim. “And if we do not solve this mystery soon, these threatening messages could shut down the school.”

“Like the Chamber of Secrets,” Hermione breathed.

“Head Auror Shacklebolt, I would like to request Assistant Auror Potter’s presence at Hogwarts until this situation is resolved,” McGonagall said. “It would help reassure both parents and students. We have muggle-born staff members to think of as well. I also request auror security at the Inter-House Quidditch Match.”

Kingsley looked at her for a moment. “Potter,” he barked, and drew Harry nearer the fireplace, where the two aurors began a whispered discussion.

“I see no point in Potter staying here,” Draco said irritably. “He’ll just lurk around the halls, sticking his nose in, like in Sixth Year.”

Hermione glared at him. “Every one of Harry’s suspicions about you that year was proven correct, Draco, and I, for one, feel better with him here.”

Draco flushed. “So you do think I’m behind—”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Hermione said. “Harry can help protect you as well.”

“I don’t need Pot-head’s—”

“Alright, Headmistress.” Kingsley stepped away from Harry. “Potter has convinced me he might do some good here, so I will assign him to Hogwarts—temporarily. And the Aurors Office will provide security at the Quidditch match.”

“Very good, Head Auror Shacklebolt,” McGonagall said.

“About that other issue we were discussing …”

“I do apologize, Head Auror Shacklebolt.” The Headmistress looked smug. “But given the circumstances, I simply cannot spare the time to visit St. Mungo’s.”

“Celeste Rosier cannot remain a Pygmy Puff!” Kingsley insisted. “She holds valuable information and nobody can return her to her original form!”

“Nonsense, there is no reason why Celly’s current form should impede your investigation,” McGonagall said, eyes gleaming behind her spectacles. Hermione looked at the older woman with interest: There was definitely some bad blood between the Headmistress and the Death Eater witch.

“Surely,” McGonagall continued, “you clever aurors can figure out a way to communicate.”
Kingsley scowled, then addressed Hermione. “You say that was a standard Transfiguration, but think back, perhaps the incantation …”

“I’m sorry, Kingsley,” Hermione said, sounding much like McGonagall. “I just don’t know. It was a very hasty spell, after all.”

“But if you could just try to—”

Hermione tried to look upset. “Maybe,” she said feebly, “… maybe I can face her … next week …”

“Honestly, Shacklebolt, show some sensitivity,” Draco drawled, patting Hermione’s hand. “There, there.”

Kingsley glared at both of them but said nothing. “I expect regular reports, Potter,” he snapped, stepping up to the fireplace and scooping up a handful of floo powder. A flash of purple and he disappeared in the flames.

“You are all free to go,” McGonagall said, looking at them over her glasses. “I trust I don’t have to tell any of you to be discreet once you leave this office.”

“You might want to tell Potter again,” Malfoy said, “since he occasionally feels compelled to share classified spells with dimwits.”

“Draco,” Hermione hissed, taking his hand and pulling him toward the door. Oh, the next few days were going to be horrid.

“What are you doing?” Draco asked as she dragged him down the spiral stairs toward an empty alcove on the third floor, concealed by a tapestry. “I’ll snog you if you like, but I’m still quite cross about—”

“Draco!” a sweet voice, soft but oddly penetrating, sang out from the other end of the corridor. Draco groaned softly, for it was Luna, of course, wearing a long blue cloak and carrying her heart-shaped net.

“Lovegood,” Draco said through slightly gritted teeth. “How are you?”

“Luna, remember? And I am just lovely, Draco, thank you for asking.” The Ravenclaw beamed at him. “Neville was quite helpful with my plan to create a meditation garden near the Malfoy cellars. He says magical bee balm will attract doxies and butterflies and actually absorb the blood still dripping into …”

Draco looked horrified, as well he might, and Hermione quickly stepped in. “What are you trying to catch today, Luna?” she asked, although she knew the answer.

“Love Diggles, of course,” Luna giggled. Then she frowned. “I expected them to swarm around you two, but I don’t see any at all!”

Hermione didn’t know whether to be relieved or offended. “It’s a beautiful day,” she hazarded, “maybe they’re all outside.”

Luna shook her blond curls. “Oh no,” she said. “Love Diggles like small, enclosed spaces like that alcove there.” She pointed to the nearby tapestry portraying Magical Monks weeding a garden. “Perhaps if you two went in there and were a bit creative—”

“Hermione!” Ernie strode up to them, waving a parchment. Oh, bugger.
“I’ve been looking for you since lunch!” the Head Boy cried. “We’re choosing a guest announcer for the Quidditch match …” He stopped at the sight of Draco. The Slytherin cast Ernie a hooded, contemptuous look, but remained silent.

“Is that a list?” Hermione asked, moving closer to look at it.

Ernie nodded. “I’m trying to get Puddlemere’s captain, but the prefects want George Weasley.”

Hermione almost groaned aloud. George had become a bit of a radio personality after the war, following up on his Pottermore fame. He even had his own weekly show—sponsored, of course, by Weasleys’ Wizarding Wheezes.

“Well, that won’t do at all,” Hermione said with decision. “I’ll—”

“There they are!” Luna waved her net wildly, nearly clocking Draco on the head. “Stand a little closer to Ernie, will you, Hermione? The Diggles just love you two—”

Draco stepped forward, displeased. “That will be quite enough,” he said in rolling tones. “Hermione has enough to be going on with without doing your job, Macmillan.”

He slid an arm around Hermione. “And I’d wager Luna here has many fine suggestions for your guest announcer.” Draco’s lip curled. “As I recall, she’s done the job herself.”

“Oh, yes!” Luna lowered the net and took Ernie’s arm. “Have you considered my father?” She asked, drawing him down the corridor, “He was quite the public speaker in his day, why in 1986 he hosted …”

Hermione stared after them openmouthed. She honestly couldn’t decide who would be worse: George or Xenophilius. She spotted another figure in the corridor and took Draco’s hand, drawing him behind the tapestry.

“I’m not snogging you here,” Draco said decidedly. “Not with Lovegood running around with that net. Let’s …”

“No, no,” Hermione said, pulling away. “Harry!” she hissed. “In here!” She stuck out her arm from behind the tapestry and flapped it up and down.

“Oh, there you are, Hermione,” Harry said, slipping into the alcove. “I was looking for—Malfoy.”

“Sorry, Potter,” Draco said. “I don’t swing that way.”

Harry scowled.

“Harry,” Hermione said, casting a spell against eavesdroppers and ignoring the byplay. “We’re running out of time. We have to get a sample of Lucius’ blood.”

“I know,” Harry said, reaching into the pocket of his auror robes. “I have it right here.” He held up a vial filled with deep red blood.

Hermione felt like hugging him, and almost did, except the alcove was very small, and hugging him would push him into Draco, which neither wizard would particularly appreciate. So she contented herself with beaming at Harry and hugging the sleeve of his auror robe. Harry smiled down at her, a smile that widened when Draco cleared his throat significantly.

“How do we know it’s my father’s blood?” Draco asked.
Harry pulled out his wand and tapped the vial, revealing “Lucius Abraxus Malfoy” in glowing gold letters. “We got lucky,” he said. ‘Lucius’ blood was among those drawn to test for Azkaban’s magical virus.”

“I read about this!” Hermione said eagerly. “It was in St. Mungo’s monthly newsletter. The hospital has a program to control the virus that involves identifying carriers.”

Harry nodded. “Lucius is a high-profile prisoner, and there’d be no end of trouble if he fell ill. He’s clear of any viruses, so the vial was put into storage.”

“How did you get the vial?” Hermione asked

“Penelope Clearwater,” Harry put his wand and the vial back in his pocket. “She’s working there under a St. Mungo’s apprenticeship program. I gave her coworker a ten-ton-toffee and nicked the vial while she was sorting him out.”

“But what if she discovers—”

Harry grinned. “She won’t. I filled another vial with my own blood.”

“Those are magical labeling vials!” Hermione said. “How did you fool it into thinking it held Lucius’ blood?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I dripped my blood into it while ranting about my hatred of muggles and how I missed abusing house elves. Merlin’s pants, Hermione, it’s just a stupid vial. I poured Lucius’ blood into it, fixed the name with a stasis charm, then replaced it with my blood.”

“We need to tell someone—we can’t allow St. Mungo’s to use vials vulnerable to tampering,” Hermione said.

“Hermione, I’m not wrecking my auror career over a vial that you asked for—”

“I’ll just write Penelope when this is all resolved—”

“This will never be resolved if you two don’t stop bickering,” Draco said, drawing glares from both Hermione and Harry. “I’d like to hear about the progress that Potter has made—if any—on getting my father’s visitors logs.”

“It seems like I do all the work around here,” Harry grumbled.

Hermione sniffed. “Perhaps you’d rather create an experimental blood potion from scratch.”

“It is an eternal mystery to me,” Draco said loudly, “that you two ever managed to defeat V-Voldemort. I say the two of you, because nothing can convince me that the Weasel was anything but comic relief.”

Harry and Hermione began sputtering, but the Slytherin just rolled on. “But I’m going to assume that Potter does have the ability to conceive and execute a viable plan and will once again ask if he has obtained my father’s visitors’ logs.”

Hermione felt a little abashed, and she knew Harry did, too. Merlin, Draco sounded just like Theo there; did all Slytherin men give stern little lectures like that? And why was it so sexy?

“I don’t have them,” Harry admitted. “The prison put a new security system in place after a bunch of visitors logs was leaked to the Prophet. The Ministry is still getting flocks of owls complaining
about recorded visits to Azkaban from manicurists and tailors and …” he coughed, “women offering, er, services.”

Draco shot Hermione a lewd look, obviously expecting her to be outraged, but she just smiled. “Parliaments,” she said brightly.

“What?” Harry and Draco asked, looking identically baffled.

“A group of owls is called a parliament. It’s like a murder of crows.”

“Is this what you did while you lot were hunting Horcruxes, Hermione?” Draco wanted to know. “You just walked around saying, ‘It’s a tiara, Harry, not a diadem, you see how it tapers around the head?’”

Draco ignored her glare and continued. “I stand by my earlier statement that the fact you two managed to fulfill such a needlessly complicated quest to defeat the Dark—Voldemort—is nothing less than a miracle.”

Hermione turned back to her friend. “Harry,” she said, all cool politeness, “perhaps you’d like to continue your explanation of Azkaban’s new security measures surrounding visitor’s logs.”

“Yes, of course,” he answered, just as politely. “Visitors’ logs are now considered classified information to prevent leaks, and even aurors require a warrant to gain access.”

“Thank you,” Hermione said. “Draco and I have a free period right now, but the Third Years are in the Potions dungeons. We can meet at the Potions Lab at four o’clock.”

“Rogue viruses, information leaks,” Draco said cheerfully, just to stir things up again. “You aurors are to be commended. It’s a wonder half of Azkaban’s prisoners haven’t escaped.”

“Aurors aren’t in charge of Azkaban anymore,” Harry told him through clenched teeth. “The prison is now run by a special department overseen by St. Mungo’s.”

Hermione nodded. With the departure of Dementors from Azkaban, the Ministry had developed the MSA, or “Medical Security Agency.” MSA guards were part Healers, part aurors and the goal was to treat and rehabilitate as well as incarcerate the inmates.

“Oh, I feel safer already,” Draco was drawling. The two men glared at each other, each with a back against the wall in the narrow alcove, arms crossed, only two feet apart.

Hermione had had enough. They were both insufferable. She slipped out of the alcove and cast a complicated skein of strong wards on the tapestry. She had no doubt Draco and Harry would break through, but it would take time. And cooperation.

“Well, you look quite smug, Hermione,” said a smooth voice as she was scaling the third-floor stairs toward Gryffindor Tower. “What have you done this time?”

The voice was playful, but when she turned her head she could see that Blaise Zabini’s face was quite the opposite. She had never seen his eyes so cold.

“I just trapped Harry and Draco together in an alcove,” she said. “You know, the good one for snogging behind the tapestry of the Magical Monks.”

“You never cease to fascinate me,” he said.
Hermione merely smiled and turned to leave, but Blaise’s voice stopped her.

“Hermione,” he said tightly. “Is Potter staying here for Ginevra?”

She turned back. Blaise always knew the latest gossip—he was worse than Theo. “No,” she said carefully. “He’s here to help McGonagall reassure parents after the third blood message.”

Blaise blinked his long, dark lashes. “That’s the story, anyway.”

“It happens to be the truth.”

“Perhaps.” Another slow blink. “Tell Ginevra she can’t hide from me forever.”

Hermione touched her wand inside her robe pocket. “She’s not hiding, I’m not telling her anything, and that sounded like a threat.”

“Relax, little lioness,” he said with a condescending arch of his eyebrow. “I’m not threatening anyone. I just want to talk to her.” He leaned toward her and his voice took on a husky timbre. “Tell her, Hermione. Tell her not to be frightened. Tell her …” his voice became breathy, “I know she misses me.”

Hermione’s pulse sped up a little under Blaise’s lethal charm, but it was too smooth, too practiced. Too cold. His whispers weren’t like Draco’s, with that dangerous heat, or even Theo’s, with that smiling quality. So she leaned forward, letting her own voice fall to a whisper.

“Oh, Blaise,” she breathed, “I’ll tell her … to stay the hell away from you.”

He leaned back, eyebrows drawing down in what would be a fiery glare on anyone else’s face.

“I doubt you just want to talk,” Hermione went on coldly. “Try a letter.”

“And have her Incendio it, as you did to Draco’s?” He looked down at her implacably. “Should I crawl to Gryffindor Tower to beg forgiveness as he did? Sob about my sorry past? Unlike him, I refuse to make a fool of myself.”

Hermione eyed him, wondering for the first time if he truly supported her and Draco’s relationship, or if his pretty speech at Slughorn’s party had all been an act. Perhaps he only tolerated Hermione while he was dating Ginny. Perhaps she’d been right to doubt his and Pansy’s motives. Perhaps he wasn’t truly Draco’s friend. She shrugged mentally: Blaise probably liked Hermione well enough, in his own way, just as he cared for Ginny in his own way. She just didn’t like his way.

“Go whisper to some other girl,” Hermione said, nettled by his assessment of Draco. “I’m sure there’s some cold beauty out there who wants to live a glamorous life with no messy feelings. Would you consider Astoria? If you can pry her off the Malfoy diamonds, you’d be doing everyone a favor.”

Well, that did it. Blaise’s eyes actually narrowed and his lips thinned. Any other man would be raging in fury. Hermione gave him her snootiest look, then turned and walked up the stairs, feeling smug again. *Hermione 2, Slytherins 0.*

Chapter End Notes
NEXT UP: Harry is disturbed. Draco is unimpressed.
With this chapter, "The Gloriana Set" hits another milestone: 200,000 words. This is crazy. In celebration, we actually advance the plot in a significant way and solve a major mystery. It had to happen sometime.

This chapter also discusses preparations for the Inter-House Quidditch Match. This event is a bit confusing because the teams are a mix of all houses, so I've prepared a little cheat sheet so everyone can play along at home. Ernie and his prefects are still arguing over team names (OMG, the names, just wait), so we'll call them the Hooch Team and Lavinia Team for now.

**LAVINIA TEAM**
- **Captain:** Lavinia Clarke
- **Keeper:** Astoria Greengrass (Slytherin)
- **Seeker:** Ginevra Weasley (Gryffindor)
- **Beaters:** two Hufflepuffs
- **Chasers:** A Slytherin and two Ravenclaws

**HOOCH TEAM**
- **Captain:** Madam Hooch
- **Keeper:** Demelza Robins (Gryffindor)
- **Seeker:** Draco Malfoy (Slytherin)
- **Beaters:** Lundy twins (Gryffindor)
- **Chasers:** a Slytherin, Ravenclaw and a Hufflepuff

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“How could you do that to me?” Draco demanded, slamming into the Potions Lab that afternoon. Hermione jumped, startled, and bottles rattled on the shelves.

“How could you trap me with Potter in that alcove?” he cried. “And whatever did you say to Blaise? He mentioned you and his voice was dripping with poison.”

“Obviously you and Harry needed time to work out your feelings,” Hermione said airily, knowing she sounded like Bluebell. She couldn’t help smiling at the idea of the two men squabbling in that tiny alcove, taking a half-hour to break a ward that they should have ripped down in minutes. She knew that because the ward was set to notify her when it was broken.

“You’ll pay for that little stunt,” Draco growled, stepping closer, his hands on the shelf behind her.

“Promise?” she whispered. His eyes darkened and his lips brushed hers.

“No, no, stop that right now!” ordered a sharp voice. Hermione looked around Draco’s shoulder at Harry, who stood in the doorway, incensed.

Draco, of course, took this as his cue to give her a hard, thorough kiss before stepping away.
“Hermione, wipe that smile off your face!” Harry snapped. “I’m here to protect you all, remember? What if something had happened while we were in that alcove? It’s bad enough that Ginny saw—”

“Potter!”

Hermione blinked. “Ginny found you two in the alcove?” This was getting better and better.

“And that daft fairy, too,” Harry went on, ignoring Draco’s glares. “I can’t believe she’s teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

“Bluebell is actually quite insightful,” Hermione said, just to wind him up. Harry and Draco gave her identical looks of disbelief. Honestly, they were more alike than they knew.

“Dragged me to her classroom, she did,” Harry grumbled. “Made me sit on a giant flower and take tea with her.”

“Can’t see why you would object, Potter,” Draco said, “seeing how you adore having tea with the half-giant. Bluebell is only a step up.”

The two friends glared at him. “Hagrid is brilliant,” Hermione said to Draco. “Obviously, I need to bring you to tea soon.” She turned to Harry. “I think Draco has a soft spot for Bluebell—she always calls him ‘Lovely Boy.’”

Draco only smirked. “It’s better than ‘Sweet Saviour.’”

Harry’s jaw tightened. “Aren’t we here for a reason?” he asked. “Or do you two just come here to play around?”

The other two sobered instantly as Harry pulled the vial out of his auror robes. Hermione picked up a pair of tongs as Draco lifted the lid off the blood potion. Draco’s face was suddenly paler, and Hermione understood his reluctance. If the potion turned deep purple, it meant his father had somehow reached into the very walls of Hogwarts to continue his deadly vendetta against muggle-borns, even as Draco himself entered a public relationship with one. If the potion was clear or pale purple, that would be worse—Draco himself would remain a top suspect, Veritaserum or no. Draco … or perhaps Narcissa. Hermione grimaced, not looking forward to that conversation.

Using the tongs, Hermione dipped the vial into the potion and held it up. Draco replaced the cauldron lid. “Pour a little of the blood into the vial,” she said to Harry. “A few drops will be enough.”

Harry’s mouth was set in a line, but his hand didn’t tremble as he tipped a few drops into the open vial. The potion inside instantly turned deep purple.

Draco’s face was expressionless, but his hand gripped the edge of the table. Hermione quickly corked the potion and put it in her pocket. “Give me Lucius’ blood, Harry,” she said.

“What? No, I—”

“You must, Harry,” she said impatiently. “You said that aurors need a warrant to get access to visitors’ logs? Well, this potion might be enough to get that warrant. We have to tell Kingsley and I have to be holding Lucius’ blood.”

“I won’t have you covering for me,” Harry said. “If you lie and tell them you stole it—”

“Oh, don’t be so bloody noble and use your head for once, Potter,” Draco snapped. “She has no
intention of saying anything. She’ll just give Shacklebolt a sly smile, and McGonagall will proclaim, ‘Brightest Witch of Her Age!’”

Hermione had to smile at Draco’s McGonagall imitation, which she privately felt was much better than his Hermione imitation. She never sounded like that. Harry looked at her and she nodded.

“We have to tell the Headmistress anyway,” she said. “I promised I’d tell her if the potion yielded any information.”

“Allright,” Harry said. “I’ll send Kingsley a Patronus.” He opened the door to leave the Potions Lab—his stag would never fit in such a small space—then turned and looked at Draco.

“Look, Malfoy, I’m sorry,” Harry said. “About Lucius, I mean. If he’s convicted …”

Hermione’s blood ran cold. If Lucius was convicted of attacking muggle-born students, he’d be executed. His stay of execution, reduced to lifelong imprisonment in Azkaban, was dependent on good behavior. She looked at Draco, whose mouth was twisted in scorn.

“It’s alright, Potter,” he said. “My father simply wouldn’t be comfortable if he wasn’t trying to destroy my life and everyone else’s.”

Hermione’s hand reached out for his, but Draco didn’t respond. Lucius’ actions, once public, would make it almost impossible for Draco to clear the family name. It was bad enough that his father was a convicted Death Eater who only turned at the last minute to save his skin and that of his family’s. If Lucius was convicted of continuing his Death Eater work in Azkaban and executed for it … Hot-red rage flooded her body—it wasn’t fair, Draco was trying to change and that horrible, evil man …

“Hermione!” She could hear Draco pleading with her. “Hermione, stop!”

Her sight cleared. She was on her knees, and so was Draco. His nose was inches from hers.

“Hermione!” he repeated. She looked around and saw bottles shattered, spilling liquids on the shelves and floor. Harry was yelling her name, too, but she could hardly hear it.

“It’s not fair, Draco,” she told him.

“I know,” he said calmly. “But we’re going to stop him anyway, and we can’t if you smash up the Potions Lab and kill us all.”

“Okay,” she said, in what she thought was a very calm, reasonable voice. Draco pulled her to him, and she buried her face in his school jumper, breathing him in.

“Does this happen often?” she heard Harry ask softly over her head.

“I don’t know,” he answered, just as softly. “But she’s very protective of me.”

“I’ll … I’ll be outside.” She heard Harry open the door and close it behind him.

“Why do I keep doing this?” she moaned.

She felt him shrug. “The war, most likely. It affects people differently. I’ve seen it before.”

“In … in …” she couldn’t say it.

He sighed. “Yes, in the dungeons. My family’s dungeons. Witches and wizards left suffering too long would lose control, smash up their prison.” He took a deep breath. “Kill themselves by
accident.”

“Accident,” she repeated hollowly.

“If I had to guess, I’d say the war changed your magic,” Draco said. “You spent so long in constant danger …” his voice broke a bit at that, but steadied, and he continued. “Your magic thinks you’re still in peril, all the time. So, in moments of strong emotion …” he trailed off.

Hermione pulled away and looked up at him. “Strong emotion?”

“Yes,” he said, with that open look that squeezed her heart. “Strong emotion.” He leaned down and kissed her, his voice taking on a teasing tone. “Now that makes me wonder, Hermione, what kind of strong emotion would make you …”

There was a sudden banging on the Potion Lab door. “Malfoy, Hermione!” called Harry’s voice. “Kingsley is in McGonagall’s office!”

“Right, then,” Draco said, waving his wand and vanishing the mess in an instant. “Ready?”

They left the lab, and Harry moved closer. “Alright, Hermione?” he asked, frowning.

She nodded. “I’m sorry—sometimes it just gets away from me.”

Harry nodded. “When Ginny told me about Zabini …” He swallowed. “I went home and walked into the sitting room and calmly opened a butterbeer. Then my sofa burst into flames.” He paused and looked with narrowed eyes at Draco, as if daring him to say anything. “I’m always afraid something will happen in training or worse, in the field.”

There wasn’t much to say to that, so Hermione just took his hand and squeezed it hard.

“We have to go,” Draco said quietly, stepping aside, so Harry and Hermione could leave the room hand in hand. She glanced back at Draco, but he just nodded.

*Change,* she thought as they climbed the stairs out of the dungeons. *We can all change.*

***

“I’m disturbed,” Harry said.

“You certainly are,” Hermione said with a grin as she poured them cider. After so many years of pumpkin juice, they both refused to touch the stuff.

Harry scowled at his goblet. “We’re grown adults,” he grumbled as he took a sip. “I can’t see how a little wine could hurt. And you look ridiculous in that school uniform, Hermione. Like a snowy owl trying to be a Pygmy Puff.”

They were seated across from each other at the far end of the Gryffindor dinner table, a few empty seats affording them a little privacy in the Great Hall. Half the student populace was staring at
them: the famous Harry Potter with the Brains of the Golden Trio. They had become used to Hermione, and the flurry around Ron had died down quickly, but then Harry strode in, wearing those dashing auror robes, here to protect them all from another deadly threat. And there was Hermione Granger at his side again, cooking up something secret in the Potions Lab and carrying on a mysterious relationship with the most dangerous man in the school. Eyes were on Draco, too, expecting him to leap up at any moment and challenge Harry to a duel. But Draco was disappointingly calm, just sitting at the Slytherin table talking quietly to Pansy and Blaise without even a smoldering look.

Harry frowned over his cider. “Kingsley is up to something.”

Hermione shrugged. “He seemed reasonable enough at McGonagall’s office.”

Kingsley had, too. He’d accepted their findings about Lucius with total aplomb and didn’t even delve too deeply into how Hermione had procured Lucius’s blood. Perhaps he thought the Malfoys kept vats of extra blood around their manor, on hand for dark immortality spells or deathly curses, and Draco had just ladled some up. She’d giggled a bit at the thought while they sat in McGonagall’s office and Kingsley was nodding sagely as Harry explained the bit about the visitor rolls. It was a giggle, honestly. She did not cackle dementedly, no matter what Draco said afterward.

Draco’s behavior had been almost as odd as Kingsley’s. He’d apparently recategorized Harry as a benign presence around Hermione, much like Neville, and had followed them up to McGonagall’s office without one snarky remark. When Harry bobbed a bit in his explanation about why he hadn’t informed Kingsley earlier about the potion, Draco had smoothly cut in, somehow implying that Harry had learned about the potion using auror-honed investigative and deductive skills, and that Hermione had sworn him to secrecy. Afterward, Draco had confessed to some surprise at Kingsley’s willingness to believe that, adding that the real story—that Hermione had marched Harry to a cauldron of Blood Potion and practically shoved his nose into it—was infinitely more believable.

Hermione was too relieved to see Draco back in regular form—the wizarding world simply wasn’t prepared for a pleasantly helpful Draco Malfoy—to think about his words at the time, but Harry obviously had. Now Harry’s natural paranoia was focused on Kingsley, and Harry was, as he had admitted over a fine shepherd’s pie, disturbed.

“Kingsley is up to something,” Harry repeated, twirling his fork in his potatoes. His green eyes took on a crazed gleam that Hermione remembered from Sixth Year. “He seemed … almost excited.”

“He’s probably glad to have a decent lead for once,” Hermione said. “He’s running for Minister of Magic, you know. It would be embarrassing if the Aurors Office couldn’t solve this.”

“I suppose,” Harry said absently, his eyes moving along the table to where Ginny sat ignoring them. Hermione hadn’t mentioned Ginny’s breakup with Blaise, but Harry was quick to notice the tension.

Earlier in their room, Ginny had insisted that Hermione eat dinner with Harry. “The sooner you find who wrote the messages, the sooner Harry can leave,” Ginny had said. “I don’t need to see the nosy git.”

Now Harry was watching Ginny in the Great Hall. Apparently, his auror training hadn’t extended to discreet surveillance.
“Kingsley said he could get the visitor rolls,” Hermione said, trying to draw Harry’s attention. No answer. She huffed—he’d been the one to bring up Kingsley, after all—and put down her fork. “Harry, you and Ginny have to speak eventually.”

Harry didn’t answer, but he did take his eyes from Ginny to look around the Great Hall. Hermione followed his gaze and saw Draco leave the Slytherin table and stride to the doors without a look her way.

“Go ahead,” Harry said. His tone, while not entirely enthusiastic, didn’t sound as nauseated as usual. Progress, indeed. Anyway, Hermione had better things to do than watch Blaise watch Ginny ignore Harry watching her.

She followed Draco to the second floor, slipping into an alcove after him. His arms immediately went around her, and for a timeless moment, all worries about Lucius and blood messages faded away. Draco seemed to need the reassurance, in the end holding her silently with her head tucked under his chin.

“I don’t trust Shacklebolt,” he said finally.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Let me guess,” she said, “he accepted my explanation about the vial of Lucius’ blood too quickly and seemed too happy to fetch the visitor rolls. Oh, and he wasn’t even fussed about Harry keeping our Blood Potion secret from him.”

“Exactly.” Draco released her, looking down into her face. “Quite astute of you.”

“I’m quoting Harry, actually,” she said with a grin. “He said all that during dinner.”

Draco grimaced at being forced to agree with Harry. “Shacklebolt testified against my father, you know.”

“A lot of people did,” Hermione said. “Including Harry. Half the wizarding world wanted a piece of Lucius.”

“Shacklebolt …” Draco clenched his fists. “Shacklebolt was the first to testify. He told The Daily Prophet that it was a travesty of justice that all convicted Death Eaters wouldn’t get the Kiss.”

Yes, well, Kingsley did say that. Emotions had been running high in the first weeks after the battle. She supposed Draco would take a dim view of such words, since he himself was a convicted Death Eater, albeit one with a light probationary sentence. She pushed away the image of Draco’s soul sucked out through his mouth, the light dying from his eyes. It wouldn’t do to set the alcove’s velvet curtains on fire.

Draco picked up on her thoughts somehow, and his arms were around her again. “It’s alright,” he murmured in her hair.

“Your father might be executed,” she said, looking up at him. “And we will have helped convict him.”

His jaw tightened. “If my father is trying to curse muggle-borns all the way from Azkaban, then he deserves it.” Hermione opened her mouth. “No, don’t deny it,” he went on. “You know it’s the truth. You can’t save somebody who doesn’t want to be saved.”

Draco was preparing himself, she thought bleakly. He was preparing himself for his father’s death. And she had to let him do it, because honestly, she agreed with him. She thought of Narcissa, suddenly, that steely, polished mask she wore. Taking socks and books to Lucius every week.
Scheming for a pureblood bride for her son. Sitting alone in that Manor. What would she do if Lucius was executed? Hermione felt another lightning bolt of rage against Lucius, this time both on Draco and Narcissa’s behalf, and again she ruthlessly suppressed those feelings.

Draco’s voice broke into her dark thoughts. “I have to leave soon,” he said. “Quidditch practice.”

“On a Monday night?”

Draco released her and leaned against the wall. “I’m Seeker on Madam Hooch’s team. She’s scheduled practice every night this week for the Inter-House Quidditch Match.” He frowned. “Your pet Hufflepuff has truly bolloxed things up this time. There is no way a newly assembled team can come together in four days.”

“Why not?” Hermione asked. “Just go up there and … fly around.”

“Fly around?” Draco repeated incredulously. “Is that all you think we do up there? Fly around? Quidditch is a game of strategy, Hermione, as well as flying …”

Hermione quit listening at this point, allowing the passionate flow of Quidditch oration to swirl above her head. It was much more pleasant to lean against Draco’s warm chest and feel the vibrations as he spoke and breathe in his cologne. It was all nonsense anyway, to her way of thinking. He just liked to fly around.

“Not only do we have to adjust our strategies to match that of our teammates,” Draco continued, “but somehow we’ll have to scout the opposing team under Lavinia Clarke and see how …”

At least his mind is off Lucius now. That inter-House match should keep him busy. Hermione might have to attend the opposing team’s practices—she didn’t trust Astoria up in the air with Ginny.

“The Lundy twins are my team’s Beaters and they have an entirely different approach than the Slytherin Beaters and I’ll have to adjust my …”

Perhaps Harry could watch Ginny’s practices; it would take just a subtle hint …

“Hermione, are you listening to me?” Draco demanded.

“Of course,” she said, blinking up at him. “Tactics. Very important.”

Draco rolled his eyes. “You are pathetic about Quidditch.”

She was, rather. No argument there.

“What will you do while I’m practicing?” Draco asked, taking both her hands and entwining their fingers. Raving about Quidditch had improved his mood—he was much like Harry and Ron that way.

“Study, I suppose.” Actually, Hermione was thinking of brewing up another experimental potion, but she’d need an assistant, or at least an adviser. Slughorn wouldn’t dare, of course, but maybe …

“I’m sorry about this,” Draco said, kissing her hands. “The match is on Thursday afternoon; we’ll find something to do, perhaps, afterward.” His voice held a hint of suggestion.

She smiled up at him. “Yes,” she said. He’d either be the all-conquering hero or defeated Seeker requiring consolation. Either scenario worked for her. Such a silly game.
Draco glanced at his watch. “I have ten more minutes. Just enough time.”

“For what?” Hermione asked.

“I’ll show you,” he said with a sly smile. And he did.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Hermione finds another Potions partner.
Hermione had a whole script prepared to encourage Harry to attend Lavinia Clarke’s team practices in Holyhead, but it proved unnecessary. The Harpy had arranged a daily portkey to her team’s practice pitch, and there was no way Harry was missing that kind of outing. He would come along to provide security, Harry announced, and Hermione was satisfied. Draco’s new teammate Demelza Robins was also attending “to ensure a fair practice environment” but everyone knew she was just scouting Clarke’s team.

It was a good thing exams had been held the previous week, Hermione thought, because all learning came to a grinding halt in the mania surrounding the official Dumbledore Inter-House Quidditch Match. Both teams practiced every night, with most of the school watching Madam Hooch’s team on the Hogwarts pitch. Seventh and Eighth Years who had mastered Apparation were sneaking off to the Harpies’ pitch and the teachers just looked the other way. Ernie and his prefects were still searching for an announcer and arguing over what to call the teams.

George and Ron were making a fortune by owl post, delivering commemorative snitches as well as illegal portkeys to Holyhead. Ron’s tiny owl, Pig, turned up in Hermione’s room with a contrite apology letter and a request to visit her once Molly let Ron out of the house and joke shop. Hermione did not respond; if she had her way, Molly would ground him for life.

The library was deserted Monday after dinner, with practically the entire populace off watching Quidditch. Hermione took advantage of the silence to research her next experimental potion: a solution to heal cursed scars. Her “MUDBLOOD” letters still itched in warm weather and showed no signs of fading. If she could find a way to heal them, perhaps the solution could help other war veterans like Lavender and Bill Weasley, whose wounds troubled them much more. Theo’s question in DADA about cursed jewelry had given her an idea; most healing solutions tried to remove the curse from the patient’s body. Hermione wondered if a solution to counteract the curse
might be more effective. Vasile might have insights, often curses interacted with the victim’s blood, rendering the scars …

“Hermione? May I join you?”

Hermione leaned back in her chair. Theo stood by her library table, books in hand, once again the smooth, collected presence from the Gryffindor party. She was glad he was safe in the castle and not screaming his head off in some Death Eater hideout, but that didn’t mean they were study pals again.

She continued to look at him, holding the moment, and Theo’s easy smile wavered slightly. Then she sighed. It was no use; the scene in the Muggle Hunting Shack was her and Theo’s Troll in the Bathroom Moment. You don’t go through some things together without becoming friends again.

“Yes, Theo,” she said with a small smile. “You can join me.”

Theo shook his head. “It’s alright. I can find a table over …”

“Sit down, Theo,” Hermione ordered, and was amused to see him immediately obey.

“I don’t want to make you uncomfortable,” he said.

“I’m not uncomfortable,” she said, and suddenly she wasn’t. Theo looked a little nervous, and the crack in his Slytherin veneer reassured her. “It’s good to see somebody still cares about their education.”

“Quidditch,” Theo spat, a world of meaning in those two syllables. Hermione nodded in complete agreement.

The evening passed with little conversation between them; Hermione found researching cursed scars frustratingly difficult and was in no mood for Slytherin banter. Fortunately, she’d taken the time to index the Restricted Section’s potions library while researching the Blood Potion and was able to develop a viable approach to a Scar Solution. But she was stuck on the brewing methodology. Bubotuber pus was required after 16 clockwise turns, but at that point, the potion was boiling, and high heat severely hurt the pus’ efficacy. And what was she supposed to do about the Anjelica herbs? The leaves’ properties could inhibit the thickening process. Slughorn would be no help, of course. He spent every night at the Harpies’ pitch.

After two hours of grumbling under her breath, Hermione finally gave up researching for the night and spent a half-hour organizing Theo’s life. He was behind on all his reading and his study schedules were in sad disarray.

“You have no time for PORN here,” she said, tapping her finger on the parchment.

A flash of that old Theo smile. “There’s always time for porn.”

“You haven’t been attending meetings,” Hermione scolded, and Theo rolled his eyes. “Here, let me add a daily review …”

“Oh no you don’t,” Theo said, tugging away his study guide. “Talk to me after the Christmas hols.”

Hermione was shocked at the very idea (“What? Wait until January?”) but Theo would not be moved. His eyes gleamed. “If you try to sneak PORN into my schedule, Hermione, I swear I’ll spend that allotted time looking at porn.” He drawled out the last word and Hermione flushed.
Slytherins. They were impossible.

Despite the success of Monday’s study session with Theo, Hermione didn’t return to the library the next night. Instead, she headed to the Divination corridor, mentally rehearsing her very reasonable request. But Snape’s portrait was empty; Hermione glanced around the deserted corridor and pulled out her wand, breaking the weak ward around the ornate silver frame. Shocking, really. Anybody could make off with Snape’s portrait for nefarious purposes.

Hermione walked to the Potions dungeons and then to the lab, the empty portrait floating jauntily behind her. She propped the canvas on the mahogany cabinet beside the empty pigeon cage. The painting only contained a shelf of colorful bottles and a bouquet of lilies, but that was all right. She would wait.

She didn’t have to wait long. She had barely decanted the Blood Potion into a large, heavy glass bottle and cleaned the cauldron in preparation for the Scar Solution when she heard that familiar, hissing voice.

“So it was you who moved my portrait. Why am I not surprised,” the former headmaster and Potions professor said.

Hermione ignored him, just poured a rainwater base into the copper cauldron and lit a small fire beneath it.

“I suppose a painted audience is better than none when showing off your marginally adequate Potions skills, Miss Granger.”

Hermione said nothing as she crushed six snake fangs and added them to the cauldron. Snape watched her beadily as she pulled a jar of horned slugs from the shelf. She selected four fat ones, smiling slightly as she remembered her conversation with Draco at the confidential café.

“Surely you haven’t brought me here to watch you brew the Cure for Boils,” Snape sneered. “A First-Year potion with absolutely no …” He trailed off as she donned dragonhide gloves and began feeding the slugs Aconite leaves.

“You were saying, Headmaster?” she asked, looking at the painting for the first time. It truly was an amazing portrait; the artist had perfectly captured the long line between Snape’s eyes, created by a lifetime of frowning and sneering. Her gaze followed the hooked line of his nose and the purse of his lips before looking up at his dark eyes, framed by curtains of black hair. Snape was standing close to the frame, exposing only his head and shoulders, and Hermione nearly shivered—the former headmaster could be looking at her through a window.

“You’ll kill the slugs with those toxic leaves,” he said.

“Yes,” she answered sadly, rather troubled even after years of adding spider legs and Boomslang skin to potions. “It should take about thirty minutes, then they can be stewed.”

“Are you brewing the Wolfsbane Potion? … No, the slugs’ digestive system would reduce the aconite’s effect … perhaps an antidote to aconite poisoning, the slug mucus would …” The frown line between Snape’s eyes grew deeper as he watched Hermine prepare her flobberworm mucus. It was a disgusting process, involving scraping the worms with a little brush, but she’d never trust bottled mucus for a potion this delicate.

“Why would you possibly need a thickening agent when …” Snape began when the creak of the lab’s wooden door caught both their attention.
“Hermione, is … ewwwww!” Lavender screeched, recoiling at the sight of wiggling pile of flobberworms on the table, along with a bowl of green mucus, not to mention the four dying slugs, who’d now turned a deadly purple color. “What in Godric’s name are you doing?”

“Just a little potion,” Hermione said, dripping more mucus into the bowl. “Like to help?”

“Nooo,” Lavender said, her face scrunched in disgust. “That smell!”

“It’s the slugs,” Hermione said, frowning down at them. She hoped Hagrid had more clover blossoms.

“Ewwww!”

“What are you doing here, Lavender?” Hermione asked. “I’d think you’d be at Holyhead.” Lavender was an avid Quidditch fan, always eager to watch her flavor of the month … oh.

“Have you seen Theo?” Lavender asked. “We were studying in the library and he said he needed to get a book from his room. That was almost two hours ago!”

Hermione shrugged. “Check the Slytherin dungeons.” That horrid Snake Charmer painting deserved to deal with Lavender.

“That’s where I’m headed, but I saw the light in the Potions dungeon. I thought maybe he’d be here.” Lavender sighed. “Theo’s so talented at Potions.”

Hermione shrugged again and resumed brushing her flobberworms. Theo had some natural talent, true, but rarely applied himself. Lavender didn’t notice Hermione’s tepid response; her eyes were shining, likely recalling the sexy way Theo shredded his fluxweed in class. Then she turned a cold eye on Hermione.

“I hope we can be adults about this, Hermione,” she said. “You can’t blame Theo for moving on.”

“Lavender …”

Her former roommate smiled triumphantly. “Draco shared Theo’s true feelings for me.”

“Lavender, you mustn’t pat Draco on the head,” Hermione said. Lavender blinked. “You mustn’t pat. He’s baking … aaaagh!” Hermione dropped her worm, horrified, as she remembered Draco’s words at the confidential café.

“He’s baking,” Hermione repeated slowly. “BAKING.”

“Hermione, are you alright?” Lavender asked.

Hermione’s face heated, and she couldn’t help glancing at Snape, who watched silently, one eyebrow raised. Lavender was staring at Hermione and hadn’t noticed the portrait.

“I … know … Draco … is … very … persuasive,” Hermione said carefully. “But he is … is … he is …” Oh, she was going to kill that man.

“Draco said Theo couldn’t take his eyes off me at dinner.” Lavender’s voice was as dreamy as Luna’s. “He said Theo switched to our Potions table so he could be near me.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped. “Lavender, Draco was BAKING! Draco bakes all the time! And you can’t eat any of it!”
Lavender frowned. “No, we were talking before DADA. I didn’t know Draco baked.”

“He … he …” Hermione had no idea what to say.

“Draco thinks I’d be good for Theo,” Lavender went on. “And Luna came by while we were in the library and she saw swarms of Love Diggles!” She blushed. “Draco thinks Theo likes my womanly …”

*Oh, Merlin.* “No, no!” Hermione cried, waving her little worm brush. “You can’t pat Draco’s head! He’s just trying to shovel snow with you!”

Lavender’s smile widened. “You’re just jealous. You can’t handle the fact that Theo’s in love with *me* now and Draco’s my friend.”

“Lavender, Theo’s not in mucus with you!”

“Ewwww. Soooo jealous. It’s very unattractive—be careful, Draco will soon tire of your harpy ways.”

Lavender flounced off, and the lab was silent as Hermione rather aggressively brushed her flobberworms. She was *never* eating at Martine’s again.

“Don’t add that mucus, Miss Granger,” Snape said suddenly. “Any traces of skin or blood will contaminate the potion.”

Hermione nodded and wiped her brush; he was right, of course, but she said nothing, just cleaned the brush bristles thoroughly and began on another flobberworm. The lab was silent again as she stewed her now-dead slugs and added them to the potion, which immediately turned purple. She took the cauldron off the fire and covered it to avoid the dangerous fumes.

“I fail to see your intention here, Miss Granger,” Snape said finally. “Are you trying to cure a werewolf’s boils?”

“No.” Hermione stripped off her dragonhide gloves and began measuring the porcupine quills, slicing them into 2-inch lengths.

“It is certainly a healing solution,” Snape persisted. “Applied to the skin, most likely. I assume you’ll be adding ginger root as well.”

“No, Anjelica herb,” Hermione said, holding up a jar of the sweet-smelling leaves.

“I can’t imagine …” Snape began, then stopped, staring. Hermione looked down at herself and saw that raising the jar had caused her robe sleeve to fall back, clearly displaying her “MUDBLOOD” scar.

The lab was silent once more as Hermione added the quills and flobberworm mucus, following up with a series of clockwise and counter-clockwise turns. Then she turned up the fire again and added the herb.

“The potion will need to simmer overnight,” Snape pronounced. Hermione nodded and replaced the cauldron lid. The Anjelica thankfully had reduced the potion’s smell. Snape watched as she cleaned the work area and put away the tray of flobberworms.

“Miss Granger!” Snape barked as she turned to leave. She looked back at the portrait; Snape’s face was expressionless. “This is a very dangerous potion,” he said darkly. “The slightest error could
make any cursed scar even worse, causing agonizing pain.”

“Well, I have eight tries to get it right,” Hermione said.

Snape raised an eyebrow. “Eight?”

She showed him her forearm. “Eight letters.”

The frown line on the painted face deepened further. “I would not advise testing it on yourself.”

“Whom should I test it on instead?” Hermione asked. “Should I bring Lavender back?”

“I strongly advise you not to do it,” Snape growled. “If you must apply this foul concoction of yours, do it in the infirmary under medical supervision.”

“Madam Pomfrey would never allow it,” Hermione said. Snape’s frown was an outright scowl now.

“I am aware of Gryffindors’ reckless disregard of their persons for the greater good,” Snape went on. “Fortunately, you have managed to entangle yourself with perhaps the only wizard capable of preventing you from killing yourself with an untested potion.”

“You can’t stop me,” Hermione snapped, quashing her reluctant respect for Snape’s grammar. “You’re just a bloody painting.”

“I was speaking of Draco.”

Hermione gaped at the former Potions master. “You want me to tell Draco? He’ll go spare!”

“Exactly.”

Hermione pouted. “I very much regret bringing you in here.”

“I consider it your single intelligent decision of the night,” Snape said.

“He can’t stop me either,” Hermione stormed. “I’ll do what I want, when I want, where—”

“It amazes me, really, that you are still alive,” Snape observed.

Hermione huffed and turned to go, throwing open the lab door.

“Miss Granger,” Snape called, and something in his voice made her turn around. The headmaster’s painted hands were clasped before him. “I knew a brilliant student once … who also enjoyed experimental potions.”

Hermione stepped closer to the painting, curiosity winning out.

“She tried to create a new protective potion,” Snape went on, his voice tense. “But she added too many porcupine quills, and when she drank it,” the painted figure swallowed, “the quills attacked her throat. It was agony.” His dark eyes were filled with pain.

Hermione could hardly breathe. “Did … did she die?”

Snape shook his head. “I was there—I shoved a bezoar down her throat.” He looked at his hands. “I had it in my pocket, just in case.” His eyes moved to the painted bouquet of lilies on the table behind him.

Snape nodded, and Hermione turned to leave again. “Miss Granger.”

“What?” she huffed, turning back again.

“I’ll mind the potion,” he said. “Overheating would be fatal.”

Hermione eyed him narrowly, then nodded. “There’s a painting of an apothecary shop across from my bedroom door. I should hear you if you call.”

Snape nodded back, still scowling, and Hermione stepped closer to the painting’s frame. “Thank you, Headmaster.” She held his painted gaze. “Thank you for everything.”

His lip curled. “If you could keep your imbecilic friends out of this laboratory, that would be thanks enough.”

***

Snape was right—the Cursed Scar potion boiled over twice that night. The former Headmaster charged out of the quaint shop in the painting opposite Hermione’s door at 1 a.m., his shouts waking half the girls’ dormitory and terrifying anyone who recognized the voice. Hermione hurried down to the lab in her penguin pajamas and fuzzy slippers to turn down the flames, enduring Snape’s barbed comments about foolish students who didn’t understand aconite’s volatility under heat. He even got in a dig about her hair. The solution boiled over again two hours later. Hermione ended up sleeping on one of the Potions tables, then rose early to check the solution.

“It’s thickened,” Snape said with a sneer. Hermione knew she must look a fright, but she was too relieved to see the potion’s porridge-like consistency to snap back.

“I’ll let it cool until tonight, then add the Shrake spines,” Hermione said as she turned off the fire.

“Don’t stir it too quickly,” Snape warned. Hermione nodded; she knew overly vigorous stirring could overexcite the spines.

“And ward the door,” the painting added. “Those Hufflepuff miscreants are still roaming the castle.”

Hermione yawned through all her Wednesday classes, drawing suspicious looks from Draco, who didn’t believe she’d been up late studying. His suspicion deepened when he caught her outside the castle after lunch with three Squeaky Mice, who carried baskets of food scraps from the kitchens.

“Just spread it all on the ground,” Hermione was ordering them, pointing with her wand. She held an empty jar that once contained Virgin Earth. “Don’t enter the glowing circle.”

“What is this, Hermione?” Draco asked as he stepped up to her, broom in hand.
“Just a little project,” she said brightly. “That will do,” she told the Mice and sent them away. Leila looked inclined to linger but followed her friends after a stern look from Draco.

“What kind of project?” Draco asked. “Is it the same project that kept you up all last night? Pansy said she saw you in the dungeons, looking … ah … disordered.”

“I like being ‘disordered.’” Hermione drew closer, hoping to distract him. She couldn’t tell him about the scar solution yet; he’d only worry and he was flying in that silly match tomorrow.

Draco slid an arm around her. “Hmmm … intriguing,” he whispered in her ear. Then he raised his head and sighed. “But I have practice—a one-on-one with Hooch.”

Hermione tried not to pout. It was for the best really, the pigeons would arrive any moment. Draco kissed her thoroughly, then stepped back, running a hand through his hair. He looked pretty tired himself.

“You’re up to something,” he said, looking at the food strewn on the grass. “Tell me what—”

“Mr. Malfoy!” shouted a voice. Hermione and Draco looked up to see Hooch flying above them, waving Draco over.

“Go ahead,” she told him. A dark cloud loomed behind the professor, and she could hear the faint sound of flapping and squawking. “I’ll tell you later.”

Draco gave her a quick kiss and mounted his broom. “Later,” he repeated, looking stern, and flew away. Hermione watched him go, then ducked behind a nearby bush, nearly knocking over a small student.

“Leila!” she snapped. “I told you to go back to the castle!”

“This appears to be a very ill-conceived plan,” Leila said. “You’re quite fortunate Mr. Malfoy had to fly away.”

“You can’t be involved,” Hermione said. “This is—” Loud screeching and flapping drowned out her words and the two witches immediately ducked down.

“Stay quiet,” Hermione whispered. Leila gave a low sniff.

Hermione knelt on the cold, hard dirt and poked her wand through the shrub’s branches. The pigeon flock was eagerly eating the food garbage, two birds fighting over a rancid wheel of cheese.

“Terra vincium sepere, sepere terra,” she murmured. The glowing circle was gone—it had only been there to show the Mice where to throw the food—but the Virgin Earth on the ground shone faintly silver. Hermione carefully spoke the incantation, moving her wand in small, slow circles.

“You say Miss Granger was here?” Hermione could hear Ernie’s pompous tones, and they were growing louder.

“Yes, sir,” a fawning Ravenclaw prefect said. “She and those Hufflepuff troublemakers were dumping garbage.”

Hermione sent Leila a desperate look, not pausing in her spellwork. Leila nodded and scrambled out from behind the bush. The Slytherin had the sense to walk carefully and say nothing until she was some distance from the pigeons, who were tearing apart a pile of moldy rolls. Hermione concentrated on the final iteration: “Terra vincium!”
The bird’s squawking grew louder, and Hermione watched in satisfaction before standing and brushing leaves and dirt off her tights. Leila was standing ten feet away, staring. Ernie and the Ravenclaw were gone.

The little girl looked at her wide-eyed. “This was a test, wasn’t it?”

Hermione grimaced. This Mouse was entirely too smart. “Maybe. What did you tell Ernie?”

“That you were experimenting with magical compost.”

Not bad. Hermione bit her lip. She’d always felt the Hogwarts kitchens were entirely too wasteful with leftover food. Perhaps …

Leila was still staring at the birds until Hermione shooed her back to the castle entrance.

“Remember, don’t tell anyone.”

The little Slytherin smirked. “I doubt anyone would believe me.”

***

Dinner that night was a rather stomach-turning affair, what with two enormous Quidditch banners hanging in the Great Hall. The banners represented the two Inter-House teams: the Hogs and the Warts. Hermione had groaned when she heard the team names Ernie’s idiot prefects had chosen, and now she groaned again at the sight of the banners. The purple Hogs banner was bad enough, emblazoned with a rabid boar snarling down at the crowd, eyes mad with rage, saliva dripping on the floor. But the cream-colored Warts banner was even worse, with weird globby shapes hopping about in a particularly disgusting way. Draco had stormed up to McGonagall’s office to protest the name to no avail; he was a Wart and the affront to his dignity would simply have to be endured.

After dinner, Hermione stole a quiet hour with Draco in the Room of Requirement, keeping him distracted enough so he didn’t ask about the Squeaky Mice earlier. Then Draco rushed off to Warts’ practice and she headed to Gryffindor Tower to get her Marauders’ Map. She needed to speak to Pansy.

Luna was leaning over a railing on the third-floor landing, waving her Love Diggles net, and for an instant, Hermione considered hiding a la Draco.

Luna turned and saw her, however. “Hello, Hermione,” she said smiling. “Are you looking for Ernie?”

“Certainly not,” Hermione said.

“If you’re looking for Neville, he and Pansy are snogging in the Gryffindor common room,” Luna said, propping her net handle against the railing. She shook her head sadly. “I didn’t see any Love Diggles around them.”

“Maybe they were being too loud,” Hermione said, never one to resist spinning theories. “Scared
“Oh Diggles love loud noises—shrieks, even,” Luna said enthusiastically. “Especially when—”

“Alright, Luna, I must be going,” Hermione said quickly, backing away and wishing she had hidden somewhere. “Good luck!”

She practically fled to Gryffindor Tower, where she found Neville on the Sofa of Significant Conversations with Pansy on his lap.

“… It’s lovely country,” Neville was saying in a low, gravelly voice. “Green, and quite secluded. At night, the stars …”

“Hello, Neville,” Hermione said loudly. “Parkinson.”

“Hello Hermione,” Neville said. He blushed faintly but didn’t let go of Pansy.

Pansy was frowning. “Theo’s been looking for you tonight, Granger. I hope you aren’t starting all that up again—”

“Now, Pans,” Neville said easily, “Hermione wouldn’t do that.” He gave Hermione a look that clearly said: “I provided a reference for you.”

“I’m not seeing Theo,” Hermione said, taking a seat opposite them. “Lavender wouldn’t like it.”

“Ugh, even worse,” Pansy said. She shifted back against the sofa arm and slid a hand along Neville’s shoulder. “Like he’d ever go for the purple slag.”

“Pans,” Neville said. Pansy huffed but said no more.

“I need to speak to you, Parkinson,” Hermione said. “About a Charms assignment.” Neville immediately stiffened. “You can stay if you like, Nev,” she said. “The details are rather interesting.”

“Wouldn’t think of it,” Neville said hastily. He lifted Pansy off his lap and set her on the sofa with an offhand strength that surprised Hermione.

“See you upstairs,” Neville said, brushing a hand on Pansy’s hair. He gave Hermione a quick look. “Be careful.”

“I’m always careful,” Hermione said. Neville snorted and practically ran up the staircase to the boy’s dormitories.

“This had better be good, Granger,” said Pansy, now stretched out on the sofa in that sinful way Slytherins had. “As you can see, I have elsewhere to be.”

Hermione took a deep breath. “I need you to stop Astoria in the Potions corridor before tomorrow’s Quidditch match.”

Pansy’s dark eyes regarded her lazily. “For how long?”

“Two minutes, maybe three.”

Pansy ran a finger over her lower lip. “I’m not exactly … close … to Astoria. It will seem suspicious.”
“Rant about me,” Hermione suggested. “The dirty Mudblood who stole him away. It’s bad enough to lose Draco to a Pureblood, but to …”

“I get your drift,” Pansy said. She blinked slowly at Hermione, considering. “It might be possible.”

“Splendid.” Hermione jumped to her feet and Pansy rose as well with effortless grace. “Stop her just before the Potions classroom, by the tapestry of Merlin.”

“Alright.” Pansy picked up her little silver purse and headed up the stairs. Suddenly she halted and turned back, looking down at Hermione, who also stopped midway up the staircase.

“Following me, Granger?” she asked, a smile touching her red-lipsticked mouth. “Would you like to watch?”


Pansy gave her a knowing look. “Are you sure? You might learn something.” Her mouth quirked again. “A few Slytherin secrets for Draco?”

Hermione’s fingers tightened on the stair bannister. “I don’t need any help with Draco.”

Pansy’s cat-in-the-cream smile widened. “You have no idea what you’ve gotten into,” she purred. “What it’s like. You won’t be the same.”

Hermione held her gaze. “Neither will he.”

Pansy blinked at that, then nodded. “I believe you,” she said, much like she had over shots at the Leaky Cauldron. “I hardly recognize Draco these days.”

The Slytherin fluttered her fingers and produced a tiny piece of parchment, folded into a flower. “Goodnight, Granger.” Pansy handed her the paper flower and walked up the boys’ staircase, an undulating figure in her form-fitting black dress and silver heels.

Hermione stared up after her, then looked down at the folded parchment in her hand. A tap of her wand and it opened. Written in elegant calligraphy were three short words: *Don’t hurt him.*

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Dumbledore's Birthday!
Dumbledore's Birthday

Chapter Notes

Well, this is a big day, a big chapter, and another big event organized by our favorite Head Boy and prefects.

In the original draft of "The Gloriana Set," Astoria's attack on Hermione at the Quidditch pitch went unavenged. But Astute Readers made it clear that simply wouldn't do, so Hermione began scheming, which led to a new Dumbledore's Birthday subplot with an Inter-House Quidditch Match, and so here we are. I hope you like it!

Here's the little cheat sheet for the teams. Go Hogs! Go Warts!

THE HOGS (purple)
Captain: Lavinia Clarke
Keeper: Astoria Greengrass (Slytherin)
Seeker: Ginevra Weasley (Gryffindor)
Beaters: two Hufflepuffs
Chasers: A Slytherin and two Ravenclaws

THE WARTS (cream)
Captain: Madam Hooch
Keeper: Demelza Robins (Gryffindor)
Seeker: Draco Malfoy (Slytherin)
Beaters: Lundy twins (Gryffindor)
Chasers: a Slytherin, Ravenclaw and a Hufflepuff

Hermione stood in a tiny alcove near the Potions dungeon door, waiting for Pansy. A steady stream of Slytherins had been moving along the corridor toward the Quidditch pitch, excitement underlying their drawling tones. Draco had passed by already, looking very handsome in his cream-colored jersey with gold lettering. It was nice to see him in something other than black.

She had woken early that morning despite the class holiday, and to her surprise, Ginny was already up. Her roommate sat on the sofa wrapped in her duvet, staring into her mug of tea.

“I have this whole set of new techniques,” Ginny said as Hermione joined her. “I thought I’d take a page from Astoria and not reveal everything during practices.” She bit her lip. “But it’s all untested against other players. Lavinia will be watching and …” She trailed off, but Hermione knew the name she didn’t say. Harry.

Hermione froze in horror. Ginny was considering a professional Quidditch career and this was her chance to impress Lavinia …

“Ginny.” Hermione’s tone made the redhead look up. “Ginny,” Hermione repeated. “I have a plan today regarding Astoria, but just say the word and I’ll call it off.”

Ginny listened silently as Hermione described the plan. Her friend deserved to know exactly what
could happen. When Hermione stopped speaking, Ginny’s eyes shone.

“You must do this, Hermione,” she said decisively. “You must.”

“But your team, and I don’t want to hurt your chances with …”

“Promise me you’ll do it.” Ginny grabbed Hermione’s hands. “Promise me you’ll succeed.”

Hermione swallowed. “I promise.”

Now, after standing in a cramped alcove for almost an hour, Hermione bitterly regretted that promise. She couldn’t guarantee anything. So much could go wrong. Frankly, she considered her odds of success maybe 1 in 3.

She glanced down at the Marauders Map. Pansy’s dot was finally leaving the Slytherin dungeons and heading her way. Astoria should be coming soon. Hermione’s hand tightened on her wand. Precise timing was necessary for this to work.

Pansy stopped opposite the Merlin tapestry and leaned against the wall, looking bored. A group of students passed by without a second look at the Slytherin witch—apparently Pansy loitered uselessly around the dungeons all the time.

Hermione slipped out from behind the alcove, striding quickly past Pansy to peek around the corner to the Entrance Hall stairs. A swish of her wand and a black foggy curtain like Draco’s appeared, designed to dissipate in minutes. She didn’t want interference. Astoria’s dot had left the Slytherin dungeons and the Keeper was alone. Hermione returned to Pansy and cast a second ward that allowed only Astoria to pass.

“She’s coming,” Hermione whispered. “Stand there. Keep Astoria here, but don’t get too close.” She tucked away her wand and pulled out a small jar of Virgin Earth, scattering it on the floor in front of the tapestry.

Pansy took her appointed spot. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“Just do your part,” Hermione said, screwing the jar shut and replacing it in her pocket. “I need three, maybe four minutes.” She slipped back into the alcove.

A thin gap between the tapestry and the alcove wall gave her a good view of the Potions corridor. Pansy was leaning against the wall again, yawning, and Astoria’s quick footsteps sounded on the stone floor.

“Astoria,” Pansy drawled.

The footsteps halted, and Hermione peeked through the gap. Astoria’s cameo profile was clearly visible. She wore a purple Hogs jersey, her hair in an intricate braid wound with purple ribbons. The Malfoy diamonds peeped out from her collar. Astoria held her long, slender broom, painted silver, in one hand.

“Paaaaansy.” Astoria sounded bored. “What on earth could you possibly—”

“What are you doing about her?” Pansy’s voice dripped with venom.

“About …”

“The filthy Mudblood slut. Are you going to allow Draco to parade her about the castle?”
“I cannot imagine why that would concern you.” Astoria sounded amused. “Run off to your crybaby blood traitor.”

Pansy’s jaw clenched. “At least he’s a pureblood, and I have a reputation to restore. But you … you must be losing your touch, Astoria, to lose a Malfoy to a Mudblood swot. Did Dray-co finally tire of your sick little games?”

Hermione suddenly came to herself—she’d been standing frozen, appalled by the exchange. She raised her wand, poking it slightly through the gap: “Terra vinctum separe, separe terra …”

“Draco will always come back to me,” Astoria said coolly.

“That’s it? That’s your plan? You’ll just wait around for Draco to come to his senses? Have you seen how he looks at her? Have you seen the diamonds in that Mudblood’s frizzy mess?”

“Cheap baubles for a cheap whore,” Astoria said, flushing slightly. “You are wasting my time here, Pansy.”

Astoria took a step forward, forcing Hermione to shift to keep her wand trained on the Slytherin blonde. Hermione’s heart skipped a beat. Pansy was losing the moment.

Then the door to the Potions dungeon swung open, causing Astoria to step reflexively back. “Hello, Miss Greengrass, Miss Parkinson,” chirped a little voice. Leila.

Hermione could have slapped herself. Why hadn’t she checked the Potions dungeon for dots? Because the whole damn school was going to the match, that was why. “… Humilus terra vinctum, incarcerous, incarcerous …”

Leila stepped forward, but was stopped by Pansy’s hand on her thin shoulder. The First Year’s little face looked confused, but then she saw the silvery Virgin Earth scattered on the floor. Leila’s blue eyes widened, then shifted to Hermione’s tapestry and away again. The First Year could hardly miss a wand poking out of the alcove.

The Slytherin Keeper ignored Leila. “You think to lecture me about Draco?” Astoria asked Pansy. “Draco left you for me, he will leave the Mudblood for me, he will always return to me.”

Astoria stepped forward again, forcing Hermione to push her wand a little further out of the alcove to sustain the connection. “Humilus terra …”

“That doesn’t necessarily follow, Miss Greengrass,” Leila piped up.

Astoria stopped, staring down at Leila.

“You seem rather unpleasant,” the girl continued. “I’m not convinced you’d suit Mr. Malfoy.”

Pansy’s mouth fell open, and Hermione would have been amused if her blood hadn’t suddenly run cold.

“You want a lesson in manners, child,” Astoria hissed, drawing her wand. Pansy’s face lost all color; she obviously remembered the Carrows’ reign the year before, with the frequent use of crucio on younger students.

Leila didn’t retreat an inch. “So I’ve been told. But you don’t appear to be a good role model in that regard either.”
“Durant!” Pansy hissed, her hand tightening on Leila’s shoulder. Hermione’s heart was pounding, but she didn’t pause the incantation. One more iteration …

“Durant?” Astoria lowered her wand. “As in Alexander Durant?”

“He’s my brother.”

“Ah, dear Alex.” Astoria smiled thinly. “My sympathies for his unjust … confinement.”

Hermione snorted silently, remembering a hysterical Durant's vile words after his sentencing to thirty years in Azkaban.

“None of this is helping Draco’s … situation,” Pansy said, trying to draw Astoria’s attention back to herself.

“If Draco wants to roll in the mud this year, that’s his affair,” Astoria snapped. “Purity will always conquer. Blaise dumped his blood traitor weasel bitch, did he not?”

Leila’s hand went to her pocket and Pansy smoothly moved to grasp the little girl’s arm.

“I’m sure you know, Pansy, what Gryffindors are good for, since you’re not above getting a little dirt under your nails,” Astoria sneered.

“Terra vinctum!” Hermione hissed softly, finishing the spell. She lowered her wand and collapsed against the alcove wall, sweat running down her face.

“Now get out of my way, both of you. I have a travesty of a Quidditch match to win,” Astoria snapped. The blonde strode forward, with Pansy barely whisking Leila out of the Keeper’s path.

Hermione pulled out the Map and watched Astoria’s dot move up the staircase into the Entrance Hall. Only then did she emerge from the tapestry.

Leila’s face brightened. “Did you do it, Miss Granger? Did you cast—”

“Hush,” Hermione said, releasing the ward on the other side of the corridor. “Thank you, Leila, and yes, I finished the incantation.”

“I’m sorry you had to hear language like that, Durant,” Pansy said.

“It’s alright, Miss Parkinson,” Leila chirped. “I don’t consider either you or Miss Greengrass appropriate role models.”

Pansy blinked, and Hermione couldn’t help grinning. Nice to see someone else deal with Leila for once.

“You were very brave to help,” Hermione told the little Slytherin, “but I want you to be careful from now on. You and your friends are to sit as far from Miss Greengrass as possible at the match.”

“The Puffs are already at the pitch. We’re sitting by Mr. Malfoy’s team bench,” Leila said. For the first time, Hermione noticed the cream-coloredribbons in the girl’s dark braids.

“Good. Don’t draw attention to yourselves.” Leila rolled her eyes, and Hermione couldn’t help but smile. The Squeaky Mice couldn’t *not* draw attention to themselves. Leila ran off, green cloak flapping.
“What a terrifying little girl,” Pansy drawled.

“You have no idea.” Hermione moved toward the Entrance Hall, and Pansy, to her surprise, fell in step with her.

“Granger,” Pansy said tensely. “Granger, I didn’t mean what I said back there, about …”

“I know,” Hermine said. “You didn’t say anything I didn’t expect.”

Pansy shook her head. “This had better be worth it, Granger. You should have just turned her into a pigeon.”

***

Draco was standing by the Great Hall doors, broom in hand, talking to Lavender. “No, I don’t know any good biscuit recipes,” he was saying testily. “You’re making even less sense than usual today, Brown.”

Lavender saw Hermione and Pansy and flounced off. Draco eyed the two witches warily.

“Good luck today, Draco,” Pansy drawled. “Don’t let me down. I have a bet going with Neville.”

“What?” Hermione was surprised. “Neville doesn’t like to gamble.”

Pansy smirked. “He couldn’t resist my terms.”

“Ewwww,” Hermione said.

“I can’t quite decide whether I’d rather win or lose.” Pansy winked at Draco and walked out of the Entrance Hall.

“I don’t know what Neville is thinking,” Hermione said, looking after her.

Draco’s hand covered hers. “Aren’t you going to wish me luck?” he murmured, lips brushing her ear.

“Maybe I’m rooting for Ginny,” Hermione said. She was genuinely conflicted over the match, wanting both Seekers to do well.

“We should make a bet as well. If I catch the snitch, you have to …”

“Hermione!” At first she thought Ron was calling her and her heart nearly stopped, but the voice was too bright and sharp. Hermione turned, slightly flushed, to see George Weasley striding toward them.
“Hermione! It’s been too long!” George looked her up and down and whistled. “Well, don’t you look fetching.” The redhead ignored Draco.

“George,” Hermione said weakly. She could guess why he was here; she’d never followed up with Ernie about choosing an outside announcer for the match. Obviously, those silly prefects had prevailed once more.

“Ron sends his love,” George continued. He looked entirely outrageous, dressed in all four house colors. A Gryffindor lion was tattooed over one eye and a snake fang hung off his remaining ear. “And I bring my love in person, Hermione.” He leered. “Care for a taste after the match?”

Hermione rolled her eyes; George was utterly devoted to his girlfriend Angelina. He just wanted to get under Draco’s skin.

“I prefer younger men,” she told George, grinning.

“Hmmm … intriguing,” George said. “I, on the other hand, admit to a weakness for older women.” He looked at Draco for the first time. “How’s your mum, Malfoy? Feeling lonely?”

Draco’s wand was suddenly in his hand. “Don’t you dare speak …”

“Touchy, touchy,” George said, grinning widely. He backed away a few steps before turning with a flourish of his four-colored cloak and heading for the Hall’s huge oak doors. “See you at the pitch!” he sang out.

“It’s just George,” Hermione said soothingly.

Draco’s face was still dark, prompting a pack of Ravenclaw First Years to scuttle to the other side of the Hall. “How you can bear that family, I’ll never know.”

***

The Hogwarts Quidditch stands were beyond packed; the noise was deafening and the match hadn’t even started yet. Word had spread of the Inter-House event and the Holyhead Harpies’ involvement. Spectators were arriving from all over Britain. McGonagall had set up a line around the nearest rows that only students and school staff could cross, but many students, especially the younger ones, had trouble fighting through the crowd to reach their seats.

Even Hermione had to use a few well-placed sparks from her wand to get to Harry. Ernie and the prefects were patrolling the stands to restrain rowdy students. But the visiting adults were the real problem, jostling for good standing-room-only spots.

“They aurors are here,” Harry said as Hermione collapsed into the seat beside him. He wore his auror robes and his eyes never stopped moving over the pitch. “I’ve never seen such a crowd here.”

Hermione pulled her wand out of her coat pocket. “Hold this.”
Harry’s eyes narrowed behind his round glasses. “Why are you giving me your wand?”

“I might get emotional,” Hermione said, feeling guilty. Harry nodded and pocketed the wand, then squeezed her hand.

The day was cold but clear; those appalling Hogs and Warts banners were suspended in mid-air over the pitch. Most students wore thick cloaks and their house colors as usual, but instead of the clear bands of yellow, red, blue and green in the stands, the Quidditch spectators were a glorious mix of scattered hues. Many wore the purple and cream colors of the two Inter-House teams since they had friends and housemates on both sides. Perhaps this match wasn’t a terrible idea after all, Hermione admitted to herself. She almost regretted casting the spell today. Revenge wasn’t exactly a testament to inter-House unity.

Hermione put on her Omnioculars to look for Draco; he stood on the pitch chatting with Warts Captain Madam Hooch. He was a vision, really, all cream and white and gold, and they’d had only a few scattered hours together this week … Hermione gave herself a shake. Focus.

A few players were in the air, making slow, desultory circles. Usually players liked to show off before a match, but tensions were high, and captains were keeping a tight rein on their teams. Harry had chosen seats close to the Hogs’ purple-draped team bench, only about fifty feet away from where Astoria stood on the grass with Hogs Captain Lavinia Clarke and a Hogs Chaser.

The captains called their players in, and Ginny zipped past, winking at Hermione and ignoring Harry. She looked beautiful in her purple jersey and cloak, her glowing hair braided in front to keep it out of her eyes and streaming behind her. She also looked determined; Draco would have a tough time beating her.

A platform hung with the four House colors floated into the center of the pitch, carrying McGonagall and Interim Minister of Magic Gawain Robards. All the players lined up in rows at the edge of the pitch. Aurors on brooms ringed the pitch and the crowd was now almost entirely silent.

Hermione felt a tightness in her chest as the speeches began. There had already been a ceremony for Dumbledore earlier in the day in the Great Hall—Draco had sat stolid and quiet at the Slytherin table, seemingly impervious to glares and glances his way. Now it was even worse—whispers rustled through the crowd and the teammates standing on either side of Draco moved away slightly. Perhaps most of the school had set aside Draco’s role in the Death Eaters’ invasion of the school and Dumbledore’s death, but no one would forget. Hermione couldn’t use her Omnioculars without being obvious, so she couldn’t see Draco’s face. She could only sit and listen to McGonagall’s short, heartfelt wish that future generations would remember Dumbledore and hold him up as the standard for kindness, intellect, courage and the ambition to change the world for the better.

Robards followed up with a rambling message about heroism, forced Harry and Hermione to stand and be recognized, then launched a thinly disguised campaign bid for Minister of Magic in January’s coming election. Hermione was relieved when Robards finally wound down and the platform and banners moved off to the side.

“Welcome to the First-Annual Official Commemorative Birthday Memorial Inter-House Quidditch Match for the Late and Lamented Albus Dumbledore!” George’s voice resounded through the stands. “Ceremonial Deification to follow the match!”

A ripple of laughter rolled through the crowd, but Harry glared at the announcer. Hermione patted his hand. It’s just George.
“This is George Weasley, co-owner of Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes, inventor of Pygmy Puffs and Extendable Ears! Visit Number 93 Diagon Alley after the match for commemorative products, like our new Dumbledore snitch that quotes famous phrases from …”

Madam Hooch’s silver whistle rang out, signaling the beginning of the match (and the end of the commercial) and the crowd cheered. Thirteen players swirled into the air and hovered level to the hoops, their cream and purple capes streaming behind them.

Thirteen players, not fourteen. Astoria had risen with the rest, launching into her usual corkscrew climb. But at five feet the broom suddenly bucked, then hung in the air, unable to rise higher. The Slytherin tugged at the handle, kicking frantically, but the broom didn’t move.

“What’s with Greengrass?” Harry asked, frowning. “Something wrong with her broom?” His voice was full of concern—he hadn’t forgotten how a cursed broom had nearly killed him in his first-ever Quidditch match.

“How odd,” Hermione said, and something in her tone made Harry look at her sharply. She shrugged and looked back at the pitch, keeping her gloved hands open on her knees.

“Looks like the Hogs Keeper’s having a bit of trouble,” George boomed gaily. “Anybody want to give her a lift to the hoops?”

The other players hung still in the air; even Ginny and Draco ignored the snitch fluttering around as they stared down at Astoria. The Keeper was now viciously hitting her broom with her wand, like someone would beat a stubborn mule.

Lavinia blew her own golden whistle, the note clearly indicating a timeout, and flashed a signal at George. Hooch summoned all the balls back to their boxes.

“Hogs Captain Lavinia Clarke has called a timeout, due to equipment issues,” George announced. “Smoke ’em if you’ve got ’em! Meanwhile, let’s talk about U-NO-POO . . .”

“Well, that’s embarrassing,” Harry said. “This is why players should take a few practice flights before every match.”

Hermione shrugged. Lavinia swooped down to Astoria and hovered beside her. After a minute or two, both witches descended to the ground.

“Strange, that.” Harry continued, still frowning. “I’ve been watching Greengrass all week. She rides a custom-made prototype called the Asperitas—they’re nearly infallible.”

“Brooms,” Hermione said.

“Looks like the Hogs’ Captain is loaning the Keeper her own broom,” George announced. “It’s a different model, I’m told, built for power instead of speed . . .”

Astoria shot straight upwards, almost knocking Lavinia over. The crowd cheered. But the broom suddenly stopped as if yanked by an invisible leash, throwing Astoria to the ground. The broom righted itself and returned to Lavinia, hovering at mounting height.

“Woohoo!” George yelled in glee. “Looks like Clarke’s broom doesn’t like Greengrass very much. Those Nimbuses can be canny judges of character, you know!”

Hermione put her hand to her mouth to hide her smile. I love you, George. Even from the stands, she could see the death glare Astoria leveled up at the announcer, who waved back from his
floating platform over the pitch.

One of Hogs Chasers came up to Astoria with spare team brooms. Astoria sneered at the last-year Nimbuses but snatched one up. She rose again, and again the crowd cheered, only to watch Astoria again stop at five feet.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Harry said. “How could someone tamper with brooms like that?”

McGonagall was on the pitch now, trying to calm Astoria as the blonde began shouting, swinging the broomstick around like a weapon. The crowd murmured in confusion. Astoria’s furious gaze swept the stands and immediately stopped at Harry and Hermione in the front row.

“There she is!” she screeched, pointing at up Hermione. “The Mudblood did it!”

“MISS GREENGRASS!” McGonagall boomed, and she didn’t need a *Sonorous* for the crowd to hear her. “YOU ARE DISMISSED!”

“Aaaaand the Hogs Keeper is expelled from the game for lack of altitude and general mayhem!” George announced cheerily. “Greengrass appears a bit put out by the call and is beating her teammate with a broom! Ouch, that had to hurt!” He was right—the Hogs Chaser tried to help Astoria again and got a face full of twigs for his trouble.

Harry turned to Hermione. “Do you know anything about this?”

Hermione raised her wandless hands, looking innocent.

Astoria was still shouting, her words intelligible, but her gestures toward Hermione were clear.

Veronica was Transfiguring a purple Hogs jersey for Ravenclaw’s Keeper, who’d been pulled from the crowd. Ginny had landed and was walking over as well.

Harry stood. “I should get down there,” he said. Hermione rolled her eyes.

“It’s fine, Harry,” she said, pulling on his robes. Harry retook his seat reluctantly.

McGonagall and another auror grabbed Astoria by the arms and began dragging her off the pitch. Lavinia was Transfiguring a purple Hogs jersey for Ravenclaw’s Keeper, who’d been pulled from the crowd. Ginny stood nearby, arms crossed, looking smug. Draco had arrived as well, hovering above the scene, his eyes finding Hermione’s. She raised her hands, keeping them in clear sight.

Hooch blew a shrill note on her magical whistle. “PLAYERS TAKE YOUR PLACES!” she shouted. Draco gave Hermione another sharp look and returned to his team.

“I saw that look with Malfoy,” Harry hissed at Hermione. “What the almighty fuck did you do?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Did you—”

The crowd’s cheers drowned out Harry’s question as the new Hogs Keeper sailed into the air and the snitch and the other balls were released again. Harry flashed her a “this isn’t over” look and stood with the rest, clapping with enthusiasm.

“Well, that was a nice little show, wasn’t it?” George’s magically magnified voice boomed out. “Bad luck for the Hogs! Could you imagine that Keeper if she actually *could* fly? I’d be hiding under the stands!”
Another wave of laughter swept the crowd, but Harry wasn’t amused. “What did you do?” he repeated in her ear. “Did you enchant the brooms?”

“Certainly not,” Hermione said. “Could I have my wand back?”

Harry handed it over, still glaring. “Then you enchanted her,” he said, his auror training kicking in. “What kind of spell …”

“And the Quaffle is taken immediately by Warts Chaser Libby Brocks.” George had decided to begin commentating after all. “Her shot is blocked by Hogs Keeper Liam McGruder—who can actually fly higher than five feet, thank Merlin …”

Even Hermione had to admit it was an exciting match, but she only had eyes for the two Seekers. Draco had superior power and speed, but Ginny hardly seemed to be on a broom. She spun through the air in some sort of aerial ballet, using her arms and legs as rudders and wings. Her hands rarely touched the broomstick, and at one point she made an impossibly tight turn with one foot on the broom and the whole crowd gasped.

Harry watched agog, mouth shamelessly open, saying only in a hoarse voice: “Where did she learn to fly like that?”

So it was no surprise that Ginny caught the snitch practically under Draco’s nose as he dove near the Hogs hoops, not far from Hermione and Harry’s seats. It was a miracle Draco was even there; the snitch had appeared fifty feet or so from Ginny and only Draco’s stunning sprint across the pitch made it a contest at all.

The stands exploded in cheers—even the Warts clapped and shouted. Lavinia accepted the Dumbledore trophy (a phoenix on a broom, designed by Ernie’s prefects) then handed it to Ginny and the stands cheered again.

“We’re going to congratulate Ginny,” Harry said determinedly. “Come on.” He pulled Hermione down to the bottom of the stands, summoning a broom to take them both to the pitch, where Ginny stood with Lavinia and the rest of the team.

“Hermione!” Ginny cried, running over to hug her tightly. “Well done,” she whispered.

“Never mind that,” Hermione said. “This is your day.”

“Congratulations, Ginny,” Harry said, his voice cutting through the excited chatter around them. Ginny gave him a polite smile. “Thank you, Harry. I hope you enjoyed the game.”

“I did very much,” Harry said, equally polite. “You have incredible technique.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. This was excruciating. “I’ll see you in the Great Hall,” she said, her eyes on the opposing team. The Warts didn’t seem particularly fussed about losing, they were laughing and whooping as much as anyone.

“Congratulate Draco for me,” Ginny said. “The snitch was practically in my lap and he still almost nabbed it.”

Hermione gave her a smile and picked up the broom Harry had summoned. She mounted it easily, thanking Merlin for Ron’s flying lessons, and flew to the Warts’ team bench, landing about twenty feet from Draco.
He excused himself from his teammates and walked over, still holding his broom. His jersey was soaked with sweat and damp hair curled over his forehead.

“You did that to Astoria,” Draco said, his voice low. “I could take you right here, right now.”

Hermione smiled up at him. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Did you enchant the brooms?”

“No, I didn’t enchant any brooms,” Hermione testily.

“Her, then,” Draco said, sounding just like Harry. “Some kind of grounding spell, I suspect.”

“Yes, but there’s a tethering component as well,” Hermione said. “I call it Terra Vinctum. Earthbound.”

“Mr. Malfoy!” The Squeaky Mice had somehow gotten on the pitch and were hopping with excitement. Dressed all in pale cream, they looked disturbingly angelic, their chubby faces pink in the cold air. Cupcake wore a tiny cream rosette.

“You did wonderfully, Mr. Malfoy,” Imogene said, “even though you lost.”

“You should have tried the Froom Move, Mr. Malfoy,” Bertie said. The entire group swerved and clutched their chests, and Hermione and Draco couldn’t help laughing.

“Wasn’t that odd about Miss Greengrass?” Percival asked. He lowered his voice to a loud whisper. “She seems a bit mad.”

“I agree,” Draco said, still smiling.

The Mice began chattering: “Three bad brooms!” “What are the odds?” “I thought she was going to crush that poor Chaser!”

“What do you think, Miss Granger?” Leila asked Hermione as they all walked back to the castle. The other Mice stopped talking and turned to look at her.

“I think it’s very sad,” Hermione said, looking at Draco. “Bound to the earth, yet so desperate to fly.”

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Draco makes a confession.
The Great Hall was a riot of color for that evening’s Inter-House Unity Feast, with students seated around twelve smaller tables rather than four long House tables. Hermione joined the Warts, sitting between Draco and Demelza Robbins. George was beside Ginny at the Hogs table, with Harry and Lavinia on the other end. Astoria was nowhere to be seen.

“She’s at St. Mungo’s,” Demelza was telling Seamus, whom she’d invited to sit with her. “My cousin works there. He said they put Greengrass up on brooms, a thestral, even a magic carpet, but she can’t rise higher than five feet.” Demelza cast a wary glance at Hermione. “She’s blaming you.”

Hermione shrugged and calmly ate her chicken. “Astoria blames me for everything. My very existence has apparently ruined her life.”

“You didn’t hex her?” Seamus asked. Other nearby students were suddenly silent.

“Nonsense. I was fifty feet away and I didn’t even have my wand,” Hermione said. Everyone looked skeptical. “Really. Ask Harry.”

Draco flickered a quick glance at her non-denial denial, but said nothing, just drank his pumpkin juice. He had been a bit broody throughout dinner, and Hermione didn’t think it was about Astoria or the lost match. Demelza looked satisfied by Hermione’s answer, but Seamus eyed her doubtfully.

Dessert arrived, letting Hermione off the hook, although she knew there would be rumors, like with the Slytherin Beaters or Astoria’s “accident” in Herbology. Let them talk. Hermione doubted any examination would turn up anything, except maybe a little Virgin Earth on Astoria’s shoes. That could actually work in her favor since Virgin Earth was poorly understood and walking through it could conceivably cause odd effects. The only people who could rat her out were Neville and Pansy, which she found unlikely.

The students oohed and aahed over the desserts: little snitch-shaped cakes that hovered over the plates. The cakes were Ernie’s idea, and at first Hermione thought he’d actually done something right. But then all the cakes suddenly took off, whizzing around the Great Hall like real snitches. Pandemonium ensued, with students dashing about in pursuit of their treats. Some used their wands to bring the cakes down from the ceiling, but others climbed on tables to snatch cakes out of the air.

Draco touched her hand under the table and when she looked at him, he gave her a faint smile. “Time to go,” he whispered.
She was only too happy to comply—best to get away while everyone was distracted. Ginny winked at them as they passed the Hogs table and George waggled his eyebrows suggestively. Hermione just managed not to blush.

They crossed the Entrance Hall in silence, leaving the shouting and general bedlam behind in the Great Hall. The fallen stone block still sat by the Hourglass Cabinet, its deadly message shrouded under a black drape.

“I saw a very odd sight earlier today,” Draco said as they descended the stairs. “A flock of pigeons was hopping outside the castle doors, unable to fly higher than a foot off the ground.”

“They were attacking owls,” Hermione said. She scowled. “They attacked Brownie.” She had told Draco about Brownie’s role at the muggle hunting shack, and he’d insisted on going to the owly after DADA with a box of treats.

“Is the spell permanent?” Draco asked.

“I don’t think so. It should wear off in time.” She smiled. “No more Quidditch for Astoria this year, though.” Astoria was rotten and dangerous, but she was no Celeste Rosier. “She’ll likely have an affinity for the earth from now on, though. Might affect her flying speed.”

They were approaching the Slytherin dungeons now, and Hermione’s heartbeat increased. She could guess where they were heading and although he’d slept twice in her bed, plus the Room of Requirement, accompanying Draco to his bedroom felt more … purposeful. She looked up at Draco to see him avoiding her eyes and flushing lightly. He felt it, too.

“Well, well,” the Snake Charmer portrait sneered. “The nosy little Hellebore is back. I assume you’re not looking for Theodore this time.” The painted cobra hissed.

The Charmer turned to Draco. “It is better to be feared than loved,” he said.

“Only if you cannot be both,” Draco answered.

“You’d speak Slytherin secrets in front of a Gryffindor?” The Snake Charmer shook his turbaned head. “Sad days, indeed.” He waved his flute and the dungeon door opened.

Hermione stared as they entered the Slytherin common room. She hadn’t been in a state to appreciate the surroundings during her last visit, her mind had been full of breaking up with Theo, or the night of her birthday, what with all those shots, but now …

Unlike Gryffindor’s cozy common room, Slytherin’s was cool and formal, like a medieval court, built on three tiers. Green lamps hung from the high, arched ceilings, and the frosted glass windows shone with an eerie light from the lake. The tapestries, chairs and carpets were heavily worked with silver, which contrasted with the black leather sofas. A giant fireplace hewn out of glossy black basalt dominated the room. There was a definite hierarchy to the seats and tables, with the most ornate at the highest level, close to the fireplace. The atmosphere was intimidating, overwhelming … and beautiful. Shining basalt stairs led downwards, dividing into (presumably) girls’ and boys’ dorms.

Hermione and Draco’s steps sounded loud in the empty room until they reached a thick, green patterned carpet with silver tassels and began descending the stairs. Draco led her down the left-hand fork.

“What happens if you go down the girls’ stairs?” Hermione asked, the first words she’d spoken since they’d neared the dungeon. At Gryffindor Tower, the girls’ stairs turned into a slide.
Draco shrugged. “A wall of spikes appears, blocking your way.”

Hermione shivered, sorry she’d asked. A carved mahogany door opened automatically at their entrance, and suddenly the surroundings felt familiar, like a typical Hogwarts dormitory passage, which was what it was. The corridor was the same as in the Gryffindor dorms, with torches and stone walls and dark wooden doors, except for those tapestries depicting smarmy wizards and witches. They passed Theo’s door on the right and Draco stopped at a left-hand door. He waved his wand and gestured for her to enter.

She did so, and stood in amazement. The room was smaller than a typical room; perhaps half the size of her and Ginny’s dorm, and theirs was smaller than most, accommodating only three students. But except for the stone walls and tall, stained-glass windows, Draco’s bedroom looked quite unlike any Hogwarts dorm. It didn’t even look particularly Slytherin. Instead the room’s furniture was painted wood in blue, green and gold, with heavy dark blue velvet curtains embroidered in golden fleur-de-lis. The bed—Draco’s bed—Hermione noticed with a flush, was covered in cream-colored satin and silk and looked sinfully opulent. The desk before the window was a little work of art, intricately carved, lit by a familiar glass ball placed on a delicate silver stand.

Draco came up behind her, hands sliding around her waist. “Well?” he asked, his soft voice in her ear. “Do you like it?”

“Are we still at Hogwarts? In England?”

“Oh yes. Aimee decorated the room for me.”

“I can’t believe you sleep here. I’d never want to leave.”

“I don’t want you to leave,” he murmured, his hands drifting to her hips.

“Has Aimee always been with you, here at Hogwarts?”

“No, only this year, when I was given my own room.” Still standing behind her, Draco’s hands ran softly over her long, suede skirt. (Hermione had changed her clothes for the Feast.) “This is much like my bedroom at our chateau in France.”

*Chateau in France. Of course he has a chateau in France.*

“It must have been difficult,” she said, leaning back against him, “to leave this room and face the rest of Hogwarts every day.”

“It was,” he murmured, lips at her throat, “but I always had you to look forward to, didn’t I? Even when we weren’t speaking, I could still watch you.” His voice deepened. “I always watched you.”

It sent a shiver through Hermione, the thought of Draco’s eyes on her every day. “I watched you this year, too,” she confessed.

“Not just this year,” he whispered, unzipping her skirt. “Not for me.”

Hermione turned to face him, pulling away slightly. Draco looked unperturbed by the interruption, merely raised an eyebrow.

“You watched me … before?” She swallowed. “Before the war?”

He shrugged. “You caught the eye. Certainly you demanded attention: your wild hair, your bossy
voice, your constant hand-waving in class. You and Potter were the Da—Voldemort’s—greatest threats. You bore watching.”

“So your interest was … professional,” she said.

“That’s what I told myself.” He brushed a thumb against her lower lip, his eyes hooded. “But no. You lingered in the shadows of my mind, Hermione: the forbidden fruit, the deepest fantasy …” He kissed her and the kiss tasted of darkness. Again, she shivered.

Draco put both hands on her throat, tilting her face up. “My obsession with you this year didn’t spring from nowhere, fully formed. I had thought of you before.”

“I can’t imagine that,” she whispered. “You hated me.”

“Yes, I was well-taught to hate.” His voice was bitter. “Taught to hate the inferior who refused to be inferior. You and your talents, I was told, were only worthy to be harnessed, like chattel.”

Draco lowered his hands and stepped back. “I wasn’t a good man, Hermione. You do not want to know what I thought of you then, at night, alone in the dark.” His lip curled. “That’s who I was. I can’t deny it.”

Hermione stared at him, the two of them standing a few feet apart in this perfect, gracious room. Draco looked at her with haunted eyes, his hands at his side again.

“You can’t ignore who I am,” he said quietly. “I’m better than I used to be, but that doesn’t mean I’m entirely to be trusted.”

Hermione found her voice. “I’m not afraid of you, Draco. I’ve never been afraid of you.”

His eyes glittered. “So Gryffindor. I’ll take what you’re offering, Hermione. I have enough of a conscience to warn you, but not enough to walk away.”

She crossed her arms with a huff. “This sounds like the old ‘I’m too dark for you, girlie’ line you gave me in Herbology. You promised, Draco. You said you’d only leave me for a Sacred Twenty-Eight bitch and not out of misplaced nobility.”

He drew closer again. “I’m not leaving you. I’m giving you a final chance to leave me. Before this goes too far.” He pushed up the loose sleeve of her blue blouse, revealing the cursed red letters on her arm.

“I stood by while she carved this word into you,” he whispered, brushing his fingers over the scars. “Your screams …” His face was unbearably sad.

Hermione was aghast. This wasn’t how this night was supposed to go at all. But this subject had been simmering under the surface ever since they’d met again, and Draco was right, it had to be brought out, ideally before his father was executed for trying to kill her and other muggle-borns. Good Godric, why couldn’t I have fallen for Theo? Cormac? Hell, Vasile would come with less baggage!

She looked him in the eye. “You have aided and abetted evil, Draco, and you have committed evil acts yourself. But you are not an evil person. I am not a perfect heroine. We are now just two self-absorbed people who overthink everything.”

Hermione expected Draco to smile at that, but his face remained stony, his hand still on her arm. “I will not let you be hurt again, not even by me,” he said harshly. “Do you hear me? I will not allow
“Draco,” she said, trying to stay calm. “You can’t protect me from everything for the rest of my life.”

“I can certainly fucking try,” he snapped.

Hermione stepped backward, pulling her arm away. “I’m not sure which is more alarming, your protective instincts or your baser ones.”

Draco simply looked at her, unsmiling, with those silver eyes.

“I know one thing for sure,” Hermione continued. “I don’t want to have this conversation again. You’ve made your point, Draco. You’ve done your due diligence. I’ll sign a bloody contract if you want.”

Hermione began writing in the air, much like Neville had with his imaginary reference letter. “I, the undersigned,” she recited, “acknowledge I will be sleeping with a former Death Eater, a former deadly enemy who meant me nothing but harm in the past, who has served evil, has ruthlessly bullied me and my friends, and has had sick, perverted dreams about me that would likely strike me deaf to hear about them. His sins are uncounted and his soul is troubled, and his feelings for me waver on the edge of obsession. No matter how this relationship turns out, there’s a good chance he’ll haunt my steps in some way for the rest of my life.”

She lowered her hand and glared at him. “Does that cover everything, Draco Lucius Malfoy? Have I left anything out? If so, let’s add any necessary addendums so I might possibly get laid tonight.”

Draco was staring down at her, his jaw sagging in shock. Then he blinked twice and seemed to get himself in hand. “No,” he said in a small voice she’d never heard before. “As usual, you’ve been quite thorough.”

He seemed utterly unable to move, so it was up to Hermione to step up to him, sliding her hands up his chest to his throat, pulling down his face to hers. It was one of the bravest things she’d ever done in her life.

Draco was frozen under her touch for an instant, then he seized her, crushing her to him. His kisses were hard and heated, entirely overwhelming. There was, Hermione was beginning to realize, always going to be a sort of desperation to their kisses—as if she and Draco were stealing something they weren’t supposed to have, and could never keep. She pushed the thought aside; she would have Draco and she would keep him, no matter what he said.

When Hermione had imagined their first time—and her thoughts had run fairly rampant on the topic lately—she’d envisioned an evening of soft, sweet, romantic touches and words. The setting certainly suited such moments, and Draco had proved himself surprisingly sweet in their times together. She’d thought this night would be a fresh start, putting the horrors of war behind them. Instead they had spoken of darkness, of twisted obsession and a murky, uncertain future. A good sign or a bad one?

Draco lifted her easily and carried her to the bed. Hermione tore her mouth from his. “I don’t want a fresh start,” she gasped. “We’ll never be those people. I want the darkness.”

“Then you’ve come to the right place,” Draco said, laying her down on the pearl-embroidered silk and arching over her. His eyes burned, and Hermione felt a warm hand at her breast and heard the sound of ripping fabric. “I’m not a patient man.”
“I think you’ve been very patient,” she said. She tugged at his cream-colored jumper until he pulled it over his head. His tie fell free, slapping her face, and she couldn’t help smiling as she quickly unraveled the green cloth and tossed it aside.

“You gave me no choice,” he growled. Hands were pulling down her unzipped skirt, followed by her shoes and tights, until she lay in her underwear, with Draco naked from the waist up. His wand was in his hand, and she heard the muttered words of a contraceptive spell. Hermione had been on pills since the summer, but if any situation in her life demanded extra caution, this was it. Her heart was pounding—this was really happening. There was no going back now.

Draco peeled off his trousers and underwear and she could see his whole body was flushed, his eyes almost wild. He pushed her down on the coverlet, his kisses rough, aggressive, and she responded in kind, feeling his hand roughly tearing off her knickers. She groaned at the feeling of skin on skin.

Her hands were over her head, trapped by hard fingers on her wrists, and the rest of her body was covered by his. “No use resisting,” Draco whispered.

“I’m not resisting,” she managed to gasp.

His eyes glinted like crystal. “Shame.” Draco released one hand to dip his fingers into her. “So wet,” he breathed.

Hermione only nodded. She was soaked. “Please.”

“I like it when you beg, Granger,” he said in that old snarky tone, straight from the beginning of the school year. It only aroused her more.

“Please, Malfoy.” Hermione opened her eyes.

“Now.”

He thrust into her hard and gasped, and Hermione cried out. A single word pounded through her head: Mine, mine, mine …

“Yes,” he gasped brokenly, “yours.” She hadn’t realized she’d spoken out loud.

Draco’s entire dark persona melted away upon entering her, and now he was kissing her with a sweeter passion. He thrust again and again, so hard her nerves, already overstimulated, simply collapsed, and she came in a series of wails that echoed in the room. Draco came as well, and they both collapsed, boneless, on the bedspread. They hadn’t even made it under the covers. He held her afterward, flushed and panting, and neither said a word. Hermione was still trembling, and Draco’s lips were in her hair.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I usually last …”

“It was perfect,” Hermione whispered back, and it was. Her mind would have cracked if he’d lasted much longer. Finally.

Draco didn’t answer and she didn’t know how long they lay there, mute and intertwined, the only sound their ragged breaths. Eventually he shifted and picked up his wand from the nightstand again. He cleaned the comforter with a nonverbal spell, then lifted Hermione and tucked her under the covers in a rather businesslike way. Then he replaced his wand and joined her. Hermione moaned at the feeling of silk sheets, and he pulled her to his side, wrapping around her.

“You will stay with me tonight.” His voice brooked no objections.
“Yes,” she managed to answer. “But only because I like Aimee’s scones.”

Draco shifted so he could look down at her face, fingers pulling out a single long curl.

“You’re so very beautiful, Hermione,” he said quietly. “I can’t believe you’re here with me.”

She couldn’t believe it either, really. And he was very beautiful, too, all sweet and flushed. She brushed his lips with her own fingers and he bent his head to kiss her. There was no darkness in his kiss this time, like it had been purged — for now.

“There will never be another for me,” he said, his voice so low she could hardly hear it. “I’ve accepted it now—it’s you or nobody.” Hermione opened her mouth, then shut it at a shake of his head. “You don’t have to say the same. I’d prefer it if you didn’t.” His eyes looked a bit sad. “You have so much love, Hermione, you care for people who don’t deserve it, for people you don’t even know. For vampires and half-Kneazles and hags in Knockturn Alley. I don’t have that kind of heart. I care for my mother, my friends—all two of them—and you. That’s it.”

“You might surprise yourself, Draco,” Hermione managed to say, thinking of his adoring Squeaky Mice.

He gave a tiny shrug and pulled lightly at her hair. “We’ll see. If I’ve learned anything with you, it’s that anything’s possible.”

Anything’s possible. Hermione couldn’t agree more. Draco slid downward, his head on her breast, giving an unconscious sigh. His hair was silkier than the coverlet against her skin, and she ran her fingers through the platinum strands. Draco’s breathing slowed; he was tired, of course, after the match and long days of practicing. Hermione’s eyes closed and her hand stilled. And so they slept, fingers twined in each other’s hair like children, wrapped in warmth and magic … and safety.

***

Hermione woke to pounding on Draco’s door, and for a moment she had no idea where she was. She was lying atop Draco, who was flat on his back, both of them wrapped in cream silk. The sunlight through the window was strange and watery, and she looked blearily at the bed’s gold brocade hangings until the shouts on the other side of the door began to hurt her ears.

“Draco!” shouted a voice on the other side of the door. A man’s voice, sounded like Blaise.


“Damn it, Draco, get your ass out of bed!” Blaise shouted. “It’s an emergency!”

With a groan, Draco rolled out from under Hermione, sliding out of the bed. He stalked naked to the door, opening it slightly. Hermione squeaked and burrowed under the covers. “What in Salazar’s name could you possibly fucking want, Blaise? Now piss off or—”

“Draco, you have to get upstairs, we’ve got—”
“What time is it?”

“What time is it?”

“A six-thirty. Draco, you have—”

“I don’t have to do shit until Ancient Runes at nine, so if you’ll kindly fuck—”

A loud crack caused Hermione to pop out from under the covers. “Mademoiselle!” Aimee cried in a high-pitched squeal. “Master Draco’s paramour! Merveilleux!”

“Paramour?” called Blaise’s voice. “You have Hermione in there? Thank Salazar! Hermione!”

Draco’s hand slammed against the doorjamb, blocking the door with his arm. “You are not seeing Hermione, Blaise.”

“Merci, Aimee,” Hermione said, trying out her rudimentary French. Aimee beamed and set her silver tray on the bed. Elf magic was simply amazing—how else would Aimee know just when Draco truly woke up and then arrive on the dot?

Hermione unfastened her Gloriana hairclip and used it to pull back her curls. Aimee’s eyes bugged out even more than they naturally were.

“La Maîtresse!” Aimee breathed.

“Did she just call me a mattress?” Hermione asked Draco, who had pulled back his arm and turned to nod politely at Aimee, heedless of his naked state.

“Mistress,” he told Hermione, amused. “as in lady, not illicit lover.” He gave her a smirk. “Unless you prefer the latter.”

Hermione smiled back, pleased to see the sparkle in his eyes. His smile widened as he looked her over, sitting up naked in his bed with the sheets around her waist.

“Aimee,” Draco softly commanded, not taking his eyes from Hermione. “Why don’t you leave the tray and run along now—”

“He has Hermione in there,” She heard Blaise tell somebody in the hall. “No, that’s a good thing!” Blaise stuck his head through the door that Draco had carelessly left ajar. “Hermione, we need you upstairs, too!”

“Blaise!” Hermione and Draco said in unison, Hermione pulling up the sheets.

“I said get the fuck out of here,” Draco snapped at Blaise. “I don’t care what your emergency is, you can—”

“Hermione, we need you,” Blaise said, resisting Draco’s efforts to push him back into the hallway. “More than we need this asshole. Please, you have to come out.” Blaise’s dark eyes were wide and his hair actually slightly ruffled.

“Why, what’s going on?” Hermione asked, suddenly concerned. She scrambled to her knees, the coverlet tucked around her torso, one leg sticking out. Draco moved to block Blaise’s view, and she craned her neck to look around Draco’s body.

“Aurors are trying to break into the Slytherin dungeons,” Blaise said. “They have a warrant for Theo’s arrest.”
NEXT UP: The aurors are back. Hermione is unconvincing.
Aurors Again

Chapter Notes

Hello all: I know that last chapter was a bit much, what with all those Death Eater chickens coming home to roost. This chapter will be shorter and lighter, despite the aurors and arrest warrant and all.

We are FINALLY starting our descent into Ending Town, but we have quite a few chapters left, and there's still much fun to be had. I added something to the summary, plus there's an interesting deal, an odd attempt at redemption and at least one surprise appearance. And yes, a few rocky, angsty moments as well.

So this post is a regular chapter, but the next post will be something completely different. All I can say is that it would be RIGHT up Hermione's alley. I hope you all like it!

Thebe

“I don’t see why we need to interfere,” Draco complained. “Theo can take care of himself.”

“I won’t leave him to the aurors, Draco.” Hermione was tying her Gryffindor tie in front of Draco’s huge mirror as Aimee plaied her hair. Draco had snuck her into a nearby bathroom so she could clean up for the day, then disappeared himself as the elf transfigured a uniform for Hermione and dried her curls. Then Aimee fell on Draco at his return, fitting him out in a flawlessly pressed uniform and fastening his cufflinks. The elf looked thrilled; Hermione could tell Draco rarely allowed her to help dress him.

“Fine,” he snapped, giving his own tie a final tug. “Thank you, Aimee.”

Aimee beamed. “C’est plaisir server maître et maitress!” She disappeared with a crack.

“Do you have an extra robe?” Hermione asked Draco. “And I need a bag.”

Draco pulled two black robes out of his trunk. “Do you mind explaining—”

“No time, those aurors could break in any minute. We’ve already taken too long.” Hermione shrunk down one of his robes and pulled it on. She grabbed his leather bag. “Let’s go.”

Draco tucked his wand and signet ring into his pocket. “Don’t boss me like I’m the Weasel,” he snapped, following her.

Hermione ignored this and knocked on Theo’s door. “Theo!” she called as Draco glared.

Blaise stepped out, with Theo behind him. Both wizards wore silk dressing gowns of green brocade open at the neck, revealing copious amounts of dark chest hair.

“Hermione, thank Salazar,” Blaise said.
“Theo, Blaise,” Draco said icily, “if you two could possibly put on some clothes …”

“Ignore him,” Hermione told them. “Why are aurors trying to arrest you, Theo?”

Theo was frowning, his dark eyebrows drawn, making him look like a satanic Harry with a sybaritic touch. “I don’t know,” he said. “I thought they cleared me after the Hunting Shack.”

“Who told you the aurors were here?” Draco asked.

“The Snake Charmer’s snake,” Blaise said. “The cobra came into the portrait in our room.”

Hermione nodded, remembering that Theo spoke Parseltongue. She bit her lip, looking Theo up and down. Draco stiffened beside her.

“Get dressed,” she told Theo. “Wear your uniform, robe and all, and get your school bag.”

“Shouldn’t he wear robes?” Blaise asked. “He’s a wizard of wealth and inf—”

“No,” she said. “Theo is a student here under McGonagall’s protection. Blaise, you get dressed as well, and both of you stay down here in your room. Ward the door as strongly as you can. Draco and I will go upstairs.”

“I won’t hide.” Theo strode toward Hermione, colliding with Draco, who had stepped in front of her.

“Stop it,” Hermione said, glaring at Draco. She stepped around him and looked up at Theo. “Those aurors have no right to storm a Hogwarts dormitory and snatch up students. We’re not going to make it easy for them. Draco, let’s go.”

Theo hesitated, while Blaise leaned against the door, dangerously seductive in that half-open dressing gown. “Dominating,” Blaise said with a smirk for Hermione. “I can see why you like that, Draco.”

“I’m not above hexing you right here,” Draco told him.

Hermione simply walked off, not looking to see if any of the men behind her were following instructions. She could hear Blaise’s carrying voice: “Tell me, boys, is she like that in bed, too, or did she like …”

Draco’s hand grasped Hermione’s, stopping her before she reached the doors. “You and Theo …”

Hermione huffed. “We don’t have time for this.” Draco just looked at her coldly. “No, I never shagged Theo, not even close. Now can we please go upstairs and try to keep him out of Azkaban?” Draco didn’t answer, but he did release her hand.

They climbed the two flights of stairs and opened a set of carved doors, then climbed the stairs to the Slytherin common room. They entered the room just seconds before two aurors burst through the portrait hole.

The Snake Charmer portrait swung inward as well, now hanging crookedly. Hermione felt a stab of rage—if the aurors had damaged that portrait ...
contempt when they looked at Draco, their wands raised.

“It’s the Death Eater,” the dark-haired auror said.

“You should all be in Azkaban,” the other snapped. “We’ll soon clear out this little pit of vipers.”

“You have no right to be here,” Hermione said coolly, stepping up beside Draco. “The only auror authorized to enter these dungeons is Harry Potter.”

“And what are you doing here, little Gryffindor?” The muscled, dark-haired auror snickered as he eyed her red-and-gold tie. “Bedding down with the snakes?”

Draco stepped forward and Hermione grabbed his arm. “Stop it,” she hissed, her voice pitched so only he could hear. “If you don’t want me to treat you like Ron, don’t act like him.”

The grey-haired auror whispered into his partner’s ear, and the younger wizard’s eyes widened. “Hermione Granger?” he repeated hoarsely.

“Miss Granger,” the older auror said to Hermione, “I am Auror Drebin and this is my partner Croft. We have an arrest warrant for a Theodore Ignatius Nott, and we intend to carry it out.”

Hermione held out a hand for the warrant and Drebin handed it over. She scanned it quickly while Draco traded glares with the younger auror.


“We are not at liberty to say,” Drebin said, stroking his goatee. “Suffice it to …”

“It doesn’t matter,” Hermione said. “You cannot arrest students without the Headmistress’ approval. Does she know you’re here? Does Harry know?”

“We don’t have to answer questions,” Croft growled, flexing his muscled arms. “Step aside—I don’t want to hurt you, girlie.”

“Croft!” Drebin cried. He sounded horrified, but Hermione watched him closely. The older auror could be stalling.

“You really think you can hurt the Brightest Witch of Her Age?” Draco drawled, sounding bored, but his hand was in his robe pocket.


“The Water Gate, through the lake,” he whispered back.

“Check on it,” she said.


“You have to!” she hissed back.

Draco nodded reluctantly, and Hermione sighed in relief. You don’t have to spell things out with Slytherins. With a final, haughty glare at the aurors, Draco spun on his heel and stalked down the stairs, his black robe billowing behind him. The aurors moved to follow, but Hermione drew out her wand and stepped before them.
“I’m sorry sirs, but you have no right to go down there.”

“You don’t belong here either, Miss Granger,” Drebin said. Croft flexed his muscles again, and Hermione rolled her eyes.

“I’m an invited guest,” she said calmly. “Draco was just getting some Potions notes for me.”

“I doubt Hermione Granger needs anyone’s Potions notes,” Drebin said. “And it is a crime against the Ministry to draw a wand on an auror.”

“Go get a warrant,” Hermione said. “Then you can sneak up to Gryffindor Tower at 6:30 in the morning and try to arrest me.”

“This is ridiculous,” Croft snapped, striding forward, “see here, sweetheart—” Hermione muttered under her breath and the auror slipped on the suddenly wet floor and fell heavily on the stone.

“How dare you attack an auror!” Drebin snarled.

“I didn’t attack anyone,” Hermione said. “He’s obviously very clumsy.”

“Incarcerous!” Drebin snapped, and coils of rope sprang out of his wand toward Hermione, only to bounce off her hasty protego shield. The ropes twined around Drebin instead, forcing him to drop his wand.

She heard doors slam behind her and the sound of Draco’s footsteps pounding up the stairs. “What happened?” he gasped, looking at Croft, who was still sitting dazed on the floor, and Drebin, wrapped up in ropes still attached to his own wand.

Hermione just shrugged.

“You were right,” Draco said, lowering his voice. “An auror wearing a bubble-head charm tried to break through, but the merpeople took—”

“What the hell is going on here—Hermione!” Harry barreled through the now-open portrait hole, hooking on his auror robes over a t-shirt and boxers. “What are you doing here? Ewww.” He grimaced suddenly, seeing Draco.

“Harry, they’re trying to arrest Theo for writing the ‘Die Mudblood’ messages,” Hermione said. Harry and Draco both winced.

“What happened here?” Harry asked, looking at the aurors. “Hermione, you didn’t hex them, did you? That’s Auror Drebin!”

“I didn’t hex anybody, they’re just very awkward,” she said. “That’s Drebin’s own wand binding him. Look, Harry, they have a warrant,” she said, giving him the parchment.

Harry gave the warrant a quick look. “What is this evidence?” he asked.

Hermione glared down at the aurors. “They either don’t know or won’t tell me. They tried to sneak in here before everyone woke up to take Theo away! I don’t think McGonagall knew about it at all!”

“I certainly did not,” the Headmistress said, striding into the room. “Miss Granger, no matter what the provocation, you simply cannot hex aurors!”

“But I didn’t, Headmistress, look, it’s—”
“What in Merlin is going on here!” roared Shacklebolt, leaping through the portrait hole. “Hermione, what did you do to them?”

“I could have hexed them, you know,” Draco said resentfully. “I’m somewhat offended that nobody thinks of me.”

“Well, you have been quite peaceful lately,” Hermione said.

“Why are my aurors on the floor?” Kingsley shouted.

“I think the proper question is: Why are your aurors here at all?” McGonagall said acidly. “This warrant …” she threw the scroll at Kingsley with a disdainful sniff, “… cannot be executed. I simply cannot allow you to drag a student out of Hogwarts.” Her tall black hat bobbed in agitation. “Head Auror Shacklebolt, when I gave your aurors the right to enter the castle, it was not for these purposes!”

Kingsley pocketed the scroll and waved a hand at Harry. “Potter, help Croft,” Kingsley ordered, and Harry moved reluctantly to pull the beefy auror off the floor. Kingsley waved his wand and Drebin leaped to his feet.

“I charge Hermione Granger with attacking an auror without provocation,” Drebin snapped.

“I did not attack anyone,” Hermione said. “I merely attempted to clean a dirty spot on the floor and Auror Croft slipped on the water. Then Auror Drebin cast an *incarcarus* spell and it bounced off my *protego* spell.”

“You decided to clean the floor during a confrontation with aurors,” Kingsley said.

“I like things tidy,” Hermione said.

“And you cast a *protego* spell against Auror Drebin.”

“I was frightened,” she said, trying to look frightened. Everyone in the room looked skeptical.

“You got off easy,” Draco said to Drebin. “Usually she Petrifies people for looking like they might possibly be threatening.” Harry nodded in agreement.

“Only people I like,” Hermione said. Draco smiled at her.

“I find it hard to believe any of this,” Kingsley said.

“Headmistress McGonagall can check my wand,” Hermione said. “And you can check the aurors’ wands. Our most recent spells will bear out my story.”

“Is that true?” Kingsley asked Drebin, who nodded reluctantly.

“None of this explains why two unauthorized aurors are in the Slytherin common room, attempting to carry away one of my students in the early morning,” McGonagall said severely.

“Headmistress, I apologize for the intrusion, but we do have credible evidence—”

“And what exactly is this credible evidence, Head Auror Shacklebolt?”

“Perhaps if we could go to your office—”

“Excellent idea,” McGonagall said briskly. “My office is a much more suitable place to discuss
your request to remove a student. And I think it’s best that Mr. Nott join us so he can be properly briefed on the evidence against him.”

“Where is Nott, Hermione?” Harry asked.

“I don’t know,” she said wide-eyed. “I only came here for Draco’s Potions notes.” Everyone looked skeptical again.

“I’ll get Theo,” Draco said, turning and walking quickly down the stairs.

“How could you, Kingsley?” Hermione asked. “No matter what the evidence is against Theo, how could you sneak a pair of aurors in here to kidnap him!”

“Hermione, you’re in danger,” Kingsley said. “All the muggle-borns here are.”

“The only danger I’m under is from your incompetent aurors!” Hermione fumed. “Croft here could have fallen on me when he tripped over his feet!”

Harry barked a laugh, which he tried to suppress under Kingsley’s glare. “I have a responsibility to root out dark influences …” Kingsley began.

“Is that what I am? A dark influence?” Theo drawled, emerging from the stairs with Draco. He was dressed impeccably in school robes and looked entirely relaxed.

“I consider myself an excellent role model,” Theo continued. “I have study guides and everything.” He winked at Hermione.

Kingsley gave a low groan. “I really dislike Slytherins.”

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Thebe’s bizarre "Not A Chapter." Hopefully you’ll want to play along!
NOT A CHAPTER: Gloriana Set Quiz

Chapter Notes

Yes, you read that right — no chapter today. Instead, in honor of our favorite swot and all you wonderful readers who reread this story, I present The Gloriana Set Quiz. There are 25 questions, with a few chances for extra credit.

To explain further, I've written up an FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions).

--

FAQ

Is this an open-book quiz?
If you like, although it might be fun to try to do it from memory first, then start looking things up.

After I have my answers, then what?
Well, it's up to you. You could post your answers in the comments section and maybe get tips from other readers. Or you could squabble with other readers about the answers, Hermione/Draco style.

When will you post the answers?
I'll make another non-chapter post soon.

What would Hermione think of the quiz?
She would consider it too easy and rewrite all the questions.

What would Draco think of the quiz?
He would consider it a sad waste of time better spent rereading his best scenes.

I wanna know what Theo's getting arrested for! Are you just shirking here?
Hush.

--

SCORING

Once I've posted the answers, you can add up your points. 1 point for each correct answer, with a half-point for extra-credit questions. (Except the last, which earns you a full point.) Once you total your points you can score as follows:

20+ Hermione
15-19 Draco
10-14 Ginny
5-9 Seamus
1-5 Lavender
"THE GLORIANA SET" QUIZ

1. How did the Squeaky Mice get their name?

2. Name one thing Draco loves about Ron.

3. In Hermione’s personal Ptolemaic system, who’s the sun, who’s a planet and who’s Ptolemy?

4. When Hermione and Draco try to say “hourglass” after visiting the Confidential Cafe, what do they say instead? (Extra credit: When Hermione tries to say Draco was lying about Lavender and Theo, what does she say instead?)

5. How does George Weasley taunt Draco?

6. Why did Vasile leave Romania?

7. Name one action that earned the Squeaky Mice detention (besides the first one).

8. Why did the Slytherin Beaters attack Draco during a Quidditch match?

9. Why did Lavender lie about sleeping with Draco?

10. What wizard did Draco quote in his letter to his father?

11. When did Hermione first clearly realize she was attracted to Draco?

12. What kind of flowers did Pansy ask Neville about during the Halloween Festival? (Extra credit: what did the flowers mean?)

13. Speaking of the Halloween Festival, what was Ginny’s costume?

14. How did Theo escape involvement in the war?

15. When did Draco first feel something between himself and Hermione?

16. What excuse did Leila give Ernie for why Hermione and the Squeaky Mice were spreading food on the grounds?

17. What did Ron give Hermione for her birthday?

18. Where was Hermione and Draco’s first kiss?
19. Why did Hermione have to go to London to get the baby Hydras?

20. How did Draco discover the Room of Requirement?

21. Once Hermione received the Gloriana Set, what two things had to happen to bind her and Draco to the jewels?

22. How does Hermione always describe Theo’s cologne? (Extra credit: What part of Theo’s body always distracts Hermione when she sees it?)

23. What phrase does Draco say in Potions that makes it clear he wants a relationship?

24. What does PORN stand for?

25. What tool does one need to dig up Virgin Earth?

EXTRA CREDIT (1 point): Name two ways “The Gloriana Set” deviates from canon.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Hermione gets the chance to lecture.

“'I can’t sit here with Potter,'” Draco said. "'I have class.'" He gave Harry a thin smile. "'And I have Ancient Runes.'"
The Committee on Magical Messages

Chapter Notes

And now we return to our story ...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The walk to McGonagall’s office was quick, and mostly silent. Students were beginning to move about the corridors and stared wide-eyed at the group of aurors flanking Hermione, Draco and Theo, led by the Headmistress. Harry edged up to Hermione and tried to ask her about the scene in the Slytherin common room, but backed off under McGonagall’s glare.

Draco, walking beside Hermione, brushed her hand with his. “This isn’t how I’d imagined our morning,” he whispered.

Hermione had to agree. This hadn’t been her plan either; she’d hoped for a little more time before sneaking back to Gryffindor Tower, time for maybe another … she felt her cheeks heat. It was tremendously embarrassing, being caught in the Slytherin dungeons with Draco before 7 a.m. by Harry, Kingsley, McGonagall and two aurors. Not to mention Blaise. And Theo. Merlin, why not bring in Ernie, Astoria and Justin Finch-Fletchley. Hermione glared at Kingsley’s back—this was all his fault.

Upon reaching the Headmistress’ office, McGonagall lost no time packing Drebin and Croft off by Floo powder, leaving the usual Magic Blood Message Committee and its Special Guest Star. Theo made a small production of escorting Hermione to a striped armchair and taking the other one. McGonagall seated herself behind her desk and the other three wizards stood around and looked annoyed.

Kingsley pulled out what appeared to be his own copy of Theo’s arrest warrant. “First of all, Mr. Nott—”

“Lord Nott,” Theo reminded him. He might be dressed in student robes, but he obviously had no intention of playing the role of McGonagall’s ward, no matter what Hermione advised. His left hand lay prominently on his chair arm, displaying his signet ring.

“The Ministry has evidence of your involvement in the threatening messages at Hogwarts, Lord Nott,” Kingsley said. He pulled out another scroll. “Azkaban documents logged a visit by you to Lucius Malfoy on Thursday, Sept. 6—two days before your return to Hogwarts.” He handed the scroll to Theo. “Is that not your signature, Lord Nott?”

Theo unrolled the parchment, and Hermione craned her neck to see a column of magically shrouded signatures except for the single scribbled name of Theodore Nott. She looked at Theo, whose face was impassive, but she said nothing. Theo wasn’t Draco; he wouldn’t appreciate her interference. She thought back to their dinner in Hogsmeade; obviously Theo had been less than candid when telling the story of his arrival in Britain.

“I haven’t agreed to any interrogation or seen any evidence linking me to the messages,” Theo said. “Perhaps if you would like to submit your questions in writing, I can respond when I have the time.”
Hermione almost groaned. Theo was playing the arrogant entitlement card again.

“Mr. Nott,” McGonagall said, with a slight emphasis on the lack of title, “I ask you to conduct yourself as a respectful member of the Hogwarts community.”

“This is serious. The Ministry has evidence linking Lucius to the ‘Die Mudblood’ messages.” Everyone winced.

“What kind of evidence?” Theo asked.

“Hermione, you can’t—” Kingsley began.

“Do you want his cooperation?” she asked the Head Auror. “Then you’ll have to tell him what’s going on.”

“He’s hoping if I’m kept in the dark, I’ll incriminate myself,” Theo said calmly.

“What if he agreed to take Veritaserum?” Hermione asked. “Same process as with Draco.”

Both Kingsley and Harry blanched at the very idea. “Oh no,” Harry said. “I’m not going through that again.”

“If you agreed to take Veritaserum? All questions would be written out beforehand, I’d approve them.”

“Don’t do it,” Draco said suddenly. All eyes turned to him. “It’s a helpless feeling,” he went on. “You’re stripped bare for all to see.”

Hermione put her hand on Theo’s. “I’ll help you,” she said, pushing away the memory of the trapped, hopeless look in Draco’s eyes as truths spilled out of his mouth. Oh, it was a horrid potion. But without it, they could be here all day.

“Perhaps,” Theo said, considering. “If you approve the questions.” He looked at Kingsley. “But first I want to know about this evidence against Lucius.”

Kingsley nodded at Hermione.

“Draco and I did some … research,” she said. “Those messages are the result of some kind of blood spell cast on the castle itself, we don’t yet know why.”

“How do you know it’s Lucius’ blood?” Theo asked.

“Because Hermione and I brewed an experimental potion that identified the blood as my father’s,” Draco cut in. “It’s a perfect match.”

“But of course, Lucius is in Azkaban,” Hermione continued, “so someone must have brought the blood here to the castle …”

Theo’s face was white. “You aurors think I went to Azkaban, picked up a pint of Lucius’ blood …” He shook his head. “No, you probably think I cut him with a smuggled knife while we talked, then brought the blood back here and cast a curse to kill all muggle-borns --”

“We’re not sure it’s a curse,” Hermione said. “We don’t know what triggers the letters or what it does—”
“The message makes it fairly clear,” Draco snapped, but Hermione wasn’t listening. If it wasn’t a curse, then …

“I’ll do it,” Theo said, breaking into her thoughts. “I’ll take the Veritaserum. And when we’re finished …” he glared at Kingsley, “I’ll expect a full apology.”

McGonagall moved away from her desk, just as before, allowing Kingsley to sit and write out his questions. Draco and Harry fidgeted and traded scowls. Theo sat stone-faced and silent.

Kingsley finished and nodded at Hermione, who replaced him at the desk. She struck out two questions and added two more before handing the parchment to Kingsley, who produced a small vial.

“Half a vial only, Kingsley,” she warned, returning to her chair beside Theo.

Theo drank half the vial and handed it back to the Head Auror, his expression unchanged except for some tightness around the jaw.

“Your name, please,” Kingsley said softly.

“Lord Theodore Ignatius Nott.”

“Did you visit Lucius Malfoy at Azkaban on Sept. 6?”

“Yes.”

“What was the purpose of your visit?”

“I wanted to talk about Father,” Theo said almost tonelessly. He shut his mouth firmly, but the serum obviously forced him to continue speaking. “Lucius Malfoy was his closest … associate. My father told me once, if anything happened to him, to seek out Lucius.”

“And you obeyed this order,” Kingsley said. “Why did you visit Lucius, having taken such pains to distance yourself from your family and their values?”

Theo looked bleak. “I don’t know,” he said. “My father sent no message for me, no note, nothing before he was executed. I thought perhaps he had told Lucius something …” Theo shook his head slightly. “I know he hated my mother, and he hated me. But he was my father.”

Hermione blinked her suddenly blurry eyes, suppressing the instinct to take Theo’s hand.

Kingsley cleared his throat and adopted a businesslike tone. “According to the logs, your visit lasted twenty minutes. What did Lucius Malfoy say?”

“What didn’t he say?” Theo responded, regaining a bit of confidence. “He ranted against the Ministry, Hogwarts, incompetent Death Eaters, Harry Potter and his friends, even his own family.”

“What did Lucius Malfoy say?” Kingsley repeated, technically staying within his list of questions, although Hermione narrowed her eyes at him.

“That Narcissa and Draco had gone soft and Mudblood assassins were lying in wait for both of them.”

Theo gave Hermione an apologetic look, but she just rolled her eyes. The Mudblood Assassins. That would be a good name for a rock band.
“Finally, I’d had enough,” Theo said, glaring at Kingsley. “I told Lucius that he and his precious son threw their lives down the toilet for fucking Voldemort. I said both he and Draco deserved everything they got—their stupidity and greed had helped to almost destroy the wizarding world.” He looked at Draco resentfully. “I still believe that.”

“Did Malfoy ever talk about your father?” Kingsley asked.

“Kingsley!” Hermione cried. “I didn’t approve that question!” But it was too late. Theo choked and tried to keep his mouth shut, but failed.

“Lucius said my father considered me his greatest disappointment and the two of them enjoyed many happy hours plotting how to disinherit me,” Theo admitted. “But my father hated his brothers even more, so they reluctantly gave up the idea.” He sighed. “Lucius said my father wanted me to swear on my signet ring that I would marry a witch from the Sacred Twenty-Eight and raise my son in ‘the old ways.’”

“Don’t you dare ask, Kingsley,” Hermione asked. “It’s none of our business.”

“But Hermione, ‘the old ways,’ that implies …” Kingsley began.

“It’s fine, Hermione. I didn’t swear that oath,” Theo cut in. “I had my own plans.”

Kingsley nodded and returned to his list. “Did Lucius Malfoy mention the blood messages?”

“No.”

“Did you write the bloody messages on the castle walls?” Kingsley asked.

“No,” Theo said.

“Did you cast any spell or take any action that could result in those messages appearing on the walls?” he asked. That was Hermione’s question and so was the next.

“No. I was as surprised as anybody else at their appearance.”

“Do you know who may have written or a cast a spell or taken any action resulting in those messages?”

“No.”

“Did you at any point deliver anyone’s blood to Hogwarts?”

Theo shook his head, looking a bit ill. “No, not Lucius’, not anyone’s.” He turned to Hermione. “Hermione, I had nothing to do with this.”

Now she did put her hand on his, his ring smooth and heavy under her palm. “I know.”

“Why did you return to Hogwarts in September?” Kingsley asked. The final question. Hermione had debated whether to allow it, but decided that the reason for his presence in the castle was relevant.

“I had a family name to redeem in the eyes of the wizarding world. With my father dead, my maternal grandmother Lady Gretchen and I thought I could restore my reputation.”

Kingsley’s face was cold. “How did you plan to do that?”
“Kingsley!” Hermione cried again, but it was too late. *Next time I’m cursing Kingsley’s parchment,* she thought. *One wrong word and he’ll break out in boils spelling, “sneak.”*

Theo’s face turned red, but he was compelled to answer. “My grandmother and I thought … a strategic marriage,” he choked out. He looked at Hermione. “A war hero, Brightest Witch of Her Age, a formidable political force if she only knew how to wield power.” He frowned. “But Draco outmaneuvered me.”

The entire room stared at Theo, aghast, Draco trembled with rage.

Hermione’s jaw dropped. “How could you, Theo?” She clapped her hand over her mouth in horror, realizing she’d asked a question.

“How could I try to marry you? Very easily,” he answered, unsmiling. “A beautiful, sexy woman like you … I even gave up Astoria.”

Hermione leaped out of her seat, her hand still to her mouth.

“You are not to go anywhere *near* Hermione,” Draco hissed.

“I second that,” Harry said, looking absolutely livid. He stepped forward, wand out.

“Harry,” Kingsley said, putting a hand on the assistant auror’s arm.

“You are not to speak to her, or touch her, or even *look* at her,” Harry snarled at Theo. Even Draco looked taken aback by the viciousness in Harry’s voice, and Hermione had expected the Slytherin to be throttling the accused by now.

“Harry!” Hermione had gotten her own emotions under control. “You are not helping!”

“We have gone far afield of our purpose here,” McGonagall’s cold voice cut in. “I don’t care to explore Mr. Nott’s questionable motives in his personal affairs. Head Auror Shacklebolt, is it fair to say that my student is no longer under suspicion regarding the blood messages?”

“Yes.” Kingsley rolled up his scroll and tucked it into his robes, his posture sagging. “Another dead end, I’m afraid.” He waved his wand and the arrest warrant vanished in a puff of smoke.

“Then I recommend that everyone except for Mr. Nott leave this office,” McGonagall said. “And Head Auror Shacklebolt, I request that Assistant Auror Potter remains in the castle, but no other aurors may enter without permission, including yourself. The castle wards will now prevent it. I am also rescinding your Floo privileges after your departure.”

‘I understand, Headmistress, my apologies,” Kingsley said. “Apologies to you as well, Lord Nott.” The last sentence dripped with contempt.

Then Kingsley turned to Hermione, who now stood between Harry and Draco, holding on to both their hands. “I sincerely apologize to all three of you, who’ve done nothing but try to help. The resources of the Aurors’ Office are at your disposal, Hermione. And I’d understand if you’d like to press charges against Drebin or Croft—or myself.”

“That’s not necessary,” Hermione said absently, still staring at Theo, who sat with his face downcast. She thought back to the Gryffindor party, to their dates in Hogsmeade, their kisses in alcoves and storage rooms, their breakup in his bedroom, the classroom confrontation, the attack at the Hunting Shack, his apologies. Each encounter stripped away another veil. Perhaps now she was meeting the real Theodore Nott.
“I suggest you three go on to breakfast,” McGonagall said after Kingsley Flooed back to the Ministry. “I’ll remain here with Mr. Nott until the serum wears off.”

Hermione let go of Harry’s hand, but retained Draco’s, or rather, Draco refused to release hers as they walked down to breakfast. As they entered the Entrance Hall, Draco drew her toward the House Hourglass cabinet. Harry just rolled his eyes and left them to enter the Great Hall.

“Theo had a plan, Draco,” Hermione was trembling. “I thought he really liked me, but it was just a plan …”

“Shhh,” Draco said, dropping his bag and taking her in his arms. “Yes, he had a plan, but he liked you, too.”

Hermione leaned her cheek against his robes, allowing her own borrowed bag to slide to the floor. Relief flooded her veins, that she was standing in this hall with Draco and not in McGonagall’s office with Theo, learning the truth at last about her boyfriend.

“Did you know about Theo and Astoria?” she asked him.

“I suspected it, they were quite … cosy at the beginning of the year,” Draco said. “Now that it’s confirmed, maybe I can get my mother off my back about this so-called betrothal.”

“I don’t want to look at him or talk to him or …”

“Let’s leave Hogwarts,” Draco said. “Tonight. Let’s go to the chateau. It’s quiet there, there’s a library.” He took her face in gentle hands, tilting her chin upward. “You can try to free Aimee, if you like. And there’s a seamy fishing village nearby with all kinds of suspicious characters to defend.”

“A … a library?” Hermione asked, still sniffling a bit.

“All in French, of course, but there are translation spells …”

Hermione frowned. “Translation spells are frequently inaccurate and fail to account for context—”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Then I will personally read the books to you in English if you will only deign to spend this weekend in a luxurious chateau in southern France crammed with history and perhaps allow a little ravishing by me on the side.”

“How would we get there?” Hermione asked. “Wait, let me guess, you have a portkey.”

Draco nodded. “There’s an empty inkpot on my desk.” Now Hermione rolled her eyes. *These purebloods and their portkeys to ancestral castles.*

He brushed her cheek with his fingers. “Will you come?” he asked. “The happiest times in my childhood were there … I went every summer with my mother.” He kissed Hermione lightly. “We can make our own memories.”

“No fireworks,” Hermione said. “Or dancers. Or yachts.”

“Certainly not.”

Hermione put her hand over his against her cheek. “I’d love to come,” she whispered.

Draco bent his head and kissed her, pressing her against the cabinet. By the time they entered the Great Hall, breakfast was nearly over. Their entrance incited much whispering, and when the two...
of them approached the Gryffindor table, the hall’s murmuring rose to a fever pitch. Harry sat alone at the far end, violently ripping apart a scone. From the look on his face, no wonder no one was sitting near him. Hermione and Draco settled opposite the assistant auror and opened their napkins.

“I fucking hate Slytherins,” Harry announced, spots of anger still in his cheeks.

“It’s alright, Harry,” Hermione said, adding a scone to her own plate. “Really.”

“It’s not alright,” Harry snapped. “Snakes trolling the school, looking for witches to clean up their sorry names…”

Draco’s face darkened. “I hope you’re not implying—”

“Godric, no,” Harry said. “Once the Prophet finds out about you two, the whole wizarding world will go spare. I’d get a bodyguard, Malfoy.”

Hermione took Draco’s hand. “It will be fine,” she said. “You’ll help, won’t you, Harry? Harry?”

But Harry’s attention had shifted to the Great Hall doors. Following his gaze, Hermione saw Ginny leaving the hall with Neville. Hermione cut her eyes over to the Slytherin table and noticed Blaise watching as well.

“Blaise won’t give up, will he?” Hermione asked Draco.

The Slytherin shook his head. “He’s convinced that Ginevra is ‘running from her feelings.’”

Harry glared at Draco. “What’s that bastard’s angle, anyway? Another marriage scheme? Where’s the political gain for Zabini? Ginny’s a blood traitor to one side of wizarding society and just another pureblood to the other.”

Draco sneered back. “A mite thick, aren’t you, Potter? You just don’t see it. Ginevra is a war hero. Beautiful, powerful, glamorous, capable of providing pureblood heirs. Famous in her own right—hell, she’s an athlete as well, being recruited by the Harpies, I hear. Blaise would be taking a gamble on how she matures, of course, but early marriage means a chance to shape her into the Zabini he wants.”

Harry slammed down his glass. “That,” he snarled, “is the most disgusting thing I’ve ever heard, and I had to hear Nott’s fucked-up plans for Hermione. Ginny is not something to be shaped and controlled.” He pointed a fork at the blond. “And Malfoy, if you think for one moment that you can control—”

Draco smirked. “Unlike Blaise and Theo, and might I add the Weasel and your humble self, I would not be so stupid.”

“How dare you compare me to those—”

“Of course!” Hermione cried suddenly. “I’ve been such a fool!”

“It’s alright,” Draco said magnanimously, taking her hand. “I forgive you for dating Theo.”

“What? No.” Hermione had stopped listening to the conversation when Harry mentioned the scene in McGonagall’s office. And then, something Draco had said …

She pulled her hand out of Draco’s and jumped to her feet. “Stay here, both of you. Stay here and
I can’t sit here with Potter. I have class.” He gave Harry a thin smile. “… And I have Ancient Runes.”

Harry glared, but Hermione just gave a huff of impatience. “Just stay here, both of you.” She dashed away from the table in time to meet up with Leila at the doors.

“Leila, you have a free period right now, correct?” she asked. She’d heard prefects complaining about Slytherin First Years causing trouble on Friday mornings.

“Yes, Miss Granger,” the girl said calmly. “I have some very interesting plans for the next hour.”

Hermione purposely didn’t ask. Plausible deniability. “Well, Leila, I’d like to ask you to do something interesting for me instead, as long as you can be discreet.”

“I am quite discreet,” Leila said. “Certainly more discreet than you and Mr. Malfoy.”

Hermione couldn’t disagree, so she just led the girl out of the Great Hall. “Fine. Now, here’s the first thing I need you to do …”

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Answers to The Gloriana Set Quiz!
Hello, Astute Readers! Today I present the answers to the fun and educational Gloriana Set Quiz. Keep in mind that these are not definitive answers; it’s a complicated story, and as with Hermione’s Ancient Runes essay, I may get some shades of meaning wrong. Feel free to correct me! I encourage it! Rebel against authority!

For each, I’ve included the chapter where the answer appeared as well. Hermione loves annotations. I have to say, this quiz clearly demonstrates that this is a very strange story.

So here we go:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1. **How did the Squeaky Mice get their name?**

Draco named them, actually. He interrupted the kids’ first detention with Hermione to apologize for coming on to her so aggressively in the Charms classroom. The kids had stolen Slughorn’s “squeaky flowers” and their squeaky mouse voices maddened Hagrid’s dog, who fell on a thestral and smashed a carriage. Later in the Potions Lab, Draco referred to the kids as the “Squeaky Mouse Club” and the name stuck. (15, “Squeaky Mouse Voices,” 18, “Gryffindor vs. Slytherin”)

2. **Name one thing Draco loves about Ron**

This is from Draco’s scroll in the first DADA class. He loves:

- How Ron finds even the shockingly low standards expected of him impossible to attain.
- How Weasley thinks with every part of his body except his brain.
- How Weasley becomes enraged when he doesn’t understand something, which means he is enraged nearly all the time.

(5, “Fighting Evil Is Fun!”)

3. **In Hermione’s personal Ptomaleic system, who’s the sun, who’s a planet and who’s Ptomely?**

Draco is the sun, Hermione is a planet. Ron is Ptomely. One could argue that Ron is the Earth as well since Ron thinks Hermione should revolve around him. (55, “I’m a Damn Planet, Ronald”)
4. When Hermione and Draco try to say “hourglass,” what do they say instead? (Extra credit: When Hermione tries to say Draco was lying, what does she say instead?)

hourglass = bugbear (50, “Knockturn Alley”)
lying = baking (61, “Research & Development”)

5. How does George Weasley taunt Draco?

Indirectly, he does so by flirting with Hermione. Directly, he makes a suggestive comment about Narcissa. (62, “Dumbledore’s Birthday”)

6. Why did Vasile leave Romania?

Romania expelled the vampire because he was too extroverted, with a tendency to talk to people. (37, “Slug Club, Part I”)

7. Name one action that earned the Squeaky Mice detention (besides the first one).

What didn’t they do? Their detention-earning antics include:

- throwing crumpets into the lake, trying to draw out the Giant Squid (45, “Secret Torrid Affairs”)
- enchanting Slughorn’s flask to follow him around and occasionally pour the liquid on his head (49, “Let’s Do Lunch”)
- trying to break into the Potions Lab (51, “Prey”)
- calling Snape a bat (59, “We Have To Stop Meeting Like This”)

And those are just the ones we know about! And the times they were actually caught!

8. Why did the Slytherin Beaters attack Draco during a Quidditch match?

Because Draco bullied them in past years, calling them Bum and Prat. (24, “Annoying, But Occasionally Useful”)

9. Why did Lavender lie about sleeping with Draco?

Because Hermione was mean to Draco, snapping at him and telling him to fuck himself, and mean to Theo, making him study so much, even though they’re both so nice to her. Oh, and Hermione acted all superior while getting ready for her date with Theo. (32, “Moaning Myrtle”)
10. **What wizard did Draco quote in his letter to his father?**

Arthur Weasley: “We have a very different idea of what disgraces the name of wizard.” (31, "Shifting Sands")

11. **When did Hermione first clearly realize she was attracted to Draco?**

After their second meeting in the Charms classroom, when she took off her clothes. That night she began fantasizing about him. “Damn it.” (6, "The Silver Snitch")

12. **What kind of flowers did Pansy ask Neville about during the Halloween Festival?**
   (Extra credit: what did the flowers mean?)

Gladioli, which symbolize infatuation. (38, "The Slug Club, Part II") The red flowers symbolize passion, while white means innocence.

13. **Speaking of the Halloween Festival, what was Ginny’s costume?**

Dolores Umbridge after her run-in with the centaurs. (36, "Halloween, Part II")

14. **How did Theo escape involvement in the war?**

His grandmother, Lady Gretchen, sent five specially trained battlewizards to fetch Theo when his father openly joined the Death Eaters. The wizards kidnapped Theo and dragged him to Germany. (25, "Dinner With Theo")

15. **When did Draco first feel something between himself and Hermione?**

In the carriage with Hermione on their return to Hogwarts. (48, "Healing")

16. **What excuse did Leila give Ernie for why Hermione and the Squeaky Mice were spreading food on the grounds?**

She said they were experimenting with magical compost. (61, "Research & Development")

17. **What did Ron give Hermione for her birthday?** (Extra credit: What did Ginny give her?)

A golden pin shaped like a book. Ginny gave her green lingerie. (20, "Hermione’s Birthday")
18. Where was Hermione and Draco’s first kiss?

The second-floor corridor, surrounded by Draco’s black mist. Sigh. (22, “Surprises”)

19. Why did Hermione have to go to London to get the baby Hydras?

The little Hydras were detained at the Customs House, not because they were deadly dangerous, but because each Hydra was considered three individual monsters rather than a single unit (part of a new creature standardization metric), and thus requiring three separate certificates per hydra. (40, “Unraveling”) The Hydras arrived in London, but Hermione had to fetch them personally because her name was on the paperwork. (41, “Plans and Schemes”)

20. How did Draco discover the Room of Requirement?

He wanted to hide from Luna, who was determined to discuss her renovation plans for the sinister, still blood-soaked cellars at Malfoy Manor. She wants to tap into a groundwater source to create a Spring of Renewal and believes the positive meditative energy could chase away any lingering Dark spirits. (48, “Healing”)

21. Once Hermione received the Gloriana Set, what two things had to happen to bind her and Draco to the jewels?

She had to thank Draco and he had to touch one of the diamonds in her hair. (29, “Spellbound”)

22. How does Hermione always describe Theo’s cologne? (Extra credit: What part of Theo’s body always distracts Hermione when she sees it?)


23. What phrase does Draco say in Potions that makes it clear he wants a relationship?

“I want you to have the right to be angry.” (32, “Moaning Myrtle”)

24. What does PORN stand for?

Pupil Organization to Review NEWTs. (18, “Gryffindor Vs. Slytherin”)

25. What does one need to dig up Virgin Earth?
A silver shovel. Fortunately, Neville had one as a gift from the Ministry for killing his wartime heroism. (41, “Plans and Schemes”)

**EXTRA CREDIT (1 point): Name two ways “The Gloriana Set” deviates from canon.**

There are likely many ways that I simply wasn’t aware of, but there were three ways I purposely deviated from canon to serve the story: Lavender survives the war, Astoria is a Seventh Year and Bluebell the fairy is 3 feet tall. Feel free to mention any others!

Chapter End Notes

**NEXT UP:** Harry bickers with Hermione. Leila approves of Draco. And yes, a mystery is solved.
When Hermione returned to the Great Hall, the four long House tables and the teachers’ table had vanished, and the magical ceiling was gray and sleety like the actual sky outside. November in Scotland was often overcast, but that morning was particularly dreary, with a slanting, icy rain fighting against a stiff wind. The rattling of the sleet against the hall’s large windows echoed in the nearly empty space. A few snitch-shaped cakes from the night before floated near the ceiling like little baked balloons.

McGonagall’s throne-like chair remained as well as her podium, and a dozen still-undecorated Christmas trees were placed around the hall. Behind the Headmistress’ chair was a broad stone wall hung with banners of the four Houses. Hermione looked thoughtfully at that wall as she walked through the double doors.

In the center of the empty hall, Harry and Draco sat opposite each other in two teacher’s chairs, arguing about the Inter-House Quidditch Match.

“Oh, come off it, Potter,” Draco snapped. “The snitch practically came up and introduced itself to Ginevra—”

“Always with the ready excuse, Malfoy—”

“Boys!” Hermione called. “We don’t have much time!” She ran over to join them, pulling out her wand and conjuring two more chairs.

“Time for what, Mi?” Harry asked.

“Our guest will be here any minute,” she said, trying to straighten her skirt and tie. She’d been running all over the castle and didn’t want to even think about her hair.

“What guest?” Draco asked. “What guest could be so important that you stick me alone with Potter for another thirty minutes of dreary—”

“Here we are,” Hermione said as the large double doors rumbled open.

Harry was standing, a look of shock on his face, and Draco and Hermione turned to see who entered the Great Hall. There, standing perfectly dry with every hair in place, stood Narcissa Malfoy.

“Mother,” Draco said, recovering quickly. He gave Hermione a sharp glance, then strode over to Narcissa. “What brings you here in this appalling weather?”

“I thought you might be able to tell me, darling,” Narcissa said, unclasping a black velvet cloak that held not a drop of rain.
Draco took the cloak, quickly conjured a cast-iron coat rack to hang it on, then escorted her to one of the chairs in the center of the room. Beneath the cloak, Narcissa wore grey satin robes and her hair sparkled with diamonds. Hermione wondered if she sat around at home dressed for a ball, or whether she had quickly transformed herself. Either way, it was impressive. Hermione tried to smooth her shirt and wished she could straighten her tights.

“Thank you for coming, Lady Malfoy,” she said, taking a chair.

“Miss Granger,” Narcissa said, eyeing Hermione’s wild hair, or the Gloriana clip, or both. “Mr. Potter,” she said, a shade more warmly.

“Always a pleasure to see you, Lady Malfoy,” Harry said. Narcissa turned to look at her son, and Harry shot Hermione a questioning look.

“Draco, shouldn’t you be in class?” Narcissa asked.

“Hermione wouldn’t let me go,” Draco said with a smile.

Narcissa fixed Hermione with a cold eye. “Your note was quite vague, Miss Granger. I assume you will share with us why it was necessary to bring me to Hogwarts and compromise my son’s education.”

Hermione barely managed not to roll her eyes. Narcissa’s precious son skived off class multiple times a week, usually to fly on his broom or sneak down to the kitchens. Missing one practically remedial Ancient Runes class would make little difference.

“Thank you for coming, Lady Malfoy,” she said. “I hope the journey was not too uncomfortable in this weather.”

“A little Slytherin girl—a Miss Durant—met me at the gate,” Narcissa said. “I found her very intriguing.”

“Leila? She is rather,” Draco said.

“Lady Malfoy,” she said. “Aurors arrived at the Slytherin dungeons this morning to arrest Theo Nott for writing the ‘Die Mudblood’ messages.”

Harry and Draco winced, but if she was hoping for a response from Lady Malfoy, she was disappointed. The witch merely raised an eyebrow. “I find it hard to believe young Theodore would do anything of the sort.”

“I did as well,” Hermione said. “But it looked very bad for him. You see, Lady Malfoy, Draco and I have brewed an experimental potion that can identify a witch or wizard’s blood, and we now know that your husband’s blood was used to create those messages.”

Narcissa looked at her son. “It’s true, Mother,” Draco said. “Hermione and I have been working on it for nearly two months. It’s a complex potion, but it works, and the blood used was definitely Father’s.”

“But your father is … confined,” Narcissa said. Hermione almost rolled her eyes again. Those Malfoys. Lucius was merely “confined” in a “place of residence” that inexplicably didn’t allow
owls.

“Exactly,” Hermine said. “Somehow, his blood was procured and transported here, and used in the spell that resulted in the ‘Die Mudbloods’ messages.”

“Hermione,” Harry said, exasperated, “do you have to—”

“Fear of saying a thing only increases fear of the thing—”

“You just like to shock people, and I must say, I’m surprised—”

“Perhaps,” Narcissa said in carrying tones, “Mr. Potter and Miss Granger could continue this discussion another time.”

“Yes,” Draco chimed in, sounding much like his mother. “I see where you’re headed, Hermione, and I must say, I don’t like it.”

Hermione sighed. “I know, Draco, I’m sorry.” She turned to Narcissa. “Lady Malfoy, Theo visited your husband two days before he returned to Hogwarts, and the first message appeared the first night he was in the castle. Aurors tried to charge him with the crime, but Theo proved his innocence under Veritaserum.”

Narcissa’s mouth twisted slightly; Hermione knew she had taken Veritaserum herself just after the war. Clearly the experience had marked her.

“Lady Malfoy,” she said quietly. “Why don’t you tell Draco why you cast that spell.”

“You seem very sure of yourself, Miss Granger,” Narcissa said.

Draco’s eyes widened. “That is not a denial, Mother.”

“Do you honestly believe I would cast a curse on the castle?” Narcissa asked him.

“But it wasn’t a curse, was it, Lady Malfoy?” Hermione asked. “Bluebell, our Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, was right from the beginning. Hate, but also love. It was a protection spell, wasn’t it? To protect Draco?”

Draco leaped to his feet, his chair falling with a clatter that echoed through the hall. “Mother!” he cried. “You didn’t!”

Narcissa was silent, and it was Harry who answered Draco.

“Of course she did,” Harry said, his face grim, looking every inch the auror. “Malfoy, your mother walked into a battle and lied to Voldemort to find you. She forced Snape to take an Unbreakable Vow for your protection. So yes, she is supremely capable of casting a spell onto the very walls of this castle to protect you from …” he looked at Hermione, “… what was the phrase?”

“Mudblood assassins,” Hermione said.

Draco ran his hands over his face, obviously trying to calm himself, then looked at Narcissa. “Tell me you didn’t, Mother,” he pleaded. “Tell me you didn’t cook up some scheme with Father to threaten Muggle-borns.”

“Sit down, darling,” his mother said coolly. “I won’t tolerate rude behavior.”

Draco barked a laugh. “Our family has served evil incarnate, allowed murder, torture and other
vile and soulless acts in our home, and now has apparently terrorized and endangered innocent students. And you object to an overturned chair? Any possible hope of redeeming myself and the Malfoy name has been utterly—"

“That’s not true,” Hermione said, “you can still—”

“I’m sorry, Hermione,” Draco said turning to her. “Sorry for all of this. We were living in a dream world, that this could possibly work for us.”

“Draco,” Hermione choked.

“Congratulations, Mother,” he said turning to her, and his voice was so cold and bitter that it was like Lucius stood before them, except Draco’s lower lip trembled in a way she didn’t think Lucius’ ever did.

“Congratulations,” he repeated. “You and Father have taken away the only true and good thing in this fucked-up life of mine.”

He turned back to Hermione. “Is there a reason why McGonagall and Shacklebolt aren’t here?”

“I thought we could talk it through … ourselves … before involving them,” she admitted.

“Potter, get them,” Draco ordered. “McGonagall teaches Ancient Runes at this time.”

“Are you sure?” Harry asked. “We can’t keep it quiet if …”

“I have no intention of keeping it quiet,” Draco said. Harry nodded and left the hall.

“Draco, darling …”

“No, Mother,” he said. “You’re trained to obey, right, like a good pureblood wife? You’ve been obeying Lucius’ orders, and now you’re going to obey mine. You had the opportunity to use your own judgment and you rejected it.”

“Draco,” Hermione said. “They’ll arrest her. Publicly. This violates the terms of her probation. They’ll charge her with casting illegal and harmful spells on the castle, with endangering students, with breaking that new statute against targeting muggle-borns, with …”

“Miss Granger,” Narcissa said, “you can hardly pretend to be concerned about my welfare.”

“I’m not,” Hermione said honestly. “It’s Draco I’m worried about.”

Draco picked up his chair and sat down. “Please take a seat, Mother,” he said in a tired voice.

Narcissa did so, her hands clasped. Her face was anguished now as she looked at her son. Hermione sat quietly, following Draco’s lead as well. This was his family at stake.

“Alright, Mother,” he said more calmly. “How did this happen?”

Narcissa took a jagged breath. “Over the summer, the Daily Prophet ran so many stories about the rising hatred for purebloods, and for our family especially. I don’t deny we have earned much of it. But I couldn’t allow you to return to school unprotected.” She unclasped her hands and extended them toward her son.

“Draco,” she said. “I didn’t know about the messages … when your father told me of the spell, he never mentioned … his hatred runs very deep …” She dropped her hands and looked down. “Very
deep in his blood. Through generations."

Hermione thought of the Malfoy family motto: *Sanctimonia Vincet Semper*: “Purity will always conquer.”

Draco shook his head. “How could you have so little faith in me? I’m not a child anymore.” He sighed. “The only real danger to me was the danger *you* caused. Who did you think was the prime suspect when that first message appeared in Gryffindor Tower? I had to take Veritaserum myself to clear my name, and who knows how that would have ended if it hadn’t been for Hermione! She’s defended me in the teeth of the school, her friends and the Ministry!”

“You must have been in danger, Draco!” Narcissa protested. “The messages wouldn’t have appeared if, if … muggle-borns hadn’t threatened you!”

Draco looked at her with contempt. “Yes, it is quite an efficient protection spell. You and Lucius are to be congratulated. All it took was a crying Fourth Year raising his wand and a few fits of temper from Hermione and suddenly we have students slamming into walls! You could have hurt her! A stone block fell from the ceiling on Sunday—it could have killed her!” He glared at Narcissa. “I will never forgive you for that. Ever.”

The doors slammed open again, and Harry, Kingsley and McGonagall entered at a run. Kingsley immediately locked and warded the door and advanced on Narcissa, who sat rigid in her chair. “Is this true, Lady Malfoy? Do you admit to casting the spell that produced those messages?”

Narcissa glanced at Draco’s implacable face and nodded. “Yes,” she said.

“We understand from Mr. Potter that you cast a protection spell, designed to shield Mr. Malfoy from any attacks from Muggle-borns,” McGonagall said.

“Yes,” Narcissa said.

“When did you cast the spell?” Kingsley said.

“On … I believe it was a Saturday, Sept. 8. My first visit to Hogwarts this term.” Narcissa’s back was straight and her voice was cool. “After sending Draco away, I slipped into the Great Hall and warded the door. It’s a very short spell, I used Lucius’ blood. I didn’t understand all the words. Lucius assured me it was not a lethal spell, it would only affect any muggle-born who attacked Draco. Actually, it would protect anyone of Lucius’ blood.”

“How does it work?” Hermione asked.

Narcissa gave her a thin smile. “I’m sure you know already, Miss Granger.”

“We’d rather hear it from you, Lady Malfoy,” Kingsley said.

“The spell soaks into the castle walls,” Narcissa went on. “My understanding is that the castle repels curses but not protective magicks. Whenever the castle sensed an attack on Draco, it responded.”

“There are a thousand years of magic in these walls,” McGonagall said. “The castle is very nearly sentient. There are already spells in place to protect students, and apparently this was considered simply another one.”

“Potter says you claim you didn’t know about the messages,” Kingsley said.
“I didn’t,” Narcissa said. “I assumed, perhaps some blood dripping in the walls. I am willing to take Veritaserum –“

Kingsley nodded. “It may come to that, although I believe you.” His voice was cold, but not unkind. “You will need to come with us to the Ministry.”

“We can’t leave the spell on the walls,” Hermione said, standing. “We need Lady Malfoy to remove it.”

“I can’t,” Narcissa said. “Not without Lucius’ blood—”

Hermione pulled the vial of blood out of skirt pocket. She’d been carrying it around since Harry gave it to her, wrapped in cushioning spells.

Narcissa looked at the vial in her hand, then up at Hermione. “You chose this hall on purpose, Miss Granger,” she said. “How did you know?”

“I saw you outside the Great Hall with Draco, and it seemed logical,” Hermione answered. “A spell this strong, extending through the whole castle, it must have been cast here, in the heart of the castle.” She pointed at the broad expanse of wall behind the Headmistress’ throne. “Probably there.”

Narcissa looked at the wall and hesitated.

“Remove the spell, Mother,” Draco said. “It is unlikely I will have children, but if I do, and they attend Hogwarts, I won’t have the castle dropping stones on any muggle-born who moves toward them in a possibly threatening manner.”

Narcissa looked horrified. “Draco, you wouldn’t—”

“Some names are perhaps meant to die out, Mother,” Draco said, and his face looked so tight and bleak that Hermione almost burst into tears.

“Draco, don’t talk that way, you must carry on—”

“Never say ‘must’ to me,” Draco said. “Never again.”

Hermione didn’t know how Narcissa did it, but she managed to stiffen her spine and walk over to the wall behind McGonagall’s chair, her heels clicking on the stone floor. They watched her pour the blood on the walls, murmuring under her breath, and the floating candles above flickered, went out for an instant, plunging them in gray shadow, with only the weak light outside. Then the candles blazed into flame once more and the wall glowed faintly red, then faded.

Draco turned to Hermione and nodded. Hermione pulled out her wand, casting a medium-grade stunning spell at Draco. The hex hit him in the arm, and the spell was strong enough to spin him around and make him stagger backward and almost fall.

Harry, Kingsley and McGonagall all had their wands out, prepared to interfere if the castle responded. But Hermione didn’t move and the walls remained solid.

“The spell is gone,” Hermione said.

“Very well,” Kingsley said, walking up to Narcissa, who still stood by the chair, her wand at her side. “Lady Malfoy, you are under arrest for violating your terms of probation by casting illegal and harmful spells on the castle.”
“Don’t forget endangering students,” Draco said, “and breaking the Ministry statute against targeting muggle-borns. And—”

“That’s enough to go on with,” Harry said.

“It’s not nearly enough,” he said, looking very much like the Malfoy she remembered from Sixth Year. “You can also charge her with assault against Dennis Creevey and Hermione Granger, and colluding with a convicted Death Eater to cause harm. And don’t forget to charge Lucius as well.”

“Draco,” Narcissa moaned. “Don’t—they’ll execute him. They’ll kill your father.”

“He deserves it,” Draco said. Hermione opened her mouth. “And don’t you dare start quoting at me, Hermione. Lucius Malfoy deserves execution, and we all know it, and if the Ministry had had the stones to do it after the battle, as they did with Ignatius Nott, we all would have been spared much grief. Charge them both, Shacklebolt. I’ll testify.”

Draco raised his wand, easily breaking Kingsley’s wards, and left the hall without a look at anyone, least of all his mother. The doors closed behind him with a thunderous boom, echoing through the nearly empty space, and Hermione wondered if Draco had slammed the doors on everyone, including herself.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Hermione makes a promise. Harry meets the Squeaky Mice.
Hermione unfolded the Marauders’ Map with trembling hands. The minute Harry and Kingsley had left the Great Hall with Narcissa, she had raced up to the Room of Requirement. But it had been empty, no Draco standing there, arms outstretched. Now Hermione was in her bedroom, praying that his dot would appear on the parchment.

It didn’t, of course, and so there was only one thing to do. Hermione changed into jeans and a jumper, then packed her beaded bag and slung a heavy cloak over her shoulder. She was closing her bedroom door when she heard a familiar voice: “Miss Granger.”

Hermione turned. Snape was in the apothecary painting, standing before the shop. “Where are you going?” the small, painted Headmaster demanded.

“I have to find Draco, sir,” Hermione said. “Aurors just arrested Narcissa for casting the spell that wrote the blood messages.”

“I find that difficult to believe,” Snape said.

“Believe it,” Hermione said bitterly. “She cast a spell on the castle to protect Draco, using Lucius’ blood.” Her mouth twisted. “It was Lucius’ hatred that manifested the words ‘Die Mudbloods.’”

Snape’s eyebrows drew down. “Where is Draco?”

“I don’t know. He’s left the castle. If he doesn’t return for Monday classes, he’ll violate his probation. The Wizengamot could send him back to Azkaban.”

The former Headmaster stepped closer to the gilt-edged frame, filling the canvas. “Where will you go?”

“I’m not sure,” Hermione admitted. She hadn’t really thought it through. “He can’t go to the Manor—aursors are likely swarming all over it, looking for evidence. The only other …” she trailed off, eyes wide.

“What?” Snape demanded.

“I know where he is,” Hermione said. She turned and burst through her bedroom door again, slamming it behind her. Stripping off her cloak, she took a deep breath; this had to work. She touched the Gloriana clip in her curls.

“Aimee!” she called. “Aimee!”

A loud crack sounded and the little elf appeared, her dark eyes even wider than usual. She wore a white pillowcase edged with seed pearls. “La-la maîtresse!” Aimee squeaked, and rattled off a string of French too fast for Hermione to understand, except the word “Draco.”
“Aimee,” Hermione said gently. “S’il vous plaît. Please stop.”

Aimee shut her mouth with a snap and looked at Hermione with imploring eyes.

“Thank you for answering my call,” Hermione said. That Aimee still regarded her as mistress was encouraging, although ordering a house elf still made her skin crawl. “I’m looking for Draco.”

“D-Draco?”


Aimee giggled nervously, her large ears flapping under her lacey bow.

“Draco left school today, but it’s very important he returns. He made a promise to the Ministry, Aimee.”

“Oui, la maîtresse Hermione,” Aimee whispered, eyes on the floor.

“He’s at the Chateau, isn’t he, Aimee?” The elf began to tremble. “I won’t ask you to betray him, or take me to him.” Aimee relaxed slightly.

“I’m going to give you a message … in the event that you possibly might see him …” Hermione waved her hand, “… someday.”

Aimee nodded, looking nervous.

Hermione eyed the little elf. She’d considered sending Draco an owl or Patronus, but the Ministry could be watching for owls, and a Patronus felt too … forceful. She had to go about this carefully.

“If you happen to see Draco, tell him …” Hermione remembered Draco’s tight, bleak face in the Great Hall and fought to keep her voice steady. “Tell him not to lose hope. He must return to school. I won’t bother him, I promise. I-I’ll stay away.”

Aimee nodded vigorously, large tears dropping from her thickly lashed eyes. “Mistress says not to lose hope. Master Draco must return to school. Mistress promises not to bother him and will stay away,” the elf recited.

“Do you know what his parents did?” Hermione asked.

The elf nodded, blowing her nose on the edge of her pillowcase.

“Both Narcissa and Lucius are imprisoned now, and soon there will be a trial,” Hermione said. “I am determined that Draco will not join them in Azkaban. But he must return to school.”

Aimee nodded rapidly. “Aimee will do everything she can!” she cried. “Aimee will deliver the Mistress’ message and tell Master Draco he must return to school!” Hermione fought to keep from smiling; the elf looked ready to clock Draco with a silver tray if he dared resist.

“Thank you, Aimee.” The little elf gave a loud sniff and disappeared with a crack.

Hermione opened her bedroom door and saw Snape still dominating the painting across the hall.

“Draco is in France,” Hermione said in a low voice. Snape frowned terribly. “I just spoke to the Chateau’s house elf. I-I’ve promised to leave Draco alone if he returns to school.”

“He had better return, Miss Granger,” Snape said. “This is no time to play the coward.”
“Draco is not a coward,” Hermione snapped. Snape’s lip curled.

“He’ll return,” she insisted. “He’ll return and we’ll figure it all out. Draco will redeem his name—I don’t care if they march both his parents out to the Quidditch pitch and Avada them right there!” Hermione could feel magic sparking off her curls and tried to take a calming breath.

Snape merely raised an eyebrow. “I fail to see how a tantrum will help matters.”

Hermione glared. “Watch yourself, Headmaster Snape. I know about a storage room with a nice can of magical paint thinner.”

***

News of Narcissa’s arrest got out almost immediately, and within a day the entire wizarding world knew that Malfoys had once again infiltrated Hogwarts to hurt students. Hermione had a wretched weekend and was half-crazed with sleep deprivation when Harry met her Monday morning in the Gryffindor common room. She raised her eyebrows at him as she came down the stairs, Crookshanks following behind, but Harry shook his head. No sign of Draco. The fluffy orange cat jumped through the portrait hole ahead of them and streaked off down the corridor.

“I saw Narcissa last night,” Harry told Hermione as they walked down to breakfast. “She’s in a fairly comfortable cell at the Ministry, quite secluded. She agrees with us about Draco—he must return to Hogwarts and complete his probation.”

Harry stopped and faced her. “She’s terrified, Hermione, not for herself, but for Lucius and Draco. If Lucius is executed and Draco sent to Azkaban …” Harry shuddered. “I don’t think she’ll survive it.”

“Draco is not going to Azkaban,” Hermione said. “If he doesn’t turn up in Ancient Runes today, I’ll go to France and fetch him here myself.”

Harry glanced around to confirm they were the only ones on the fourth-floor landing. “We’ll go together.”

“Harry, you’re supposed to stay here and …”

“Why should I? The spell is lifted, there will be no more messages.”

“You told McGonagall you’d stay to reassure the school until the trials …”

“No.” Harry said. “You followed me to hell and back during the war, and I’ll follow you now.” He grinned. “I’d ask Ron to join us, but I don’t think his heart would be in it.”

“Prat,” Hermione said, smacking him on the shoulder. He just grinned more widely and put an arm around her as they descended the stairs.

They entered the Entrance Hall to find Leila and Percival standing by the Hourglass Cabinet. Leila looked up, her eyes widening, and Hermione saw Percival hastily stow a glass bottle in his robes.
Unfortunately, Harry noticed as well. “What do you have there, Mr. …?”

“Knightley,” Percival said.

Hermione couldn’t help smiling. Percival Knightley? She couldn’t imagine less heroic-looking boy. But then Harry hadn’t been much to look at during their First Year either.

“It’s a tonic, Assistant Auror Potter,” Leila said brightly. Sure enough, when Percival handed Harry the bottle, its label read: PERFECTLY INNOCUOUS TONIC.

Harry’s lips twitched. “I suppose you’re both a bit tired from all your studying.”


“It has been a long couple of weeks,” Harry said. “Perhaps I should try a few drops.” Leila and Percival’s eyes bugged out.

“NO!” Percival cried. “I mean … we … you …”

“That’s all the tonic we have, Assistant Auror Potter,” Leila piped up. “And we have some very difficult exams this week.”

Harry exchanged looks with Hermione, who bit her lip to hide a smile. “Very well,” Harry said. “I’ll just keep this for you, then. I won’t drink it, but if you feel the need for a tonic, just come and find me.”

Leila and Percival’s faces fell. “Yes, sir,” Percival said sullenly. The two children turned to leave the Entrance Hall, then Leila spun around.

“By the way, Miss Granger,” she said, “your cat is chasing pigeons again.”

Hermione groaned. She should have known. Crookshanks chasing pigeons was usually harmless fun, but now the birds didn’t stand a chance …

“Go on to breakfast,” she told Harry. “I’ll be there soon.” Harry’s eyes narrowed, but he nodded and entered the Great Hall.

“He’s very dashing,” Leila said, looking after Harry.

Percival snorted. “He’s an absolute tosser. He took our Wrapsodi!”

“Yes,” Leila said serenely. “I’ll have to seek him out and ask for it back.” She began walking toward the Great Hall doors.

“What? He won’t give it to you,” Percival said, following her.

“I have my ways.”

“Ways? What ways? …”

Hermione stared after the bickering children, then shook her head. Harry had better watch out.

The castle’s giant oak doors creaked open and Hermione stepped outside, shivering in the cold November morning. Right in front of doors, in clear sight of the Entrance Hall windows, was Crookshanks hunting pigeons.
One couldn’t call it a hunt, really: The pigeons couldn’t fly more than a foot above the ground; they could only pathetically hop about, squawking madly. Crookshanks had one flapping bird in his paws, and was dragging it about as he stalked a second one. As angry as Hermione was at the pigeons for attacking owls, the sight was too sickening to tolerate.

“Crookshanks!” she scolded, “let that pigeon go!”

The cat gave a long, complaining yowl, shaking his captured bird.

“Those pigeons are under a spell, Crookshanks, and it’s wrong to hunt them!”

Crookshanks yowled again, clearly unconvinced.

“Yes, I know they’re vile, nasty birds,” Hermione said. “That’s why they’re under a spell. It’s a punishment, not a death sentence!”

Her familiar hissed, but released the bird, then looked at Hermione with reproachful golden eyes.

“I know,” she said. She glared down at the pigeons, now clustered together and eerily silent, watching her. “Over here, Crookshanks,” she said.

Hermione led the cat a few feet away, then picked him up. “It’s quite all right for you to chase the pigeons,” she whispered in one ear. “But you mustn’t hurt them. Or eat them. You don’t know where they’ve been.”

Crookshanks hissed and looked at the birds balefully. Then he nudged Hermione’s hand with his nose—his way of indicating agreement. Hermione dropped a kiss on his furry head and put him back on the grass. The cat immediately bounded over to the pigeons, who pitifully tried to fly again. Hermione smirked; it served the horrid things right.

Draco was not at breakfast, and the entire Slytherin table was sober and silent. Leila sat beside Pansy. Hermione took a seat near Harry, Ginny and Neville. Ginny looked pale and worried, and Harry kept glancing at her, but they didn’t speak.

“I knew it was the Malfoys all along,” Dennis Creevey said loudly. “That entire family is sick and evil.” Most of the Gryffindors nodded agreement.

Hermione glared down the table at him. “Stop it, Dennis. Draco knew nothing about those messages. He did not cast the spell, Lady Malfoy did.”

“You’d better watch it, Hermione,” Dennis said. “If you don’t come to your senses, you’ll be visiting your Death Eater boyfriend in Azkaban.”

For an instant, the image of Narcissa shopping in Diagon Alley for socks and books and scarves for Lucius flashed through Hermione’s mind, and she brutally pushed it aside. “Draco is not going to Azkaban.”

Dennis pretended to look around the hall. “Where is he then, the coward? On the run, is he? How long will that last?”

The Great Hall was quiet; even the Teacher’s Table was watching. “Dennis,” Hermione said, keeping her voice level. “I understand, I really do. Those ‘Die Mudbloods’ messages were terrifying. What Narcissa and Lucius did was horrible. But it was Lucius’ hatred and Narcissa’s ruthlessness that cast that spell. Draco knew nothing about it.”
“So he says,” Dennis sneered.

“He said so under Veritaserum,” said Harry. “I was there. Malfoy voluntarily took Veritaserum to prove his innocence.”

“Innocent? Malfoy?” Dennis cried. “It made me sick to see him sitting in this Hall during Dumbledore’s ceremony. He tried to kill Dumbledore!”

“He refused to kill Dumbledore,” Harry snapped. “Again, I was there. You were not.”

“Come on, Harry,” Hermione said, pulling at his sleeve. They were doing more harm than good here; the entire hall was murmuring and many at the Gryffindor table looked at Hermione and Harry with unfriendly eyes. Harry gave Dennis a final glare, obviously trying to think of a charge to bring against him, but followed Hermione out of the hall.

He had to walk briskly to catch her—Hermione was already halfway to Ancient Runes, hoping against hope to see that long, slender form leaning against the corridor wall, reading a scroll, perhaps, impeccable in his pressed robes and silver cufflinks.

But he wasn’t there; the corridor was empty. Hermione stopped and stared at the classroom door, her vision blurring. He couldn’t give up, he just couldn’t …

Then she heard them, those familiar footfalls. Draco was in the Ancient Runes corridor, walking toward them, back stiff and pale face expressionless.


“Yes.” Cold grey eyes flickered over to Harry. “Where is my mother?”

“At the Ministry. I saw her last night,” Harry said. “We’ve made her as comfortable as possible, but she’s very worried about you.”

“She should be,” Draco said indifferently. His gaze turned to Hermione. “You had no right to call Aimee.”

“Of course I did,” Hermione answered tartly. “She came, didn’t she?”

“Aimee is my elf,” Draco said. “I’ve ordered her not to leave the Chateau again.”

Hermione crackled with fury. “You what? She is not property, she is a living, breathing person! Did you tell her to punish herself for coming to me? Did you order her to burn her ears or smash her feet or —”

“Hermione!” Harry yelled. Draco’s face went white, then brick-red. Hermione clapped her hand over her mouth, horrified by what she’d just said.

“How dare you?” Draco snarled. “I would never—”

“I’m sorry, Draco,” Hermione said, tears running down her cheeks. “I didn’t mean it. I know you wouldn’t hurt Aimee, I’m just so angry, you were gone and I didn’t know if you’d come back, and I don’t want to buy socks and books!” She felt Harry’s arm around her.

“You’ve really put her through it, Malfoy.” Harry’s voice was cold. “She’s been defending you all weekend and this morning, too, and worrying about the consequences if you didn’t come back. I know it goes against the grain for you Malfoys, but could you please try not to make things
worse?"

No one spoke, and the only sound was Hermione gulping as she tried to stop crying. Splendid, now she had a headache.

“I’m going to stay in school,” Draco said finally, his voice strained. “I’m not going to Azkaban. I promise.”

Hermione looked up, blinking tears out of her eyes. Draco took a deep breath. “I will stay in school,” he said, looking directly at her. “I will complete my probation. I promise.”

Harry looked unconvinced. “You need to stay away from her,” he told Draco.

“No, Harry, Draco—”

“He’s right.” Draco’s eyes were red-rimmed and sad. “It’s for the best.”

Hermione stepped closer. “No, together we’ll find a way—”

Draco shook his head. “No, we won’t. You can’t dig me out of this, I have to do it myself. Alone.”

“He’s right, Hermione,” Harry said.

“Well, I don’t agree,” Hermione snapped. She couldn’t believe Harry and Draco picked this moment to agree. “I won’t just stand by and—”

“Yes, you will,” Draco said. “You promised if I returned to school, you wouldn’t bother me. You’d stay away. Isn’t that what you told Aimee?”

Nuts. He had her. Hermione scowled. “Yes, but—”

“Get her out of here, Potter,” Draco said. He slumped slightly, looking drained. “Just get her out of here. Please.”

“Come on, Hermione,” Harry said, pulling her away.

“But I can’t miss class—”

“Merlin, Hermione,” Harry snapped, “you can probably teach that fucking class by now. Come on.”

“This isn’t over, Draco Malfoy!” Hermione yelled as Harry tugged on her hand. “You promised you wouldn’t do this—you promised you’d only leave me to chase women and marry a Sacred Twenty-Eight bitch! You promised!” She yanked her hand from Harry’s and stomped out of the Ancient Runes corridor. McGonagall and her students stared as Hermione swept past, head high despite the tears on her cheeks.

Then Harry put his arms around her, letting her cry all over his nice auror robes. She expected empty consolation or perhaps muttered curses about Malfoys, but when she looked up at him, Harry was shaking his head.

“Sacred Twenty-Eight bitch?” he asked her.

“Draco promised,” she sniffled. “He promised he wouldn’t be noble.”

Harry just sighed. “Gin’s right— you two have a very odd relationship.”
Both Draco and Hermione kept their promises: Draco stayed at Hogwarts and Hermione didn’t bother him. It was the start of the school year all over again, with a few crucial differences. Pansy and Blaise publicly supported Draco this time and accompanied him to meals and classes. Hermione, Neville, Ginny and Harry also defended Draco at every turn, as did the Squeaky Mice. But the student body’s anger and hatred continued to grow to dangerous levels, with older students practically declaring open season on the blond Slytherin and hexes echoing off the corridor walls.

The biggest difference, however, was Draco himself. Instead of wrapping himself in an arrogant air of indifference, he was once again the hopeless, silent wraith of Sixth Year, ignoring everyone, keeping his head down and mouth shut, and disappearing for extended periods of time. He avoided Hermione whenever possible, was silent and cold in Potions, and managed to get his beanbag changed in Defense Against the Dark Arts. Herbology’s Winkweed unit was over, and Draco was once again on the other end of the large greenhouse.

Two days passed with no contact, and Hermione found it hard to remember that it had been any other way between them. She felt like she’d woken from a dream. Had this pale, cold man really pursued her, sent her suggestive notes in runes, waltzed with her, touched her, kissed her body in her bed and his own? Sometimes, when he looked at her, she saw a glint—he remembered every minute as well. She loved him so much, she knew this, but telling Draco that wouldn’t help now. She had missed her chance to tell him, and now he was determined to live his own hell alone.

Astoria returned to Hogwarts in time for Herbology on Wednesday, but she still couldn’t fly higher than five feet, rumor had it. Her usual sneering superiority had vanished, and Astoria walked the castle as pale and wraithlike as Draco, the Malfoy choker still circling her throat.

McGonagall summoned Hermione into her office to respond to Astoria’s accusations on the pitch, but the Headmistress’ questions were cursory at best. Once or twice she neared the truth, asking about the traces of Virgin Earth found on Astoria’s shoes and the pigeons’ odd behavior. She even mentioned Neville. But McGonagall always veered away whenever she approached a real clue, and it was clear she had no appetite for solving the riddle, especially after Hermione said that her own “independent” reading gave every indication that a condition like Astoria’s may possibly be temporary. In theory, of course. That was good enough for McGonagall, who sent her away with a sympathetic look and her office password if Hermione ever wanted “to talk.”

Hermione spent her evenings in the library, with Ginny keeping her company. If Ginny had Quidditch practice, Neville and Pansy would coincidentally turn up. If not them, Harry suddenly had “auror research” to conduct. Her friends obviously didn’t want her to sit alone, especially with the dark looks other students sent her way, and Hermione was grateful. Draco remained secluded in his room when he wasn’t at classes or meals.

Draco also kept turning up with mysterious injuries that week, and Harry began casually appearing in all of Draco’s classes and in the hallways he frequented. Hermione came across the two men arguing in an empty classroom after lunch on Thursday, with Draco spitting that he didn’t need a bodyguard, and Harry responding that what he needed was a fucking medic to follow him around.
Hermione leaned against the wall outside the classroom door so she could eavesdrop more comfortably.

“The hexes are getting worse, Malfoy,” Harry was saying. “You could end up crippling or dead, and then Hermione would kill me.”

“Hermione won’t—she needs you. She’s better off apart from me.”

“Merlin, you’re an idiot,” Harry said. “You think she’s apart from you? She’s lying in wait, like a lioness in the grass. She’s still wearing those creepy diamonds, isn’t she? You’re acting like you have a choice, like she has a choice.”

“You have to make her stop defending me, Potter,” Draco said. “People are going to turn on her, and on the Squeaky Mice, too, you have to make them all—”

“Hermione’s taking care of the kids,” Harry said. “And she can take care of herself. The only person here in danger is you.”

“I’m fine.”

“Just let me heal that fucked-up ear—what kind of hex was that?”

Hermione heard scuffling and the crashing of desks. “Get off me!” Draco yelled. “What the bloody hell!”

“Hold still, you fucking prat—sorry, I didn’t mean to get your eye—”

“You’re giving me more wounds, you fucking—”

“What’s going on?” asked a voice behind Hermione. It was Blaise, looking rather alarmed.

“Either Draco and Harry are killing each other, or they’re actually bonding,” she said. Men.

“Potter,” Draco snapped, “get your hand off my face or I swear I’ll—”

“I think your cheekbone is fractured—”

“Well, poking it won’t help!”

Blaise smirked. “I haven’t heard Draco sound this cheerful in days. I’ll leave him to it.” He turned to go.

“Blaise,” Hermione said, touching his sleeve. “Thank you. I doubted once whether you were really Draco’s friend, but I don’t anymore.”

His face was expressionless. “I assume you have a plan to help him.”

She looked down. “I don’t,” she said, ashamed. “I’m testifying at Narcissa’s trial next week.”

Blaise’s jaw tightened. “Is Draco testifying against his parents?”

Hermione nodded. “He said he would. Not that it would do his reputation any good. He’d just be the Death Eater who threw his parents to the wolves to save his own neck.”

“If you were together with him again, publicly, as his girlfriend or even fiancée—”
Hermione shook her head, although her pulse gave an odd leap. “Then he’d be the evil Death Eater who seduced Gryffindor’s Princess,” she said. Godric, she hated that title.

Blaise’s dark eyes were wide and sad. “Then it’s hopeless. If Lucius is executed, Draco will never recover. He’ll get his NEWTs and go into seclusion. Or abroad. Alone.”


Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Hermione cultivates some new hobbies.
Hello all: Whew, that was a pair of chapters, wasn't it? The final stretch of this story will be pretty turbulent, but fear not, it won't be entirely bleakness and angst. Hermione will contend with things in her own Hermione-like way, Astoria brings her own distractions, Luna continues to hunt Love Diggles, Harry is sticking around and Ernie will cap things off with one final event. And yes, more Dramione, too.

So there's plenty of interesting stuff ahead even if Draco is being Shakespearean about his situation.

Thebe

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione’s conversation with Blaise on Thursday had accomplished one thing: She was through with the moping about. Draco might enjoy haunting the castle as a brooding, tragic figure until Narcissa’s trial, but she didn’t have to live that way. If she couldn’t help her estranged lover right now, there were other interesting things she could do. One must move forward.

With such thoughts in mind, Hermione headed back to the Potions lab after DADA to check on her Scar Solution. She had taken it off the fire and let it cool for a week, and it had congealed into a lovely pink cream. Now she was ready to test it.

“I strongly advise against this, Miss Granger,” Snape’s portrait said for the umpteenth time.

Hermione unbuttoned her shirt cuff and pushed up the sleeve, baring the “Mudblood” scar. “Harry is in the library with Draco,” she said. “If something goes wrong, there’s a painting of a rose garden by …”

“I am familiar with the paintings hanging in the Hogwarts library,” Snape said with a sneer. “I was studying in that library before you were born.”

Hermione unwrapped a small, clean brush, the same type she used on the flobberworms. Then she took the lid off the cauldron.

“Do you have the Aurum Potio on hand?” Snape asked.

Hermione replaced the lid and held up a bottle of thick golden potion. Snape had given her the password to his secret private stores, where she’d fetched the same potion he’d used on Dumbledore to treat the Horcrux curse.

“The incantations will have no effect coming from me,” Snape warned. “You, Potter or Draco will have to speak the words.”

“I know,” Hermione said, lifting the lid again. “You’ve told me.” She dipped the tiny brush into the cauldron and stretched out her arm. Then she brushed a dab of the cream on the red, raised M on her skin.
The M glowed more brightly, sending tingles up her arm. Then the glow faded, leaving the letter looking exactly as before.

Hermione frowned. “It didn’t work. Maybe another …”

“Don’t.” Snape’s voice was tense. “Give it time.”

“But it’s supposed to—”

“Obviously the aconite has slowed the absorption process. An entirely predictable outcome that you chose to ignore. A few days, perhaps.”

“Fine.” Hermione donned dragonhide gloves and cleaned the brush thoroughly. She’d hoped the flobberworm mucus would counteract the anti-absorption effect. Maybe she should have used pond slime instead, but then the solution would run all over the …

“Miss Granger,” Snape said, sounding bored, “I assume you know the symptoms of aconite poisoning.”

“Numbness, sweating, skipped heartbeats and dilated pupils,” Hermione recited glibly. She buttoned her shirt cuff and rolled down her jumper sleeve. The bottle of golden potion she tucked into her bag to return to Snape’s secret stores.

“Thank you for your assistance, Headmaster,” she said. “Would you like me to move your portrait for a time? Perhaps the main Potions dungeon? You could observe Professor Slughorn’s classes. The First Year Hufflepuff classes are especially interesting.”

Snape’s lip curled. “Don’t you dare threaten me, Miss Granger.”

***

“I have … a present,” Hermione said with a smile.

“Give it to me,” Draco said in her ear, his voice low and dark. They were in the old charms classroom, having “lunch” two days before the Inter-House Quidditch Match. Draco was on the teacher’s desk, with Hermione standing between his knees. Outside the room’s wide windows, dark clouds had gathered to plan an afternoon thunderstorm, and the sunlight was grey and weak. Draco’s face was shadowed.

“Don’t you want to find your present?” she asked. Draco unraveled her tie and cast it aside.

“Where is it, Granger?” he whispered. “Where’s my present?” His hand unbuttoned her shirt and slipped between her breasts, stopping at the small wrapped object in her bra. Draco’s fingers closed around the ribbon-tied paper. Thunder rumbled faintly outside.

“Found it,” he murmured, plucking it free. Hermione smiled again, smoothing back his hair as he unwrapped the object without tearing the paper. A silvery glow lit up his face and he stared down at it wide-eyed.
At first glance, the object looked like a tiny Remembrall, just a simple glass ball. But then a light appeared within the ball, a swirling, silvery glow that tried to take shape again and again.

Draco looked at Hermione. “Is this what I think it is?”

She nodded. “I captured a bit of my Patronus. It’s a way to be with you … when I’m not with you.”

He raised the twinkling ball in his hand, awestruck. “Thank you,” he said quietly. His eyes shone as brightly as the Patronus inside. Then he held the little glass ball to his chest and kissed her.

“You will always be with me,” he murmured against her mouth. “You are my Patronus, Hermione. No Dementor, no evil presence can pierce my thoughts of you.”

He wandlessly floated the ball to land on a nearby desk, where it shone like a tiny star in the dimming light. Another low roll of thunder sounded. Draco kissed her again, and she felt warm fingers parting her shirt, easily finding her bra’s front clasp.

“Come, Hermione,” he whispered into her ear, rough palms moving over bare breasts. Lightning flashed as he drew her onto the desk. “Chase my darkness away.”

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When Hermione arrived at her usual library table Thursday after dinner, she was surprised to see Luna sitting there. Harry and Ginny must have added the Ravenclaw to the Hermione Watch rotation. She idly scratched her left forearm under her jumper sleeve; the carved letter M didn’t itch or feel warm at all, but the other letters were even more irritating than before.

“Hello Hermione,” Luna said brightly. “It’s nice to see you. Usually Harry puts me with Draco, but Draco went up to his room early.”

“You spend time with Draco?” Hermione asked in surprise.

“Oh yes.” Luna’s round blue eyes were fastened on a point at least a foot above Hermione’s head. “Blaise always lets me into the Slytherin common room.”

“How …” Hermione swallowed. “How is Draco?”

“Quite wretched,” Luna said in her breathy, frank way. “And rather jumpy, too, especially after Astoria Greengrass popped out from behind a chair last night and grabbed his hand.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped. “She what?”

“I saw her hiding behind the chair, but I thought perhaps she was looking for Meemy Loopers,” Luna said. “They’re wonderful for calming the nerves. They hide under furniture and hum little tunes only familiars can hear, but still relax the …”

Hermione blinked, still trying to imagine Astoria crouched behind furniture, waiting to pounce on Draco.
“Do you have much studying to do, Hermione?” Luna asked. “If not, I was hoping you could help me capture some Love Diggles. They seem to like you.”

“Why are you so determined about this, Luna?” Hermione asked. The witch was driving half the school mad with her Love Diggle hunt.

“It’s a private project for Bluebell,” Luna said sadly. “I was so excited when she offered it to me for extra credit, but now I fear I’ll let her down.”

Hermione almost growled. Bluebell. Of course.

“Would you help me, Hermione?” Luna pleaded, blue eyes wide. “Please?”

Hermione leaned back in her chair. She was caught up on all her assignments, with PORN planned out for the next month, and she did need a diversion …

“Alright,” Hermione said finally. “But I’m not running around the bloody castle with a net. We’ll do this my way.” She pulled out a fresh piece of parchment and labeled it “Love Diggles.” She hoped Ginny didn’t catch her doing this; she’d never live it down. “Tell me your methodology.”

Luna had none, of course, unless you called running around with a heart-shaped net and freaking out innocent people a methodology. The Ravenclaw’s routine was simple: Roam the castle looking for Love Diggles, spot some around an oblivious couple, and swing the net in the Diggles’ general direction as the Diggles—and the students—scattered. Predictably, such practices had yielded not a single Love Diggle.

“Your approach is inherently flawed,” Hermione pronounced. “You can’t just wander about and hope Diggles appear. You say the Diggles only swarm around certain couples; if we make a list of Diggle-attracting couples, perhaps we can find a common denominator. Then you’ll be able to predict where Diggles are likely to appear.”

Luna’s eyes were wide. “Of course! Logic! I didn’t think of that at all, because Diggles are attracted to romantic feelings, and romance isn’t logical.”

“I disagree,” Hermione said. “I think true romantic feelings are very logical. Perhaps that logic isn’t clear at first, but it’s always there.”

“Like you and Draco,” Luna said. “At first glance, you appear nothing alike, except for a taste for sexual deviance.”

“Luna!” Hermione was shocked. “I do not have a taste for sexual deviance!”

The library went silent around them, and Hermione glanced about to see students at nearby tables staring. Then the murmuring began, and Hermione distinctly heard “orgy.” She groaned and put her forehead on the table. Merlin spare her.

“Of course you do, it’s only logical, as you say,” Luna said. “Draco has a taste for sexual deviance, you were having sex with him, ergo you are also …”

“We had one night,” Hermione hissed, raising her head, “and it wasn’t deviant!”

“Well, it wouldn’t be, at first,” Luna said placidly. “He’d want to work up to it.”

Hermione glared at Luna, ignoring the sudden jump in her pulse. “We’ve gone far afield of the topic at hand,” she said, sounding like McGonagall.
“It is quite odd, really, that Diggles don’t swarm around you and Draco,” Luna said. “Or Harry and Ginny, or Neville and Pansy. But they’re often thick around Theo, whether he’s with Lavender or yourself.”

Hermione eyed the Ravenclaw, intrigued despite herself. She began making a chart divided into Diggle Attractors and Diggle Repellers.

“Don’t forget you and Ernie as well,” Luna said. “Oh, and that nice Slytherin boy had a cloud of them when I talked to him the other day. You know, the one who likes choking.”

“I doubt he likes the choking you’re talking about,” Hermione said darkly.

“You should have taken him up on his offer,” Luna said. “But perhaps you’re saving that for Draco.”

“Oh about those Diggles,” Hermione said hastily. “Do you see levels of attraction? Say, certain couples attract an unusual number of Diggles while others draw only a few?”

Luna nodded eagerly, and they spent a happy thirty minutes assigning numbers to various couples. Then they came up with various Diggle swarm criteria: intensity, duration and location. It was all nonsense, of course, to Hermione’s way of thinking, but it did pass the time, and maybe it would keep Luna and her net from terrorizing the school.

“Let’s meet again on Sunday,” Hermione said, “and see if we’ve drawn any conclusions. Meanwhile, observation only—no hunting.”

Luna beamed. “You’re a good friend, Hermione. I hope you and Draco get together again soon. Let me know if you’d like an activity rubric for the reunion.”

Hermione blushed, thinking of Draco’s list, still at the bottom of her trunk. “We have that covered, thank you, Luna.”

***

Hermione was walking back from Hagrid’s Friday night with Neville when she noticed some odd, shadowy movements to the left of the castle doors.

Hagrid had invited select students to his “Hydra Goodbye Barbeque,” where guests put sausages on long-handled forks and held them over the hydras’ cage. The hydras were due to return to Greece in a week (they were officially the property of the Athens Magical Zoo) and their departure date couldn’t come soon enough for Hermione. The “babies” had doubled in size, and their breath was less fiery but not yet poisonous. The Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures was sending officials to oversee the hydras’ transport and ensure the monsters actually left the country.

Not surprisingly, only Neville and Hermione had turned up at Hagrid’s farewell event—even Harry had refused to go, and Hermione had forbidden Leila from attending.
Hagrid had a lovely time despite the lack of guests, stuffing himself with burned sausages. Hermione and Neville secretly fed their own dinners to the Hydras rather than eat meat cooked with toxic monster fumes.

“Go ahead, Nev,” Hermione said as they approached the castle doors. “I want to enjoy the night for a bit. Clear my head.” Hagrid’s magical clover wine was some kind of strong.

“Stay close to the castle,” Neville said and tottered off unsteadily.

Hermione took a few minutes to look over the valley ringed by mountains. Night came early in November in northern Scotland. Hogwarts’ grounds were shadowy outside the ring of light cast by torches posted on either side of the doors. A faint red light flickered from the Hydra pen and trees sighed in the frigid wind off the peaks.

The scene looked tranquil enough, but Hermione could hear faint thumps and muffled swearing off to the right. She circled a corner and walked over to where two stone walls jutted out from the castle.

In the shadows between the two walls, a dark figure was riding a broom in the small grassy space. Well, “riding” was the technical term, perhaps. Astoria was on her Asperitas prototype broom, flying upward, then bucking backward, at five feet. Again and again she tried to break the invisible barrier. The Slytherin’s hair, necklace and silver-painted broom shone in the quarter moon's light.

After a particularly vicious lift—that Asperitas accelerated quickly—the spell’s invisible leash snapped Astoria sharply backward, knocking her to the ground. The Slytherin raised herself painfully to a sitting position, panting. She choked, a sound that might have been a sob.

Hermione froze, hoping not to be seen in her black cloak, but Astoria hissed and jumped to her feet with only the smallest wobble. The blonde was much taller than Hermione, but Astoria was the one trapped between the two walls, and Hermione’s wand was now in her hand.

“Come to gloat, Granger?” Astoria snarled.

Hermione said nothing, just raised her wand (Astoria flinched slightly) and created a ball of light that lit up the stone-walled space.

“No, Greengrass,” she said calmly. “I’m here to help you.” She’d been thinking about Astoria since her Love Diggle session with Luna the day before.

Astoria’s eyes widened and she clutched her broom to her chest. “The spell, you’ll take off—”

Hermione chuckled. “Merlin, no. And don’t bother threatening me,” she added, as Astoria began winding up for a stream of threats and filthy insults. “There is no counterspell. You’ll have to wait for the enchantment to wear off.”

“When?” Astoria hissed through clenched teeth.

Hermione shrugged. “Eventually.”

“I’ll destroy you for this, Mudblood! You’ll rue the day you—”

“Oh stand down, Greengrass,” Hermione said, rather amused now. Maybe it was the wine. “You deserved that spell and you know it. Anyone who would hex another flier off their broom deserves to be grounded for a while. I’m offering a different kind of help.”
“I don’t need help from a disgusting Mud—”

“Yes, yes, dirt under your feet and all that.” Hermione rolled her eyes. “I get it. Do you really want to keep this feud going, Greengrass? When are you going to learn you can’t win?”

Silence. Astoria’s hand tightened on the silver broom handle. “It continues to baffle me,” she hissed, “how you, who are nothing, think —”

“You may want to consider the possibility that I am not nothing,” Hermione lectured. “Rather it is you who are nothing, but only because you make yourself so. Your mind is narrow, your goals laughable and your penchant for using people only drives them away.”

“You think you know me, Mudblood.” Astoria’s smile was wicked. “You think you know Slytherins, that you can lead our men around and expect them to heel.”

“Obviously not, or I’d be with Draco right now,” Hermione said. “But perhaps you’re not speaking of Draco.” Astoria stiffened—very slightly, but Hermione caught the movement, even in the half-light. “Yes, I know about Theo. Is that all you had to offer, Greengrass? Pure blood and sick sex?” Hermione sighed. “So sad.”

Astoria strode forward, clearly determined to force her way out of the walled space, but Hermione raised her wand slightly and the Slytherin froze.

“As I said, I’m offering help.” Hermione continued. “I’m feeling unusually charitable tonight. Plus I have some extra time on my hands these days, with Draco off being noble and all. So, I’m willing to make a deal.”

“A deal,” Astoria repeated coldly.

“You drop this vendetta against me, and stop chasing Draco, and I’ll ...” Hermione stepped closer and touched the tip of her wand to the crooked M on Astoria’s choker. “I’ll free you from that necklace.”

Astoria stumbled backward in shock. She swallowed, the lattice of diamonds rippling on her throat. “I ... I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Narcissa Malfoy gave you the necklace, of course,” Hermione said. “It’s the only explanation. She ordered you to wear it, and to do everything in your power to renew your betrothal with Draco.”

Astoria flushed and opened her mouth, but suddenly her head drooped. One long, pale hand touched the diamonds.

“Every time I try to remove the necklace,” she whispered, “it tightens.” Another swallow. “If too much time passes without speaking to Draco, without touching him, it ... it ...”

Astoria’s words sobered Hermione, and she stared at her rival in horror. Was there no end to that family’s scheming?

“I told Draco once that his future could be different, and I still believe that,” Hermione said. “Your future could be different as well, Greengrass. You could shed the necklace and the legacy and walk away.”

Astoria’s face suddenly looked younger, a girl again. Then she frowned. “You can’t do it. How can a Mudblood undo centuries of ancient magic?”
Hermione sighed. Some people were so stubborn.

“I’m not a fool, Granger,” Astoria said. “I can read books, too, and I visited Borgin and Burke’s. There’s no way to break the spell.”

*Oh, lovely, another witch turning up at the shop with enchanted Malfoy diamonds.* Astoria’s visit might have reignited Borgin’s memory of the Gloriana Set. At the very least, rumors were likely spreading about that necklace.

“Let me try to free you,” Hermione said. “I can be … creative.” She looked pointedly at Astoria’s broom. “Obviously.”

Astoria looked struck by this. She was quite a logical witch when she wasn’t being controlled by racist hatred or cursed diamonds. “What could you possibly do?”

“Any number of things.” Hermione said carelessly. “First, I’ll ask Draco to allow you to speak and touch him regularly so you’re not tortured by the necklace. Then I’ll have a chat with Narcissa.” The direct approach was always best.

Astoria nodded, cringing slightly at Narcissa’s name.

“Excellent.” Hermione put her wand back in her cloak pocket with a smug smile. She began to leave the walled space, then turned back to give Astoria a hard look.

“One more thing,” Hermione said, “If I hear of you harassing, touching or even *looking at* Leila Durant, and the deal is off. I’ll see you expelled, and you can try to catch a husband with a Malfoy leash around your neck.”

Astoria nodded tightly.

“Say it, Greengrass.” Hermione wished the blonde wore a signet ring.

“I will not harass, touch or look at Leila Durant.” Astoria said. “And if you manage to remove this necklace, I won’t take action against you. I won’t pursue Draco.” She actually shivered. “I have no desire to be a Malfoy anymore.”

“Alright then,” Hermione said. She turned and walked back toward the castle, thinking of the fear and loathing in Astoria’s voice when she spoke of the Malfoys. Neville was right, Hermione thought. These were very deep waters.

***

Hermione had no trouble finding Draco Saturday morning with the help of the Map. Surely this could be an exception to her promise to stay away.

Draco didn’t agree. “You need to leave, Hermione,” he said sternly when she turned up at Slughorn’s opulent office. He was correcting Potions essays at the professor’s silver-inlaid desk, looking entirely suited to his surroundings. The lamps reflected off his shining hair, and he...
dominated the room as if it were his own.

Hermione moved to the other side of the desk, not daring to come any closer. This was the first time they’d been alone since … well, since they’d spoken in the Entrance Hall, before joining Harry for breakfast. The morning after their night together, a night she’d been trying not to think about.

Draco returned to his stack of essays, determined to ignore her. To Hermione’s right was Slughorn’s glass bowl of water, with a single petal that transformed into a fish. Green sand streamed into the lower bulb of the brass hourglass nearby. Flames crackled behind the fireplace’s elaborate brass screen, but the room was still chilly. Draco wore a heavy green jumper, its collar low enough to reveal a thin silver chain around his neck, a chain so thin as to be hardly visible. Her eyes picked out the faint gleam of silver as they swept down the long muscles of his throat, from sharp jaw to collarbone, his skin glowing in the lamplight … Hermione shook her head. Focus.

“I want to talk about Astoria,” she said.

Draco looked up. “Has she been harassing you? I’ll—”

“No, nothing like that. It’s the necklace. Draco …” she swallowed hard. “The necklace compels her to speak to you, to touch you. And whenever she fails or tries to remove it, it … chokes her.”

He dropped his quill, shocked. “I can’t believe my parents would …” Hermione raised her eyebrows and he trailed off. “Actually, I do believe it.”

“I want to free Astoria from that necklace,” Hermione said. “I’ll take her to see Narcissa and—”

“No.” Draco stood, managing to loom over her despite the wide desk between them. “You will not contact my mother.”

“You would condemn Astoria to a life …”

“She deserves it,” Draco said coldly. “Astoria schemed and manipulated and tried to trap me into marriage. She attacked you twice. Her hatred and her greed brought her to this.”

“I won’t allow it. I’ll find a way—”

“No. I absolutely forbid it.” Draco placed his hands on the desk’s dark wood and leaned closer, grey eyes on hers. “Stay away from my mother.”

“You can’t stop me,” Hermione snapped. Her fingers twitched for her wand, but she clenched her fist instead.

Draco straightened and ran a hand through his hair. “Listen to me, Hermione. Aurors have moved Mother to a secret location until the trial, with a Secret Keeper. She’s received death threats and there are people in the Ministry who would betray …”

He choked, and Hermione wanted nothing more than to take him in her arms until that look of sick pain left his face. She nodded. “I won’t try to see her.”

Draco looked relieved. “I don’t like it either, that necklace,” he admitted. “It’s sick and wrong and someday I’ll do something about it, but not now.”

Hermione said nothing. They stared at each other across the parchment-cluttered desk, the only sound their breathing, the tick of Slughorn’s clock and the snapping of the fire. Hermione felt an
inexplicable peace steal over her, just by being in Draco’s presence. He was all right, at least for now. Pale, careworn and obviously worried, but all right. She could see the tension drain from his face and posture as he looked at her, leaving only … longing.

Hermione’s lip trembled. Draco had forgotten nothing. The feelings between them were as strong as ever, a subterranean lake spreading just beneath the surface. She ran her hand over the desktop and Draco’s eyes tracked the movement. He looked up, and his glance fell on the Gloriana clip, perched atop a very messy knot of curls.

He tore his eyes away and sat again behind the desk, picking up his quill. “I won’t help her with the necklace,” he said, beginning to scribble on an essay, “but I will allow Astoria to have contact with me occasionally—the last thing I need is another Malfoy-related incident.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. *Big of him.* Her hand left the desk and stretched toward Draco of its own volition, like she was wearing a necklace herself.

“Hermione.” Draco didn’t look up, but his voice was gentle. “You can’t stay here.”

“I know,” she choked. She forced herself to leave the office, running blindly down the sixth-floor corridor. A bad stumble forced her to stop, panting. *Well, that was a bit of a setback.* But she wouldn’t give up; there must be another way to get that bloody necklace off.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Hermione goes on another field trip with an unexpected companion.
Hi all: Here's a nice big chapter that sets all kinds of things up. Because we're over 230,000 words, so of course it's time to set up some new stuff. :) I myself squealed a few times while writing this chapter, especially at the end. The only things it lacks are the Squeaky Mice and Snape (sorry).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Please, Hermione,” Harry begged.

“I fail to see how a visit from me would do any good,” Hermione said primly. “I wouldn’t like to waste the good Healers’ time.”

“I’m not giving up on this,” Harry said.

Hermione and Ginny both looked at him with irritation. They had withdrawn to their bedroom Saturday afternoon to relax with butterbeers and chocolate, not to listen to Harry’s wheedling. The assistant auror had followed them from the common room, levitating above the stairs to the girl’s dorms. Now he was planted on their sofa and refused to leave.

“I don’t know why you need to interrogate Celeste Rosier anyway,” Ginny said, stretching on her bed like a cat. Her red skirt rode up on her thighs. “Surely you’ve gathered enough Death Eater dirt from Macnair.” Hermione had filled her roommate in on the events at the Hunting Shack and afterward. Honestly, she should have just made copies of her auror statement and passed them out in the Entrance Hall.

“Kingsley just wants credit for the capture,” Hermione grumbled from her spot on the sofa beside Harry. She was already halfway through her butterbeer—it had been a long week. “Nobody believes that Pygmy Puff is really Celeste, do they, Harry? Harry?”

Ginny was pulling her hair out of its ponytail and letting it ripple down over her shoulders, over her white top. Her red bra was clearly visible under the knitted fabric. Harry swallowed. He was technically off duty, wearing jeans and a Weasley jumper, but he hadn’t touched his butterbeer and wore an auror badge on his belt.

“Harry,” Hermione repeated. “Harry!” He looked over at her, startled. “I said, the aurors want credit for Celeste, right?”

“It’s important that people know she’s been apprehended,” Harry said earnestly. “But nobody will believe it the way she is now. Hermione, you have to change her back.”

She shrugged. “Can’t. Sorry. You’ll have to find another way to interrogate her.”

“We’ve been trying,” Harry said. “Kingsley even drew a grid of letters on the floor, hoping Celeste would, uh, roll from letter to letter to spell things out. But she won’t.”

Ginny snickered. “Some powerful Aurors Office, can’t even intimidate a Pygmy Puff.” She sat up and crossed her legs.
Harry rose to his feet, looking severe. “Alright, I’ve had about enough of this.” He stalked over to Ginny’s bed. “You want my attention, Ginevra? Well, you have my attention. You have my full, complete and undivided attention. Is there anything I can possibly do for you?”

Ginny looked up at him with a smile. “There are many things you could do for me.”

Harry flushed. “What, you’ve learned some new tricks from Zabini? Eager to try them on someone else?”

“Harry!” Hermione cried.

“Stay out of it, Mi,” Harry said, not taking his eyes off Ginny. “She knows exactly what she’s doing. She wants me to play some Slytherin game. Well, I’m not a Slytherin, Ginny, and I don’t play games with women.”

Hermione looked at Ginny, expecting to see anger or shame or embarrassment, or maybe all three. But her roommate was as cool as the Norwegian pond Hermione was always trying to emulate.

“Well, there you’re wrong, Harry Potter,” Ginny said, sliding off the bed and standing. Her voice was as clear and cold as crystal. “You have your game, too—the gallant hero, the Boy-Who-Lived.” She clicked her tongue. “But I’m not the sweet maiden anymore … dear, dear, dear.” She stepped up to him, much as she had outside the Burrow. “I’m all defiled and fallen now. Whatever will you do with me?”

Harry’s fists clenched and his profile was stony, but he said nothing.

Ginny stepped back again. “Tell me, Harry, why did that Frenchwoman leave you? Was it that you weren’t good enough for her, or did you make her think she wasn’t good enough for you?”

Hermione’s breath caught; Harry was a gentleman in every sense of the word, but he had a temper. Few people saw it—perhaps only Ron and Hermione, really—but it was there. Hermione jumped off the sofa, expecting the furniture to burst into flames. She was reminded of Draco on the Quidditch stands, incensed that she would believe Lavender’s lie. The same coiled fury.

“Are you trying to make me lose control?” Harry asked Ginny softly, and at that moment he sounded very Slytherin, no matter what he said.

“I’m trying to make you real, Harry.” Ginny sounded entirely calm. “I seem to be surrounded by pretty shells.”

Harry turned and strode to the door, yanking it open. Then he turned back. “You’re not who I thought you were, Ginny,” he said, his voice thick with disappointment.

Ginny’s smile didn’t waver. “No, I’m not. I’m better.”

Harry swung out of the room, slamming the door so hard Hermione thought it would splinter. She looked over at Ginny, who had the nerve to look satisfied.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” Hermione said. “You’re playing with fire.”

“He’s playing with fire.”

Hermione just sighed and fell back onto the sofa. “You two have a very odd relationship.”
“Tell me a story,” Hermione said.

Draco’s hands were around her waist and her Torrid Secret Affair cardigan was unbuttoned, revealing a blue lace bra. “There are other things we could …” he began, lips brushing her ear.

“I’ll make it worth your while,” Hermione said. They were dancing in the Room of Requirement to the tune of a floating violin, stealing an hour or so between dinner and Quidditch practice. The Inter-House Quidditch Match was the next day, but Draco didn’t want to talk about that, or about the recent scene with the Squeaky Mice on the castle grounds. Clearly he didn’t want to talk at all.

“Tell me a story,” she repeated, hand trailing down his cream-colored jersey.

“Vixen,” Draco murmured.

“I’m waiting, Mr. Malfoy.”

Draco ran his own hand over her breast, stroking the blue satin. “You wore blue on your birthday,” he remembered. “At Slughorn’s party.”

“You wore grey,” Hermione said, thinking of those beautiful robes that matched his eyes, how he shone in the candlelight.

“I couldn’t wait to see you, to see if you’d wear the diamonds.” Draco sounded like he was under Veritaserum again. “I arrived early, stood by the door.”

He chuckled softly. “I saw you wearing the pin in Potions but had no opportunity to touch it. And I needed you … to thank … ahhh …” Hermione’s hand had left the jersey and drifted lower, managing to unfasten the unfamiliar Quidditch trousers. She slipped a hand inside.

“Enough talking,” Draco breathed.

“Oh no,” she said. “Finish the story.”

“Fine,” he said in a suddenly clipped tone, eyes shut. “I was standing with Blaise near the door, and you walked in with Ginevra. Your hair was coiled up, with the clip on top …” He opened his eyes and looked down at her.

“It suddenly hit me, what I had done,” Draco said, stopping all movement. “All the implications. I had given you the Gloriana Set, one of my family’s most priceless, magical works of art. It hadn’t been used as an interest gift in 100 years. Not even my mother had been deemed worthy.”

Hermione’s mouth fell open in shock and she drew back her hand. No wonder Narcissa had been a little salty in Diagon Alley about the diamonds.

“When I saw you enter the dungeon,” he continued, “wearing the jewelry, I panicked. I practically ran from the door.”

Hermione grinned up at him. “So that’s why you were lurking behind the candelabras.”
“You cornered me.”

“Did not,” she argued. “I wanted to look at the tapestries. You asked me to dance. Actually, you didn’t even ask me, you just ...”

“... Couldn’t resist,” he said, pulling her toward him. “You were trembling,” he murmured against her throat. “Like you are now.”

The music from their waltz, and Bill and Fleur’s wedding, filled the room. “You comforted me,” she said.

“I’m very comforting,” he murmured into her ear.

“And you made small talk, too.”

“I’m very comforting and I have lovely manners,” Draco said. “And storytime is over.” His hand captured hers, drawing it downward to touch him again.

***

Ginny went off Saturday evening with Lavinia Clarke after inviting Hermione to join them. But Hermione chose to stay behind to further cultivate her new hobbies. She stopped by the Potions Lab to show Snape the vanished “M” on her arm and dab some Scar Solution on the red “U” scar. Snape had reluctantly agreed not to snitch on her as long as there were no apparent side effects. Then she headed to the library.

She was surprised to learn in “Faeries and Follies” that Love Diggles were actual creatures—a breed of doxies usually invisible to the naked eye. Hermione was also researching another experimental potion, this one called Screaming Rain. Plus there was Astoria’s necklace to consider, although Hermione tried hard not to think about the implications of a necklace of submission that choked its wearer when she disobeyed. Shiver.

Hermione was halfway through “Diamonds of Doom: An Illustrated History of Cursed Jewelry” when she sensed a presence by her table. She looked up from her book and her mouth twisted in distaste. Theo.

“What is it, Nott?” she asked, trying to sound bored. They hadn’t spoken since the scene in McGonagall’s office. Hermione had discreetly asked Slughorn to return Theo to his former Potions partners and the professor had agreed. Slughorn was also tutoring Draco privately now. The man did like a quiet class.

Theo flinched at her use of his last name. “I’d like to talk to you, Hermione,” he said. He was dressed all in black, and one broad hand, adorned with that bloody signet ring, clutched at his bag’s leather strap. “Please.”

“Sod off,” Hermione said, her eyes back on a page about the Black Orlov Diamond, which was said to drive its wearers to suicide. “Go seduce another muggle-born for your family’s
“It wasn’t like that,” Theo said tensely.

Hermione turned the page. “It was exactly like that. You always knew when to turn up and when to walk away. Strategic. I thought it was a typical Slytherin trait, but it was more, wasn’t it? A little game of chess, with the White Queen as the prize.” She looked up, eyes narrowed. “Gain her trust. Draw her in with that smooth charm. Declare yourself helplessly smitten. Checkmate.”

Theo threw down his bag and sat opposite her without invitation. “It wasn’t like that,” he repeated. “I’ll prove it.” He produced a bottle and set it on the table before her. The tiny bottle was half full of clear liquid. “Veritaserum.”

Hermione sniffed. “So you say.”

“Taste it then,” he said. “Taste it and try to say your name is Harry Potter.”

They locked eyes, and as if of its own accord, Hermione’s hand reached out and took the bottle. Slytherins. Always taking shortcuts.

“I shouldn’t,” she said, holding it up to the lamplight. “No matter what you say, it will change nothing.”

“You won’t feel stupid anymore,” Theo said. “I know how you hate feeling stupid.”

Very true. Hermione uncorked the bottle and brought it to her lips, a single drop. “My name is H… H….” She couldn’t say it; she couldn’t say “Harry Potter.”

She set the open bottle on the table and Theo picked it up, his fingers brushing hers. He threw back the liquid in a single gulp and slammed the bottle down again. His jaw tightened.

Hermione touched her wand on the table, casting a Muffliato spell around them. She looked at Theo but said nothing. This was his party.

“My grandmother was concerned about me returning to Britain,” Theo recited. “She’d read the Prophet articles about threats against purebloods.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. The Prophet’s screaming headline “PUBLIC DEMANDS DEATH FOR DEATH EATERS!” in July had certainly caused a lot of trouble among pureblood matriarchs.

“Death Eaters were being rounded up,” Theo continued. “All were tried, then either executed, imprisoned or given the Kiss. My father had just been executed.” He took a deep breath. “Lady Gretchen suggested I make an advantageous marriage to restore my family’s reputation. She considered you the best candidate.”

“I was dating Ron then,” Hermione said, frowning. “It was in the paper.” Another annoying headline: “TWO OF GOLDEN TRIO TO WED?”

“Lady Gretchen said it wouldn’t last. She’s spooky that way. ‘Trust me, Theodore,’ she said, pointing at your picture, ‘that one’s got a taste for danger now.’” Theo frowned. “She was certainly right.”

Hermione glared. “Watch it, Nott.”

Theo coughed nervously. “I apologize. You have to understand, Hermione, arranged marriages are
typical with purebloods. We usually marry for strategic advantage.”

Hermione looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, and Theo stared straight back at her, his green eyes so like Harry’s—that same directness. Except in Theo’s case, the candid expression was probably entirely the Veritaserum.

“Yes,” Hermione said, “but in pureblood marriages, both parties are part of the arrangement. In our case, you weren’t positioning yourself as a strategic advantage. You were presenting us as a love match.”

“Not entirely,” Theo said. “I didn’t quite understand the concept of a love match. I didn’t think you’d marry me just for me—that’s why I kept mentioning my money and political acumen.” He shook his head. “I entirely misread you—I mean, here you are, pining over a man two steps from Azkaban …”

“Strike two, Nott,” Hermione growled.

Theo blinked. “Strike what?”

She rolled her eyes. “A muggle term. Do you have a point here?”

“The point, Hermione, is when I saw you at the Gryffindor party …”

“Is he bothering you?” a voice cut in. Harry towered over the two of them, looking furious. He’d been broody throughout dinner, less than thrilled to hear that Ginny was off with Slytherin Harpies.

“No, Harry,” Hermione said, trying not to blush. “It’s alright.”

“How can you talk to him when he—”

“Please, Harry,” she said through gritted teeth.

Harry glared. “I’ll be right there. Watching.” Harry stabbed a finger toward a nearby table and stalked off toward the Restricted Section.

Hermione turned back to Theo. “You’d better hurry this up. Harry isn’t a patient person.”

“When I saw you at the Gryffindor Party …” Theo swallowed. “I meant what I said. You were a vision. I wanted you, not your reputation. Hermione, even if there hadn’t been a plan, I would have pursued you anyway.” He looked into her eyes. “I need you to believe that. It was all real to me.”

“Not real enough,” she said bitterly despite herself. A single word hung in the air: Astoria.

Theo looked ashamed. “You had me aroused … frustrated. I’d never had such trouble with a woman before. And Astoria kept …” He flushed, but the Veritaserum compelled him to continue. “She kept turning up in my room, wearing little but that bloody necklace and she would …”

“Please don’t say any more,” Hermione said quickly. “I’m begging you not to say any more.” Too much information!

“When we met Astoria outside that storage room, her words …” Theo hung his head. “I felt like rubbish. I knew I was only degrading myself with her. I ended it that night, told her to go play her little games with Draco.” He took a deep breath. “I never touched her after that, I swear.”

Hermione eyed him doubtfully, but Theo was under Veritaserum after all. And more to the point,
she really didn’t care any more. She leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. Harry returned with a giant, bloodstained tome and slammed it unnecessarily loudly on his table.

“I don’t know what you expect me to say,” Hermione told Theo. “Your original plan was doomed to fail, but not because of Draco. I don’t plan to marry anyone, not for a long time. I’m only 19. I’m six months out of a war that has consumed my life for seven years. I don’t even know who I am.”

Theo smiled softly. “You know who you are, Hermione. You know yourself better than anyone I’ve ever met, except perhaps Luna Lovegood. Like her, you dance to a tune that no one else can hear. We just stumble after you, hoping to keep up.”

Hermione stared back at him open-mouthed, feeling much like she had when Theo listed three things he loved about her in Bluebell’s class.

“I wasn’t expecting immediate nuptials anyway,” Theo continued. “A long engagement was even better.” His eyes glinted. “A long, passionate engagement.”

“Strike three,” Hermione said, standing. Harry stood immediately as well, although Hermione kept him away with a slight wave of her hand. Theo, of course, stood when she did.

“You’ve fulfilled your goals here, I hope,” she said in her best McGonagall tone. “because this is the last time we’ll discuss this. I appreciate that your feelings were real, at least as real as mine were. But I don’t love you, Theo, and I never will. Even if Draco and I have truly ended,” her fists clenched at the idea, “I’ll never return to you.”

“We could be friends, then …”

“No.”

“You’re friends with Weasley …”

Hermione glared. “I was friends with Ron for seven years before we became a couple. He has always been honest with me. Almost too honest,” she added with a slight grin. “Ron has proven himself to me time and time again, and it will take more than a little bad behavior to drive me from him for good.”

Harry was drawing closer now, and Theo gave the assistant auror a wary look before turning back to Hermione. “I still care about you, Hermione, and you are obviously unhappy—”

“You’re right, I’m absolutely miserable,” Hermione said. “I miss Draco so much that I can’t breathe. Is that what you want to hear? I love him. But if you haven’t noticed, my friends are rallying around me. One is practically breathing down your neck.” She scowled again. “You need to leave me alone, Theo.”

Theo smirked. “You called me Theo.”

“Get lost, Nott.”

Theo picked his bag and winked. “I will, for now.”

He strolled off as if he’d won something, although for the life of her, Hermione couldn’t imagine what it was. She sank down in her chair again, and Harry joined her immediately.

“Are you alright?” he asked.
Hermione just groaned and put her head in her hands. “You’re right, Harry. I need to stay away from Slytherins.”

“Good luck with that,” Harry said. “Neville tells me the snakes are planning a Slytherin-Gryffindor party. Inter-House Unity.”

“Merlin spare us,” Hermione breathed. From what she’d heard, Slytherin parties were scenes of total high-fashion depravity. Her reputation would never survive it.

“I don’t think he will,” Harry said with a sudden grin. “Merlin was a Slytherin, too.”

***

Hermione lingered in the third-floor corridor, wrapped in a black cloak. It was Monday morning and she should be in Arithmancy, but instead she was standing beside the statue of the one-eyed, humpbacked witch. She’d been pacing there for a half-hour now, trying to screw up her courage. So much could go wrong.

Once again she took a silent inventory. Hermione wore jeans, dragonhide boots and a heavy black jumper, and her braided hair was studded with all three Gloriana pieces. The long strap of the pink beaded bag was slung across her chest. She was ready for anything.

Anything but the person she saw come out of the secret passage to Honeyduke’s. The witch’s hump opened with a loud creak, startling Hermione, who staggered backward. Then she stared open-mouthed as Ron’s head and shoulders popped out.

“Hermione!” Surprise and wonder spread over his freckled face, and he wiggled out of the statue and landed before her.

Hermione was amazed, not only by Ron’s presence but by the look on his face. He actually looked thrilled to see her, like he couldn’t believe his luck. He moved to embrace her, but Hermione backed up further, recovering enough to glare at him.

“I’m surprised you’d want to touch a Death Eater whore,” she said icily.

Ron paled, the freckles on his cheeks standing out starkly. He dropped his gaze and when he looked up at her again, his dark blue eyes were filled with pain.

“I’m sorry, Hermione,” he said. “I’m so sorry.”

Hermione continued to glare. “I’m still livid at you, Ron, and I don’t care if Molly let you go, I’m not—”

“Mum didn’t let me go,” Ron said. “I just ... came.”

“You what?” Hermione stared up at him in amazement. Molly’s word was law around the Burrow, especially after Fred’s death. Her children would do anything to avoid distressing her in any way. “But—but Molly ...”
“I couldn’t stay away anymore, Hermione,” Ron said earnestly. “I know you don’t want to see me, but I couldn’t have you believe I thought you were a … a …”

“A whore,” Hermione said coldly.

Ron’s head drooped. “I just wanted to hurt you, because I was hurt. I couldn’t bear to think of him touching you the way I …” His fists clenched. Hermione stood frozen, unable to speak. Ron looked up and met her eyes.

“I’m so sorry. I know you have no reason to forgive me.” He swallowed. “I hate Malfoy. I’m sorry, but I hate him. But I can’t hate you. I can’t think badly of you. If you want that Slytherin asshole, well … alright then.” His mouth twisted. “You’ll do what you want anyway.”

“Yes, I will,” Hermione said. “And I expect you to respect me and treat me well even when you hate my choices.”

“That’s what Harry said.” Ron looked at her with concern. “Harry told me all about Malfoy and the blood potion and his parents. Are you sure you’re alright?”

Hermione crossed her arms, still nettled. “I’m fine.”

“He said Malfoy won’t let you near him, doesn’t want you involved.”

“Yes,” Hermione said shortly.

“At least I agree with the Ferret about something.” Ron looked around the empty corridor and back at Hermione. “I thought I could catch you before lunch—we could go to the Three Broomsticks or something … wait …” His eyes fell on her cloak, boots, and most dammingly, her pink bag. “Are you skivving off classes? Where are you going?”

“Out.”

“Alone?” Ron looked around as if someone was hiding behind a tapestry. “Where’s Harry?”

“I don’t need Harry,” Hermione said. “This is my business, Ron.”

“Where are you going?” Ron repeated, eyes narrowed.

“You don’t need to know.” Hermione began to climb into the still-open hole. “Go see Harry. And Ginny. You owe her an apology, too.”

“Let me come with you,” Ron said. He held her arm to keep her from falling down the slide into the tunnel. “I won’t be any trouble, I won’t say a word … you’re not meeting Malfoy, are you?”

“No,” she said, trying to get her other leg into the passageway. “Let go of me, Ron.”

Ron’s eyes gleamed. “I’ll tell Harry.”

“Tell him what? That I’m going to Honeydukes? Let go of me or I’ll Petrify you right here.”

“I know you’re still mad at me …”

“Damn right I’m still mad at you …”

Ron released her and stepped back. “You’re doing something Harry won’t like,” he said, frowning. “I bet Malfoy wouldn’t like it either. You’re sneaking off somewhere. I bet Malfoy can figure out
where you’re going.”

Hermione looked up at Ron, horrified. This was a terrible time for the redhead’s occasional flashes of strategic insight. Even if she Petrified her friend, he’d eventually recover and he and Harry would go to Draco. Then Draco would leave to find her and if he didn’t return by midnight, he’d break his probation. Plus she couldn’t leave Ron frozen for hours, even propped up in a closet.

Still, Hermione knew, she could get around all that. The fact was, she didn’t want to go on this mission alone. She was practically shaking at the thought. Would she get the information she needed or just make everything worse?

But that didn’t mean Ron was the one to take her. She eyed him thoughtfully, one of her legs inside the statue. Ron, picking up on her subtle signals for once, just looked back at her. He wore a heavy black cloak over his shocking orange Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes jacket. Maybe.

“You’re right,” Hermione said finally. “I am going somewhere dangerous, and if Harry or Draco or even Ginny knew, they’d try to stop me.” She looked him in the eye. “Are you going to try to stop me, Ron?”

Ron swallowed noisily. “No.”

“If I let you come with me …” Hermione said, trailing off. Her mind gibbered: What are you doing? It's Ron! He'll muff up everything! He’s just comic relief, and if there’s one thing you don’t need ...

Hermione pushed the last thought aside. No, that wasn’t her voice, that was Draco’s. But Ron was more than comic relief, he could be more.

“If you come with me, you can’t be the Ron I saw at the Burrow,” she said, holding his eyes with hers. “You can’t be the Ron you were at Hogwarts this year. I need the Ron who outsmarted McGonagall’s chess set. I need the Ron who entered an Acromantula den, who stabbed the Horcrux with Gryffindor's Sword.”

Ron stepped closer. “I want to be that Ron,” he said hoarsely. “I can be that Ron. Please, Hermione.”

Hermione eyed him for a moment more. “Alright,” she said finally. “You can come along.”

Ron’s face broke into a wide, happy smile she hadn’t seen since Fred died. Hermione sighed. Maybe she was being a fool, deluding herself because she didn’t want to go alone. But given the number of risks she’d taken this year, what was one more?

Ron was hugging her now, apparently thrilled to be selected for a dangerous mission he knew nothing about. Honestly, a Squeaky Mouse would have more sense.

“Idiot,” she said fondly. “This isn’t a holiday. Now let me go.”

He did so, and she took the short slide to the tunnel floor and lit her wand. Ron quickly joined her, still giddy.

“So where are we going?” he asked. “Knockturn Alley? Gringott’s again? You want to free another dragon?”

Hermione looked up at him, and something on her face wiped the smile off of his. He looked down at her questioningly, his freckled face sober.
“We’re going to Azkaban, Ronald,” she said. “I need to see Lucius Malfoy.”

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Lucius. Oh boy.
Wild For Hold

Chapter Notes

Hold on to your shorts for this one, folks, because we’re gonna meet the one and only Lucius Malfoy. Writing this chapter gave me heart palpitations.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Azkaban? Lucius Malfoy?”

Ron reacted about how Hermione expected he would: sputtering in outrage and repeating himself. It was only natural, she thought, trying to be patient as she explained her plan. Yes, Lucius was an evil git; yes, he plotted against muggle-borns from Azkaban; yes, Astoria Greengrass was a walking nightmare who deserved to choke on those bloody diamonds; and yes, once Astoria was free of the necklace she’d probably murder the lot of them—Malfoys, muggle-borns and all.

“She’s a loon, I tell you,” Ron said hoarsely, convinced that if Hermione heard enough horrid stories about Astoria, she’d see sense and they’d spend the day at the Three Broomsticks instead. “George told me about that Inter-House Quidditch match—he said Greengrass nearly killed her own Chaser with a broom!”

“She just beat him around the head a few times. He’s fine,” Hermione said. She checked her watch as they continued along the tunnel. They needed to quicken their steps if she was going to be back by dinner.

“I still say if anyone needs to be collared, it’s Astoria Greengrass,” Ron went on stubbornly as he followed. “She gave me the creeps. Narcissa Malfoy did us all a favor, really, and you want to free the bint?”

“Narcissa didn’t do Draco a favor,” Hermione said. “Astoria’s hiding behind furniture and pouncing on him!”

Well, that delayed things a bit further, because Ron practically fell on the tunnel floor laughing. Hermione had to drag him by the arm to keep him moving, which gave her ample time to regret not sneaking off alone.

Ron sobered once they left the passageway and stood in Honeyduke’s cellars, preparing to Apparate. He still couldn’t believe Hermione planned to interview the worst dark wizard alive to help some Bellatrix-In-Training.

“Be reasonable, Mi,” he begged, a hand on the wand she’d raised to Apparate them. “If you’re looking to help people, let’s find some who deserve it. You’re always talking about taking soup to Knockturn Alley. We could do that today. Or we could free some house elves.”

Ron beamed suddenly. “I know, we could make a list of all the reasons Gawain Robards is an idiot and shouldn’t be Minister of Magic, and pass out copies at Diagon Alley. You’d like that, wouldn’t you? You could lecture people all day long.”

“That would be a lovely day with you, Ron,” Hermione admitted. “But I promised Astoria. Draco
and I can’t have any future with her baying after him like a rabid bloodhound.”

Ron just shook his head; he obviously didn’t see any future ahead for her and Draco, Astoria or no. But he quit trying to tempt her with social justice campaigns and released her wand.

“It will be fine, you’ll see,” Hermione said, taking his arm. “It will be a nice seaside outing.”

***

The Azkaban Pier looked anything but inviting on that November day. Hermione and Ron Apparated to a windswept, rocky beach just down the waterfront and climbed the wooden steps to the deserted boardwalk. It was barely noon, but fog was already swirling in from the North Sea, giving the scene a twilight feel. A weak sun glowered behind thick clouds.

Hermione had last been there with Kingsley, just a day after the Battle of Hogwarts, to welcome the innocent Muggle-borns newly released from Azkaban. The isolated island fortress could be accessed only by ship; no Apparating, no owls, not even a Patronus was possible. On that May afternoon, the sun had been bright, the boardwalk’s iron railings were hung with flowery garlands, and cheering friends and relatives of the released prisoners swarmed the waterfront.

This time, the scene was bleak. The Azkaban pier’s only function was to ferry criminals, staff and visitors to the rocky island. Hermione once again thought of Narcissa, making this journey twice a month to see Lucius. And to cast dangerous spells aimed at muggle-borns, Hermione thought, her jaw hardening. And to trap young women in diamond collars.

“Blimey, Hermione,” Ron said, looking around. He pulled his heavy cloak closer. “I can still feel those Dementors.”

He was right, she realized. Dementors had patrolled this boardwalk for so long that the fog felt heavy with their presence. *This will never work … Astoria will never be free … Draco won’t ever come back to me … he’ll go to Azkaban and sit alone in a cell, eventually hunched and aged, reading a book by candlelight with only shreds of memories remaining of a single night years before, trying to cling to …*

“Let’s go,” Ron said suddenly. He grabbed Hermione’s hand, pulling her along as he strode toward the pier’s iron gates. “I’m not staying here all day. Nice seaside outing my ass.”

Hermione choked back a sob, and suddenly she was very grateful for Ron. He wasn’t the most imaginative bloke, and that could only be an advantage when loitering around Dementer-tainted infrastructure. Draco would have been quickly overcome. She wondered how Harry managed this place.

“We’re here to visit someone,” Ron was telling the blue-cloaked guards at the iron gate. “I’m Ron Weasley, you know.” The guards ignored him.

“Hermione Granger?” Ron tried. The guards looked at each other, then nodded as the gates opened.
“Come on,” Ron said grumpily, leading the way. They walked down the pier, their shoes loud on the wooden planks. “How do you know they’ll even let you see—blimey!” Ron broke off, his eyes wide.

Hermione froze as well. On the other side of a weatherbeaten guardhouse, an enormous black galleon was tied to the pier with silvery ropes, rocking on the sea swells. Back in May, the Ministry had released magical balloons when the released prisoners arrived, blocking a clear view of the Azkaban ship.

Now Hermione could see why. The galleon’s hull, rigging and sails were the same inky color, and the ship rocked precariously in the icy wind off the Scottish coast. Its sails were ragged and torn, the hull’s splintered and broken wood encrusted with salt. The ship looked ready to fall apart and sink at any minute. It also looked deserted, a narrow gangplank leading from the pier to its black depths. Silver lettering on the bow spelled out “CHARON.”

“We are not boarding that,” Ron declared.

“We certainly are.” Hermione strode forward and almost fell into the North Sea as the rickety gangplank wobbled, and it only Ron’s Quidditch reflexes, blunt but effective, kept her out of the drink. His long arm shot out and pulled her against him.

“Watch it, Hermione! Merlin.” Ron hauled her along the gangplank, his arm like iron, and led her into the Charon’s red-lit opening. The heavy door slammed shut behind them, and Hermione and Ron looked around a surprisingly large room. A blood-red lamp swayed from the ceiling and the walls were lined with glowing iron chains bolted to the walls. There was still nobody in sight. Did the ship sail itself? Was it sentient? What was the MSA thinking, sending people on a haunted ghost ship?

Hermione followed Ron up a wooden flight of stairs to the galleon’s main deck, also deserted. As soon as their feet touched the deck, the Charon shuddered, its silvery ropes springing free of the pier and curling onto the deck. Hermione and Ron dodged the writhing ropes and clung to railings as the ship rose and fell in the North Sea swells.

“We’re headed for that whirlpool!” Ron shouted, just as the Charon reached the edge of a frothy swirl and the entire ship began to spin.

Hermione just shut her eyes and clung to Ron’s waist for dear life until the spinning stopped, and the Charon jerked wildly, apparently trying to shake off its two passengers. Before them loomed a wild, black island rising from the choppy sea like a giant witch’s hat.

“Azkaban,” Ron said hoarsely, if unnecessarily. The Charon rocked toward the islands’ white-stone dock. Tied to the dock was another galleon, this one considerably less ominous. Its hull and sails were silvery grey, its rigging and banner bright blue. Witches and wizards formed a line as blue-robed guards helped each passenger aboard. Hermione could see neat benches on the main deck and servers circulating among the passengers selling refreshments. She groaned.

“What?” Ron asked. He was still staring up at the prison fortress and hadn’t noticed the other galleon. “Are you alright?”

“We took the wrong ship,” Hermione said, pointing. “Look. That’s the ship for visitors.”

Ron rounded on her. He looked a fright, utterly soaked and blue with cold, hair plastered in his eyes. “You put us on the prisoners’ ship!”
“How was I supposed to know?” Hermione retorted. She clambered down the wooden steps to the room with the glowing chains, then pushed open the door.

“That’s it,” Ron snapped, following her along the gangplank. “We’re not doing this. We’re going —”

“No! I have to see Lucius!”

“Lucius? Lucius Malfoy?” asked a voice. Hermione and Ron had reached the white marble dock, and both turned to see a tiny, plump witch with pink hair and blue robes smiling up at them. She looked like a sugar-spun Celeste Rosier. “You’re here to see Lucius Malfoy?”

“Oh, yes,” Hermione said nervously.

“Well, that’s lovely!” The witch clapped her hands. “He doesn’t get many visitors, you know, just his wife, usually. So sad. Visitors are vital to healing. Are you his Quill Pals?”

Ron turned purple at the very idea of being Quill Pals with Lucius Malfoy, but Hermione nodded gamely. “We share an interest in ancient runes.”

“Hermione Granger!” the witch cried. “This is truly an honor.” Ron huffed under his breath. “And Ronald Weasley! I’m Nurse Minnie, Azkaban’s director of healing services. My, you’re both soaked to the skin! You should have waited for our new Friendship. Isn’t it lovely?”

“Lovely,” Hermione said. “And the Charon …”

The witch looked a bit embarrassed. “Yes, I’m afraid we are still using the old Azkaban ship for prisoners. The Friendship ran a bit overbudget, I’m afraid, no money for a new prisoner ship until next year.”


“Hermione,” Ron groaned. “Can we please dry off and warm up before you start up another sodding cause?”

“But Ron—”

“Your friend is right, Miss Granger,” Nurse Minnie piped up. “You can’t appear before Mr. Malfoy looking like that!”

Hermione rolled her eyes at the very idea of primping for Lucius Malfoy, but she let herself be ushered into the prison. The director’s quick-dry spell left Hermione’s hair hopelessly bushy, and she only managed to force it into a ponytail with the help of the Gloriana clip. She tried to straighten the clip on the top of her head, but it kept dragging down to the right. Oh well.

Ron smoothed his newly dried, bright orange jacket, which Hermione now noticed featured flashing purple Ws. “Where’d you get those diamonds?” he asked her suspiciously.

“Draco,” Hermione said shortly. Ron glowered but said nothing.

Nurse Minnie escorted them personally through a maze of corridors and stairs, always climbing higher. Azkaban was unsettlingly quiet, any footfalls swallowed by the thick walls and floors. They passed endless doors, tightly shut and labeled with glowing letters. There were no windows,
only hanging lamps casting a thin golden light. As they climbed the winding stone stairs to higher levels, the walls and doors became even thicker, the guards more frequent. The doors’ names were now familiar: Rowle, Yaxley, C. Nott., G. Nott, L. Nott … The trio walked on silently until they struck a landing near the top of the fortress. Four guards stood under the tall, pointed ceiling between three closed, unnamed doors.

“Our most-dangerous prisoners are kept on this level,” Nurse Minnie said, pricking her fingertip and dripping a bit of blood on one door’s lock. The name “L. Malfoy” appeared in silvery letters. “Maximum security.”

A hint of steel crept into Nurse Minnie’s voice for the first time. “I’ll have to ask you both for your wands. You understand, of course.”

Hermione handed over her vine wand, and after a small hesitation, Ron did the same. They also shed their heavy cloaks, leaving Hermione in her black jumper and jeans, her pink bag’s strap slung across her chest.

“No magical items or spells can pass through the bars,” the prison official said, patting them down. She opened Hermione’s pink bag, which appeared to hold only a quill and sealed inkpot. Ron’s pockets yielded a bag of Jelly Slugs and a gilt-edged teacup.

“Oh, how lovely!” Nurse Minnie clapped her hands. “Such nice gifts!”

Ron goggled at the very idea of bringing gifts to Lucius Malfoy, but he recovered quickly. “Yes,” he said with a grin. “You can give them to him after we’ve left.” Nurse Minnie conjured up a gift box for the items and set it aside.

Hermione rolled her eyes, then led Ron a few steps away. She lowered her voice. “You don’t have to come with me, Ron.”

“You’re not seeing him alone;” Ron said mulishly.

“This will be delicate and he will be … unpleasant.” She bit her lip. “Whatever he says, you can’t react. Whatever I say, you have to back me up.”

“I understand,” Ron said. “You can trust me.”

“If Lucius doesn’t succeed in shaking me, he’ll go after you,” Hermione went on. “He will say foul things about you, me, Draco, and you’ll have to stand there and take it. Those are my conditions.” She looked at her friend doubtfully. If all else failed, she knew a few wandless hexes.

Ron took a deep breath. “I know.” He looked pleadingly at her. “Please let me do this.”

Hermione took a deep breath and nodded. The die has been cast. She turned to Nurse Minnie. “We’re ready.”

“Go right through that door, dearies,” the prison director said. “I’ll be right here. Have a lovely visit!”

Hermione pulled open the heavy door, which led to a windowless room with a slanted ceiling, divided in half by a row of bars. The bars glowed faintly—magically cast iron. A single straight-backed chair was placed outside, facing the bars. On the other side of the bars was a cot and a desk, and sitting in the cell’s chair, facing the bars from the other side, was Lucius Malfoy.

He looked surprisingly well, certainly better than he had at the Battle of Hogwarts after being
beaten down and degraded under Voldemort. Lucius was the same height as Draco, with the same hair and eyes, but his frame was broader, his face more square. He wore simple grey robes and his long, platinum hair was tied back from a still-handsome face with a black ribbon. Lucius held a book in one pale hand, and Hermione noted it was D. Egbert Donalson’s “Unraveling the Elder Fubarks.”

“Miss … Granger,” Lucius said as if he barely remembered who she was. He ignored Ron, who stood silently a little back.

“Mr. Malfoy,” Hermione said, emphasizing the “Mr.” just a tad.

“I understand I have you to thank for this intriguing volume.” Lucius tilted his head slightly and looked at her with hooded eyes.

“A mere suggestion,” Hermione said, matching his tone. “The chapter on musical runes is particularly interesting.”

“Really.” Lucius raised an eyebrow. “I confess I found Donalson’s interpretation rather … emotional.”

“The songs were dirges. Some emotion was to be expected,” Hermione said calmly. “My personal theory is that musical runes responded to the heart of the witch or wizard touching them.”

“Romantic frippery,” Lucius said, bored.

“I don’t believe so.” Hermione warmed to the topic. “Witches and wizards in those times didn’t tap runes with wands; they brushed them with their fingers. They played those runes like paper pianos; is it any wonder the magic responded to their emotions?”

Lucius’ look of boredom didn’t waver. “I doubt you traveled here to debate the Elder Fubarks, Miss Granger.” His eyes met hers briefly. “Do have a seat.”

Hermione had planned to stand, but if Lucius wanted to play this as a social occasion, she’d go along. At least Ron was keeping quiet.

“I assume this is The Paternal Visit.” Lucius tone gave the last three words a significant meaning and Hermione almost groaned. Another bloody courtship milestone she hadn’t known about. By the shuffling of feet behind her, Ron likely knew what Lucius meant.

“No, sir,” she said. “I am not planning a marriage with Draco at this time.”

More shuffling behind her. Ron had obviously caught the hedge in that statement. Lucius did as well. The prisoner eyed the Gloriana clip sticking crookedly out of her ponytail.

“I never saw you as a witch to be won with baubles,” Lucius said.

“I didn’t think you saw me as a witch at all.”

Lucius waved a hand. “Let us not bandy semantics—”

“Wacky Faint,” Hermione said without thinking.

Lucius’ eyes narrowed. “Why are you here, Miss Granger? Surely you don’t expect me to discuss the … unfortunate … spell on Hogwarts Castle.”

“Certainly not, Mr. Malfoy,” she said. “I’m here to talk about diamonds.”
It was impressive, really, how a man sitting behind prison bars could still look down his nose at her. “Very well,” he said. “We could discuss, perhaps, the shocking lack of breeding displayed when one parades a family’s stolen treasure in public.”

“I’m so sorry, I wasn’t quite clear.” Hermione sounded anything but apologetic. “I’m here to discuss your wife’s diamonds. Now Astoria Greengrass’ diamonds.”


“I can only be grateful I didn’t merit such a gift,” Hermione said. “I’d like to think I’m worth more than a slave’s collar.”

Lucius rose to his feet, looming behind the bars. Hermione remained seated, praying Ron would stay where he was. The look on the former Malfoy lord’s face was cold fury.

“You,” he hissed. “You defile my only heir, flaunt our jewels and insult my wife. You will pay for —”

Hermione saw a shadow move to the left. “No, Ron,” she said sharply.

“Ah, yes, your blood traitor lapdog,” Lucius said, finally deigning to notice Ron. “He’s used to taking the leavings of his betters, of course.”

“I loved Ron when your son was still mired in evil and hate,” Hermione said calmly. “Draco will never be his better, but his behavior this year has made him perhaps Ron’s equal.”

“Mudblood whore,” Lucius snarled. “Get out. Get OUT!” His hands clutched the bars, which flung him backward, leaving thick red weals on his skin.

Hermione stood. “We still haven’t discussed Astoria’s diamonds,” she said stubbornly. “Narcissa presented this Chain of Stars to her. And since Astoria cannot remove the necklace, she is permanently under Narcissa’s control … and therefore yours.”

Lucius’ eyes—so like Draco’s—suddenly turned cold. He stepped closer to the bars again, an evil smile touching his thin lips.

“Draco will thank me one day,” he said softly. “One day my son will retrieve La Chaîne d’Étoiles and clasp it once more around Miss Greengrass’ lovely throat.”

“And then …” the wizard’s smile widened, “Draco will be able to enjoy its full advantages.”

His words dripped with suggestion, and Hermine had to call up the frozen pond on Pluto to keep from flushing. Ron gave a low growl at Lucius’ tone—he’d been amazingly controlled, but she’d better move this along.

“You’re taking quite the risk here, Mr. Malfoy,” Hermione said. “Perhaps you’re right, perhaps Draco will leave me and take up with Astoria again, enticed by a lifetime of submissive sex.” Her discussions with Astoria had turned out to be good training for this conversation. She retook her seat, ignoring Ron’s shocked gasp.

“But I think you’re quite wrong.” Hermione crossed her legs and put her clasped hands on her knee, the very picture (she hoped) of calm. “Draco has no interest in Astoria anymore and will likely marry someone else. It doesn’t have to be me. In which case, that necklace will be lost forever, and he won’t care.” She smiled. “Draco doesn’t need to choke a woman to get what he
wants.”

Lucius’ face was cold stone. “He … will … return … to … her,” he said through gritted teeth.

_Merlin, he even sounds like Astoria._ “Are you willing to bet your diamonds on it?” she asked. “You’ve already lost the Gloriana Set; will you allow another heirloom to slip through your fingers?”

Hermione let that question sink in for a moment. She was a great believer in letting people think. Lucius took his own seat again and sipped his tea from a dented metal cup, prolonging the moment, just watching her.

“What do you propose, Miss Granger?” he asked as if he couldn’t care less.

“Tell me how to free Astoria from the necklace. You must know how. Allow her to return it to the family.”

Lucius froze. “You’ve already said that Draco wouldn’t use it, Miss Granger.”

Hermione looked him straight in the eye. “Maybe his heirs won’t be so dainty.”

Another silence fell, this one so thick and charged that Hermione could hardly breathe. She sat watching Lucius, counting the seconds as he stared at her, cup in hand, like he’d never seen her before. She had no idea what was going through his mind. Ron was utterly still behind her; she assumed she would have heard the thud if he’d fainted in shock.

Hermione counted two minutes, and was ready to faint from the tension herself, when Lucius finally emerged from his frozen state. He set down his cup and leaned back. His face wore a slight smile, and when he spoke, he sounded amused.

“I almost regret your blood status, Miss Granger,” he said.

Hermione blinked. That sounded like a compliment, in a racist sort of way.

“Well,” he said. “You have convinced me it would be in the Malfoys’ best interest to release Miss Greengrass. She is apparently unworthy after all.”

“Bloody hell,” Ron said behind her.

“Indeed,” Lucius said, all cordiality. He stretched out a long arm to pluck quill and paper from his desk, then wrote a short note. The parchment rolled up into a tight scroll and Lucius slid it between the bars to roll on the floor at Hermione’s feet. She eyed it in amazement, then picked up the scroll.

“Do read it,” Lucius said carelessly. “It is simply an instruction to Miss Greengrass to remove the necklace.”

“That’s it?” Hermione asked, looking down at the scroll in her hand. “That’s all that’s required?”

“You were a bit mistaken, Miss Granger.” Lucius looked smug. “But then I don’t expect one such as yourself to understand the nuances of magical jewelry. Narcissa did give Miss Greengrass the necklace, and the girl did follow orders, but those orders were mine. Dear Narcissa merely delivered my words.”

His took a sip of tea. “The wording was precise. My wife told Miss Greengrass she was passing on
her own interest gift, and she did it in a way to keep the necklace under my control. Narcissa said, ‘Lucius would be honored if you would wear this, dear …” The wizard imitated his wife’s snifty tone perfectly, “… Lucius would prefer it if you didn’t take it off. Lucius would like it if you showed Draco where his true interests lie, and please don’t give up.”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed. “If you control the necklace, that means you …”

Lucius’ smirk widened into a smile. “Yes, sweet little Astoria Greengrass is not bound to my wife, nor to Draco, she is bound to me. I regret that present circumstances prevent me from taking full advantage of that fact.”

Bile rose in Hermione’s throat and she swallowed it down. As much as she loathed Astoria, the very idea of the blonde under Lucius’ power made her sick with dread.

“You recoil, Miss Granger,” the wizard said darkly. “Do keep in mind, my son is no less … possessive.”

Hermione shifted in her seat. Whatever was coming, she wasn’t going to like it.

“I speak, of course, of the diamonds you now wear,” the dark wizard continued. “And the set’s motto.”

Hermione blinked. Borgin hadn’t said anything about a motto.

“Draco didn’t tell you? Intriguing.” Lucius’ eyes glittered. “Tap the box with your wand, and these words will appear: Noli me tangere. Surely the Brightest Witch of Her Age knows her Latin.”

“Noli me tangere,” Hermione repeated. “Touch me not.”

“Well done ... Miss Granger,” Lucius continued, purring over her name, playing the role of superior instructor, “And perhaps you can tell me the famous poem that contains that phrase.”

Hermione struggled silently, her hatred of Lucius warring with the urge to prove her knowledge of 16th-century Muggle poetry. The latter prevailed, of course. She stood, and in a voice that seemed not her own, she recited:

“And graven with diamonds in letters plain
There is written, her fair neck round about:
Noli me tangere, for Caesar’s I am,
And wild for to hold, though I seem tame.”

“That is correct,” Lucius said, a teacher praising a rather dim pupil. “The first Lucius Malfoy commissioned goblins to create the Gloriana Set in the 1500s as an interest gift for the Queen.”

Hermione had heard the rumors surrounding Lucius I and the first Queen Elizabeth, who apparently rejected both his proposal and his diamonds. It was said that an angry Lucius had cursed the Queen to never marry. But the set had apparently retained the motto, which quoted a love poem written to the Queen’s mother.

“Noli me tangere,” Lucius repeated, a strange light in those grey eyes that held hers. “Tell me … Miss Granger … are you also ‘wild for hold,’ though you seem tame?”

Hermione flinched, stepping back and knocking the chair over behind her. She heard Ron move forward and pick it up, and felt a light touch on her back, a silent question. She clutched Lucius’ scroll to her chest, but when she spoke, her voice was cool.
“Thank you for speaking with me, sir,” Hermione said. “I won’t take up any more of your time.”

Lucius remained seated—an obvious slight. “Your visit was a pleasure, Miss Granger,” he said. “I see now Draco’s long fascination.”

He shrugged. “Strange. I thought I’d beaten it out of him.”

Hermione’s fist clenched around the scroll, but she concentrated on Ron’s hand still on her back. Calm. *It won’t do to set the chair on fire.*

“Ah, well.” Lucius gave her a hooded look that reminded her of Draco. “I can’t help but think … perhaps I gave *La Chaîne d’Étoiles* to the wrong witch. Lost opportunities.” He smiled thinly. “Think of me, Miss Granger, sometimes. Or better yet, visit again. Alone.” That silky voice caressed the last word, sending a shiver up Hermione’s spine. If another velvet box had turned up in her bedroom, and she had tried on the necklace out of curiosity …

Ron had finally had enough. “You son of a …” Hermione flung out an arm, and felt her friend collide against it, but mercifully Ron halted and said no more.

“I pity you, Lucius,” she said quietly. “A single Dementor remains in Azkaban and I’m looking at him. I *will* think of you here, all alone, shriveling into a wraithlike shadow of lust and hate, rattling your chains. Looking at you, I see the process has already begun.”

Lucius’ eyes flashed, but he said nothing, and Hermione turned to meet Ron’s shocked eyes. Now she just needed to get out of this room before she or Ron fainted. Or both.

Ron hurried to open the door, and it took every ounce of self-control for Hermione not to rush through it. She counted her steps: one … two … three … four … and there was Nurse Minnie, jumping up from her chair with a smile. The heavy door swung shut behind them.

“My, you were in there for a time,” Nurse Minnie said brightly. “Did you have a nice visit?”

Ron turned to Hermione. “I don’t care if we have to take that death ship. We’re getting the hell out of here,” he said.

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“*Holy fuck,*” Ron was repeating under his breath. “*Holy fuck, holy fuck, holy fuck …*” He and Hermione were on the deck of the *Friendship,* slamming firewhiskey, a gift from another Azkaban visitor.

“Rough visit, eh?” the bluff wizard had asked, handing them his flask. She and Ron had boarded the galleon undoubtedly looking more dead than alive. “You two need this more than I do.” Then he thanked them for defeating Voldemort and returned to his wife.

Hermione and Ron huddled on the bow, wrapped in their cloaks and passing the flask between them. The *Friendship* didn’t use the whirlpool, so the ride was longer but smoother. Hermione had
her hood up and she leaned against Ron’s shoulder.

Ron took another swig. “Holy fuck,” he said one last time. “I can’t decide who was more scary, him or you.”

“Definitely him,” Hermione said. She still trembled like a leaf.

“Those diamonds he was talking about.” Ron swallowed. “They’re really the ones you’re wearing?”

“Yes,” Hermione said. Ron had earned some answers today. “A diamond clip and two pins, named the Gloriana Set. The jewels cut any man who touches them, except for Draco.”

Ron was silent but his body stiffened, as did the arm around her. “Hermione …” He took a deep breath. “Hermione, I’m trying to be supportive here, but do you really want to be part of that world?”

“I’m not joining their world,” Hermione said. “I’m trying to get them to join ours.”

“Good fucking luck with that,” Ron said. He took another big gulp from the flask, then grinned.

“What?” Hermione asked, looking up at him. She didn’t see anything to grin about.

“I was thinking of my gifts to Malfoy Senior,” Ron said. “I hope he likes the nose-biting teacup.”

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Yes, Draco is displeased again and takes extreme measures to find out what happened with his father.
Half-drunk, Hermione and Ron nearly splinched themselves Apparating from Azkaban Dock to Hogsmeade. They staggered into the Three Broomsticks and found a table in the upper level where they’d had their ill-fated date months before.

Ron was still pale and shaky; he kept nervously eyeing Hermione’s hair as if the Gloriana diamonds would leap off her head and attack him. It took two plates of sausages and potatoes to calm him down. After the waiter served them fat wedges of apple pie and left, Hermione reached across the table and took Ron’s hand.

“Thank you, Ronald Bilius Weasley,” she said. “You more than Exceeded Expectations today. You were Outstanding.”

Ron beamed as he swallowed half of his pie slice. “No higher praise from you, Hermione.”

He looked down at their clasped hands, then up again, and his blue eyes were sad.

“I was awful to you, the last time we ate here,” Ron said. “Merlin, I’m no better than Lucius—calling you names, treating you like that just because you didn’t want to …”

“It’s alright, Ron.” She squeezed his hand.

“Did you mean what you said, about me?” Ron asked. “You really loved me once?”

Hermione nodded, feeling a little teary.

“But you love Malfoy now, don’t you, Mi?” he asked. “Even with the psycho parents and the freaky diamonds and the naughty tangerines?”

She nodded again.

“Merlin.” Ron’s mouth turned down. “Will you tell Malfoy you saw his father?”

Hermione sighed. “I won’t have to.”

Ron walked Hermione back to Hogwarts but refused to go further than the one-eyed witch’s statue. “I need to get home,” he said. “Mum’s likely going spare. She’ll never let me out of my room now.”

“Wait a minute,” Hermione said. She summoned a quill and parchment out of her beaded bag and sat in the middle of the corridor, writing rapidly.
Dear Molly,

Please forgive Ron for leaving the Burrow without telling anyone. I needed him for a delicate mission, and without Ron my efforts would have surely failed. Ron demonstrated courage, self-discipline and maturity, and helped me free a young woman from a captivity more terrible than she knew. I’m very proud of him.

See you this Christmas,

All my love,

Hermione

Hermione stood and handed the parchment to Ron, who read it wide-eyed. He grinned as he rolled it up and stuffed it in his cloak. “It’s treacle tarts for me all week!” he said gleefully. “Mum will be revolting.” His voice climbed higher. “My boy! So brave! So mature!”

He held out his arms for a hug, and Hermione embraced him without hesitation, then stepped back and took his hands.

“Let me know if you need protection again,” Ron said, looking smug.

She laughed. “I certainly will.”

Ron disappeared down the witch’s hump with a jaunty wave, and Hermione began climbing staircases, smiling to herself.

She stopped outside the owlry to read Lucius’ scroll; she wouldn’t deliver anything to Astoria on his word alone. The message was as she expected: short, to the point and vaguely creepy.

My dear Miss Greengrass,

I have decided it is in our family’s best interest if you remove La Chaîne d’Étoiles and return it to us.

I regret the loss of such an intriguing association.

Appreciatively,

Lord Lucius Malfoy

Hermione shook her head, almost amused, and entered the owlry to tie the scroll to Brownie’s leg. “Take this to Astoria Greengrass, please,” she said, stroking the downy feathers. The owl nipped her affectionately and fluttered off.

She put her gloved hands on the owlry railing and watched Brownie’s small shape disappear into the darkness. The night wind blew her hair wildly and tugged at her cloak. But she stayed despite the cold, thinking of Lucius in his cell, weaving his sick little plots. Some things never change.
But then she thought of Ron, setting aside his hatred and fear to follow her into Azkaban today. She thought of Draco and *ego aperita*. She thought of Pansy and the look in her eyes when Neville touched her hair. She thought of Ginny, determined to be glamorous but not overstrung. *Change. We all can change.*

The cold wind strengthened, sending shivers down Hermione’s back, but she hardly noticed, hardly heard the rustling of feathers and soft hooting of owls. Next week were Lucius and Narcissa’s trials before the Wizengamot, and those outcomes would help determine Draco’s future.

She sighed and turned away from the railing. The trials couldn’t come soon enough. She was sick of waiting, watching Draco, keeping herself busy with potions and prison visits and hunts for Love Diggles …

Love Diggles. She’d never checked in with Luna, and her friend was probably roaming the castle that very minute, terrorizing innocent couples. Bluebell’s words from their first DADA class whispered in her mind: “*I want you all to think of love … love of family, of friends, of places and things, and yes, romantic love …*”

Hermione froze on the owlry stairs. Different kinds of love, even different kinds of romantic love. Various couples shuffled through her mind … *of course*. She would speak to Luna tomorrow.

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Hermione didn’t bother to look for Draco the next morning. Like the day after she’d nicked his silver snitch, she knew the blond would turn up. It was unfortunate that he happened to turn up in the Divination corridor right after breakfast.

“Put the net down, Luna,” Hermione was saying. “You don’t need the sodding Loopies. I’m telling you, I know how to find your Love Diggles.”

Luna stared at her, finally giving Hermione her full attention. The Ravenclaw had spent the entire walk from the Great Hall describing a complicated chain of imaginary creatures: “Woobers tend to cluster around Monzies, who are always seen near Loopies after it rains and Loopies follow Love Diggles when …”

“Luna,” Hermione repeated, “all you have to do is …” She trailed off as a familiar scent of cologne and warm sunshine wafted her way. Draco was striding toward them, leather bag in hand, black robe billowing.

“Granger,” he growled, ignoring Luna.

Like that ever worked. “Draco!” Luna cried, eyes lighting up. “Were you able to ask your mother about a Fountain of Memories before she was arrested?”

Hermione couldn’t help a small groan, expecting an immediate scene, but Draco merely glared at Luna before turning his disapproval on Hermione again. “I need to speak to you, Granger.”

“Well, I’m speaking to Luna right now,” Hermione said, annoyed by his high-handedness. Calling her *Granger.*
“Let’s all have a nice chat!” Luna suggested, sounding just like Bluebell. She opened the door to a small classroom and swept in, net over her shoulder. Hermione huffed and followed her friend, and Draco, of course, followed Hermione. Just like a chain of Woobers and Monzies.

“Is that a Glowygooby under your jumper, Draco?” Luna asked. “How clever—their light often attracts Love Diggles and—”

“No,” Draco snapped, flushing slightly as he pulled his robe closed.

Hermione paid the others no heed; she was too busy looking around. The room was stuffed with Divination paraphernalia: mirrors, crystal balls, tea sets, boxes of twigs and eggs. Moth-eaten copies of "Unfogging the Future"—levels 1 through 4—were stacked on the desks. A large crystal ball, filled with pale fog, sat on a tall stand near the teacher's desk.

*Of course,* Hermione thought. *LAID.* Padma Patil had requested a Divination lesson in PORN, but Hermione had refused. "I fail to see the point in even taking a Divination NEWT," she told the Head Girl. "Surely the proctors can just See everyone's future performance and mark them accordingly."

Padma had stalked off in a huff, vowing to found her own study group. Obviously Luna had led Hermione and Draco into the headquarters for Learning Assistance In Divination.

Draco was leaning against the closed door now, arms crossed, glaring at both witches. Hermione ignored him.

“Look, Luna.” Hermione wiped rows of numbers off the blackboard with her wand, then picked up a piece of chalk. She rapidly wrote two columns of names. “No Diggles around Harry and Ginny, Draco and myself or Pansy and Neville. But plenty of Diggles around Theo, whether he’s with me or Lavender. And an especially large number around, well, Ernie and myself.”

Draco’s glare intensified, but Luna beamed. “Hermione!” she cried, “you can’t mean …”

“I do,” Hermione said. “This is obviously a special breed of Love Diggle, attracted to romantic feelings, yes—but *unrequited* romantic feelings.”

Luna clapped her hands, thrilled. The crystal ball on the stand glowed brightly pink, with two shadowy figures dancing—more like writhing, really—in the mist.

“Of course!” Luna cried. “Theo has unrequited feelings for you …”

“And Lavender does for Theo,” Hermione said quickly.

“And Ernie, of course, is hopelessly devoted to you, Hermione. He’s always looking at your—”

“That will be quite enough,” Draco broke in, sounding just like his mother. “Luna, I assume you now have enough to go on with, so I hope you will possibly consider taking yourself and your net off to locate some pathetic, pining knob too stupid to realize his feelings will *never* be returned.”

“Oh yes,” Luna said sunnily, unraveling the previous statement with ease. She was a Ravenclaw, after all. She hugged Hermione. “Thank you! Bluebell will be so pleased.”

“That is our mission in life, of course,” Draco drawled.

“And Draco, I’m sure whatever sentence your mother receives, house arrest will be involved,” Luna continued. “The perfect time for renovations!”
Draco bristled. Hermione hustled Luna out of the room with a quick “You’re-very-welcome-see-you-in-Transfiguration-bye.” She slammed the door, then turned to face the Slytherin.

“How are you now?” Hermione asked. “You’re breaking your little rule, Malfoy.”

Draco’s face was dark. “I feel more like breaking your neck. How dare you visit my father?”

Hermione walked over to the teacher’s desk and hopped onto it, legs dangling. She gave the tall wizard an airy smile. “I assume Astoria returned the diamonds to you.”

“Yes, and showed me the letter.” Draco uncrossed his arms and stepped closer. “Apparently my father controlled the necklace all along.” He pulled out his wand and Hermione eyed it warily.

“I told you to leave this be, Granger,” he said. “My family. My parents. My former betrothed. Mine. My business. But you just had to interfere, didn’t you? What did you promise my father in return for this little favor?”

“I didn’t promise him anything.”

“I don’t believe you. My father does nothing for free. What did you sacrifice to help a woman wholly undeserving of any sacrifice?”

“Not a thing,” Hermione said smugly. The crystal ball beside the desk shifted to dark grey fog swirling around a slender, pointed shape.

“You think you can play games with me?” Draco’s voice shook with fury. “You think you can go alone to Azkaban and play games with my father?”

“I didn’t go alone,” Hermione said. “Ronald came with me.”

Draco’s jaw dropped.

“Ron felt terrible about calling me a Death Eater whore,” Hermione went on serenely. “This was a good opportunity to make it up to me.”

Draco’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t believe a word of this. I don’t believe you took Ronald ‘Moron Is a Way of Life’ Weasley to Azkaban to help you confront my father.”

Hermione shrugged. “See for yourself. As I told you before, I’m a rubbish Occlumens.”

“You think I won’t? I want to know every word my father said to you.” Draco stepped closer still, a threatening figure swathed in his black robe, his wand pointed at Hermione’s head.

Hermione swallowed but didn’t look away. “Go on,” she said.

Draco hesitated. “I’ll be careful.”

“While you’re in there, you might take a look at my PORN,” Hermione said. “I’m sure you’re behind.”

His lips quivered, almost a smile, then Draco nodded and whispered, “Legilimens.”

Hermione trembled; Draco’s sudden nearness was flooding her senses, and now his magic was flooding her mind. But instead of her visit with Lucius, other scenes crowded forward: Draco’s wicked smirk on the carriage ride to Hogwarts, the firelight on his face the night of the Gryffindor party, Draco’s face so young and broken with Cupcake on his shoulder (“Don’t be angry”), Draco
holding her on his broom, Draco wet and shivering in a Gryffindor blanket. … And finally, Draco standing before her in his bedroom with a curled lip and haunted eyes: “You do not want to know what I thought of you then, at night, alone in the dark …”

Draco staggered backward, panting, the connection broken. “Control yourself!” he snapped, his face bright red.

“You control yourself!” Hermione hissed back, a little rattled herself. “You’re the big Death Eater-trained expert!” She looked over at the crystal ball, which was inky black except for a tiny, bouncing pink shape.

Draco closed his eyes for an instant and took a deep breath. “Alright,” he said more calmly. “Just … just think of your visit to Azkaban.” Another deep breath. “Think of my father.”

Hermione nodded and closed her own eyes. It was easier without seeing Draco’s face. Again she felt his magic, now unerringly focused on the recent encounter.

“… Miss … Granger …”

“… The chapter on musical runes …”

“… Wacky Faint …”

“… I loved Ron when your son was still mired in evil and hate …”

“… Mudblood whore …”

Draco’s magic quivered and threatened to break the connection, but he refocused.

“… You’ve already said that Draco wouldn’t use it, Miss Granger.”

“Maybe his heirs won’t be so dainty.”

Horror rippled through Draco’s magic, but it held.

“… Miss Granger, are you also ‘wild for hold,’ though you seem tame?”

Somehow, Draco held on until he reached her memory of leaving Lucius’ room. Then he lowered his wand and stepped back. His face was bloodless and his wand trembled.

“You really didn’t,” he breathed. “You didn’t promise him anything.”

Hermine sniffed. “Of course not.”

“He was looking at you,” Draco growled.

“Yes,” she said. Malfoy men. They were all pervs.

“He was talking runes with you,” Draco said, as if no topic could be more suggestive. “About dirges.”

“Yes,” Hermione said again. She almost rolled her eyes, but then she remembered her discussion of dirges with Draco in the Charms classroom, over the Codex Runicus. Draco had played that odd, halting, heartbreaking tune on the runes for her. Then he’d backed her against the chalkboard: “Have you been thinking of me?”
“I’d much rather discuss runes with you,” Hermione said in a weak attempt at seduction.

Draco just looked furious. “You have gone too far this time, Hermione. One of these days your luck will run out and you’ll find yourself in a Death Eater’s power again. Have you learned nothing?”

“I’m fine, Draco, you saw for yourself—”

“You have to stop doing this.” Draco was nearly pleading. “You have to stop risking yourself for Theo, for Astoria…” He swallowed, “for me.”

“I won’t stop.” Hermione said stubbornly. “It’s who I am. I spent seven years risking myself for Harry, and I’ll risk myself again if I have to. Draco, your father had Astoria on a leash. Don’t tell me he wasn’t plotting ways to yank on it, all the way from Azkaban.”

Draco fell into a nearby chair, his head bowed, his white-blond fringe over his eyes. Hermione slid off the desk and knelt before him. She took his hands, trying to look into his face.

“You warned me about Astoria,” Draco whispered. “I should have handled it myself. I just … couldn’t go back there.”

Hermione said nothing, just held his hands tightly. Draco sighed.

“You were right to bring the Weasel,” he admitted, his voice stronger. “His behavior was surprisingly well-considered.”

“High praise indeed,” she murmured.

“For the Weasel, yes,” Draco said. He looked up slightly, meeting her eyes, and gently pulled his hands from hers. Hermione sat back on her heels and Draco reached out to brush a lock of hair off her face. His fingers caught in a curl and he tugged her head back, raising her chin. Hermione’s eyes slid shut and she waited for the feel of soft lips on hers.

But Draco’s fingers slid out of the curl, and Hermione heard the scrape of his chair. She opened her eyes to see the black-robed figure stand and back away. Then he picked up his bag and prepared to leave.

Hermione stood as well. “Draco,” she said.

He turned to look at her, his leather bag dangling from one hand. They stood perhaps five feet apart, the crystal ball between them empty except for a tiny, silvery glow.

“You can’t run forever,” Hermione said quietly. “For Caesar's I am.”

They stared at each other for a long moment, then without another word, Draco swiftly crossed to the door and left the room.
Draco kept his distance for the rest of the week, although Hermione often felt his eyes on her. Harry continued to dog the Slytherin’s steps, to Draco’s obvious irritation, but while Draco was still mostly shunned around school, the hexing and baiting was dying down. Draco still looked drawn and haunted, however, eating little at meals and politely refusing any treats Pansy offered him. Only the Squeaky Mice could make him smile, although Hermione made sure they didn’t pester him.

Theo returned to his usual urbane manner and Hermione reluctantly allowed him to join her table in Potions again. The Slytherin must have had an I’ll-cut-you-with-the-glass-shards moment with Lavender, because Lavender wouldn’t even look at him and her hands trembled as she counted out their Griffin claws. Hermione thought about helping her, both with the task and her obvious distress, but thought better of it. Maybe this would teach Lavender to stop chasing Slytherins.

It was at this juncture, with the entire school divided over the Malfoys’ latest actions and tensions running high between nearly all the Eighth Years (notably between Ginny and Blaise, Hermione and Theo, Lavender and Theo, and of course Draco and just about everyone), that the Slytherins chose to hold their own inter-House party and invite other Eighth Years. Neville begged Hermione to attend for Pansy’s sake (Pansy was planning the party with Astoria, of all people) and Hermione agreed, remembering Neville’s reference for Draco and his help with the Virgin Earth.

The party Saturday night was for Slytherins and Gryffindors only, thank Merlin, which cut out Luna and Justin Finch-Fletchley among others. Ernie and Padma, however, were invited as Head Boy and Girl (a typical Slytherin political move). Harry was invited as well, and had surprisingly agreed to come instead of pleading weekend auror duties.

The dress code on the invitation was “semiformal,” a blatant attempt to get Gryffindors out of denim and sneakers. Hermione found herself standing in front of her bedroom mirror the night of the party, fingers twitching to grab her wand and lengthen her dress hem. What she was wearing was Pansy’s fault: a shocking dark green—almost black—halter dress with a short, flowy skirt, bare shoulders and a deep V neckline. Ginny had also painstakingly sorted Hermione’s hair into long ringlets with two Gloriana hairpins drawing strands off her face.

“This is too much,” Hermione said, staring at her reflected image. The silver bangles on her wrist matched her heeled sandals. “Entirely too much.”

“You look dazzling,” Ginny said. She herself wore a strapless dress of dark purple with an amethyst pendant on a golden chain. Her hair was unbound, falling like smooth, coppery curtains from a center part.

Hermione shook her head. “You’re the dazzling one, Gin. Harry will lose his mind.”

“I’m not dressing for Harry, or for Blaise,” Ginny said severely. “I’m dressing for me.”

Harry was waiting in the Gryffindor common room with Neville, and Hermione halted on the stairs, stunned, for it could almost be Theo in glasses standing there. Harry wore a black suit with a crisp white shirt and a green tie that matched his eyes. His hair even stuck up in an organized way. Pansy must have gotten to him as well. Harry wore a tiny gold tie clip in the shape of a phoenix and the magical watch Hermione had given him for his birthday.

“You look incredible, Hermione,” Harry said, kissing her on the cheek.


“Well, Pansy insisted that Neville and I …” Harry trailed off and Hermione didn’t need to turn
around to know that Ginny was walking down the stairs. Hermione moved over to Neville, who
looked like an entirely different person all in black with a silver tie.

Harry met Ginny at the bottom of the stairs, and whatever he said brought a rare flush to the
redhead’s cheeks. Ginny tore her eyes from his (in her heels, Ginny and Harry were almost of a
height) and walked over to Hermione and Neville. The Patil twins and Lavender turned up as well,
followed by Seamus in an ill-fitting brown suit and red shirt.

Neville led the way to the dungeons, obviously fulfilling a promise to Pansy to deliver the
Gryffindors dressed appropriately and on time.

“Intelligence without ambition,” the Snake Charmer said as the group approached the repaired
painting.

“A bird without wings,” Neville responded.

The Charmer suddenly stood and bowed. “Welcome to Slytherin Dungeons, little Hellebore,” he
said politely to Hermione. The painted cobra uncoiled and bowed as well.

Nearly everyone stared at the portrait in confusion, but Hermione smiled. “Thank you, sir,” she
said. She caught Harry’s eye and he grinned at her.

The portrait’s door swung open and the steamy strains of R&B wound into the corridor. Ginny,
well-used to Slytherin ways, now led the group inside. Hermione followed, amused to hear muggle
music in this pureblood bastion. A party in the snake pit, she thought. Godric help us all.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Corrupting influences and Lavender strikes again.

We have a Slytherin Party in the next chapter and yes, Theo is going to want to dance
with Hermione. Should she dance with him? I honestly can't make up my mind.
Slytherin Party, Part I

Chapter Notes

I have no notes for this chapter. Just … just read it. Hoo boy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Slytherin common room had been transformed into a high-end nightclub, full of spinning shadows and dappled lighting. Partiers danced to the pounding music on little floating platforms or in a cleared space ringed with strings of lights. Multicolored coils of steam swirled up from small cauldrons. This was nothing like the Slug Club’s gracious, candlelit setting with its roses and floating orchestra. The common room’s large window to the Black Lake cast an eerie glow, with merpeople undulating on the other side of the glass.

Hermione’s pulse responded to the beat of the music, her breath quickened, and her gaze swept the dungeon for a familiar flash of platinum hair. Draco was nowhere in sight, but there was Blaise, holding a square bottle of sirenscotch. His black suit was practically a tuxedo, silk lapels framing a white shirt and black tie.

“Welcome,” Blaise said, white teeth flashing. His dark eyes lingered on Ginny long enough to make Harry stiffen, but Ginny ignored them both, her attention drawn by the merpeople. Blaise tried a new tack.

“Hermione,” he said. “You are quite the temptress tonight.”

“You just like the color,” Hermione said, smiling up at him.

“I like all of it.” Blaise handed the sirenscotch to Harry, not taking his eyes off Hermione. Harry bobbled the bottle and nearly dropped it, glaring at Blaise. Ginny just looked amused.

“Dance with me, Hermione, please,” Blaise said, and Hermione allowed herself to be led away. Blaise had, after all, been a good friend to Draco since Narcissa’s arrest.

“Strange time for a party,” she said to Blaise, trying not to blush. This wasn’t waltzing in the Potions dungeon. Blaise’s hands were on her hips and he ground slightly to the music. Hermione did her best to follow along without becoming too embarrassed. She cleared her throat and focused on Blaise’s silver, snake-shaped tie pin. “There’s little to celebrate these days.”

“I know, but Pansy insisted,” Blaise said. “She and Astoria said it would cheer everyone up.”

“Things must be bad if Astoria is cheering people up.”

Blaise lowered his head to whisper in her ear. “I love that sharp tongue of yours.”

Hermione snickered at his suggestive tone. In some ways, Blaise was a wind-up doll like Astoria. She looked around Blaise’s shoulder at her friends: Neville was handing out glasses; Harry was pouring the drinks and doing a bad job of it, since he was glaring over at Blaise at the same time. He spilled sirenscotch on Lavender’s dress, causing her to squeak in outrage, and Ginny rolled her eyes and pulled the bottle from Harry’s grasp.
“Are you going to ask me about Draco?” Blaise breathed in her ear, hands traveling up her ribs.

“No,” Hermione said, pulling away. “Are you going to feel me up?”

Blaise smiled. “Don’t tempt me.”

“Apparently, I already have,” she said tartly. “Find another way to irritate Harry.”

“Oh, but this is so effective.” Blaise looked disappointed, but he did withdraw one of his hands, taking hers instead and placing the other hand on Hermione’s exposed back. His touch still felt rather suggestive, what with that sinful music playing, but definitely an improvement.

“I’m sure Draco will turn up,” Blaise said with a smile. “He’d hate to miss you tonight.”

Hermione could see Pansy now, resplendent in a draped silver dress cut low in the front and back. Neville’s hand was trailing up the witch’s bare spine in a way that made Hermione almost blush. Honestly, Neville was her friend.

Her gaze then landed on Astoria, who wore an off-the-shoulder white lace dress. The blonde’s throat was pointedly bare of any jewelry. Astoria met Hermione’s eye and the Slytherin gave a short nod, which was all the thanks Hermione was likely to get. No matter, keeping any witch out of Lucius’ control was thanks enough.

Blaise gracefully spun her, still keeping a reasonable space between them. Hermione gave him a grateful smile, then looked over the room again. Another pair of dark eyes caught Hermione’s—a Slytherin wizard she didn’t know, likely a Seventh Year. He eyed her boldly with an arrogant sneer. Lovely, some pureblood muggle-hater with his knickers in a twist.

The music faded, and Blaise released her with a kiss on the hand and a leer just for Harry, who was pushing his way over with a frown.

“Damn it, Hermione,” Harry began, “his hands were all over …”

“Oh hush, Harry,” she said, finishing her drink. “Blaise was just trying to annoy you.” She plucked two champagne flutes from a floating tray and handed one to her friend. “Relax, have some fun. It’s a party.”

Harry sipped his champagne with a reluctant grin, his coat sleeve falling back to reveal tiny snitch cufflinks. He really did look sharp tonight. “Are you going to boss everyone into having fun?” he teased.

“Only if they need it.” The icy champagne was cool in her veins after the scotch. “Come on, let’s dance.”

She and Harry probably looked silly, doing their typical clumsy swaying in this intoxicating setting. The magical phonograph in the corner was belting out a deep bass beat that was quite provocative, but Hermione and Harry were too busy giggling at a clearly drunk Slytherin stumbling after the Patil twins. Harry’s laughter trailed off, however, when he saw Ginny and Seamus join the dancers.

“Harry,” Hermione said. He looked back at her. “Have you and Ginny spoken since …”

“No, not really.” Harry sighed. “But she was right about Chloe.”

Hermione said nothing, just swayed in her friend’s arms, trying not to look at the couple behind
Harry. The wizard was pulling at his dance partner’s clothes with his teeth. “Give it to me, give it to me, give it all …” the phonograph crooned.

Harry was still sighing, obviously not in tune with his surroundings. “I was all stern and honorable with Chloe, too,” he admitted. “Merlin, Hermione, it’s true. I’m like Percy with women.”

“Did you lecture her about cauldron bottoms?”

“No.” Harry grimaced. “But I did talk about wand protocol. And not in a fun way.”

Hermione giggled. Harry carefully drew a stray curl out of her face, avoiding the Gloriana pins.

“Chloe didn’t go back to France for a title,” he continued. “That Duke Truffle Prick or whatever, she’d known him since childhood.”

Harry glanced over at Ginny. “I have no idea how to behave now. Everything I do just pushes Gin away.”

“A fresh start,” Hermione said.

“What?”


Harry was frowning. “I suppose you know all about fresh starts, with Malfoy.”

“Quite the opposite,” Hermione said.

“The two of you are terrifying, really,” Harry said. “I’ve been following Malfoy around for over a week and he’s exhausting. Thank Merlin his parents’ trials are next week. Then I can go back to chasing dark wizards. It’ll be like a vacation.”

The music ended, or more accurately, began bleeding into the next shocking, almost moaning tune, and they stopped dancing. Again Harry looked over at Ginny, who was obviously teasing Neville about something salacious as Pansy smirked beside him. Over by the phonograph, that dark-eyed pureblood creep was still staring.

“A fresh start,” Harry said, looking thoughtful.

“Yes,” Hermione said.

“Alright.” Harry picked up two champagne flutes and walked over to Ginny, looking lighter than he had in a long time. He wasn’t wearing his auror robes but he walked with that confidence. Hermione smiled and stepped over to a platter of chocolate-dipped strawberries.

“Well, well, well. Hermione Graaaaanger,” drawled an unfamiliar voice. She turned to see the arrogant Slytherin, now standing before her, those dark eyes narrowed as if she was invading his space. Her fingers twitched, wanting to touch the wand hidden in her dress. Every nerve ending was on alert.

“Isn’t this an honor,” the wizard continued. “Marcus Fixe.” He pronounced the name as if she should know it.

She said nothing, just frowned at him, her wand hand pressed against her hip.
“I’m held to be quite charming, but surely I haven’t struck you speechless,” the young Slytherin said. He was attractive in a coiled sort of way, more in the way he stood and held his head, rather than his features or body, which were unremarkable.

“You were sneering at me, before,” Hermione said coolly. “I’m guessing you don’t want me here.”

Fixe sniffed. “I’m surprised you’d let Zabini paw you so.”

“You disapprove,” Hermione said. “I’m devastated.” She looked him up and down. “You need to work on your charm, Mr. Fixe.” She turned and walked away, sensing rather than seeing Fixe’s eyes on her. Creepy.

Anxious to escape Fixe, she walked straight into a wizard in a grey suit. “Oh, excuse me—Ernie!”

Ernie looked down at her, his mouth open. “Hermione … you look so … so glamorous.” His face was as red as his ears.

“Come, dance with me,” Hermione said. Fixe was still lurking by the strawberries. “There are some seriously weird wizards here tonight.”

Ernie complied, but the music had switched to a low, throbbing beat that neither of them knew what to do with. Conventional dancing simply wouldn’t do, and with a sigh Hermione instructed Ernie to put both hands around her waist with her hands linked around his neck. They managed to find some sort of rhythm, and Hermione was doing fine until she looked over to see Ginny standing with Harry, their eyes wide. Ginny grinned and gave Hermione the thumbs-up and Hermione felt her face heat. Sweet Merlin, it would be all over the school now:

Hermione Granger grinding with Ernie Macmillan—they were in an orgy, you know, in the storage room with half the student government …

The very idea made her giggle, which cooled her embarrassment somewhat. Ernie appeared to be sniffing her hair or something and she was just about to warn him about Gloriana pins when the inappropriate song finally ended. She stepped backward from Ernie, who thanked her and walked quickly away.

“He’s probably off to wank somewhere,” said a familiar voice. “I think you broke him.”

Hermione sighed and turned around. “Theo,” she said. This was truly an annoying party.

“Having a good time?” Theo asked with a small smile. He looked much as he had at the Gryffindor party in a black suit with a green shirt and green-patterned tie. He extended a broad hand toward her, the silver band of his ring shining in the shifting lights. “Would you care to dance?”

“No, thank you,” Hermione said and marched off the dance floor toward the refreshment table. Hopefully, she could find something non-alcoholic.

Theo followed. “So we are no longer friends,” he said, “but certainly not enemies. Allies? I would categorize us as acquaintances again, but not friendly acquaintances.”

“Schoolmates,” Hermione said, rummaging among the bottles. “A perfectly fine word.”

“So cold, though,” Theo said. “Where’s Draco tonight?”

“Don’t ask me,” she snapped, sniffing a clear liquid. No, definitely not water. “I’d be the last to know.” She slammed down the small bottle and picked up another one.
“Please, let me help you,” Theo said, taking the bottle out of her hand. “What would you like? Sirenswhiskey? Firewhiskey? There’s some absinthe here as well.”

“Water,” Hermione said, “or juice. Something non-alcoholic.”

“At a Slytherin party?” Theo asked. “A tall order.” He rustled around the bottles. “I don’t see any soda, but I believe … yes. Sparkling cider. Who knew?”

Hermione sniffed suspiciously at the glass he handed her. It smelled alright. She took a cautious sip.

“Merlin, Hermione,” Theo said, rolling his eyes. “I’m trying to earn your trust again. I’m not going to sneak you liquor you don’t want.”

“So you say,” Hermione began, “but I—”

“Theee-oh!” Lavender was standing before them, her face flushed. She’d obviously had a fair amount of firewhiskey already; her cheeks were flushed and her blonde hair unraveling from its intricate twist.

“You …” Lavender poked Theo in the chest. “You led me on! And … and broke my heart!”

“I didn’t!” Theo protested. “I told you—Draco was lying! Hermione, tell Brown here that Draco was lying about me!”

“He was baking,” Hermione said, resigned to not making sense for the next ten minutes.

“That’s another thing!” Lavender cried, full of drunken indignation. “Draco doesn’t bake at all, Hermione! I asked him for some recipes and he looked at me like I was mad!”

“You are mad, Brown,” Theo snapped. “Draco doesn’t bake and I never led you on. Tell her, Hermione.”

“You mustn’t pat Draco on the head, Lavender,” Hermione said, sipping her chilled cider.

Theo glared at Hermione. “This is a hell of a way to get back at me.”

“Oh … Theo …” Lavender blubbered.

“Oh look, there’s Ginny,” Hermione said, anxious to party with someone who wasn’t Slytherin, male, loony or all three.

“Don’t leave me!” Theo pleaded. “Brown, get off me! Stop crying on my suit! Hermione!”

Hermione practically ran to Ginny, who received her with delight. Ginny insisted that the two of them dance to the current song, which was nearly as degenerate as the one she’d danced with Ernie. The other dancers strove to avoid the two crazy Gryffindor girls, which gave Hermione plenty of space to wave her arms wildly and Ginny to embark on a series of spins that nearly sent the redhead into the room’s giant window. She certainly scared the merpeople outside half to death. Hermione took her friend’s hands and dragged her back to the dance floor, passing a flock of pearl-clutching Slytherin girls. Hermione rolled her eyes: That Slytherin couple over there was practically acting out the pounding song (which featured an extremely bossy man telling his girl what he wanted right now), and they were offended by Ginny?

Harry was actually being human tonight, Ginny told Hermione during a lull in the music. The-Boy-
Who-Lived had found some charm in that Voldemort-addled head of his and had stopped glaring at Blaise. Ginny then complimented Hermione on loosening Ernie up and said Lavinia Clarke and two other Harpies—former Slytherins—were at the party.

“They’re very nice but they have this weird obsession with Draco,” Ginny said. “They keep looking for him. He made quite an impression at the Inter-House Quidditch Match.”

Hermione was shocked. “Even with the ‘Die Mudbloods’ spell and trial and all?”

Ginny shrugged. “It only makes him more attractive outside Hogwarts. Slytherin women are really strange.”

Hermione could only agree. The men, too. She danced a second song with Ginny, relaxing enough to switch back to sirenscotch again. They were attracting a fair amount of attention, though—Slytherin women apparently didn’t dance with each other. Blaise was prowling the perimeter and Pratt and Bloom (the former Slytherin Beaters) were watching open-mouthed. Hermione repressed the urge to go over and scold them like they were Squeaky Mice.

She soon regretted the sirenscotch because she found herself eyeing Theo, now dancing with Daphne Greengrass in a very tantalizing way. He had shed his coat and tie and freed the top few buttons on his green silk shirt. Theo caught her watching and winked, and Hermione turned her head away. Lavinia Clarke was talking to Neville, at least until Pansy arrived and drove off the Harpy with a single look.

After three songs, Hermione and Ginny withdrew to sofas near the fireplace with Neville, who now had Pansy on his lap. Harry joined them soon afterward, tie loosened and face flushed.

“You were dancing between the Patil twins,” Ginny said to Harry mischievously.

“I may never be the same,” Harry said, smiling back at her. “These Slytherin parties are something else.”

Hermione had to agree. The whole scene was arousing: the music, the alcohol, the runaway hormones. Neville, beside her, was whispering to Pansy, who was giggling. Harry had shifted closer to Ginny, his smile making him look much like Theo. Ginny leaned back negligently on her side of the sofa, long legs crossed, champagne flute in one hand, quite at ease in this setting. She looked back at Harry with very Slytherin eyes.

I need air. Hermione slipped away from the fireplace, with an eye to leaving the common room for a time. Maybe she would leave the party altogether; her friends were obviously preoccupied and the evening suddenly felt flat, lifeless. Draco was likely in France again this weekend, with only Aimee for company, brooding over the trials ahead, and here she was …

“Leaving already?” It was Fixe again. “Don’t tell me one little Slytherin party is too much for Hermione Granger.”

Hermione turned to face him. Fixe’s round face and black curls made him look ridiculously young despite an exquisitely tailored black suit. The hand holding his drink sported a fat emerald ring that matched his tie.

“Why do you keep saying my name like that?” she asked him peevishly.

“Like how?” Fixe sipped his sirenscotch on ice, his dark eyes never leaving hers.

“Like it’s a grand title to sneer at.”
“It is a grand title, but I wasn’t sneering,” Fixe said.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Nice try. You obviously sneer at everything. A less than charming Slytherin trait.”

“It’s the drawl.” Fixe shifted between her and the portrait hole. “We can’t help it.”

She glared up at him. “Yes, yes, I’m Hermione Granger. I’m a crazy drunkard who lets men paw her while dancing. Now that I’ve dashed all your hopes and expectations, may I leave now?”

Fixe arched an eyebrow. “Interesting. Does this mean you might let me paw you as we dance?”

Hermione huffed and looked out at the party, ignoring Fixe. Theo, she noted, had been cornered by Lavender once more. The blonde Gryffindor was chattering anxiously, petting the poor man’s arm after spilling her drink on him.

Fixe followed her gaze. “Nott has his hands full there. Odd girl. Merlin only knows what she’s saying.”

“Oh, Theo, please forgive me,” Hermione squeaked. “Here, I’ll lick the sirenschotch off your sleeve!”

“Fine, but watch the cufflinks, dearie,” Fixe said in an absurdly deep voice.

“On the other hand, let me use this napkin, Theo. I’ll dab it all over you in a very suggestive way.”

“And I’ll squeal like a little girl and spill my own drink.”

“Oh, Theo, you’re so handsome when you look murderous!” Hermione breathed. “Where are you going? Please threaten me again, it’s just foreplay, right? Theo!”

Hermione dissolved into giggles, she couldn’t help it, and Fixe laughed outright, looking even more boyish now. Theo had made his escape, but at a cost—he’d knocked over two tables and his wrinkled shirt now had a spreading dark stain. Other Slytherins snickered as Theo disappeared down the stairs to the boys’ dormitories.

The fracas had caught the attention of Harry, who had his arm along the back of the sofa he shared with Ginny. Lavender was sobbing into her rejected napkin, but the Patil twins were quick to comfort her. Harry turned back to Ginny, who evidently said something shocking, given the look on Neville’s and even Pansy’s face. But Harry just gave Ginny a lazy smile that Hermione had never seen before.

“You look rather smug,” Fixe said. Hermione started—she’d forgotten he was there.

“I like seeing my friends happy,” she said.

Fixe set down his glass and shed his suitcoat, handing it to a passing Slytherin boy without looking. “We are dancing now,” he announced, taking Hermione's hand and pulling her toward the mass of bodies. The other Slytherin stood glaring, still holding Fixe’s coat.

“I am not dancing with you to this shocking song, Fixe,” Hermione objected, “so just …” Fixe ignored her entirely, just placed her in the center of the crowd and put her arms around his neck. His own arms slid around her and she could feel his warmth through his grey silk shirt.

“Fixe, I have a boyfriend and …”
“He won’t mind,” he murmured.

“He certainly will mind, you have no idea …” Hermione tried to back away, but the crowd pressed too close, and the music and alcohol were working against her. At least Fixe kept his hands at her waist.

“This is no more than you did with our Head Boy,” Fixe said, sounding a bit irritated.

Well, yes, but Fixe was not Ernie. The Slytherin's smooth palm on her bare arm gave her goosebumps. Another hand lay gently on her waist, and Hermione took advantage of Fixe's light touch to spin out of his grasp, putting another dancing couple between them.

Fixe followed, looking determined, and Hermione dodged behind a different writhing couple, continuing to dance with her arms over her head. She circled Lavender and the Patil twins, who were dancing in a cluster, then stepped in front of a lumbering Gregory Goyle. The former Malfoy henchman’s eyes bugged out when he realized whom he was suddenly dancing with, and Hermione gave Goyle a bright smile as they briefly swayed together, then she twirled away again.

She’d lost sight of Fixe, though, and paused uncertainly on one foot. A hand wearing a square-cut emerald ring captured hers from behind and spun her around.

“Found you,” Fixe growled. “You’re a terrible flirt ... Miss Granger.” A shiver ran down Hermione’s spine at the way he said her name.

“Wild for hold,” Hermione said before she thought.

Fixe blinked, startled, then placed an arm on her bare back, retaining her other hand. “Better?” he asked, starting up a modified waltz. “Or will you run away again?”

Hermione flushed but refused to answer, and they danced in silence, with Fixe keeping an appropriate distance this time as Blaise had.

“Having fun tonight?” the Slytherin asked with careful courtesy.

“I was,” she said significantly. Fixe just smiled, releasing her hand to brush a curl from her face.

Hermione flinched. “Careful,” she said, thinking of her hairpins.

“It’s just a curl,” Fixe said, twining the strand in his finger. “Just a beautiful, shining, twisted curl that refuses to be confined.”

Hermione felt her face heat. Slytherins. Next, Rupert Pratt would sidle up to her and murmur about choking in velvet tones. She yanked her hair out of Fixe’s grasp, glaring, and could only be grateful when she heard Neville’s voice.

“Is this bloke bothering you, Hermione?” her friend asked. Fixe immediately backed away, hands in the air. He winked at Hermione, ignoring Neville, and disappeared into the crowd.

“Who was that, Hermione?” Neville wanted to know.

“Marcus Fixe,” Hermione said, frowning. “Just some Slytherin asshole …” Her eyes widened. No.

“Hermione?” Neville asked.

She looked around frantically. “Where did he go?”
“Where did who go?” asked Pansy, stepping up. “What’s with you, Granger?”

“I’m fine,” Hermione said, craning her neck to look over the crowd. She left them and began weaving through the room.

Hermione circled the common room, dodging Theo, who was once more impeccable in a fresh shirt and tie, and Ernie, who’d obviously had more to drink and wanted another dance. She saw Astoria sway up to Theo and latch onto his arm. Theo looked like he’d rather have Lavender back again.

Huffing in irritation, Hermione stepped onto a floating platform and danced a bit mechanically while she surveyed the party below. People were pointing up at her, but she hardly noticed. There he was, leaning against a silver-papered wall with a glass in his hand again, in a pool of light, his face upturned toward her. Hermione lowered the platform and ruthlessly pushed into the mass of dancers, popping out in front of Fixe on the other side.

She stood there panting, knowing her dress was askew and her hair likely wild despite the diamonds. Fixe straightened, his round, boyish face showing no expression. Hermione shoved him against the wall and crashed her lips against his, kissing him roughly, then pulling away. Her eyes held his darker ones.

“Draco,” she growled.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Hermione makes everybody mad. Pansy offers legal advice.
Slytherin Party, Part II

Chapter Notes

This is my birthday weekend and what better way to celebrate than with another Slytherin Party post, with an extra sprinkle of depravity. Hermione herself adds a little touch of evil. Thank you for all your great comments and kudos as we roll toward the finish line. This story would not be as rich without my Astute Readers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“It’s Marcus, actually,” said the wizard, utterly unfazed by Hermione’s kiss. “Did you just call me Draco? Draco Malfoy? He’s a very powerful wizard. I’d hate to cross him.”

Blood pounded in Hermione’s veins, and for the first time that night she truly felt the music. She twined her fingers with his, tugging lightly.

“Dance with me some more, Marcus.” She leaned forward in a classic Ginny move, her lips only inches from his. “You said yourself, my boyfriend won’t mind.”

“I’m shocked, really,” the wizard said as she led him to the dance floor. “Hermione Granger seducing boys at parties. Does this mean you’re going to educate me?”

Hermione ignored this, as well as the wide-eyed looks around her. Her reputation was in tatters, anyway. She was furious with him, but that could wait. Draco was here, he wanted her, she wanted him, the music was pounding and they were going to dance.

As if on cue, the phonograph shifted to a crooning, wailing beat that sent the partygoers, already high on teenage hormones, into a frenzy. It was so weird to dance with this wizard, the height was different, the hair, the feel of his skin. But the murmuring kisses on her throat, his fingers tracing her Gloriana pins, and the movement of his body against hers was entirely familiar.

“Hermione,” Draco whispered with that dangerous heat she knew so well. Hermione moaned, and suddenly she was roughly pushed away, spun around and drawn back again, her back against his chest. His hands were on her hips, his lips at her throat again, and she tilted her head back against his shoulder to allow better access.

“Fuck, I want you, Hermione,” he groaned hoarsely into her ear. “You’re so sexy tonight. You’ve been driving me mad.” His voice deepened. “Move with me, darling.”

She raised her arms, hands easily reaching that unfamiliar curly hair, and they undulated to the music, Hermione pushing back against him, Draco pressing into her.

“You want it, too, don’t you, sweetheart, such a ...” he whispered a stream of filthy words and suggestions in her ear until her body thrummed with need to the music.

“Touch me, Draco,” she moaned, eyes closed, “Please, I ...” She felt his hand slide up her leg, raising her dress slightly.

“Hermione!” Her name again, but in a rather different tone. Her eyes popped open to see Harry, looking completely appalled.
“Hermione!” Harry repeated. “What are you doing? You don’t even know this bloke!”

“Don’t tell him, don’t tell anyone,” Draco whispered as Hermione was pulled away.

“Honestly, Hermione, you’re worse trouble than Lavender,” Harry scolded. He glared at the wizard. “She’s not one of your Slytherin sluts, you little fuck, so why don’t you just take yourself off.”

Harry hauled her over to Ginny, who was on the sofa near the main fireplace. Draco followed, looking amused. Ginny saw them and rolled her eyes. “Oh, Harry.”

“What?” Harry asked her. “Didn’t you see them out there? Do you want Malfoy in Azkaban for murder when he finds out?”

“It’s true, I’m very frightened of Draco Malfoy,” the curly-haired wizard said. “He’s quite powerful. And handsome.” Hermione bit down a smile.

“What are you still doing here?” Harry snapped, sounding just like Ron. “Get away from her!”

Ginny jumped up. “Come on, Harry. Let’s dance.”

“I am not leaving her alone with …” Harry began, continuing his Ron behavior.

“Yes, you are,” Hermione said. “You’ll just have to trust me. I will sit on this sofa with Marcus and behave myself and you will dance with Ginny.”

“Come on, Harry.”

“What? Gin, we can’t …”

“We certainly can. She’s a big girl.” Ginny took his hand. “Come along,” she said, in a bossy tone worthy of Hermione herself. She flounced off, hair rippling, pulling a reluctant Harry behind her.

“So much for my secret identity,” Draco said, joining Hermione on the sofa.

“She won’t tell Harry,” Hermione said. His closeness affected her, even in his present form, but Harry had severed their brief, heady connection. Draco sat stiffly, both feet planted on the carpet, hands on his knees. Hermione’s posture was equally stiff on the other end of the sofa as she took in the scene.

Thin tendrils of multicolored fog swirled on the dance floor, writhing to the music. Ginny and Harry were gyrating in an oddly careful way, as if afraid to spark something they weren’t ready for. Harry’s eyes held Ginny’s and he raised one of her hands to brush it with his lips.

It was getting late. Slughorn might be tucked into his posh office, ignoring his responsibilities, but McGonagall would surely turn up if the Slytherins didn’t tone down the depravity soon. A giant silver-and-onyx clock chimed the half-hour—11:30—and the phonograph switched to a smooth, romantic melody. Harry and Ginny followed suit, trading their careful grinding for even more careful swaying.

Hermione sighed and shifted slightly, leaning against her side of the sofa. She crossed her legs, drawing a quick glance from Draco, but still she said nothing. He was the one who followed her to this sofa. If the git wanted to talk, he could talk.

“I can’t stay long,” he said finally. “The crowd is thinning out, and people are starting to ask
questions. I had to fend off Astoria.” His dramatic shudder was pure Draco.

“Marcus isn’t actually a student, is he?” Hermione asked. She’d hate to meet the real wizard in the halls.

Draco shook his head. “I nicked some Polyjuice from Slughorn’s stores. Marcus is a muggle at Kings Cross Station.”

“If this was some sort of sick test, Draco, I don’t appreciate—”

“Of course not,” the Slytherin said, offended. “I would never be so pathetic.”

Hermione sniffed. “Too late. Staring at me, sneering at me, grabbing me, stalking me around the dance floor.” She stood up, her temper flaring. “I’m not a plaything, Mr. Fixe.”

Draco put a hand on her arm, his eyes round and dark. “I’m sorry, Hermione. Please, sit here with me. Please. I do have something to say.”

Hermione dropped back down on the sofa with a huff, blowing a strand of hair out of her face. She crossed her arms and refused to look at him.

“I just wanted to see you tonight,” he admitted. “Even disguised myself so I wouldn’t cause trouble. I vowed to stay away …” He swallowed. “But I couldn’t.”

“It was a really stupid stunt, Draco.”

Draco impatiently pushed sweaty black curls off his forehead and frowned as they tumbled down over his eyes again. “I know, I obviously wasn’t thinking straight. But now that we’re both here …” He looked around. “This is a good opportunity to talk privately—without being alone.”

Hermione sniffed again. “Don’t give me that stern look. Aren’t I behaving? I wasn’t the one following you around, showing off my charming lack of charm.”

Draco smirked and began rolling up his sleeves. “It seemed to work well enough on …” His voice trailed off as he stared down at his forearm.

“What is it?” Hermione asked. “There’s nothing—“ She saw the look on his transformed face and stopped.

He turned his left forearm back and forth, running a hand over the smooth, bare skin. “I’d forgotten what it was like. To be unmarked,” he said in a strange voice. “I still feel it, though, underneath … I’ll always be …”

“Draco,” Hermione said, reaching for his hand, but he pulled it away. “Draco,” she repeated, “don’t you dare start that up again.”

The Slytherin looked around again, then leaned closer. “This is what I want to talk about. Hermione, you have a brilliant future ahead after Hogwarts. You could be Minister of Magic someday and I—”

“WHAT?” Hermione’s voice cut through the music and chatter like a knife.

“There are some realities that even you can’t fight against,” Draco went on doggedly. “My mother’s trial is in two days, and she’ll likely go to Azkaban. If my father is then convicted and executed, which he will be, that’s it. It will be nearly impossible to restore the Malfoy name.”
“You don’t know that,” Hermione said. “As I said, what you do matters—”

He eyed her darkly, a strange expression on such a cherubic face. “I won’t drag you down with me.”

“I’m not listening to this—nobody tells me how to live, not even you. I’ll love who I want, when I want, when I want …”

Draco’s eyebrows lifted. “Love?”

Hermione groaned. This was a ridiculous time to talk of love, in such a setting, with his parents facing imprisonment and possible execution, not to mention that Draco was a good four inches shorter with chubby pink cheeks …

“Damn it, Draco, you promised you wouldn’t do this,” she said. “You promised you’d haunt me always in some creepy way.” She switched to a wheedling tone. “Look how good you were at that tonight. You’re a natural.”

He shook his head. “I saw Weasley stand by you in Azkaban,” he said soberly. “He loves you. He might actually be alright.”

“Wow, big shocker, Ronald Weasley is not a total waste of space,” Hermione snapped. “You deserve a wizard who—”

“Oh Merlin,” she groaned loudly. “It’s the Gryffindor Party all over again, isn’t it? Your big plan? We’ve had the hot sex, and now you expect me to go find someone more suitable? I—”

“Good evening, Hermione.” Ernie’s pompous tones rolled over them, and Hermione started violently, afraid the Hufflepuff had overheard her raving on about hot sex.

“I don’t believe we’ve met,” Ernie said to Draco. Ernie’s suit was rumpled and his ears flushed from alcohol, but his face was stern. “Ernest Macmillan, Head Boy.”

Draco just sneered back until Hermione elbowed him sharply. “Marcus Fixe,” he said, sounding bored and faintly French.

“I’ve never noticed you before,” Ernie said, suspicious.


Ernie looked offended. “I wasn’t informed. As Head Boy, it is my duty to welcome all new students.” He paused. “I also feel a moral imperative—”

“Don’t, Ernie,” Hermione warned.

Ernie’s ears were bright red. “Hermione, it must be said. I don’t know what you’re accustomed to in France, Mr. Fixe, but here we treat witches with more respect.”

“Really,” Draco said blandly. “So, if you had the chance to stroke Miss Granger’s leg while whispering filthy things in her ear, you’d run off bleating about her virtue?” His voice was pure Astoria. “So sad.”

Now Ernie’s entire face was red. “How dare—”

“Ernie.” Hermione reached out and squeezed his hand reassuringly, ignoring Draco’s slight glare.
“I appreciate your concern, but I’m just going to stay here and wait for Harry and Ginny.”

“If you’re sure, Hermione,” Ernie said doubtfully. Hermione released his hand and nodded and Ernie strode away, back stiff.

Hermione glared at Draco. “*I should* dance with Ernie again, on general principles. I could unbutton his shirt and whisper dirty ...”

“Don’t you dare,” Draco snapped.

She snickered. “Your plan is just as stupid now as it was at the Gryffindor Party. Even if you succeed in pushing me away for good, don’t think for a moment that I will turn to a wizard you deem *suitable.*”

Draco stared at her, dark eyes wide.

“So go ahead, end everything between us,” Hermione went on, waving a hand. “Just walk away. Who knows what I’ll do then? Maybe I’ll visit Viktor in Bulgaria. We still write, you know. Or maybe hunt dragons with Charlie Weasley.”

She leaned closer, holding his eyes with hers. “Or maybe, Draco, I’ll choose—how did you once put it?—a pale shadow of what I really want.”

Draco looked horrified. “You wouldn’t. You’d *forgive* him?”

“I’ve forgiven you for far worse.”

“You couldn’t possibly.”

“We’ll see.” Hermione stood, bringing Draco to his feet as well. “Don’t think you can control me. Walking away won’t keep me safe. Quite the opposite.”

Draco looked too appalled to speak. Hermione stepped closer and kissed him lightly on the lips. “I’m not trying to hurt you, Draco,” she said quietly. “But as you’ve said before, I have no sense of self-preservation.”

Draco opened his mouth to object, but then his eyes flickered to his arm—a faint outline of the Dark Mark was spreading on his skin, and thin white-blond streaks had appeared in his hair. The Slytherin gave her a hard look, then spun on his heel and stalked away.

Hermione watched that strange curly head disappear down the dormitory stairs, then turned back to see Theo standing nearby, looking at her reproachfully. Honestly, she couldn’t please anybody tonight.

“Why are you kissing Seventh Years?” Theo wanted to know. He stepped closer, a glass of scotch in hand.

Hermione fell back onto the sofa, feeling drained. She just wanted to go to bed. “I don’t owe you any explanation,” she said, kicking off her silver sandals. “But before you start on me, Theo, try to remember which of the two of us is more trustworthy.”

Theo clenched his jaw but remained silent.

“Better,” Hermione said. “There’s hope for you yet.”

A small smile. “May I join you?”
Hermione gave a tired wave of assent. Then she conjured a red velvet ottoman with gold tassels and put her feet up, wiggling her silver-painted toes. If she was going to sit with another annoying Slytherin, she might as well be comfortable.

Theo sat beside her, saying nothing, and they watched the party in silence for a time. It was nearly midnight; the Harpies had left, Lavender and the Patil twins, too. Blaise had also disappeared, but Ernie was lingering near the portrait hole, chatting with Neville and Pansy. Ginny and Harry were on the dance floor, but instead of dancing, Ginny was using the extra space to show Harry some Quidditch moves with a silver-topped cane. (What Lucius wannabe came to a party like this with a cane?) Hermione watched her friends fondly: Ginny looked so happy to be instructing Harry, and Harry looked like his old self with his coat off, his hair disheveled and his shirttails sticking out.

“I still think you and I can be friends,” Theo said suddenly.

“Go be friends with Astoria,” Hermione said, leaning back and closing her eyes.

“I told you, I’m not going back to her,” Theo said. “I don’t want some cold, grasping …”

“Fine, whatever. I still see no benefit in being friends.”

“Entertainment value,” he said promptly. “Brown will never give up.”

Hermione yawned. “I’m too tired to fight with you about this. You had it right earlier—we’re acquaintances, but not friendly acquaintances.”

“Very well.” If there was one skill Theo excelled in, it was the tactical retreat. He said no more, and before long Ginny and Harry came over.

“We’re all heading out,” Ginny said, twirling the cane like a baton. “Come with us, Hermione?”

“Yes, come with us,” Harry said sternly.

Hermione sighed. Harry obviously had no intention of leaving her with Theo, and she didn’t want to stay anyway. She stood, trying and failing to straighten her dress. Theo stood as well, bending to retrieve her sandals and handing them to her.


“Come along, you two,” Ginny said. She set the cane on the sofa and took Hermione’s hand. Harry followed them with a final glare for Theo. Hermione smiled at Ernie as she passed him, but he was still frowning.

Nobody spoke much on the way back to Gryffindor Tower, which was fine with Hermione. She and Ginny bade Harry goodnight at the Fat Lady’s portrait and said little until they were both in bed. Hermione sat back against the pillows, her Elder Fubarks book on her lap and Crookshanks curled beside her. Ginny lay on her back, releasing a snitch and catching it again.

“Did you have fun tonight?” Hermione finally asked. One had to start somewhere.

“Yes, most of the time,” Ginny said. “You?”

“Yes, most of the time. How did you know that wizard was Draco?”

Ginny caught the snitch and sat up, eyes sparkling. “So obvious, the way you two danced together. It was obscene.”
Hermione blushed. “You’re exaggerating. And you were having a good time on the dance floor, too.”

“Not like that,” Ginny said, grinning. “But yes, I had fun.” She looked down at the snitch in her hands. “Blaise asked me to dance tonight.”

“Did you?” Hermione asked carefully.

Ginny shook her head. “But I didn’t refuse him because Harry was there. Blaise was just so … Blaise. Oozing up to me, all suave, acting like nothing had happened.”

She looked up at Hermione and her face was sad. “I know it’s a bit of an act, that Blaise really does care in his way. Maybe if we had danced and talked, we could have …” Ginny sighed. “But suddenly I was just so tired. I didn’t want to peel off layer after layer of charm to reach the real Blaise.”

“I do think there’s a real man in there,” Hermione said. “He’s been very loyal to both Theo and Draco.”

“I know,” Ginny’s long hair covered her face as she looked down at the snitch again. “I just don’t want to put in the work. Does that make me selfish?”

“No,” Hermione said.

“But you’ve worked so hard for Draco …”

“It doesn’t feel like work, though,” Hermione said. “It’s hard, and maddening, and right now I want to shake him, but it’s not work. Ron, now …” she grinned, “he was work.”

Ginny looked over at Hermione and her face was worried. “You talked with Draco for a long time. What happens now?”

Hermione closed her book and set it aside. She felt oddly calm, like all bets were placed and it only remained for the wheel to spin.

“I don’t know. It’s all up to him.” She grinned. “I threatened to date Theo if he left me for good.”

Her roommate’s jaw dropped. “You didn’t. That’s so … Slytherin.”

Hermione sighed. “I had to. He’s worked up some crazed scenario where I settle down with a Certified Good Guy and run the Wizarding World while Draco broods alone over the windswept moors. Or something.”

“You wouldn’t, though … would you? I mean, with Theo?”

Hermione shook her head. “Certainly not. It’s up to someone else to unlock that book.”

Silence. Ginny looked at her thoughtfully, then nodded and burrowed under the covers. Hermione followed suit, turning off the lamps and closing her eyes with a sigh. She was just drifting off when Ginny spoke again in the darkness.

“Harry was different tonight,” she said. “Smiling, flirty.”

“He’s been so serious for so long. It’s hard for him, but he’s trying.”

Ginny giggled. “I thought he was going to murder Draco, seeing him dance with you like that.”
“Harry will always be difficult, you know,” Hermione warned. “Moody. He won’t change.”

“I’m not asking him to change himself,” Ginny said patiently. “I’m asking him to change how he treats me.”

“Tonight was a good start, though, right?”

“Oh yes,” Ginny said sleepily. “We’ll see if he can keep it up.”

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Narcissa’s trial. Testimony confirms that Draco is irritating.
Sunday morning found Hermione in the library, researching wizard law and nursing a hangover. As predicted, the Slytherin party had done her reputation no good at all. She and Draco were truly finished, according to rumor, and Hermione Granger was now A Witch On The Prowl. Cormac McLaggen stopped by her table and had to be discreetly hexed into leaving.

“Hermione?” asked a familiar voice. She looked up from her book of famous Wizengamot cases to see Ernie standing behind the opposite chair. “May I join you?”

She put down the book and looked the Head Boy over, from fitted black jumper to close-cropped dark hair and hazel eyes. His jaw was set with rare determination and his hands empty of books. Ernie wasn’t here to study.

Hermione almost said no, but Ernie was her friend and she couldn’t just bounce him off. So she nodded, and he sat opposite her, hands folded on the table.

“I spoke to the Headmistress this morning,” Ernie said. “She’d never heard of a Marcus Fixe, and our only transfer student this year is that Second-Year girl from Ilvermorny.” He frowned. “Clearly some Slytherin snuck him in—Fixe probably isn’t even his real name.”

“Probably not,” Hermione agreed.

“That wizard had no right to take advantage of you like that,” Ernie went on, looking uncharacteristically fierce. “He’s trouble and—”

“Don't worry, Ernie,” she said quickly. “I never want to see that face again.”

Ernie blinked, but the sincerity in her tone must have convinced him, because he dropped the subject entirely. Instead, he gave her a small smile.

“I enjoyed our dance last night,” he said, a light flush spreading on his cheeks.

“I did, too. Very much.” Hermione really had. Looking back, her dance with Ernie had been the most relaxing part of the whole screwy evening.

“Hermione …” Ernie swallowed. “I thought perhaps you’d like to have dinner with me tonight. In Hogsmeade. The Spangled Veil?” He paused, and then seemed to lose his nerve. “A working dinner, of course,” he continued with a hint of his old pompous tone. “I need to brainstorm ideas for the school’s holiday celebration. We’ll have the usual: caroling and skating and feasting, but I thought perhaps an Inter-House activity like making wreaths with all four houses’ colors, or tree ornaments, or …”

The Head Boy rambled on about Inter-House wassailing as Hermione considered the offer. It was tempting to spend the evening planning a school activity (an Inter-House Trivia Tournament,
maybe?) rather than brooding about Draco and the next day’s trial. But she couldn’t. It wouldn’t be fair to her friend.

“Ernie,” she said softly, and he cut off his description of an Inter-House Candy Cane Relay and blinked at her. “Thank you, but I can’t go to dinner with you. Or help you plan an Inter-House Holiday Activity.” Her voice was gentle but firm.

The Hufflepuff nodded in understanding. He scraped his chair back and stood, and when he spoke, his voice was unusually crisp. “Alright then,” he said.

“Ernie,” Hermione said, and he looked at her but didn’t meet her eyes. “Thank you for checking up on Fixe. You’re a good friend.”

He waved away her thanks and stalked off, and Hermione slumped in her chair, feeling wretched. Then she pulled her book of case law toward her and resolutely opened it. Now she could finally make some progress.

But it was not to be. Hermione’s next visitor then arrived, none other than Justin Finch-Fletchley. She had never warmed to the supremely posh muggle-born but allowed him to join her table. This Hufflepuff carried actual books and surely he was just here to study.

Well, she couldn’t have been more wrong. The snifty wizard had scored some top-drawer sirenscotch and knew a nice grassy spot in the Advanced Herbology annex where no one ever went. Hermione couldn’t even speak at first, she was so flabbergasted. What, now she was some floozy eager to roll around with anyone holding a bottle?

“Justin,” Hermione said, putting down her book with a frown. "Just because I did some rather, er, racy dancing at the Slytherin party last night doesn’t mean I’m shagging men in greenhouses now. I know you’re upset about your breakup with Hannah, but propositioning notorious witches isn’t an appropriate response. Your time would be better spent studying for your NEWTs.”

“Ah, you mean PORN,” Justin said with an unsavory glint in his eye. “You’ll help me with that, won’t you … Hermione? Private lessons?”

“Do your own PORN, Justin!” Hermione yelled, her patience exhausted. What was wrong with people? The whole library was staring now. Justin flushed as well, then packed up his books and left in a huff. As if she was the unreasonable one. Hermione closed her eyes, seriously regretting her original decision to return to Hogwarts.

“Granger.” This voice was female, thank Merlin, but icy cold. Hermione opened her eyes to see Pansy sitting opposite her now, wearing a fluffy, high-necked jumper of such a pale pink it looked almost white.

“Aren’t you the scandal these days,” the Slytherin said. “I risk my reputation just sitting here. Are you meeting that Finch fool later?”

“Certainly not,” Hermione snapped.

Pansy’s eyes narrowed. “I told you not to hurt Draco,” she said. “He’s in agony over his parents, and you just …”

“It’s not what you think, Parkinson.”

“That boy you danced with, that Fixe, nobody has seen him. I’m guessing Draco buried him in a shallow grave.”
“Marcus is fine,” Hermione said.

Pansy looked doubtful but decided to change the subject. “Astoria said you helped her with that ridiculous necklace. Don’t tell me you felt guilty about the Quidditch match.”

“Certainly not,” Hermione said. “Astoria is a menace in the air. But nobody deserves to be leashed.”

“Merlin, you Gryffindors really are insufferably self-righteous.”

“Keep that in mind, in your dealings with Neville,” Hermione warned.

Pansy sniffed. “Don’t lecture me about men, Granger. I’m not the one fighting off horny wizards in the library. And Theo seems to think he has a chance with you again.”

“He’s delusional.”

“That’s what I told him,” Pansy said.

Hermione bent over her massive lawbook again, but Pansy wasn’t going anywhere.

“What’s the plan, Granger?” she asked. “Lady Malfoy’s trial is tomorrow.” She leaned forward to look at Hermione’s book. “I doubt you’ll find answers in the case of Aberforth Dumbledore and his goat.”

Hermione sighed and cast a *Muffliato* spell. “Everyone thinks I have a big plan, but this situation defies analysis. I can’t formulate a program of action because I don’t have a clear goal.”

A tiny frown line appeared on Pansy’s flawless forehead. “I don’t understand.”

“Do you know about Lucius’ role in the ‘Die Mudbloods’ messages?” Hermione asked. The formal charges against Narcissa had been published in the Prophet, but the Ministry was waiting to charge Lucius until after her trial.

Pansy nodded. “Neville told me.”

“Lucius deserves to be executed—it’s only justice,” Hermione said. “But apparently justice will also ruin Draco’s name and send him into a self-loathing spiral that precludes healthy romantic relationships. Bad outcome.”

“So help his father then,” Pansy said, waving a ringed hand.

“That’s no better,” Hermione said. “I should help Lucius escape justice? Let Draco keep trying to redeem his family name, only to see his efforts unraveled by yet another parental plot?”

Pansy folded her hands on the table before her, the long nails the same pale pink as her jumper. Her dark eyes were hooded, her painted mouth slightly pursed.

“We could … make arrangements,” she said.

Hermione met the other witch’s eyes. “Yes, I’ve considered that.”

“Do you think it’s possible?” Pansy asked, leaning forward intently.

“Of course,” Hermione said calmly. “He’s behind magically cast iron, but there are many muggle ways to complete the job. Slow, but not too slow.”
Pansy raised her eyebrows as if to ask, “Well?”

“I can’t,” Hermione said. “Then I’d be as bad as Draco’s parents, committing a dark deed behind his back to protect him. It would be a betrayal.”

Hermione and Pansy looked at each other regretfully. *Shame.*

“So what will you do, then?” Pansy asked.

“I can do very little now,” Hermione said. “I did write the Wizengamot and say the potion Draco and I brewed that identified Lucius’ blood was experimental and shouldn’t be admitted as evidence. The Wizengamot doesn’t need the potion anyway; they have Narcissa’s confession.”

“A wife can’t be forced to testify against her husband,” Pansy said. She rolled her eyes at Hermione’s surprised look. “I’ve had a thorough grounding in domestic and marital wizarding law.” She smirked. “Helps with the marriage contracts.”

“Draco won’t let Narcissa retract any of her confession,” Hermione said.

Pansy’s pink-painted mouth turned down. “So that’s it, then.”

“Honestly, some dark wizard Draco is,” Hermione grumbled, picking up the law book again. “I expected more from a Slytherin. He should be off scheming and bribing, not sacrificing love for the greater good or whatever.”

“You’ve ruined a good man, Granger,” Pansy said.

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Hermione’s letter to the Wizengamot infuriated Kingsley, of course, since it undermined the Aurors Office case against the Malfoys. The Wizengamot ruled that the Blood Potion’s test of Lucius’ blood was inadmissible as evidence, which didn’t surprise Hermione. The Ministry was slow to change its ways, and a shifty potion secretly developed by two students would not be easily accepted. Hermione had taken out a patent on the potion in her and Draco’s name and submitted it to the aurors’ experimental lab for testing, but it would be at least a year before it could be used in criminal cases.

The case against the Malfoys now hinged on Narcissa’s confession. Kingsley and Harry signed the confession as witnesses, so there was no need for their testimony, nor Draco’s. Only Hermione’s testimony still remained.

Hermione sat beside Kingsley on the day of Narcissa’s trial in the lowest row of the Wizengamot’s giant, circular hall. Draco was on the other side of the hall, looking like he was the one who’d spent almost two weeks in jail. He cast Hermione a resentful look, likely miffed about her letter to the court. Kingsley was still angry as well, but he gave Hermione a careful overview of the planned proceedings as they waited. First, the prosecutor would call Hermione to testify why she suspected Narcissa of causing the blood messages and brought her to Hogwarts. Then Kingsley would present
Narcissa’s confession and read it into the court record.

“I know you’ve testified many times before, Hermione,” Kingsley said, “but be careful. We have
the confession—all they need to know is why you brought Lady Malfoy to the castle.” He patted
her hand. “You’ll be fine. Just—”

A bell rang out, and Narcissa entered the courtroom. She took the accused’s chair in the center, the
magical chains clamping on her wrists. Draco flinched at the clinking sound. Narcissa wore simple
black robes and no jewelry, looking like a blonde Mary Queen of Scots on trial for her life.

In charge of the proceedings was Chief Warlock Mathilde Crone, a rather haglike witch with a long
warty nose and a faintly green tinge to her skin. Rumor had it even Kingsley was afraid of her.
Crone read the charges against Narcissa, fourteen in all. Narcissa sat still as stone, but her eyes
occasionally flickered over to her son.

The prosecutor—a portly, middle-aged wizard in spectacles—then called Hermione to stand on a
small witness dais. Hermione was wearing her most conservative robes, the same long blue ones
she’d worn to testify at the summer trials. Her hair was pulled sharply back with a single Gloriana
pin buried inside the knot of curls.

Narcissa’s gaze shifted to her and Hermione found it difficult to look into those cold blue eyes. She
reminded herself that Draco’s mother had broken the law and cast a dark spell on Hogwarts.
Frankly, Hermione thought the woman a bit mad. Must run in the family.

Questioned by the prosecutor, Hermione described the chain of logic that had convinced her that
Narcissa had cast the spell. “Bluebell—our Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher—said the spell
wasn’t a curse, but I didn’t believe her at first,” Hermione said.

“What made you think of a protection spell rather than a curse?” the prosecutor asked.

Hermione cleared her throat. “Each of the three messages appeared after Draco Malfoy was
attacked by a Muggle-born. On Sept. 8, the night of a party at Gryffindor Tower, Dennis Creevey
tried to hex Mr. Malfoy in revenge for his brother’s death. Mr. Creevey was flung into a wall, and
the next morning we found the ‘Die Mudbloods’ message. Three days later, I tried to hex Mr.
Malfoy in the hallway before Ancient Runes. I felt something pull me against the stone wall,
forcing me to drop my wand, and the next morning there was a message.”

“A moment, Miss Granger,” the prosecutor said. “Why did you attempt to hex Draco Malfoy?”

Hermione tried not to blush. “He read my journal.”

“You tried to hex Mr. Malfoy because he read your journal?”

“Yes.” Great, now the entire wizarding world will wonder what I wrote. She risked a look at
Draco, who smirked slightly.

“Mr. Malfoy is also very irritating,” she added. “I’m sure many people would happily testify to that
fact.” Half the courtroom nodded.

The court then produced the recent picture of Hermione and Draco in the entrance hall, and she had
to do a little fast talking to keep Ron and his “Death Eater whore” rant out of the court record. She
and Mr. Malfoy were arguing, she said. Mr. Malfoy was annoyed she wasn’t at the Quidditch
match and he pulled his wand.

“I’ve been a little … impulsive … since the war,” she said, shamelessly playing that card. She
could see Harry in an upper row, rolling his eyes. “Mr. Malfoy didn’t mean me any harm, but again, he’s very irritating.” A good number of spectators, including Harry and Kingsley, nodded again in agreement. Narcissa frowned.

“The point,” Hermione said, “is that when I tried to hex Dra-Mr. Malfoy, a stone block in the ceiling fell, smashing the, um, cabinet behind me. Mr. Malfoy pushed me out of the way. The next day, the ‘Die Mudbloods’ message was written in blood on the stone.”

She took a deep breath. “Three messages appearing three times after Draco Malfoy was threatened by a muggle-born. And the messages didn’t start appearing until Narcissa Malfoy visited Hogwarts on Sept. 1.”

“I have a question, Miss Granger,” said Crone. “You are operating on a very limited time frame. Who’s to say this spell was cast after students returned to school? Why not during the summer or even during the war?”

Damn. Hermione had hoped nobody would notice that. She couldn’t help the faint heat in her cheeks. *I am a frozen, unruffled pond.* “Because I successfully Petrified Mr. Malfoy on Sept. 5,” she admitted.

A ripple ran through the court and spectators, and Draco was openly smirking now.

She didn’t wait for the Chief Warlock to ask, just barreled ahead. “He promised to show me the Codex Runicus, but he failed to bring it.” She glared at Draco, whose smirk had widened into a smile.

“The Codex what?” the Judge asked.

“It’s a rare fourteenth-century manuscript that precedes the fourth iteration of the Elder Fubarks,” Hermione recited glibly. Narcissa looked outraged.

“Is that why you hexed him, because he didn’t bring this … Codex?” Crone asked.

 Damn, too bad I’m under oath. That would have been a great excuse. “No,” she admitted, carefully not looking at Draco. “He walked toward me in a possibly threatening manner.” After I took off my clothes.

“And so you Petrified him,” the Chief Warlock said flatly.

“Just a little,” Hermione said. “The point is, the spell worked perfectly. Nothing happened to me and no blood message appeared. That was the day before Narcissa Malfoy visited the school, and three days after that, Dennis Creevey was stopped from hexing Mr. Malfoy and the first ‘Die Mudbloods’ message appeared.”

The entire Wizengamot looked dubious, as well it might, and Hermione took a moment to thank Merlin that Narcissa had confessed to the aurors. Hermione didn’t have to prove that Narcissa cast the spell, simply explain why she thought Narcissa did so. The prosecutor let her go, and Hermione returned to her seat, casting a glare at Draco on her way and receiving another smirk that warmed her heart.

“You did well,” Kingsley whispered. “Thank you for not …” The Head Auror trailed off, staring at the center of the courtroom. The prosecutor had unrolled the parchment containing Narcissa’s official confession and was gasping in shock.

“No!” the prosecutor cried. He shoved his spectacles up his balding forehead and glared at
Narcissa, who looked a little smug.

“Chief Warlock Crone,” the prosecutor said. “In light of changes to this confession, I request a moment with Head Auror Shacklebolt.”

This was granted, and the courtroom buzzed as Kingsley left his seat to huddle with the prosecutor. Draco looked at the two Ministry officials with narrowed eyes, then shifted his gaze to Hermione as if the disruption was her fault. Hermione shrugged back. She honestly had no idea what was going on. Draco still looked suspicious, undoubtedly thinking of Hermione’s innocent look at the Inter-House Quidditch Match.


“Narcissa recanted parts of her confession,” he hissed back. “She said she identified the blood as Lucius’ because she was frightened, but that it was hers all along.”

Hermione stared at Kingsley, shocked. Narcissa was taking the fall for the crime, and the aurors had to let her do it because, as Pansy had said, no witch or wizard could be forced to testify against a spouse. Hermione looked from Narcissa’s still-smug face to Draco, who appeared baffled. Well, he’d figure it out soon enough.

Kingsley’s voice shook with rage. “That’s it, then. There’s no case at all against Lucius. He won’t lose so much as pudding with dinner.”

Crone called Kingsley to read the confession and the Head Auror strode over to the small dais. As he read the confession in freezing tones, Draco’s face went from bafflement to suspicion to outright shock. Then he stared at his mother in horror.

“Do you have anything to add to your registered confession, Lady Malfoy?” the prosecutor asked coldly.

“Yes.” Narcissa’s voice was entirely composed; she could have been giving a toast at a garden party.

“When I cast that spell, it was not my intention to threaten or frighten muggle-borns,” she said. “The hatred against muggles runs very deep in the Black family as well as the Malfoys. I did not take that into account.” Her voice quavered slightly. “I thought I was protecting my son, but I was wrong. He didn’t need protection and I only endangered him further and likely destroyed his happiness. I submit myself to the ruling of the Wizengamot.”

The eyes of the entire courtroom turned irresistibly to Draco, who sat white and unmoving. A murmur ran through the crowd, Wizengamot members and spectators alike, and Hermione couldn’t tell if they were hostile to Draco or not.

Narcissa was quickly found guilty of all charges except the conspiracy-related ones, although Hermione knew there would be speculation about the possible co-conspirator. Draco would be the most likely suspect. Crone then handed down the final sentence: a confiscated wand and six months in Azkaban, then another five years of house arrest. Narcissa appeared resigned but Draco looked devastated. When the court was adjourned, he moved immediately toward his mother without a look at Hermione. Kingsley was with the prosecutor again, his face thunderous.

“Miss Granger.” Hermione tore her eyes from the back of Draco’s head to see Headmistress McGonagall standing there in her tall hat, eyes kind behind her spectacles. “I understand how you must feel.”
“Really?” Hermione asked bitterly. “Because I have no idea how I feel. I’ve put Draco’s mother in Azkaban, yet Lucius goes free.”

“Lady Malfoy put herself in Azkaban.” McGonagall’s voice was cool. “She deserves that sentence: She knows it, you know it, and in time young Mr. Malfoy will realize it. Lady Malfoy made a terrible mistake, and if it weren’t for the two of you, that spell would have haunted Hogwarts for generations.”

Hermione looked around. Most of the crowd had departed, the remainder huddled in little groups. Narcissa, Draco and the aurors, including Harry, were gone.

“Lady Malfoy saved her husband’s life today,” McGonagall went on.

“I wonder who got to her,” Hermione said darkly.

“Perhaps no one did,” the Headmistress said. “Today this courtroom was another battleground in the war. And I believe once again Lady Malfoy has used her own judgment to save her family.”

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Despite McGonagall’s words, Hermione remained conflicted about the outcome of Narcissa’s trial. Lucius may have escaped execution, but his and Narcissa’s actions had still severely damaged the Malfoy name. Hermione flooed back to Hogwarts with the Headmistress, but she didn’t go to class. She went to her bedroom instead, where Ginny found Hermione hours later staring into the fire, still wearing her courtroom robes.

Ginny sat beside her on the sofa, and Crookshanks jumped up between them for double the petting.

“Ginny, I can’t believe it—Narcissa really took all the blame?”

“Yes,” Hermione said, still staring at the fire as she absently stroked Crookshanks.

“Where’s Draco?”

“He and Harry are escorting Narcissa to Azkaban.” Harry had sent Hermione an owl, writing that Narcissa was being settled on the prison’s lowest, minimum-security floor.

“What will Draco do? Are you back together now? It’s not going to be like before, is it?” Ginny asked. “You know, where you both deny your feelings and throw almighty scenes? Because I’m not up for another round of that.”

Hermione sniffed. She couldn’t speak for Draco, but all of her scenes had been entirely justified. “I don’t know. It all depends on him. But no matter what happens, my behavior will be above reproach.”

Ginny looked skeptical.

“Seriously,” Hermione said. “I promised Leila I would be a better role model in my personal
affairs. Although she said if I ever felt moved to hex Percival, I would have her full support.”

Ginny raised her eyebrows. “Inter-House unity, perhaps?”

Hermione smiled for the first time since the trial. “Maybe someday.”

Draco didn’t return to the castle for dinner, and he didn’t appear anywhere on the Marauders Map. The map only covered the castle so Hermione headed out to the grounds, still wearing her courtroom robes. She didn’t find him in the greenhouses or on the Quidditch pitch. She even checked Hagrid’s hut. Her chest tightened—tomorrow was a school day, and Draco needed to return to Hogwarts by midnight or he’d violate his probation.

Midnight came and went, and Hermione lay sleepless in bed, with Crookshanks curled beside her. Where could Draco be? Perhaps a Ministry spell had already been activated. Perhaps an owl had already arrived with a notice of a hearing before the Wizengamot, like Harry had received after blowing up his aunt. Except Harry had been an underage wizard using accidental magic, not an AWOL former Death Eater on parole …

She finally dozed off, exhausted, and dreamed of the Charon bearing her and Ron to Azkaban in chains. “I hope someone brings us socks,” Ron was saying. She couldn’t answer because just then they were attacked by nose-biting teacups. Lucius Malfoy appeared in a captain’s hat and turned all the teacups into diamonds, which he strung on a chain and placed around Hermione’s neck. “Wild for hold,” he whispered, pulling her …

Hermione sat up, a scream in her throat. A single silver light had appeared in the dark room, and Crookshanks yowled softly. She grabbed her wand as the light floated closer, no bigger than a candle’s flame. Hermione froze, wand still upraised, and as the light hovered before her eyes. It was a tiny otter, the smallest Patronus she’d ever seen.

“Entrance Gate,” the otter said in a tiny voice almost too faint to be heard.

The teeny Patronus vanished and Hermione immediately slid out of bed and shoved her socked feet into boots. Draco.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Moonlight on the Hogwarts grounds.
The Entrance Gate

Chapter Notes

This is a shorter chapter, quite Gothic. You could call “The Gloriana Set” a Gothic story, with its ancient castle, threatening blood messages, star-crossed lovers and all that melodrama. There’s even a beautiful blond Damsel in Distress. Like the scene in Borgin’s shop, the first scene in Slughorn’s office and, of course, the Slytherin party, this chapter is heavy on setting and mood.

Gates, of course, are boundaries, usually either trapping someone within or offering sanctuary from without. Neither seems to apply in Draco’s case since he has chosen to return to a place that surely hates him. In ancient times, gates were where kings sat in judgment and it remains to be seen who Draco’s toughest judge will be.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hogwarts’ grounds were shadowed, a half moon weaving between shreds of clouds. Hermione didn’t dare light her wand, so she brought Crookshanks. “Lead me to the front gate, Crooky,” she whispered after they slipped through the castle’s huge doors.

The bushy orange cat set off on a winding path around the lake, then through the trees. The only sounds were the creaking of branches in the wind and the swishing of fallen leaves under her boots. It was very cold, and her breath puffed small and grey.

The black stone posts of Hogwarts’ entrance gate loomed suddenly before her, and Hermione stumbled backward, the hood of her heavy cloak slipping off her head. The moon peeked out from behind the clouds and its light traced the winged shapes of the gate’s stone boars.

The moon also revealed a dark shape lying huddled just within the closed gates on the Hogwarts side. Hermione stepped closer, no longer needing the cat. Her steps crunched loudly on the graveled path, but the shape remained unmoving. She drew her wand, wondering what she would find. Was he injured?

Hermione knelt on the cold ground, heedless of the damp seeping through her pajama pants. He was curled into a ball, wrapped in his cloak, hood drawn over that bright hair. She touched his shoulder and his body shuddered and curled more tightly.


Hermione shuffled closer and gently peeled the hood away from his face, revealing pale skin and hair. She laid a hand on his cheek and it was icy cold and damp with tears. His eyes were closed.

“She’s in that place.” Draco’s voice was thin and wavery. “We took her to that place. She’s there all alone.” He swallowed noisily. “They wouldn’t let me stay.”

Hermione said nothing, just pulled a red handkerchief out of the tip of her wand and wiped Draco’s face. Then she pressed her fingers against his cold cheek.

Draco shuddered again. “No,” he said hoarsely, eyes still closed. “You shouldn’t be here. I
shouldn’t have called you.”

“You were right to call me,” Hermione said, looking down at him.

An icy, trembling hand touched her fingers, then withdrew. “You’re so warm.” His eyes fluttered, but dark lashes shuttered his gaze. “My mother was warm once. My father leached it all out of her. He ruined her.” Draco’s cheeks were wet again. “I’ll ruin you.”

“Nonsense,” Hermione said in her bossiest tone. “You’re not ruining anyone. You can’t even keep me from meeting vampires. What makes you think you could mess me up?”

“But … but …” now Draco looked up, pale eyes shining watery in the faint moonlight. “You love me.”

Hermione sniffed. “Aren’t we full of ourselves.”

“You do,” he insisted. He took a jagged breath. “I made you love me. I’m sorry.”

“Well, what’s done is done. Can’t be helped now,” Hermione said, still striving for a light tone. Draco was shivering, she needed to get him into the castle. Crookshanks crouched nearby, eyes gleaming wide and golden.

“Cold,” Draco said. “I was always so cold. Cold and hateful. Watching you. Always so warm … Mine. Everything I want is mine. I stole you.”

“You didn’t steal anything.” Hermione’s throat felt almost too tight to speak. “I gave.”

“I haunted you, pushed you …”

“Yes, yes, you’re very spoiled and pushy,” Hermione said. “Apparently, I like that.”

Draco blinked up at her, confused.

“Let’s go inside,” she said softly, her hands on his arms.

“No!” Draco twisted away and rose to his knees. He grabbed the gate’s iron bars, his back to her. “I can’t!”

“You must. You—”

“No, no!” he cried. Hermione frowned, concerned. Was he in his right mind?


He released the gate and turned back to face her, but said nothing, just knelt there, panting. Hermione shuffled closer again and put her hands on his shoulders.

“How long have you been out here?” she asked. It had to be nearly three in the morning.

“I arrived … just before midnight,” Draco said, his teeth chattering a little. He sagged against the gate and slid down until he sat on the ground, legs outstretched. “I had to enter the gates. I had to meet my probation. I promised.”

“Yes, you did,” Hermione said in relief. “Well done. And you’ve been lying here ever since?”

Draco nodded. “You’ll catch your death out here. Let’s—”
“I can’t. I can’t enter the castle,” Draco said, his voice stronger now. “I’m the curse.” He clutched her cloak. “I thought this year would be different, but no—just more blood, more violence, more fear. What will happen this time? Who will be hurt?” His eyes rolled wildly. “Will it be you? Other muggle-borns? The Squeaky Mice?”

Hermione stared down at him, horrified. “You won’t hurt anybody,” she said. “Not me, not anyone else.” Her voice sounded weak to her ears, however, and Draco certainly didn’t look reassured. He shouldn’t have gone to Azkaban tonight, she thought wretchedly, wandering about in that Dementory fog …

The moon emerged fully from the clouds again, bathing the grey ground with light. Hermione was still kneeling on the ground beside Draco, who sat with his back to the gate. She could now see a smear of blood on Draco’s right hand, extending past his wrist.

“Draco!” She raised her wand and removed the blood, then ran her hand gently over his palm. “How did you …”

It was then that she saw it, the silver chain over his cloak, glinting in the moonlight. And hanging from the chain was a single curved piece of broken glass. “Draco.”

He looked up at her, his silvery eyes truly focusing for the first time.

“I’ve been wearing your Patronus,” he said, “all the time, since Mother was arrested. Gave me strength …” He swallowed. “I broke it, to send you a message.” He held out his hand, the cuts on his palm clearly visible.

“Draco,” Hermione said again.

He shifted on the ground, leaning back against the bars. When he spoke, his voice was a bit stronger. “Tonight … that ball was all that kept me upright. I wanted to give it to Mother, but they wouldn’t let me. And I … I needed it, too …”

“It’s alright,” Hermione said. She slid her arms around him and put her cheek against his.

“You’re so warm,” Draco murmured. “How can you be so warm?”

“Cow pajamas,” Hermione said. “Fleece.”

“I … I … don’t understand.” His teeth were chattering.

“Draco, I have to get you inside.” Hermione was really worried now. She’d Petrify and levitate him into the castle if she had to, but hopefully it wouldn’t come to that.

“No,” Draco said, still sounding desperate. “I won’t bring evil into Hogwarts again.” His hand convulsively moved to clutch the glass shard on his chest and Hermione quickly blocked the movement with her own hand.

“Alright,” she said, trying to sound reassuring. “We’ll just stay here a bit. Here, let me show you something.”

Hermione sat on the cold, damp ground, her back to the gate and Draco settled beside her like a small child, his head on her shoulder. She cast a warming charm around them, although it wouldn’t last long in the frosty air.

Then she slowed her breathing and leaned her cheek against that silky hair. She raised her wand
and focused on a small memory—the day at the confidential cafe when she’d told Draco about her hourglass spell. (“Twenty points will be lost tomorrow, and nobody will know why ...”)

“Expecto Patronum,” she whispered, producing a tiny flash of silver on the tip of her wand. Draco gasped softly. “Speculobulla,” she murmured, a charm of her own design.

A tiny bubble grew out of the wand tip, expanding around the light, then fell off the wand into her outstretched palm. Hermione held it up, the glass still warm in her hand. Draco raised his head and stared.

Without another word, Hermione vanished the glass shard on his silver chain and replaced it with the tiny ball. Draco looked down at the bit of Patronus on his chest. For a moment they said nothing, the only sounds the rustling of the trees and creaking of iron bars. Then Draco’s eyes met hers.

“I’ve been a fool,” he said hoarsely. “Despairing … and weak.” Icy fingers gripped her hand. “I love you. I will always love you.” His grip tightened, and his eyes shone like twin Patronuses. “Tell me it’s not too late. Tell me I haven’t broken the object.”

The tips of Hermione’s fingers touched his cold face, sliding along that sharp, stubbled jawline. “Cracked it, maybe,” she admitted.

Draco shifted closer, pushing himself up and sliding an arm behind her. “I’m so sorry,” he whispered, his lips inches from hers. “I was a fool to leave you, to think that would make any difference. It only made things worse.” Cold, rough palms cradled her face. “You only found more danger. Oh, Hermione, if you only knew what I went through … alone. Without you.”

His mouth was stiff and cold at first, but Hermione warmed his lips with hers until his finally opened and she slid her tongue inside, where her warmth mingled with his. Draco pulled her closer, and it was another timeless moment on the hard, cold ground against hard, cold iron bars but nothing about that moment felt cold, but warm and soft and sweet.

Hermione pulled away and looked at him, clouds from their breaths mingling in the air. Draco seemed to come to himself. He looked around, blinking, at the Gate, the moon, the cat, at their position on the ground.

“It’s freezing out here,” he said. He frowned at Hermione. “You’ll catch your death of cold.”

Hermione rolled her eyes and shifted to her knees, trying to pull him up, but Draco weighed a ton, and his muscles refused to respond. After a bit of grunting and scrabbling he managed to get his feet under him and pull himself up using the Gate’s iron bars. He leaned against a post, panting. Hermione now stood in front of him, looking up into his shadowed face, her arms around his waist.

“How can you walk?” she asked.

“Certainly.” Draco said with a trace of his old haughty tone. She released him and he stomped his feet to get the blood moving. The moon drifted behind clouds again, leaving them in near darkness.

“Crooky!” Hermione called, and the cat’s glowing eyes drew closer. Draco slowly began to walk, staggering slightly despite Hermione’s supportive arm. They made good progress, but then Draco halted again, about fifteen feet before the castle’s great oak doors flanked by burning torches. Hermione stood silently beside him, hands at her sides.

“I’m nothing but a danger to this school,” he said.
“This castle has stood for a thousand years,” Hermione said. “It can handle a single neurotic former Death Eater.” She backed away, leaving him alone in the torchlight. “Let the castle decide.”

Draco glanced at her quickly, then turned back to the castle. He seemed to brace himself and walked toward the doors, his figure black against the flames’ golden glow. He stopped, framed by the pointed stone archways. Small carved figures writhed within the doors’ square wooden panels and the torches flickered. Hermione’s breath caught. Would the castle reject him?

Then the torches’ flames leaped higher and the carvings stilled. A thin black line ran up the center and slowly, oh so slowly, the medieval doors creaked open with the scraping of oak against stone. Draco stood frozen and Hermione didn’t dare breathe. The doors rumbled to a stop and he moved forward, his dress shoes’ heels clicking on the wide steps. Draco entered the castle and Hermione and Crookshanks followed.

The Entrance Hall was quiet and dimly lit; Peeves, thankfully, seemed to be in another part of the castle.

Draco turned to her and clasped her hand with still-cold fingers. “Don’t you ever get tired of saving me, Hermione?”

“Never. I like to keep busy.”

He smiled. “Go back to your tower, princess.” Hermione hesitated, and he bent to brush her lips with his. “It’s late. I’ll be alright now.”

Hermione bit her lip, considering, then nodded. There was no more she could do tonight. She squeezed his hand and released it, then began ascending the stairs. Halfway up, she turned back. Draco still stood in the center of the Entrance Hall, his face upraised, her bit of Patronus twinkling on his chest like a tiny star. Draco gave her a stern look and made a tiny shooing motion with his hand. Hermione sniffed.

“Fine.”

She met no one on the way to Gryffindor Tower—not that she expected to at four in the morning—and the Fat Lady sleepily let her in. She crept into her and Ginny’s bedroom and stripped off her freezing wet pajamas and socks. She pulled on her fleecy pink sheep pajamas, then sat on the bed to towel the damp fog out of her hair. Finally tucked into bed with Crookshanks, she thought of Draco’s devastation at Narcissa’s sentencing, his huddled figure at the Gate, her Patronus reflected in his eyes, Draco standing tall before the castle’s oaken doors.

Her eyes slid shut. He’s back, she told herself, and her mind responded mockingly: For now.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Back to school again. Pansy is plotting.

There may be a delay before the next post (I know, so sorry, bad timing). I have some really big work deadlines that will severely curtail writing time. Thank you for all your wonderful, encouraging kudos and comments.
Hermione’s sleep was uneasy, shredded by dark dreams. She skipped her LOOP Tuesday morning and staggered into a blessedly long, hot shower, drying her hair carefully with her wand and pushing it back with a wide black headband. Her face looked pale in the bathroom light, her eyes dark. Back in her bedroom, she dressed quickly and left after waking up Ginny.

Slowly she descended the dormitory stairs, fretting about Draco and fighting the urge to head to the dungeons. **Stop it.** If the git didn’t go to class, that was McGonagall’s problem. He was back in the castle again, meeting the terms of his probation and the Headmistress wouldn’t let any auror but Harry near him. Hermione was still anxious, however, and was mulling how to approach Blaise at breakfast when she climbed through the portrait hole and stopped, startled.

There was the wizard himself, leaning against the opposite wall and reading a parchment covered in runes. His tie was perfectly knotted, his black robes pressed, silver cufflinks polished and not a hair out of place. A far cry from the man she’d left just hours before. Here was a Slytherin in full armor on a murmuring battlefield.

Draco looked up, his eyes a bit shadowy and hollow but shining a clear grey. “Good morning.”

Hermione knew she must look ridiculous, standing in front of the portrait hole with her mouth open. She could hear shuffling and muffled complaints behind her as she continued to block the common room’s only exit. Draco raised an eyebrow and she flushed and shifted aside.

Neville popped out into the corridor and also halted upon seeing Draco. The Slytherin gave him a polite nod.

“Ah, hello, Malf—” Neville said, moving aside for the rest of the Gryffindors. A trio of First Years squeaked in fear and ran off. Two burly Fourth Years scowled and looked inclined to speak, but a sharp look from Hermione sent them packing.

“Excuse me.” Neville shouldered his bag. “I have to water my Winkweed.”

“Pansy’s in the Entrance Hall,” Draco said. Neville and Hermione glared, but Draco only smiled thinly. Neville stalked off, muttering under his breath.

Hermione bit down a sharp retort. It took some courage for Draco to stand outside Gryffindor Tower on such a morning, with his mother’s trial and sentencing so fresh.

“I’m glad you’re here, Draco,” she said primly instead. “This gives us extra time for studying. I’m sure you’ve completely neglected your PORN.”
“I have, a bit,” Draco admitted.

“We’ll just have to look at your PORN together.”

“And study for NEWTs as well.” Another thin smile.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “I suppose you’re walking me to breakfast, then.”

Draco shrugged. “If you like. I just wanted you to see me.” His eyes were watchful. “I didn’t want you to worry.”

She stared in surprise, but had no chance to say anything, for Dennis Creevey’s shrill little voice could be heard on the other side of the portrait hole. Merlin knew Hermione didn’t want to deal with him this early, so she just nodded and began walking toward the seventh-floor staircase. Draco left the wall and fell in step beside her.

Students in the halls scattered at their approach: “Blood … Death Eater … Azkaban … that horrible witch …” Draco’s face showed nothing, but he kept his hand in his robe pocket.

That was bad enough, but whispers followed Hermione as well, and not just the “Death Eater Whore” and “Traitor to Her Kind” mutterings she’d expected. Apparently her Wizengamot testimony was making the rounds: “Violent … unstable … she Petrified him …”

Hermione huffed in irritation. People were so illogical—either Draco was a dangerous Death Eater who deserved to be hexed every day or he was a helpless victim of Hermione’s suspect mental state. You couldn’t have both.

Draco paused outside the Great Hall’s open doors. “You don’t have to do this,” he said. Hermione raised her eyebrows and he sighed. “But I of course fully support any action you choose to take on my behalf,” he recited. Hermione nodded in satisfaction.

The entire Great Hall went silent as Draco and Hermione entered, their footsteps loud on the checkered stone floor. Rolling clouds filled the enchanted ceiling, reflecting the skies outside—a storm was brewing. Together they walked to the Slytherin table, sitting opposite each other with Hermione’s back to the Gryffindors. Leila and Pansy smiled at them, and Blaise raised his goblet of juice in their direction. Theo, seated beside Blaise, went very still, his face a Slytherin mask. Hermione concentrated on pouring her tea while Draco made a small production of spreading jam on his toast.

Restive murmurs began sweeping the Hall, and Hermione regretted sitting with her back to the other tables. She could feel the hostile eyes and hear the spitting words: “Malfoy … Azkaban … Death Eater … curse …” and a stray “said he read her journal.” Draco munched his toast, unperturbed, but Pansy looked alert and Leila was tugging at her braids.

“We need to do something,” Pansy said.

“No, Pans,” Theo, Blaise and Draco all said at once.

Over at the Hufflepuff table, Justin watched them venomously but the Squeaky Mice were beaming and waving. Ernie stood by the table, arguing with his prefects. “No, Starling, we’re not going to have a Christmas fashion show!” the Head Boy cried.

“Magical mistletoe games!” piped up another prefect.

“Magical mistletoe is banned after …” Ernie began.
“Stop it, Pans,” Draco said suddenly, his forkful of eggs halfway to his mouth.

“I’m just thinking.” Pansy’s long, mint green-painted nails tapped on her saucer.

“Exactly. **Stop it,**” Draco said. Blaise and Theo nodded in agreement, but Pansy didn’t take her eyes off Ernie.

The glares and whispers continued through breakfast, and Hermione could hardly eat. Draco, however, finished all his eggs and drank three cups of tea, either used to the tense atmosphere or determined to brazen it out. Then the Hall fell silent again as Draco and Hermione stood and walked the path through the large double doors.

“Merlin,” Hermione said, sagging against the Hourglass Cabinet. Ravenclaw was clearly leading in House points. “I hope every morning won’t be like that.”

“It’s quite possible,” Draco warned.

“Perhaps Harry can—”

“No.” Draco’s face was stern. “We will handle this ourselves.”

Hermione blinked up at him, surprised, then smiled and patted his arm approvingly. “You said ‘we,’ Draco.”

“So I did.” His hand brushed hers. “Perhaps we should …”

“I have a better idea.” Hermione turned and headed toward Ancient Runes.

“I find that hard to believe,” Draco said, but he followed.

Hermione stopped outside the classroom door and drew her wand. “You’ll want to stand very still,” she said. “I’ve only done this on pigeons.”

“I do not like the sound of—”

“Be still.” Hermione raised her wand and squinted. **‘Defendo!’** A thin purple film appeared around Draco, glowed, then vanished.

“What did you do?” he asked suspiciously.

“A little defense spell I worked up last week,” Hermione said, tucking her wand away. “It should get you through classes all right.”

Draco looked down at her doubtfully, but didn’t pursue the topic. The morning sunlight only made the shadows around his eyes look darker, and his mouth was tight. Hermione raised her hand to his face, her fingers tracing the sharp lines from cheekbone to jaw, then brushing that full lower lip. His mouth relaxed, opening slightly.

“How are you?” she asked, her voice soft.

“I’m here,” he answered, leaning into her hand, now on his cheek. “I’m with you.”

“That’s right.” Hermione had no chance to say anything more, for McGonagall was arriving with her pack of students. Draco stepped away from her touch with a faint smile.

Hermione enjoyed Ancient Runes that morning—they were well into the Fubarks now. After a
brisk little review, the class was tasked with writing a short note and signing their name in runes. Hermione wrote up a little dialogue between the Elder Fubark and Younger Fubark, where the Younger explained the language’s complex phonological changes and the Elder insisted that 33 simpler letters were good enough for anybody.

It was a nice little interlude, with everyone diligently drawing runes under McGonagall’s eagle eye. Even Draco seemed to relax, using his wand to make his runes play an inky little game of Quidditch on the page. Hermione was pleased with her own creative approach—she did not cackle as she wrote, no matter what Draco said on the walk to Potions. But she was determined not to bicker with the Slytherin today and merely noted that phonology in his rune notes was occasionally simplistic.

Draco was offended. “A little efficient streamlining did that alphabet nothing but good.”

“Oh please,” Hermione scoffed. “How many sounds do you pile on a single ‘k’? That poor little rune practically collapses from the load.”

Potions was less entertaining. Draco had opted to return to their old partnership in class rather than continue private lessons with Slughorn. Theo’s lips pursed in displeasure, but he said nothing, just pounded his purple shrivelfigs Ron-style for his and Lavender’s Shrinking Solution. Draco ignored everyone and sliced his and Hermione’s figs with delicate precision.

Hermione was glad Slughorn had set such a simple potion—the glares and whispers around them were very distracting and she almost spilled her vial of cowbane essence all over Theo. She heard a muffled Jelly-Legs Curse and turned to see Romilda Vane’s partner collapse, his legs weakly flapping. Draco and Hermione traded smug looks and Lavender looked around nervously.

Odd events continued throughout the day: students spontaneously (or so it appeared) babbled nonsense, vomited slugs or sprouted antlers on their heads. Draco appeared indifferent, but Hermione just knew he was silently taunting people just to see the result. Justin arrived at DADA covered in fluffy pink feathers, clearly the result of a rebounded—and entirely inadequate—attempt to turn a certain individual into a Pygmy Puff. The timing was unfortunate (for Justin, anyway) since this was his first class with Bluebell, who was under the impression that the Hufflepuff had done it to himself on purpose.

“Poor dear,” the fairy said, waving her wand and vanishing the feathers. “Everyone adores Pygmy Puffs, of course, but I’m sure you have many fine qualities, Mr. Finch-Fletchley. You don’t need pink feathers to find love.”

“No, just a bottle,” piped up Ginny from her green beanbag. (Hermione had told her about Justin’s proposition after the Slytherin party.) The entire class was snickering now and even Theo cracked a smile. Only Luna looked disappointed, saying she preferred the pink feathers.

“They attract Love Diggles, you know,” she told Justin, who was unfortunate enough to be placed beside the blonde Ravenclaw. “I saw a swarm around you and Hannah before lunch.” Justin appeared to profoundly regret adding the class.

Draco stayed after DADA to talk to Bluebell and then had to go make up a Muggle Studies test (on musical theater, with special attention on Andrew Lloyd Webber), so Hermione went to the library alone. She found a table under a tall, arched window and watched the raindrops run down the glass. The wind was picking up outside, the Black Lake wreathed in swirling clouds. Hermione pulled her gaze from the window and opened her Transfiguration textbook. She was halfway through an extra credit essay when a shadow appeared over her parchment and a flowery perfume made her eyes water. Pansy.
“Granger,” the Slytherin said, taking a seat opposite and placing a tiny silver clutch on the table.

“Parkinson,” Hermione said and returned to her notes on size differentials. She didn’t entirely agree with the measuring formula, which failed to account for the diameter of ...

“The student body is looking rather strange today,” Pansy said. “Or shall I say, stranger than usual.”

Hermione shrugged. “I hadn’t noticed.”

Pansy leaned forward. “You have to take that spell off Draco. It’s doing more harm than good.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Hermione said, turning a page. Perhaps the feathers had affected her spell on ...

“Granger.” Pansy’s dark eyes were serious. “I understand why you did it, but you shouldn’t have.”

Hermione looked up, finally giving Pansy her full attention. “Really?” she asked. “You’d rather Draco walk around with pink feathers and antlers on his head? I’m sorry Colin’s nose swelled up like that, but frankly, he deserved it.”

“You don’t get it, Granger,” Pansy insisted. “People aren’t saying Draco cursed those students, they’re saying the castle did it.”

Hermione dropped her quill, splattering ink all over her essay. “No.”

“Yes.”

“That’s very bad,” Hermione said. If students thought the castle was retaliating against anyone trying to hex Draco again, that would mean another suspected blood spell. And if someone painted messages on the walls ...

“Yes,” Pansy said again.

“I’ll lift the spell,” Hermione said. “But Pansy, you see how it is. Harry isn’t here and I can’t be with Draco all the time. The rage is only growing …”

“I have a plan,” Pansy said.

“What kind of plan?” Hermione asked. “Is it another spell? Perhaps a …”

Pansy snickered. “My plan isn’t rooted in magic, but in a realistic understanding of human nature, a quality that few Gryffindors possess.”

“I know plenty about …” Hermione began, then snapped her mouth shut as Draco appeared, looking a bit drained.

“I can’t say I did well on that test,” Draco said, placing his bag on the seat by Hermione. “The bits about the singing cats and the bloke in the fancy coat made no sense. I do, however, feel that the opera ghost was misunderstood.”

He nodded hello to Pansy, then froze. “Are you two planning something together?” he asked, almost sounding nervous.

“Certainly not,” Pansy said. She rose from her seat, picked up her clutch and walked off with a lazy wave. Draco watched her go, eyes narrowed, then turned an equally suspicious look on
Hermione stood as well. “I have to take off the Defendo spell,” she said. “People think it’s the castle again.”

Draco nodded. “I was concerned about that.”

Without another word, they both headed to the library’s Goblin History section and Hermione drew her wand. She bit her lip—the spell was easy to cast but difficult to lift, since it naturally resisted any magic. “Stay very still,” she said.

He obeyed, standing stiffly in place, arms at his side, and Hermione carefully ran her wand from head to toe, murmuring the spell. Draco glowed faintly purple again and she lowered her wand.

“I may have missed a spot,” she said worriedly. “Your right shoulder …”

Draco just shrugged the shoulder in question. It couldn’t be helped, Hermione decided, she could only cause more trouble with another attempt. The spell would likely wear off anyway.

The Slytherin certainly didn’t seem concerned; he gave her a roguish smile that reminded her of their first time in the Goblin History section: “I’ll kiss you if you tell me …” His first overt move. What might have happened if Theo hadn’t turned up?

Hermione expected him to make a move now, to shift closer or twine a curl around his finger or something, but Draco just looked down at her. Waiting. Hermione didn’t move either, just breathed in his cologne, savored his presence. The only sound was wind rattling the casements and the muffled rustling of two Goblin Wars books fighting for space on a nearby shelf.

They might have stood there forever, each waiting for the other to act, if a sweet flowery scent hadn’t drifted down from above. Hermione looked up, half-expecting to see Pansy sitting atop a tall bookshelf.

Instead Hermione saw a large pink petal drift down from the library’s dark-beamed ceiling, leaving a spiraling trail of golden dust. Draco held out his hand, allowing the petal to land lightly on his palm in a puff of gold sparkles.

“What’s this?” Hermione asked.

“A message,” Draco said calmly. He held up the petal, but it was bare of any writing.

Hermione’s eyes narrowed. “A message? From whom?”

Draco didn’t answer, just brushed the petal under his nose. “Lovely perfume.” His eyes widened slightly at the press of a wand tip against his throat.

“Answer the question, Malfoy.” Hermione’s hand on her wand tightened but Draco just looked amused.

“Will you threaten me with hideous hexes and curses?” he asked. “Keep in mind my now-invincible right shoulder.”

His words brought back the declaration in the woods before Halloween: “I want you to feel entirely justified in doing so …” Hermione flushed and lowered her wand.

“It’s from Bluebell, actually,” Draco said, vanishing the petal with a flick of his fingers. “She is
helping me with a project.”

Hermione wanted to ask about the project, but she’d already made enough of a fool of herself. She tucked away her wand instead. “Very well,” she said briskly. “I suppose I’ll see you at dinner.”

Draco eyed her, then took a step closer and suddenly he filled her entire vision, his cologne mingling with the petal’s lingering perfume. “Meet me in my room instead,” he said softly. “The wards are set to let you in.”

“What about dinner?”

“We could have dinner in my room.”

“How will … oh. Aimee.” Hermione stiffened. “This isn’t your Chateau, Draco, you can’t just order—”

Draco’s eyebrows rose. “Order? Aimee begged me this morning to let her serve us dinner. Do you want to break her heart?”

“You are literally blackmailing me into coming to your bedroom. You should be ashamed.”

“I am,” Draco placed a hand on the shelf and leaned closer again. “I thought my natural charms would be enough.”

“I am not prancing through the Slytherin common room like a cheap—”

“Just give everyone time to clear out and—”

“Because sneaking into your bedroom is so much better—”

“Is pointless arguing seductive for Gryffindors?” Draco wanted to know. “I personally consider it a sad waste of time, but I suppose it beats dueling.”

Stepping closer, Draco drew his fingers through Hermione’s loose curls, pulling her head back slightly. His lips met hers, almost hesitantly at first, the kiss belying his confident words. Her hands slid up his chest to cradle that sharp jaw, not quite roughened yet, but give it a few hours. At her touch Draco’s kiss deepened, became more demanding, and Hermione sighed into his mouth and allowed herself to be pressed into the bookshelf, ignoring the snarling protests of the goblin books at her back. Merlin, she had missed this, the strange sweetness with a taste of danger, the sense that if she pushed him just a touch too far he would throw up one of those black mists and …

The flowery scent around them grew stronger, and Draco and Hermione broke off their kisses and looked up—hundreds of pink petals were raining from the ceiling, blanketing the shelves and library floor. The golden dust made the whole Goblin History section sparkle. Bluebell obviously knew what they were doing and was either growing impatient, or more likely, eager to add to the mood.

The fairy dust made Draco sneeze, and Hermione couldn’t help giggling. He glared down at her slightly, his hair and shoulders dotted with pink petals. She probably looked ridiculous as well, because Draco’s face softened and he began brushing petals off her curls. The goblin books rattled in the shelves, attempting to shake off the petals or spit out any caught in their pages. A few books fell onto the petal-strewn floor, flapping wildly.

“I’d better not keep a fairy waiting,” Draco said. “Next she’ll send doxies playing tiny violins.”
“I’ll meet you in your room,” Hermione said, flushing slightly. His smile widened and she tossed her head, adding, “I wouldn’t want to hurt Aimee’s feelings.”

“Of course not.” Draco’s lips brushed hers and he backed away, wading through petals as he left the Goblin History section. Hermione stared after him for a moment before returning to her table. A few petals fell from her hair as she packed her bag and she smiled as she zipped them inside with her books. Perhaps Draco was right. She just might have a thing for pointless arguing.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Dinner with Draco. Stormy weather.
Storm Clouds

Chapter Notes

I have a special fondness for chapters like this—just Hermione and Draco alone in a room. Such scenes have always been so intimate, even in the very beginning, when they were fencing in the Charms classroom.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Marauders’ Map made navigating the Slytherin dungeon fairly easy, although Theo took a ridiculous amount of time to leave his room and head off to dinner Tuesday evening. Hermione waited in the alcove behind the Merlin tapestry for him to pass, then tripped up to the Snake Charmer portrait.

“It is not titles that honor men,” the Charmer said, setting down his flute. The cobra bobbed hello.

“It is men who honor titles,” Hermione answered. Niccolò Machiavelli had obviously been a Slytherin.

“Well spoken, little Hellebore,” the Charmer said as the portrait opened.

Draco’s door opened easily to her *Alohomora*, revealing the spotless, gracious room. A lace-covered table glittered with crystal and china and covered dishes. Hermione’s lips tightened. It was outrageous, really, Draco’s little lap of luxury here. The blue velvet curtains, embroidered with gold fleur-de-lis, were tightly closed. A silver tea tray graced the desk, its teapot embossed with the Malfoy crest and the words “Sanctimonia Vincet Semper.” Purity Will Always Conquer. There was no sign of the French prince in residence.

Very well, she would wait. Hermione poured herself a cup of tea and stirred in two sugars. As she reached for the cup, her eye was caught by three silver picture frames lined up in a fussy row. She picked up the first picture: Draco and Narcissa at Platform 9 3/4. It was obviously First Year, and Draco’s little pointed face looked at her curiously, his hair slicked back. Narcissa’s smile didn’t reach her blue eyes. The second picture showed Draco and his friends cheering at a Quidditch match, all wrapped in green-and-silver scarves. *Probably singing “Weasley Is Our King,”* she thought waspishly. Draco’s arm was around Pansy, his face flushed. Hermione was startled to see Theo on Draco’s other side, his face so bright and young, black hair flapping. She’d hardly noticed Theo back then.

A movement in the corner of her eye drew her to the third frame, this one oval-shaped with entwined silver roses. The frame held a *Prophet* photo of Hermione herself, shot at Azkaban Pier of all places. Hermione held a half-dozen daisy bouquets, her hair wild from the North Sea wind. She was smiling, for the first group of released muggle-borns was walking (or limping) off *The Charon.* It had been the day after the Battle of Hogwarts and the first time that Hermione had felt they had truly won, that the sacrifices had been worth it, to see all those muggle-borns freed and back in the arms of family and friends. The photo didn’t show any of that, only Hermione smiling again and again, clutching the daisies as a long curl whipped into her eyes and she shook it back impatiently. How long had that picture been on Draco’s desk? Hermione didn’t remember it from her first visit, but she had been … distracted.
The silver teapot suddenly flashed an eerie green in the darkening room. Other objects also briefly glowed green: the china, the carpet, even a silver-backed hairbrush on a chest of drawers. Draco’s silver-chased jade clock and the table’s candlesticks also glowed.

Hermione looked around the room with a frown, but suddenly was all as before. She hastily set down the picture of Draco and Narcissa. Did the family objects not like her there, touching Draco’s things? Sanctimonia Vincet Semper, after all.

She huffed, not liking the thought, and moved away from the desk, bumping her hip on the dining table. The room was crowded, but Godric forbid that Draco go without his huge standing mirror or overstuffed armchair. His Herbology notebook lay open on the chair and Hermione hesitated, then tossed her head. No bloody hairbrush was going to tell her what to do.

So Hermione settled in the armchair, sipping tea and flipping through Draco’s Herbology notebook. His drawing of the Devil’s Snare didn’t include enough thorns. Hermione shuddered and snapped the notebook shut. Where was Draco, anyway?

The lovely room now seemed close, almost oppressive. Sanctimonia Vincet Semper. Hermione suddenly felt like an interloper despite Draco’s invitation. Narcissa’s venomous words echoed: Your company has caused him to temporarily forget his duty to his family, his betrothed and to himself …

Hermione jumped to her feet and found herself at the closed curtain, her hand on its thick golden cord. The rich, twisted rope was heavy in her fist. The room was closing in. She knew better than to listen to Narcissa, but could Draco truly shed the old ways? Could he make a real future with a muggle-born?

She viciously tugged on the rope and the velvet curtains parted to reveal a roiling Great Lake, stands of kelp whipped by strong currents. The storm that had threaten earlier in the day had arrived in full force, its power felt even underwater. She could hear the muffled roaring and splashing of water. Chunks of driftwood spun past; fish darted for shelter. Dark clouds billowed from the Lake’s muddy bottom …

“Hermione,” a quiet voice said.

She jumped, startled, and turned around, dropping the golden rope. Draco stood there, his bag and black robe slung over one arm. His sharp features were etched with tiredness. He closed the bedroom door behind him.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” he said.

“It—it’s fine,” Hermione stuttered.

A piece of driftwood slapped against the glass, and Draco's eyes flickered to the window, then back at her. “We don’t have to eat here, if you don’t want to,” he said. “We can go to the Great Hall.”

Hermione swallowed. “No, I’d like to stay,” she managed to say. “It’s a beautiful table.” The students’ dinner was likely over anyway.

Draco nodded and circled the table, carelessly tossing his robe and bag on the armchair and removing his tie. He made no move to kiss her, just pulled out one of the dining chairs and Hermione took a seat, running her hands over her skirt. Draco sat opposite her and opened his napkin with a practiced flick of his fingers.
He played the perfect host, serving each of them and pouring glasses of pale elf-made wine, but his mind was clearly elsewhere. The dinner was quiet, oddly constrained. Hermione made an effort, catching Draco up with the Squeaky Mice’s latest antics and Hagrid’s efforts to import a dozen Stymphalian chicks, meat-eating birds with bronze beaks and sharp metal feathers.

Draco listened politely and offered up a few stories from his Muggle Studies class. But he was still distracted, not quite meeting Hermione’s eyes and constantly fiddling with something in his trouser pocket. He refilled their wine glasses, but neither drank very much. The room’s golden lamps brightened as the light from the lake dimmed. Draco rose to shut the curtains again and add another log to the fire. It was a cozy scene, but the silences were growing longer. The jade clock ticked, the fire in the hearth snapped, and faint sounds of the storm could be heard behind the heavy curtains, an occasional roll of thunder muffled by the Lake. The very air felt heavy with unsaid words. Finally, Draco put down his dessert fork and looked at directly at her.

“Hermione, what is it?” Draco’s voice was soft. “Talk to me.”

Hermione looked down at the crystal glass in her hand. She didn’t want to talk about it. She wanted to close her eyes and avoid the whole conversation, but that wouldn’t be very Gryffindor. So she straightened in her chair and eyed him across the table. He looked so perfect, almost glowing in the lamplight. It was all perfect, too perfect. For now.

“Draco, I’m glad you’re here. I’m glad you’re safe,” she said. “But I haven’t forgotten. You broke your promise. You … you left me.”

Draco’s shoulders sagged slightly. “I know, and I’m sorry,” he said. “I thought it was best …”

“You don’t get to decide what is best for us,” Hermione interrupted, trying to keep her voice even. “If your feelings change, if you no longer care, that’s one thing. But when you do care, when you love me, and still leave, without any warning or discussion, you just leave …”

Her hand began to shake and she set down the glass. “I can’t live like that.”

Draco blinked. “What are you saying?”

“I love you, Draco,” Hermione said. “There’s no one else, but I couldn’t bear it if you left again—if you decided I wasn’t …”

“I won’t.” His hand reached out to cover hers on the lacy tablecloth, stilling the shaking. “Everything’s alright now. We can handle the talk, my mother will survive Azkaban until spring and we’ll …”

Hermione pulled her hand away. “No, no, you don’t understand. You said it yourself, Lucius will never give up. What if he breaks out of Azkaban again and goes on a murderous rampage? I’d be his first target. What if the Ministry seizes all your properties and assets? What if the courts find a loophole and put you back in prison? What if you’re attacked by a werewolf or cursed by a Malfoy victim or you finally taunt someone into a violent frenzy on the streets?”

Her eyes held his. “Will you once again decide that you’re too dangerous for me and leave?”

Draco sat frozen, staring at her in horror.

“I mean it. I won’t live like that, Draco,” Hermione repeated coldly, pushing her chair back and standing over him like an avenging angel. “I will make the decision. I will walk out of …”

Draco stood as well, drawing himself up to his full height. Sounds from the storm outside
intensified, piercing the heavy curtains: water splashing against the windows, a faint thud of something striking the glass again. Hermione expected Draco to raise his voice, to shout at her that she was his, that he would never allow her to walk away, but he said nothing, his face expressionless. Nothing.

But then, what could he say? Hermione didn’t know, didn’t know what she needed to hear, but she needed something. She turned away, needing to look at something else, anything other than that Slytherin mask. Once again she pulled on the curtain, revealing the stormy Lake, but the dark water reflected Draco clearly; he stood behind her, his hand slipping into his trouser pocket again. Would he draw his wand? Would he try to trap her here?

But Draco just stood frozen for endless heartbeats. Then he removed his hand from his pocket and held up a small object. Hermione blinked—she knew that shape, the shine of onyx in the lamplight. She turned to face him again.

“Very well,” Draco said, stepping closer. “Here’s what I will do.” Now his grey eyes held hers, hard and determined, his jaw was set, and Hermione couldn’t look away.

He swallowed and spoke in a clear voice: “I swear on my ring and upon my very soul that despite any number of horrors and injustices that may rain down on myself and those I care for, I will not leave Hermione Granger unless my feelings have changed, or at Hermione Granger’s personal request. Ego Aperta.” The ring glowed green, then faded.

She stared up at him, then down at the ring. “What was that?”

Draco didn’t answer, just slipped the ring on his finger. The ring seemed to shrink, resizing itself to fit a smaller hand. Draco sighed, tension draining from his body.

Hermione gasped. “You put on your ring. You changed your family motto.”

“Yes, I did,” Draco said calmly. “You’re right—I can’t wait for the perfect time to wear this ring and claim my title. I’ll claim it now, with both parents in Azkaban and my name a byword for evil. I will make the name mean something else.” A faint smile. “And I certainly couldn’t keep the old motto. It didn’t fit my plans at all.”

He held out his hand so she could see the ring more clearly, and Hermione stared down at the crest, the shield flanked by dragons and snakes, the central ‘M’ and the two words shining brightly silver.


“I considered ‘We Malfoys Promise Not To Serve Evil Anymore, Really This Time,’ but that was too long,” Draco said. “I needed Bluebell to help me change it.” His eyebrows drew down slightly. “It took some time. The ring … resisted. Forcefully.”

Hermione looked from his face to the ring, then back again, not knowing what to say. Draco raised his other hand and she could feel trembling fingers on her cheek. She was touched by his oath to remain with her, but oaths could be fickle and meaningless, easily gotten around. More significant was the motto itself.

“I love you, Hermione,” Draco whispered, stepping closer still. “Tell me again that I haven’t broken the object.”

Hermione looked up into those now-pleading eyes. Her heart lurched in her chest and she flung herself into his arms, gripping him tightly. Draco’s arms wrapped around her. He’s free, really free.
He freed himself.

“You haven’t broken anything,” she said into his jumper. “I love you, and I’ll stay for as long as you want me. I’m yours.”

They stood there for a timeless moment, clutching each other almost desperately. “You won’t regret this,” Draco said hoarsely. “I won’t let you regret this. I know I’m a prick, I know I’m impossible, but …”

“I won’t regret it,” Hermione said, her face still buried in his chest. It was as Harry said, neither of them had a choice anymore. If Draco tried to leave again, Hermione would chase him to the ends of the Earth, and as for Draco, well, he’d warned her himself that he’d haunt her for the rest of her days. A love for the ages, we are.

She felt his hands gently tilt her head back so he could kiss her, no hesitation this time. Dazed by the feel of him, she didn’t resist as warm fingers moved to unbutton her Torrid Affair Cardigan. She broke the kiss to look at him, but Draco’s head was bent, his white-blond fringe hiding his eyes.

“Too fast?” he asked in her ear. “There’s no hurry, we can …”

Hermione shook her head. “Not fast enough,” she said.

There was a silence, with only the ticking clock to be heard. Even the storm outside seemed to pause. Then Draco’s mouth was on hers again, harsh, demanding, and the sound of ripping cloth rang out sharply. So much for that skirt. Draco released her and yanked off both his jumper and shirt at once. The firelight and lamplight made his silvery Sectumsempra scars glow.

He moved to the bed, shedding the rest of his clothes, and gave her a significant look. She joined him, feeling the embroidered seed pearls under her hands. “My beautiful girl,” Draco whispered, pulling her atop him. “Hermione.”

Hermione’s hair fell rippling to his bare chest as she arched over him. Lightning flashed, its silvery light shining through the water and into the room through the open curtains. Draco’s eyes shone.

“Come to nurse me, Granger?” he asked with a trace of his old smile.

“Yes.” Hermione smoothed his hair back from his forehead, then bent to run her lips along that roughened jaw. He smelled just the same, even better, the antiseptic odor of the infirmary replaced by some deliciously fragrant cedarwood soap. Merlin, she had missed him. She would never let him go again. Thunder rolled.

Her hand trailed over his stomach and further down, and Draco’s gasps made her body throb with need. Her mouth moved from jaw to chest and then lower, and he moaned softly. He stammered over her name as her lips closed over him, his hands in her hair now as he gave her breathless instructions. So bossy, and it only aroused her more. “Stop, please,” he finally begged, “or it will all end right here …”

Hermione released him and looked up at that almost-broken face, his eyes glittering slits. She moved up his body again and kissed him and now he felt his hands on her, pulling off the Slytherin lingerie, stroking and circling until she was the one moaning. She muttered a wandless accio and felt the etched wood of her wand against her palm.

Draco’s eyes popped open at the sound of her murmured contraceptive spell. Better safe than sorry. “Hermione …” he began. Hermione slapped down the wand and pushed his hand away, then
lowered herself onto him with one sharp movement. Draco gasped as she rode him, his hands on her hips.

“I’m … I’m … going to … fuck …” he groaned and flipped her over in one smooth motion. “Let me,” he gasped, “or it will be over in seconds.”

Certainly, nobody wanted that, so Hermione was fine with the change. She was more than fine. Courses of pleasure thrummed through her body and Draco continued to thrust, his mouth on hers, his hand between them again, until she cried out, her voice mingling with another roll of muffled thunder.

“Come for me now, Granger,” he murmured, switching to her last name, and that did it. She called his name as the waves of her climax crested one after another, while she felt him come inside her, again and again, until they finally collapsed, and the only sounds in the room were their panting breaths and the waves outside.

Then he was kissing her desperately, mumbling against her mouth, and Hermione could only catch the odd word, “back … stay … mine.” He repeated the last word again and again, and she could feel dampness on her cheeks. She was almost concerned—he sounded a bit hysterical, the emotions of the evening catching up with them both—but Draco calmed down after a while, rolling onto his back once more and drawing her with him.

The room was quite dim now, the storm had subsided. Draco’s face was shadowed, his dark profile sharp against the dying firelight. His breathing was softer now, and she lay with her head on his shoulder as he pulled the covers over them both. They were both exhausted, she knew, from weeks of tension and little sleep the night before.

“I’m staying,” she whispered, and felt his body relax further. “Sleep now.”

Draco mumbled something she didn’t quite catch, so she just made a vaguely reassuring sound in her throat. That seemed to do it; he sighed and his breathing evened out, slow and deep. She snuggled into his warmth and fell asleep surrounded by the smell of cedarwood and Draco.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Ernie’s last event.
Yes, this is the last official chapter, with only the epilogue remaining. I can't tell you all how much your support and comments have meant to me. Every kudo and bookmark has encouraged me to keep posting and push each chapter to be as rewarding as possible. I'm so grateful.

I also can't believe how many readers kept up with this story through all the good times and bad, even when a happy ending seemed unlikely, even when we all wanted to shake Hermione or Draco or Theo. This story pushed everything to the absolute limit: the love triangle, the blood potion, the revenge on Astoria, and especially the slow burn. Even the Love Diggles took chapters to resolve. Draco finally won Hermione, then left her, then snuck back in with a different FACE and you still stuck with the story. I thought I'd have an outright revolt on my hands after that, but you have all been amazing.

I feel like this story could go on and on, but it's time to send Hermione and Draco off to live their life together. Squeak!

Hermione and Draco both had plans for Wednesday morning. They hadn’t discussed them, hadn’t set up a schedule or anything, but it was fair to say they had plans. As Leila would say, “very interesting plans.”

And those plans, it was also fair to say, did not include oversleeping until nearly eight o’clock. Yes, they were both very tired, but Hermione’s pre-dawn LOOP habits and those very interesting plans should have guaranteed an early morning.

Instead Hermione blinked herself awake in a sweet haze, enjoying the weight on her chest, a head of messy white-blond hair under her chin, warm arms around her. Watery sunlight rippled through the room and ...

She bolted upright, knocking Draco back against the headboard. The storm had passed, and in November, morning sunlight meant only one thing: They were late.

“Seven fifty-two!” Hermione wailed, the final “oo” of the “two” hitting an almost impossibly high note. Draco groaned and rubbed the back of his head. Hermione scrambled out of bed, dragging the cream-colored coverlet with her. Then she stood in the middle of the room, too horrified to act further.

“Draco!” she cried. “Do something!”

“Do what?” he asked grumpily. “Join you in making hysterical screeching noises? Half the castle knows you’re in here with me now. Those silencing spells don’t last forever, you know.”

Hermione clapped a hand over her mouth, now even more horrified, and stared at Draco. He was stretched out naked on the coverless bed, now eyeing his erect self somewhat mournfully. She
lowered her hand and tried to moderate her tone.

“Draco,” she repeated. He looked up at her hopefully and she huffed. “There’s no time for that!”

“Are you sure?” Draco patted the bed beside him.

Hermione glanced at the sliver-chased jade clock by his bed. “Seven fifty-FOUR!”

Draco sighed and gave up. “Aimee.”

A loud crack echoed in the room, the elf instantly appearing in a cloud of lace with her tray.

“Maître Draco et Maîtresse Hermione!” she cried. “My heart, it is full of joy to see you unclothed together!”

Hermione flushed and pulled the coverlet more tightly around herself. “I need to get to my room, Draco—”

Aimee eyed Draco curiously, then turned her gaze to Hermione. “But I do not comprehend, do you mean to leave Master Draco in such a state? There is always time for —”

“Aimee!” Hermione cried. Was this her life now? Was she really being reproached by a house elf for not having morning sex? “Draco needs to go down to breakfast! He needs to be seen!”

The elf sighed. “Anglaise.” She set her tray on the still-cluttered dinner table, then snapped her fingers, and table and tray vanished. “Then I shall Apparate Mistress Hermione to her room.”

“Thank you, Aimee,” Hermione said, snatching Draco’s shirt and jumper off the armchair. Draco was sitting up now, feet on the floor, still shamelessly naked. Hermione approached him cautiously.

“I’ll see you at breakfast,” she said, giving him a quick peck on the cheek and picking up her wand.

He snaked an arm around her and Hermione suddenly found herself on his lap, his lips on her throat. “Draco!” she squeaked and pulled away. She practically ran back to her position in the middle of the room, refusing to look at him.

“Alright, Aimee,” she told the elf severely, and Aimee giggled and touched her arm, popping them instantly into Hermione’s room. Ginny was standing on one foot in the center of the room, pulling on her tights, and nearly fell over in shock.

“Ginny, this is Draco’s house elf, Aimee,” Hermione said. “Aimee, Ginevra Weasley.”

“Mademoiselle Ginevra! It is an honor to meet one of la Maîtresse’s friends!” Aimee said, bowing.

Ginny smiled kindly at Aimee, then looked Hermione over and snickered. Hermione looked at the mirror and groaned: Draco’s shirt and jumper hung low past her hips but gaped widely around the neck, clearly revealing multiple marks from her jaw on down, and her hair was completely destroyed.

“Rough night?” Ginny asked innocently.

“I am not talking about this now,” Hermione said, moving to the wardrobe for a pressed uniform.

“Oh, just a few details,” Ginny wheedled, abandoning the tights. “It was just Draco, right? Although judging by your current state, perhaps he had a little help …”
“GINEVRA MOLLY WEASLEY!!” Hermione dropped a skirt. “It was just … I’d never … Merlin, you’re as bad as Luna!”

Ginny grinned. “Luna’s convinced that Draco is sexually deviant.”

“Well, he needs to work up to it!” Hermione snapped, picking up her toiletries bag. “And for the record, that option is not—”

“Touch-eee,” Ginny said. “I’d expect you to be in a better mood on such a morning.”

“Très Anglaise,” Aimee said sadly. Hermione jumped, startled—she’d forgotten the elf was there. “Denying herself sexe du matin and Master Draco too!” The elf looked disapproving.

“You are right, Aimee, that’s very sad,” Ginny said. “There’s always time for a nice blow job.”

Aimee’s face lit up. “Exactement!”

“I’m leaving now,” Hermione said. “And so are you, Aimee. And thank you.”

“Oui, Mistress Hermione,” Aimee said dolefully. Hermione stomped off to the bathroom to prepare for the day, Ginny’s peals of laughter still ringing in her ears. Obviously, she’d have to keep her roommate and Draco’s elf far apart from now on.

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Draco had saved a place beside him at the Slytherin table and Hermione fell onto the bench with a thump, feeling frazzled. Draco just sipped his morning tea, looking as pristine as ever—Aimee’s work, Hermione darkly suspected. The Malfoy ring stood out starkly on his pale hand, and half the Slytherin table was staring at it.

As for the rest of the Hall, it looked like Hermione’s hope that the school’s vendetta against Draco would ease up overnight was entirely misplaced. She could hear murmurings about blood and Death Eaters: “Sick” and “twisted” appeared to be the general consensus about her and Draco’s relationship. She tried not to listen, but it was hard, what with that pack of Ravenclaws talking loudly about Hermione’s “journal of conquests.” Hermione gnawed on a dry scone, too depressed to even add jam. Luna was probably telling everyone how deviant she was.

The Slytherin table looked no happier; Theo’s face was dark, and Blaise actually narrowed his eyes in concern. The only ones unaffected were Pansy and Draco, the latter buttering his scone.

McGonagall rose from her throne-like chair and the Hall fell silent, to Hermione’s relief.

“Students,” the Headmistress said, “please grant your attention for a very important announcement.”

Hermione started, crushing the bit of scone in her hand. What would McGonagall do? Anything she said about Draco would only make things worse. Draco continued buttering his scone like he was being graded on the pastry for neatness and thoroughness.

“Mr. Macmillan?” McGonagall said.
Hermione turned to look at the Hufflepuff table, where Ernie stood, ears red. He cleared his throat.
“Thank you, Headmistress McGonagall. Good morning, Hogwarts students. I’m sure you all look forward to another productive day of …”

“Mr. Macmillan,” McGonagall said.

Ernie nodded. “Christmas is coming,” he said, as if his announcement was all that was needed for the holiday to occur. “And as part of our school efforts for Inter-House Unity …”

Angry murmurs swelled. Everyone had had it up to here with Inter-House Unity.

Ernie raised his voice and continued, “And as a part of those efforts, the school is hosting an Inter-House Unity Secret Holiday Gift Exchange.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped. A what?

“As Head Boy, I have developed a comprehensive spell to ensure that each student receives the name of someone of a different gender and House, and in their own year if possible,” Ernie went on.

“Ooooh …” Smiles and whispers spread through the Hall, with some girlish squealing. Hermione looked at the Ravenclaw table; Head Girl Padma rolled her eyes, her expression clear: I had nothing to do with this.

“The spending limit is five galleons,” Ernie continued, “and we’ll all exchange our gifts at the Holiday Feast. In the spirit of Christmas fun, please keep the name you receive confidential.” He drew his wand and cast a spell; scrolls began appearing on students’ plates.

Hermione pulled the roll of parchment out of her tomatoes and sighed. Best to get it over with, hopefully … What? Demelza Robbins?

Lavender's happy squeal practically shook the Hall. The Gryffindor’s significant look at the snakes’ table left no doubt whose name she held. Theo certainly understood immediately; the poor man almost cringed.

The Slytherins had no compunction about breaking Ernie’s rule of silence. Within minutes the snakes had a little auction going, with desirable names going to the highest bidder. Hermione sat open-mouthed as a Slytherin prefect called out names in drawling tones: “Abbott … Carter … Padma Patil …” Gold began trading hands, and Hermione glared at Draco as he turned over his scroll and bid for Percival.

“You shouldn’t be trading!” she hissed. “And your name should be a different gender!”

Her travesty of a boyfriend just winked and tossed a coin at the prefect, plucking his new scroll out of the air. “I know just the gift,” Draco said smugly. “He’ll love it.”

Hermione huffed and turned to Leila. “I see you’ve kept your original name,” she told the younger girl approvingly.

“I have some very interesting ideas for Miss Astoria Greengrass,” Leila said.

“Wrong gender!” Hermione sputtered. “Wrong house!”

“Yes,” Leila said. “This activity has been poorly executed.” She tucked her scroll into her skirt pocket and began spooning up her oatmeal.
Hermione looked over the Hall again. Pandemonium had broken out as students cheered and groaned and swapped. Unwary students who left their scrolls unattended risked having them switched by students unhappy with their names and willing to take a chance.

“Miss Granger?” said a voice behind her. It was Rupert Pratt, holding his small scroll. “Do you know a … Percy Weasley? Is he a Ravenclaw?”

“What?” Hermione squeaked, then tried to moderate her tone as the former Beater flinched. “Percy is a Gryffindor, Rupert—and he hasn’t attended Hogwarts in years!”

Pratt’s face fell. “Nuts, I paid ten galleons for him.”

That was the last straw. Hermione left the Slytherin table and stalked over to Ernie.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she snapped, waving her tomato-smeared scroll in the Head Boy’s face. “I have Demelza Robbins!”

“Thank Merlin,” Ernie said, standing. “Could you trade with me?”

“Please,” Ernie begged. “I have Goyle and no one else will take him!”

Hermione huffed. “Fine,” she said. “In the spirit of Inter-House Unity.” They traded scrolls. “This gift exchange was a ridiculous idea—”

“Well, Neville said—”

“Neville?” Hermione looked over at the Gryffindor table, where Neville seemed a little unnerved by the uproar around him. Interesting. Then she turned to the Slytherin table, and there was Pansy, looking smug.

“Hey, Ernie,” Hannah Abbott said, holding up her scroll. “Who is Marcus Fixe? Do you think he’d like a few bars of my homemade soap?” Ernie and Hermione stared at her, unable to speak.

“Students!” McGonagall’s voice rang out. “You will return to your places in good order!”

Hermione returned to the Slytherin table and sat beside Pansy.

“Why, Pansy?” she asked in a low voice. “Why a gift exchange?”

“It was necessary,” Pansy said, admiring a sapphire bracelet peeping out from under her shirt cuff. “The school needed a distraction to take their minds off Draco.”

“Did you sabotage the spell?” Hermione asked.

“No need.” Pansy cast Ernie a contemptuous glance. “I knew I could count on our Head ’Puff to bollox it up. Neville thought it was a lovely idea.”

Hermione almost groaned. Neville was so upright and trustworthy; who knew how many diabolical schemes Pansy could execute through him.

“It will never work,” she told the Slytherin witch. “People hate Draco now. You won’t throw them off so easily.”

“Just wait.” Pansy smirked and transformed her sapphire bracelet to an emerald one with a tap of her wand.
Hermione didn’t have to wait long. By lunch, it was as if there had never been any blood messages. Draco wasn’t hexed once; even Justin was too busy trying to track down his ex-girlfriend’s scroll to harass anyone. Dennis Creevey did his best to foment more hatred, and Draco was the subject of many glares at lunch. But then a rumor swept the castle, likely started by Pansy: Some names had been assigned more than once. That meant some students might not get gifts at all, and paranoia ran rampant as students tried to confirm that somebody had their name.

Draco disappeared after lunch and turned up late to Double Herbology looking especially smug. But Hermione had no chance to question him since McGonagall summoned them both to her office immediately after class. First the Headmistress requested that Draco remain in the castle until the holiday break. Then she updated them about Celeste Rosier; despite the best efforts of the Healers and McGonagall herself, the Death Eater would likely remain a Pygmy Puff for the rest of her days.

“Professor Hagrid has placed Celly in a nice coop behind the pumpkin patch,” the Headmistress said, eyes gleaming behind her spectacles. “I plan to visit often.”

Finally, McGonagall delivered a formal reprimand to Hermione for casting an illegal Transfiguration. Then she gave Hermione an Outstanding NEWT score in the subject, which meant Hermione wouldn’t have to sit the Transfiguration exam. Hermione beamed; Draco rolled his eyes.

Once back on the third floor beside the gargoyle, Hermione suggested they take a walk in the castle's main courtyard. The late afternoon sun still shone brightly and the courtyard’s high walls would shelter them from the cold wind. Draco agreed and she ran up to Gryffindor tower to grab her scarf, mittens and her just-finished Gryffindor knit cap. It was her practice cap—she was knitting more as Christmas presents—and while the red-and-gold lines were a bit crooked and the pom-pom entirely too big, she was pleased with the result.

Draco, resplendent in a green velvet-lined black cloak, silk green scarf and black leather gloves, raised an eyebrow when Hermione met him in the Entrance Hall. “I know,” she huffed. “Go ahead. Tell me I look ridiculous.”

“You look completely ridiculous,” Draco answered with conviction, then slid an arm around her and pulled her closer. “And adorable.” He kissed her thoroughly, then tugged the cap over her eyes before stepping back.

“Draco,” Hermione said, flushing as she straightened her cap. Nearby students stared but nobody threatened Draco or shouted “Death Eater Whore.” That Pansy might be on to something.

The couple discovered quickly that they weren’t the only ones eager for a breath of fresh air. Students were thick on the courtyard's wide, grassy expanse, divided into quarters by white-flagged paths that led to a large astronomy model in the center. The iron model was Copernican, not Ptolemaic, Hermione noted with approval.

Draco had small patience for crowds and would have retreated immediately if Hermione hadn’t noticed that the yard’s northwest quadrant was nearly empty. She led him through clusters of shivering students toward the clearing. (Bloom and Pratt looked especially cold, maybe they would like some nice knit caps.)

They quickly discovered the reason for the empty space: The Squeaky Mice were playing under a large Birnam oak tree, shrieking wildly and jumping into piles of yellow leaves. A few of the First Years were shoving Bertie under a particularly large pile, but abandoned the game immediately when they saw Draco and Hermione.
“Miss Granger! Mr. Malfoy!” the Mice shouted. Their chubby faces were red with cold and excitement. Leila looked as flushed and disheveled as the rest of them, with large golden leaves stuck in her dark hair.

Hermione’s attention, however, was caught by Percival, who wore a very familiar badge: round and black, with bright green letters flashing “POTTER STINKS.”

She turned to scowl at Draco, but Leila beat her to it.

“I’m surprised at you, Mr. Malfoy,” the girl said severely. “Auror Potter is very nice … and brave.” Her cheeks reddened further.

Draco smirked. “Just a bit of Christmas fun.” Percival struck a pose.

“Miss Granger? Mr. Malfoy?” Bertie had finally struggled out of the leaf pile, an agitated Cupcake hopping on his shoulder. “Could you oversee our detention on Saturday? I’m sure Professor Hagrid wouldn’t mind.”

“Professor Hagrid gave you lot detention?” Hermione was surprised. “What did you do?”

“We wanted to play with his new Pygmy Puff!”

"It's so big and fluffy!"

Hermione exchanged a horrified look with Draco. “What—”

“Professor Hagrid put it in with his new chicks,” Leila piped up. “He let us watch and—”

“I thought those Stumpy chicks were going to snack on that Puff!” Percival interrupted loudly. Leila frowned at him and the black-haired boy grinned and thrust out his chest. “POTTER STINKS” flashed merrily.

“What happened?” Hermione asked.

“The Puff just looked at the chicks and flapped its wings—”

“And the chicks started screeching and ran into their nest—”

“We came back later and they were still hiding,” Percival said. “They won't come out.”

"The chicks won’t eat either,” Imogene said. “We tried to give them beef tips.”

Hermione and Draco exchanged another horrified look. “Did you lot go into that coop?” Draco asked sternly.

“We wanted to feed the chicks,” Imogene said. “And play with the Puff.”

“It’s a very interesting Puff,” Leila said.

“But Professor Hagrid caught us,” Bertie said.

“You lot are not to go anywhere near that coop,” Draco ordered. “Those chicks are dangerous, and so is the Puff.”

“That’s what Professor Hagrid said!”
“He wants us to clean out the thestral stables!”

“It stinks in there!”

“Well, you know all about stinking, Percival,” Leila snapped.

“Can we write sentences with you instead, Mr. Malfoy? Miss Granger?” Imogene asked. “Please?”

“Certainly not,” Draco said. “You will clean those stables without complaint. And furthermore …”

Draco began ranting about monsters and loony game keepers and the Mice listened in mutinous silence. Hermione rolled her eyes; she’d already heard this lecture on the Hogsmeade platform. She stealthily drew her wand, catching Leila’s eye, and Leila casually shifted to block Draco’s view of Percival. Hermione stepped away from Draco and muttered under her breath, flicking her wand tip toward Percival.

Then she moved back to Draco, laying her hand on his arm. “Draco, that’s enough,” she said. “I’m sure they all understand.” Hermione stood on tiptoe to whisper in his ear. “I’ll ward the coop.”

Leila tugged on Percival’s robe, prompting Percival to turn away from Draco to glare at her. The other Mice began to giggle.

“Let’s go,” Hermione whispered to Draco. She trailed her hand down his arm. “It won’t take long and maybe after dinner … the Room of Requirement?”

Draco brightened. The Slytherin seemed to think he was owed something after that disaster of a morning and Hermione was refusing to return to his bedroom on a school night. He fixed the Squeaky Mice with a stern look. “All right, remember what I said.”

Draco stalked off and Hermione followed meekly. But she couldn’t resist a final look back at the Squeaky Mice, who stood around grinning at Percival’s badge, which now flashed “DO YOUR HOMEWORK.”

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Warding the Stymphalian chicks’ coop was easy enough, although Hermione couldn’t help quivering a bit under Celeste’s gaze. Who knew a Pygmy Puff could have such cold eyes. Draco held his wand on the former Death Eater while Hermione cast a ward allowing only Hagrid, themselves and McGonagall to enter the coop. She also created a partition between the Puff and the nest, so the chicks could relax and eat their beef tips.

After dinner Hermione and Draco headed to the Room of Requirement, which now had the strength to provide a simple bed with a thick grey quilt.

“I’m not breaking curfew tonight,” Hermione warned, hands on her hips.

“We’ll see about that,” Draco said. He was all business tonight, unbuckling his belt and stripping down to his black silk boxers.
“Draco …” Hermione began. The wizard was stretched out on the bed now, propping himself up with one elbow, and she trailed off, distracted by his long form. Draco’s hand brushed the quilt before him, a silent—and irresistible—invitation. Hermione never remembered walking to the bed. She only knew she was there, standing with her knees against the quilt, looking down at those shining eyes.

“Draco, you can’t just demand I break …”

“Watch me, Hermione,” Draco said with a smile. “You like to watch me, don’t you? You’ll watch me do many things tonight.”

His eyes glittered in a way that sent shivers up her spine. Hermione swallowed, but said nothing, just waited. She wasn’t sure what she was waiting for, but Draco would know.

“Take off your clothes, Hermione,” he said softly.

The moment stretched thin, caught between two equal wills, until Hermione smiled. For the past harrowing weeks Draco had been trapped by circumstances, his fate and the fate of his family in the balance. Now he felt a bit more in control, and being a Malfoy and a Slytherin, he wanted to demonstrate it. At least for tonight.

Holding his gaze, Hermione took two steps backward, unraveling her tie and unbuttoning her uniform shirt to reveal a red bra. Draco watched attentively, but his self-satisfied smirk faded as she cast aside her bra and stepped out of her knickers. The windowless Room was a bit dark and Hermione wiggled her fingers in a nonverbal, wandless spell. A single lamp suddenly blazed to life, casting its golden light on her bare body.

Draco sat up, eyes wide. He didn’t move a muscle as Hermione moved to kneel on the bed, then bend over to kiss him.

He responded instantly, pushing her down on the quilt and kissing her deeply, and his hands were everywhere. Hermione’s own hands ran over his chest, those thin scars and nearly invisible hair. Draco pulled away and hovered over her, the lamplight shining on his face, or perhaps reflecting an inner brightness as he looked at her. His warm sunshine smell surrounded her, layered with rich cologne.

“Tell me you love me.” His voice was almost impossibly deep.

“I love you,” she whispered.

“Again.”

“I love you,” she said more strongly. They were both collared now, as surely as if they wore matching Chains of Stars.

Draco’s mouth was on hers, his hands on her throat, his body trapping her. There was a little darkness now, just a slight edge, a tiny flex of his fingers. His lips moved to her ear. “I love you, Hermione Granger, love you, love you …” He repeated it like a mantra, moving against her with clear intent. Hermione’s eyes slid shut and she moaned.

His hands left her throat to slide downward—she was soaked already, from that touch of darkness, and she heard Draco chuckle lightly when he discovered that. His mouth moved to follow, Hermione’s fingers in his hair, and at the touch of his tongue she spasmed, biting down a scream. Soon she was falling apart, covered in a sheen of sweat and he hadn’t even entered her.
“Please, Draco,” she moaned, “I can’t wait anymore … please …”

“I like it when you beg, Granger,” said that smug voice from Potions and she almost came again. She was getting a little hysterical now, pulling on his hair, it had to hurt him, but his voice was only slightly ragged. “Open your eyes and watch Draco Malfoy fuck you.”

She obeyed, expecting to see a dark Draco, but his eyes were bright and his smile open, and she couldn’t help smiling back.

“Con-control freak,” she managed to gasp, and his smile widened as he thrust into her until she screamed. Draco’s face was flushed with determination and she learned why when he pulled out and flipped her over.

“Hands and knees, Hermione,” he said in her ear, and his voice was agonized. She wasn’t controlling her limbs very well, but he helped her, and when he entered her again she squeezed her eyes shut and let her nerves collapse as he continued until he finally came with a shattering groan and they fell bonelessly on the bed.

She didn’t know how long they lay there in the silent room, only their breaths to be heard. She had no idea what time it was and didn’t care. Another point to Slytherin. Draco stretched with a soft moan and picked up his wand, probably for a quick cleaning spell, when he froze.

“I—I—never …” he swallowed. “I never cast …” His grey eyes were wide, tinged with a little fear.

“It’s alright,” she panted. “I take a muggle pill.”

“A what?” Draco blinked. “What’s a pill?”

“Muggle medicine.” Hermione grinned. “What are they teaching you in Muggle Studies?”

“Vacuum cleaners today.” Draco was still nervous. “They sound terrifying.” He balanced on one elbow, looking down at her. “What is this pill? Is it safe? Why didn’t you tell me?”

She brushed his sweaty, slightly curled fringe from his forehead and watched it fall back again. “It’s alright, trust me.”

Draco nodded, still a bit doubtful. “You understand if anything comes of this, you and I will …”

“Shhhh.” Hermione put her fingers on his lips. “We don’t need to talk about that now.”

He visibly relaxed and waved his wand, and Hermione felt the soft coolness of his cleaning spell. She shivered, and Draco immediately tucked them both under the quilt. “Don’t worry, I’ll get you back to your Tower,” he murmured.

Hermione snorted lightly. Like she needed any help. Draco was stroking her hair, running a finger over the Gloriana pin still tucked behind her ear. His other hand lay on her breast and she felt the cool onyx of his family ring. Ego Aperta.

“I still can’t believe you changed the motto,” she said, stroking the dragons with her finger. She thought back to the scene in the Charms classroom, when she forced Draco to turn out his pockets. She hadn’t dared touch the ring then, could almost feel its malevolent presence.

Draco sighed. “It wasn’t easy,” he said. “I began trying after Mother’s arrest. I didn’t see how I could ever have you again, but no matter what, I was determined to change the motto.” His hand stroked her breast. “But the ring kept switching it back to Sanctimonia Vincet Semper.”
“What made you go to Professor Bluebell?”

He shrugged. “She seemed knowledgeable, so I talked to her yesterday after DADA.” He rolled over on his back, one hand behind his head.

“What will your parents say?”

“Doesn’t matter.” His jaw was set. “I’m the head of the family and I make the decisions.”

“Did the crest’s motto change on everything?” Hermione asked, remembering the glowing objects in his room. “Carpets, banners, silver toothbrush holders?”

He looked amused. “Yes. The signet ring sets the seal. Bluebell and I knew we’d likely succeeded when Grandfather’s cufflinks glowed. But I didn’t know for sure until I put on the ring.” His smile widened. “Aimee is probably embroidering the new motto onto linens as we speak.”

“You should free her,” Hermione said sternly. Lacey towels were still towels.

“You’re welcome to try,” Draco said, his thumb rubbing her nipple. He followed it up with his lips and Hermione moaned.

“Curfew,” she gasped. “There’s no time …”

“There’s always time …” Draco began whispering all the things there was surely time for. “Trust me.” So Hermione did.

***

Draco was true to his word, checking the time himself, dressing without argument, and escorting her up multiple staircases to Gryffindor Tower before curfew. They passed jabbering groups of students, but no threats or snarls, just:

“... Lydia swears she has Ogden’s name, but I know she’s lying, I saw the …”

“... Frank has Polly, can you believe it? He thinks she’ll …”

“... I can’t find that Marcus Fixe anywhere, do you think he’d like knitted snowman socks?”

Draco sneered at the chatter but Hermione was only relieved. Although Neville was likely to take a dim view at being used in such a way. *Oh, well, that’s Parkinson’s problem.*

With ten minutes left before curfew, they stood in the corridor out of earshot of the Fat Lady, discussing possible weekend plans since Chateau de Malfoi was out of the question.

“You pack that little pink bag anyway,” Draco ordered. “Tell Ginevra you’ll be spending the weekend in the dungeons.”

“I can’t,” Hermione said. “I promised I’d have dinner on Saturday with her and the Harpies.” She
grinned. “I think they’d rather have you, though.”

“Not a chance.” His finger traced her throat. “Very well, I’ll release you Saturday night, but come back to me afterward.” He gave her that open look. “Please.”

“Alright,” Hermione said, resigned to total scandal. “You are truly a corrupting influence.”

Draco just chuckled and twined one of her rampant curls around his finger.

“Oh, my sweet, innocent Hermione,” he murmured. His breath was hot in her ear. “I haven’t even begun to corrupt you yet.”

Chapter End Notes

NEXT UP: Epilogue
Epilogue: Five Things

Chapter Notes

Exactly one year ago, I posted "Mine," the first chapter of "The Gloriana Set." Back then this story was only 120,000 words, Theo was little more than a plot device, the Squeaky Mice were in two chapters only, the Astoria revenge scheme never happened and Azkaban, Love Diggles, the Halloween Festival, the Snape portrait and the Slytherin Party never appeared. So much changed as I posted the story, mostly due to all you readers, since I did this without a beta reader (too much of a control freak). I can't thank you all enough!

As one reader pointed out, this whole story is about love (yes, Bluebell, all kinds of love), so no wonder it's now more than a quarter-million words. Big theme. One inspiration for this story was Shakespeare's sonnet 116 (where Marcus Fixe's name came from): Love is "an ever-fixed mark that looks on tempests and is never shaken." Hermione and Draco connected in that first chapter and that connection never wavered for the next 80 chapters.

So here we have the Epilogue—not too far in the future. (I've learned that lesson from JKR.) And in the spirit of breaking just about every writing rule in this story, I even introduce a new character. I hope you enjoy it and cheers to Happy Ever Afters!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione awoke bathed in sunshine. Draco’s high-ceilinged bedroom at the Chateau de Malfoi was five times as large as his room at Hogwarts, but very similar, with the same blue velvet curtains with golden fleur-de-lis and the colorfully painted furniture. But this room’s main window overlooked expansive grounds dotted with statues and fountains, with vineyards in the distance. The carved wooden desk held his glass Patronus ball on its delicate silver stand.

With utmost caution, Hermione sat up, blinking in the morning light. The long lump beside her, hidden beneath the cream silk coverlet, didn't move. Thank Merlin.

She reached out an arm and pulled her beaded bag off the nightstand, along with her wand. A muttered spell and she’d summoned her LOOP notebook and pen. With any luck, she’d have time to record her thoughts and plan her day. Hermione flipped to a fresh page and touched ink to paper. It was important to keep a disciplined mind.

Her thoughts refused to comply, however; instead they roamed freely over the weeks at Hogwarts since Narcissa’s trial. Pansy had proven very creative at distracting the student body from Draco’s perceived villainy. When the school had settled down a bit in December, and Draco started getting threats again, everybody’s Secret Gift scrolls suddenly vanished. Ernie and his prefects tried to re-create the gift list, but of course half the students lied about their drawn names, which created more chaos.

The Squeaky Mice thrived on the uproar, and Hermione darkly suspected that Leila, with Pansy's encouragement, was happily making things worse. Percival wore his transformed "POTTER STINKS" badge for an entire day before noticing it read "DO YOUR HOMEWORK." He complained to Draco, who spent most of Friday night in his room working to change it back.
Hermione watched from his bed, where she was reading Vasile’s "Curses of Home and Hearth" book while wearing a small lacey thing and trying not to look smug. The next day Hermione secretly taught the switching spell to Leila, who charmed the badge to flash phrases like “EAT YOUR VEGGIES” and “WRITE YOUR MOTHER” and Hermione’s favorite: “POTTER’S CUTE.”

With all the gift scrolls vanished, Ernie begged Hermione to help him cast the spell again. Hermione airily refused, proposing a nice trivia tournament to take everyone’s mind off things. So the Head Boy recast the spell himself, adding all his prefects' suggestions, and the charm collapsed under the weight of its many amendments and assigned everyone the same name: Marcus Fixe. The student body revolted and the controversy raged on until McGonagall herself took a hand a week before the Holiday Feast, casting an efficient spell that assigned each student a name and prevented any swapping. Hermione drew Ernie’s name, and wrapped up a stack of books on effective leadership and his very own Life Organization Optimization Plan.

At the Holiday Feast, Draco presented Lavender with a pair of socks with Theo’s faces in little hearts, charmed to show Theo blowing kisses. Lavender put on the socks right there at the Gryffindor table and shortened her skirt to display them, and Hermione couldn’t hide her grin at Theo’s outraged expression. Luna gave Draco with a hand-painted model of the “Malfoy Meditation Retreat,” complete with a tiny Fountain of Renewal trickling minute drops of water. Draco managed a pained smile and quiet thank you, but Hermione thought it was lovely and set it up in his bedroom at Hogwarts.

Luna’s model certainly was better than Hermione’s own gift: a book on decorum, titled “To Be Truly a Lady,” from Justin Finch-Fletchley. Hermione glared down at the book, curbing her desire to Incendio it. *Bloody hypocrite with his grassy makeout space and bottle of sirenscotch.* She ended up reading the book over the holidays and owling Justin six feet of parchment with her notes and annotations. “You stick with him,” she told Brownie as she tied the heavy scroll to his leg. “Don’t leave until he’s read every word.”

The morning after the Holiday Feast, Hermione and Draco prepared to board the Hogwarts Express in a tense mood. The Squeaky Mice were running amok on the platform, each wearing one of Hermione’s knit caps. Draco looked a little sour at the sight of Ernie wearing a matching black cap with a big yellow pom-pom. Hermione asked sweetly if Draco would like his own silver-and-green cap — certainly Bloom and Pratt seemed to enjoy theirs and Draco's ears did look a bit pink.

Draco just gave her a haughty sneer. He and Hermione were both sleep-deprived, and not in a good way. Draco had finally realized the night before that Hermione hadn’t been glamouring her Mudblood scars; they had truly faded, with only faint, silvery letters remaining. He’d demanded an immediate explanation and then promptly exploded, ranting about the dangers of brewing experimental potions and testing them on oneself with only a witless painting to help. Then he dragged her off to the infirmary and woke up Madam Pomfrey. The matron gave Hermione an antidote foraconite poisoning, although Hermione insisted her pupils weren’t dilated and she was only sweating from her sprint from the Slytherin dungeons. Draco then broke Hermione's wards around the Potions lab and laid into Snape, who merely raised a painted eyebrow. The portrait had a few choice things to say about Draco leaving a dangerous witch to her own devices while he ran off acting like a bloody Gryffindor.

The next day, Draco was still moaning about the Scar Solution, not to mention his precious badge, which despite all of Draco’s efforts was now stuck at "POTTER THE WONDER AUROR." He and Hermione bickered the entire train ride to London and their friends left them both at Platform 9 3/4 with obvious relief.
With Draco’s parents in Azkaban, Hermione had made the reckless decision to bring her still-
annoyed boyfriend home with her for the first week of the Christmas holidays. After all, she
reasoned, if her mother didn’t send Draco screaming out of her life, nothing would. Mum behaved
quite well at the train station and drive home. But alas, it couldn’t last.

“So, Draco,” Mum said as they ate dinner that night in the Grangers’ wood-paneled dining room.
“I understand your family did their best to kill our Hermione during the war.”

Draco blinked and set down his fork. “Yes, I’m afraid so.”

“They weren’t very competent about it,” Mum observed with a sip of her wine.

“No,” Draco admitted. “I was a shit Death Eater myself.”

Dad barked a laugh, but Mum looked disapproving. “So I’ve heard. Cursed necklace? Poisoned
wine? Shockingly inefficient.”

“Yes, well, you see, my heart wasn’t exactly in it,” Draco said apologetically.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Honestly, Mum, we should all be grateful that it wasn’t.”

“I suppose,” Mum said, but she fixed Draco with a cold eye, and her thoughts were clear: Slacker.

Mum was quite impressed by the Gloriana Set, however, and looked Draco up and down before
suggesting that Hermione infuse the Malfoy ring with similar magic. “He’s a very good-looking
young man, dear,” she commented. “I can see why you might forgive a questionable work ethic.”

To Draco’s surprise, Hermione insisted on telling Mum and Dad all about her adventures at
school. She had sworn not to keep things from her parents anymore and tried to keep her promise,
although she did skim over the rougher parts at the Nott Hunting Shack. She even told them about
Petrifying Draco in the charms classroom. (Mum nodded approvingly at Hermione while Dad
frowned at Draco.) Dad adored Squeaky Mice stories, and Mum was extremely interested in
anything concerning the Malfoy family. Both of her parents were appalled by the blood messages,
although Mum only nodded thoughtfully at the news that Narcissa had cast the spell. After
Christmas services, Hermione told the story of Astoria’s necklace and her own visit to Lucius’
Azkaban cell. Dad and Draco were both scowling when she finished describing her talk with
Lucius, but Mum just looked smug.

“Well, dear, that’s what happens when you don’t keep your men in line,” Mum said as she served
them all eggnog. “They fall into bad company with masks and all and next you know, they’re
getting tattoos and chasing younger women. This whole Voldemort thing was obviously a badly
managed midlife crisis.” Mum smiled kindly at Draco, who sat frozen in horror, clutching his
untouched eggnog.

“That’s it,” Draco hissed at Hermione while her parents went upstairs to fetch more presents. “It’s
official. Your mother is scarier than mine.”

Hermione practically ran from the house to Azkaban Christmas afternoon to visit Narcissa while
Harry and Ginny circled each other all evening, but shared a passionate kiss as the clock
tolled midnight. Then Ginny danced off with those annoying Harpy friends of hers (who would not
stop ogling Draco). Hermione checked in with Harry, who said with a smile, “She’ll come back.”
Then Hermione went to Ginny, who gave her the exact same smile and said, “He knows where to
find me.” At that point, Hermione just gave up and rescued Draco from Luna, who’d shown up
with Bloom (the slightly more intelligent former Beater) and was making very suspicious hand gestures. Ron and Draco later met by accident at the drawing room’s makeshift bar and traded nods and pained smiles.

Hermione and Draco stayed at the Leaky Cauldron that night and the next morning took the inkpot portkey to the Chateau de Malfoi in Southern France. The Chateau lived up to all Draco’s promises: the library was extensive and the fishing village truly seedy. The only disappointment was Aimee; whenever Hermione said “freedom” or “money” or “clothes,” the elf cried, “Je ne comprends pas!” and ran off sobbing. It was maddening.

Hermione frowned down at her LOOP notebook, thinking of the elf. Then she took a relaxing breath: five beats in, five beats out. She’d consider the Aimee problem another time. The lump under the covers had shifted slightly and some people had small respect for life organization plans. She cracked open the journal and rapidly wrote the date and time.

Five Things To Look Forward To:

1) The Chateau library's 1750 copy of Perenelle Flamel’s “Magical History of France” that Draco promised to start translating aloud to her after lunch.

2) Her plan to take waterproof cloaks to the fishing village today, along with jars of caulking material. Some of those wretched boats the villagers were squatting in were quite leaky.

The body under the covers beside her was definitely moving, and a warm hand brushed her ankle, moving up her bare leg. Somebody was waking up and unlikely to take no for an answer. So spoiled.

She wrote a large “3” in her notebook, but her attention was distracted now as a rough palm moved to her knee and she felt a hot breath on her hip. The hand moved slowly higher and the breath moved to meet it.

Hermione wrote quickly. The first two items on her “Five Things To Look Forward To Today” list often changed these days, but the last three never wavered:

3) Draco

4) Draco

5) Draco

THE END
Chapter End Notes

And that's it. I love you all so much. What an amazing community this is. You're all brilliant. I'll be sticking around, reading Dramione and posting an occasional short sequel to "The Gloriana Set." Feel free to ask any questions you like about the story, now that I don't have to worry about spoiling anything.

In the meantime, I'm working on an original novel about a single mother who accidentally becomes a criminal mastermind. (It could happen to anybody!) There will be strong Dramione overtones, since she falls for one of the criminals and there's an ex-husband, too. "The Gloriana Set" has given me the confidence to go for it.

Take care and Happy Reading!

Love,

Thebe

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!