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**Prodigal Witch**

by [MissFantastic](http://archiveofourown.org/users/MissFantastic)

**Summary**

Hermione Granger returned to England after years abroad. Of course things have changed back home, but so has she; though Hermione didn’t know just how much she was still changing. No one ever said change was easy and in her case it was downright dangerous, but at least she wouldn’t be alone. Not only do drastic changes affect Hermione’s life and magic, but she will also end up bound for life to another person. The question is will she be able to choose her life partner or will it be out of her hands?

I posted this story on Granger Enchanted back in 2014. Thank you so much to bunnyhops for all of her lovely beta work back in the day. She rocks! This is a Hermione/Multiple Wizard story, so if that isn’t your cup of tea, feel free to skip this story. As a heads up, all the wizards are Slytherin!

I like to create photo collages as I write to help create a visual for the scene or chapter. I’ve created a folder of photos for this story on my Flickr page (MissFantastic) in case you want to see what I envision. Of course, feel free to use your own imaginations as well!

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**Notes**
I've written this whole story, since I posted it a few years ago. It is 39 chapters total and I will be trying to post a chapter a day here.

Disclaimer: All characters and story lines from the Harry Potter series belong to JK Rowling and the lovely people at Scholastic & WB. I do not own them and make no money from publishing/writing this story.

Thank you so much to bunnyhops and krazyredhead for the edits, encouragement, and critiques for this chapter!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Chapter One

Hermione heaved a contented sigh and smiled as she stood on the corner in Diagon Alley. It really felt good to be home. She had not realized how much Wizarding Britain was home to her. It had certainly not felt that way when she left four years ago.

Her eyes were drawn to a small corner shop that sold newspapers, snacks, and other odds and ends. She was standing in front of that shop when her life had fallen apart around her. She made her way over to the exact spot and was pleasantly surprised to find the memory only elicited whispers of heartbreak and betrayal, though it had taken years for that to be the case. Hermione smirked as she thought of all the things that had changed.

Although it was not that long ago, the Hermione from back then seemed so much younger - so much more naive. Back then, she had just graduated from Hogwarts, having opted to go back for a proper seventh year and sit for her N.E.W.T.s. She had done exceptionally well, getting the most N.E.W.T.s in the history of the school. Her fiancé, Ron Weasley, had opted to "start his life going," as he put it, and had gone off to play Quidditch professionally. She remembered that he had been irritated that Hermione insisted on returning to school, because he had wanted to start a family right away. Hermione was sure she was not ready for motherhood at eighteen and used her education as a perfect excuse. Harry had gone straight into the Auror Academy to start his training there.

Seventh year at Hogwarts without her two best friends had been strange, but good. Life was quieter that year and Hermione was able to get so much more work done. She made other friends, this time gravitating toward people who were as interested in learning as she was. House affiliation was not a factor and she was friendly with people from all over the school. She corresponded with Ron and Harry, of course, but otherwise was blissfully immersed in academics.

It had been quite a shock to her when she had stumbled across this little shop all those years ago and saw tabloid photos of her fiancé, naked and in a compromising position, with a pair of buxom witches. The headline had read: Randy Ron's Repeated Romps. Hermione felt like her heart shattered into a million tiny pieces. She was in shock and had trouble breathing. She had no idea how long she had stood there staring in the shop window at those photos - photos that were graphic enough to leave no room for doubt about Ron's betrayal. All she could focus on was the motion of his pumping hips and the swaying of the woman's breasts.

Staring in the window back then, Hermione had seen her reflection, which made her feel even worse. She had just finished taking her exams and had a graduation party planned at the Burrow that evening; the whole family would be there for Hermione's party. She’d popped into Diagon Alley for a trip to the bookstore. She had promised to reward herself with some fun books after so much studying. Her reflection showed a small, mousy, dowdy witch. Hermione had thrown on an ill-fitting robe, her bushy hair was sticking out in all directions, and she even had ink stains on her fingertips. She certainly could not compare to those busty, sexually confident witches with Ron in the photos.

Hermione grimaced at the memory. It had been the most painful experience of her life, but Hermione Granger was never one to wallow in self-pity. After the shock came a white, blinding rage. Hermione forced herself to purchase one of the offending tabloids and Apparated directly to the Burrow, where her soon-to-be ex-fiancé still lived. He had money from Quidditch, but did not want to spend it on mundane things like rent. He also liked that his mother still cooked and cleaned
Hermione had disrupted breakfast with a spectacular display of hexes directed at the youngest male Weasley. Within seconds, Ron was stripped down to his pants with the tabloid photos imprinted on his chest. Every other inch of visible skin broke out in boils. The boils across his back spelled out ‘Lying Weasel’. Hermione ignored his screams and stomped up to the room she had shared with Ginny. Her trunk was still packed from school, so it only took her a few moments to gather her things. In those moments, however, Harry had come up to try to stop her. It still made Hermione sad to recall how her very best friend in the world had defended Ron, had accused her of over reacting and encouraged her to stay and work it out.

Hermione stormed out of the Burrow in a whirlwind of emotion and never looked back. As she was finishing school, she had been offered several apprenticeships with Masters across the globe, none of which she had taken because of her relationship with Ron.

Her relationship with Ron no longer an issue, Hermione set off into the world.

Now here she was, about four years later, in the same exact spot where everything had changed. She still had some sadness and hurt over how her relationship ended, but could not regret that it had ended. She and Ron were not a very good match and she would not have been happy. She certainly would not have finished two complicated apprenticeships, earning the title of Master in both Potions and Arithmancy, if she had stayed with Ron. Neither would she have had the opportunity to travel so widely and thoroughly as she had, since Ron did not like change or new places.

Hermione smiled at her reflection in the shop window. It too was altered. She was still small, that had not changed - but she was no longer mousy or frumpy looking. She was a confident looking, self-assured witch. In the course of her travels, she had sheared off her long, trademark curls that kept getting in the way and found she quite liked her little pixie haircut. She had the opportunity to find her own personal style and discovered that she liked shopping for clothes. She was wearing one of her favorite dresses, a bright royal blue vintage shirtdress with a flared skirt that stopped a few inches above her knees. She had paired the classic dress with fun coral t-strap very high-heeled sandals. Hermione chuckled as she looked down at her nicely manicured pink fingernails, because they were still stained with ink. Some things did not change.

Hermione checked her watch and saw that she was going to be late if she did not hurry. She had been wrapped up in the changes to Diagon Alley and in her own memories that time flitted away. She whirled around to head down the street and ran smack into a solid body. She let out a shriek of surprise as she lost her balance. Hands reached out to grab her so she would not fall back on her bum.

OoOoO

The friends were meeting some other wizards for lunch and a pint. They had all gone to school together and now, years later, they were still as close as they had been then. They all noticed the petite, shapely witch down the street.

"Bless the springtime and little dresses," Theo Nott grinned. He was often the quietest of the group, but when he spoke, everyone agreed that his comments were spot on.

"Indeed." Draco Malfoy chuckled. He appreciated a nice set of legs on a witch.

"Who is that?" Blaise Zabini asked, his eyes raking over the witch as they got closer to her. She seemed very interested in something in that shop window. "She looks familiar."
"You would know," Greg Goyle teased. Blaise had a reputation as a shameless flirt, who made it a point to get to know every pretty witch he came across. Greg took another look. "She does look familiar, but I can't place her."

"Well, let's go talk to her." Draco grinned. Draco liked her brightly colored high heels, and that he could see the outline of her thighs with the sun shining through the thin fabric of her dress.

All four wizards were so busy appraising her form, that they were caught off guard when she suddenly turned and barreled directly into them. She had been looking down at her watch when she ran straight into Draco's chest. He noticed that she really was a tiny thing. Even with those heels he liked, she only came up to his chin. Blaise and Theo reached out from either side of Draco to grab her arms, saving her from falling arse over teakettle. Some kind of purse flew out of her hands and Draco reached down to retrieve it, giving him a close up of those legs he had been ogling.

"Oh, bollocks! I am so sorry!" the witch apologized. She looked up at the four of them and her eyes went wide.

"Oh no, please do not apologize," Blaise purred, ever so slightly stroking the arm that clung to his. She had grabbed him back when she was falling. "Running into a pretty witch is never a bad thing."

Theo took the opportunity to look closer at the witch. She had smooth, firm and very darkly tanned skin. She also smelled divine; whatever scent it was, it was delicate and lightly floral. Greg furrowed his brow, sure he knew the witch from somewhere. She was about their age and had a lovely heart shaped face. Her whiskey brown eyes had widened when she saw them, letting him see flecks of gold in her eyes.

The witch righted herself and stepped out of their grasp, smoothing out her dress.

"Nevertheless," she smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry for not looking where I was going."

"I’m not sorry. If you had been looking then we may have never met," Draco said, returning her smile. He stared for a moment at those plump pink lips. He was sure they were soft. Draco handed her the rectangular pink purse she had dropped.

"Oh, but we’ve already met, Draco," the witch smirked, tucking her bag back under her arm. It was Draco’s turn to look surprised and the others just looked confused. Clearly, no one had placed her yet. "Thank you for your assistance. And thank you, Blaise, Theo. It was nice to see you again, Greg."

The witch nodded at them in turn and went on her way. Theo thought her voice sounded very familiar. He wondered if she was some sort of singer that he’d heard on the wireless. It was an alluring voice, sexy, throaty and feminine. He liked how she said his name. None of that would account for how she knew them, though.

"Wait a minute!" Draco called after her. The pack of Slytherins had been stunned for a moment, but quickly caught up with her. They certainly were not going to let her get away.

"I’m afraid I can't," she said as she once again looked at her watch and kept up her pace. "I’ll be late."

"This is not fair, Piccola." Blaise smiled, easily keeping up with her quick stride. He did so love it when witches played hard to get. Blaise adored a challenge. "You know who we are, but we don't know you."
"But you do know me, quite well." She laughed. Theo decided her laugh was even better than her voice. "It isn't my fault you all have poor recall. If anything I should be offended!"

Greg knew her identity was right on the tip of his mind. He knew her from somewhere, but it was not coming to him.

"We certainly don’t want to offend," Theo said sincerely, capturing her hand in his. That slowed her down, as he intended. She looked over at him and Theo added her twinkling brown eyes to the list of wonderful things about this witch. "Let us make it up to you."

"Yes," Draco added. "Let us take you to lunch, as an apology."

"I already have a lunch date and I’m keeping my friend waiting," the witch giggled. She certainly was enjoying having the advantage over them. Draco liked that about her and smirked.

"Blow him off," Blaise encouraged, turning on that brilliant smile of his. "If indeed it is a him you are meeting."

"Oh, I couldn't do that." She stopped walking and clearly feigned scandal, raising her hand to her throat. Her eyes twinkled with amusement and Blaise knew then that this witch could easily play all his games. "He is a very, very dear friend."

Draco was trying to think of another objection, another way to keep her with them, when he noticed their witch looking over his shoulder and roll her eyes.

"Great, more Slytherins," she muttered to herself.

"Are you lot so hard up that you are chasing witches down the street now?" Adrian Pucey teased. The tall, debonair wizard was with the even taller and definitely beefier Marcus Flint. They had been going to meet the other four wizards for lunch, and had not expected to see them following a pretty little witch down the road like lost puppies. It was not entirely shocking though either.

"This lovely witch seems to know who we are, but none of us can quite place her," Theo explained. "Does she look familiar to you?"

Adrian and Marcus studied the witch, still holding Theo's hand. They were clearly appreciative, just as the others had been. She just stood, staring back at them with her brow raised, amused.

"This is a puzzle." Adrian nodded, circling them so he could see her from every vantage. This was certainly a delicious looking witch. She seemed classy to him. "She does look familiar, but I can't fathom forgetting any detail about this lovely creature. Marcus?"

"Same," Marcus agreed, brow furrowed and arms crossed over his broad chest. He liked what he saw, which surprised him. He was not usually attracted to petite witches, being so large himself. He always felt like he was going to break them. However, the way this wisp of a witch was standing so strongly, easily challenging his stare with her own – he knew she wouldn’t break.

"Marcus Flint, a wizard of many words," the unnamed witch laughed. Marcus' brows rose and his affection for the little witch cemented in place. "You look good."

Marcus chuckled, flattered by her good opinion. Obviously, she’d seen him when he was younger. He had finally fixed his crooked teeth and even more crooked nose when he stopped playing Quidditch, having not seen the point prior to that since they kept getting broken.

"You too, Adrian," the witch continued, turning to face the other wizard. She reached out and
touched his cheek. "But then, you always looked good. Such a pretty face."

The witch patted Adrian's cheek and walked away, leaving him slack jawed and the other wizards chuckling. Soon enough, though, they realized they were losing her.

"Wait," Adrian called out. Now there were six wizards falling in step behind the small witch.

"Sorry, can't," she said as she walked. "I'm running late for my lunch date. I'm sure you all will figure it out soon enough."

"You called us Slytherins before," Draco pointed out as they walked. "Does that mean you went to Hogwarts?"

"Good catch," she smiled brightly. Draco and the others all decided they wanted to give more right answers so they could see more of that smile. "I did indeed go to Hogwarts, with the lot of you."

"Which house?" Greg asked, keeping up with her quick pace.

"Definitely not Slytherin," the witch laughed.

"How can we see you again, if we don't know who you are?" Adrian cajoled.

"That is a pickle," she smiled, seeming to be disturbingly unaffected by the problem.

"Don't you want to see us again, Piccola?" Blaise gave his best flirtatious, seductive smile.

"Oh, I'm sure I'll see you around." she shrugged. "Besides, once you have solved your little puzzle, you will have lost interest."

"That's not possible," Theo objected. He was certain that this witch was interesting and would remain so, no matter her name. He had never felt so enthralled and briefly wondered if she was some sort of Siren.

"Well gentlemen, this is my destination." The witch stopped in front of a very posh, small restaurant that all the wizards had either been to or heard of before. It was a quiet, understated place with exceptional food. It was where they would take a witch if they wanted to be able to talk to her without interruption and to impress her at the same time. This fact made several of them wonder more about this lucky date she was meeting.

"This is a very nice place." Draco smiled. "We were also just on our way to lunch. Did we mention that?"

"No, you hadn't," she shook her head.

"This seems as good a place as any." Blaise grinned. He didn't want to drop hints like Draco. He saw no reason to be subtle.

"Suit yourselves. Enjoy." The witch smiled at them, effectively ending their banter and went inside. Several of the wizards just gaped at her retreating form and all of them felt somewhat dissatisfied at seeing her go.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter.
Thanks for all the lovely comments!
Now - Obviously they have to figure out who she is...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione saw her dear friend already seated at a table for two in the small restaurant. Her smile for him was bright and genuine. Although they wrote often, it had been over a year since they were actually in the same place at the same time. For his part, he was so focused on her that she knew he missed the half-dozen wizards that crowded through the door after her. If he had seen them all, he would not look so welcoming.

He stood and she rushed to him, giving a little bit of a leap when she reached him, so that she could wrap her arms around his neck. She gave him a warm kiss on his full lips.

“Severus, I’ve missed you terribly.” She smiled. Her former professor, but current friend, squeezed her tightly. He was not a very demonstrative man and she knew that squeeze was equivalent to another wizard shouting or crying with joy.

“Oh, sweet Merlin. What fresh hell is this?” Severus rumbled in that silky baritone of his. Hermione had been attracted to his voice since she was a schoolgirl. She giggled as Severus set her down on the ground; sure that he had now noticed Adrian, Blaise, Draco, Greg, Marcus, and Theo over her shoulder. She turned around and saw the six of them, very conspicuously gawking at her and their old Head of House. All were clearly shocked. It was not a large restaurant, so they could clearly see and hear her.

Hermione noticed a host trying to discretely get their attention so he could seat them.

“They followed me,” Hermione admitted, grinning mischievously. She really had enjoyed watching them try to figure her out. “I bumped into them on the street, in a fashion. They said I looked familiar, but couldn’t figure out who I was.”

“And you did not tell them,” Severus concluded, fixing her with a stare.

“Oh Sev, it was ever so much fun,” Hermione laughed. Then she sobered up. “I assumed they would desist after a point, but clearly, they have not.”

“Never underestimate a Slytherin when we want something.” Severus sighed, though his eyes sparkled with amusement. “I had rather thought you’d learned that lesson by now.”

“Severus!” Draco finally blurted.

“I know my own name, Draco,” Severus replied. ”You all are worse than a pack of dogs, following witches in the street.”

Hermione chuckled when they all looked properly chastised. It had been ages since Severus was their professor, but old habits die hard.
"She is just so...," Draco tried to provide an excuse but just trailed off. Hermione liked making her childhood nemesis at a loss for words. Messing with Draco was much more fun for her than if he were any other wizard.

"Enthralling," Theo supplied. The other wizards nodded.

"Intriguing." Greg added.


"Irresistible," Adrian smiled.

"Shaggable," Marcus added seriously.

Severus and the other wizards stared at Marcus, while Hermione burst out laughing. She liked his blunt manner. With Marcus, a witch would know exactly where she stood.

"Gentlemen, I can seat you here next to your friends," a harried restaurant employee finally managed to horn in. They seemed torn, wanting to have these wealthy wizards dine there - but also wanting to get them out of the middle of the room.

"You may as well all sit," Severus finally conceded, rolling his eyes.

Hermione chuckled as the six wizards eagerly nodded. They even started to pull chairs toward the tiny table for two, jostling each other to get space.

"Oh for Merlin’s sake! You are wizards!" Severus huffed, enlarging the small table to fit all eight of them. He glared at the younger wizards and directed Hermione to sit next to him. "So much for a nice quiet lunch just the two of us."

The waiter brought a bottle of wine that Severus must have ordered.

"I guess we will need another two bottles." Severus sighed, giving the other wizards a dressing down with his glare.

"Did we interrupt a romantic date?" Theo asked tactfully. Hermione was a little put out that the bookish Slytherin had not recognized her. They had been friendly in her last year at Hogwarts, working on several projects together. Hermione had always admired him. He still looked bookish with his glasses, but he had gained muscle mass over the years and appeared more manly than when she had known him as a boy.

In response to Theo’s question, Severus turned to her and raised an eyebrow.

"Don't make that face at me, Severus Snape!" Hermione scolded. "You are the one that ended our physical relationship and insisted that we just be friends."

Hermione missed things about her former lover, but did agree with him that it would be smart to stop having sex when they realized they wanted different things. Severus never wanted children, but Hermione knew she would - one day, when she was ready. Hermione sighed and looked over her menu.

“I hadn’t realized you were an idiot, Professor,” Marcus observed, pouring one of the bottles of wine the waiter had brought. He filled Hermione’s glass first. His comment and actions earned him one of Severus’ intense glares and a giggle from Hermione. She liked that Marcus did not wither at all under the other wizard’s famous glare.
"Don't fret, Sev," Hermione beamed at her friend. "If I do move back to England as I plan, we will have plenty of time to catch up. You will be sick of me soon enough, I’m sure."

Severus just shook his head, smirking and settling back in his seat. He draped his arm across the back of her chair and his long, nimble fingers absently stroked her shoulder. Hermione loved to point out that her friend found her bossy and nosy, especially since no one else in the snarky wizard's life dared boss him around or poke into his business.

"So you don't live in England?" Adrian ventured. "Where do you live?"

"I have been semi-nomadic for years."

"I was living in Istanbul most recently."

"What's in Istanbul?" Draco asked.

"Turkish people," Hermione answered straight-faced, making the others laugh.

"Ah, she’s a funny witch too," Blaise smirked.

"What do you do?" Greg asked.

"Right now nothing." Hermione smiled. "I have some offers for jobs that I will be following up on, so I am hopeful."

"Hopeful," Severus snorted. "You know you will have your pick of occupations."

"What is your field?" Theo asked, sipping his wine.

"I did an apprenticeship to Master in Potions and then did a second apprenticeship in Istanbul to Master in Arithmancy," Hermione replied.

"Wow, few people manage to achieve a dual Master," Theo said, suitably impressed. Hermione was proud of herself. She had worked hard. "And you are so…"

"Gorgeous," Blaise smiled.

"I was going to say young," Theo grinned. "But she is that too."

"What else would you expect from the brightest witch of her age?" Severus drawled, watching the wizards to see who would pick up his clue.

Theo leaned forward in his seat slightly and his mouth dropped open.

"Oh, my….I can’t believe," Theo sputtered. "You look so different!"

"You know her?" Draco pressed.

"Finally!" Hermione grinned. "I was starting to feel a bit offended that you didn’t recognize me, Theo. I had thought we had become friends that last year of school."

"We had…we are!" Theo defended. "I just…I didn't know you were back. And you look so different! Your hair and your clothes…"

"Tell us!" Draco demanded. It seemed he didn’t mind not knowing who she was when everyone
was in the same boat, but was irritated that his friend had the information he wanted.

“It’s Hermione Granger!” Theo finally blurted, still not taking his eyes off her.

OoOoO
Draco’s jaw dropped and he stared at the pretty witch. Now he could see her, clear as day. It seemed so obvious. Her long, bushy hair was gone. The cute short hair cut made her look like a sprite. The Hermione he had known wore school uniforms, and her form was swallowed by voluminous robes. He had no idea she was hiding that sweet body under there.

“That’s it!” Greg smiled. “Hermione! It was right there in my mind, driving me crazy. How are you?”

“Good, Greg,” she returned his smile. “And you?”

“Can’t complain,” Greg shrugged. “I like my job at the Ministry and I’m getting married next month to Hannah Abbott.”

“Congratulations!” Hermione smiled.

“Wow,” Adrian grinned. “You went and grew up nicely.”

“Thank you, Adrian,” she said, rolling her eyes. Most of them noticed her slight blush, though. “As I mentioned before, you haven’t changed. You are still as beautiful as you were back in school.”

Adrian puffed up a bit at her compliment. He figured he had an edge now to ask her out. Many of the younger girls had crushes on him in school and he hoped that Hermione was no different. That could be his in with her.

“You sure have,” Marcus leered a bit. He realized he had been spot-on earlier when he figured this tiny witch was strong enough to handle him, despite her size. Hermione Granger was as tough as they came.

“If I had known that you were hiding that delicious body under those school robes, Piccola, I would have made more of an effort to get underneath them back in school,” Blaise purred shamelessly. He was quickly realizing that this was not the witch for him. Blaise knew himself well enough to know that he needed to be the center of someone’s attention, of their world. Hermione Granger was much too complicated for him. He decided that he could use a female friend though, having never had one before.

“You never made any effort to get under my robes in school, Blaise,” Hermione scolded. “Let’s not start telling tales.”

“I did so!” Blaise laughed. He always figured that Hermione had never noticed wizards hitting on her while they were in school. Turns out, he was right. “I flirted, sent little signals – but alas, you were always too wrapped up in your books, your friends, or some crisis to notice.”

“That’s true,” Theo confirmed. “You just figured no one would try to chat you up because you were with that Weasley, so you assumed everyone had noble intentions of friendship.”

“Even you, Theo?” Hermione looked surprised.

“I am a wizard,” Theo defended himself. “And I was a teenaged wizard back then, so yes, even me.”
Hermione laughed. Draco realized that he should have recognized her laugh. They hadn’t had a lot of laughter between them in school, what with being on opposite sides of a war. Even back then, he had liked her laugh. It seemed musical. Draco also realized that she was staring at him, awaiting reaction.

“You’ve rendered me speechless, Granger.” Draco smiled. “I should have known you’d go and shag a Professor. You always were a teacher’s pet.”

Draco saw Severus’ shoulders shake with quiet laughter as his godfather exchanged an amused look with Hermione. It was odd to see the pair so friendly, but it made sense. They were both frighteningly smart.

“What’s so funny?” Adrian asked.

“Oh nothing,” Hermione waved. “That was just one of my favorite games to play back when we dated – teacher’s pet.”

“I still have the collar somewhere,” Severus chuckled.

“Oh you are killing me here,” Marcus groaned. The mental image of this witch, trussed up for the taking was making him hard. The others laughed, but Marcus was sure he saw a few glazed eyes and was sure those wizards were picturing something similar. “Snape, you are one lucky bastard.”

The waiter interrupted to take their orders. It turned out to be a surprisingly pleasant lunch. All of the wizards seemed pleased Hermione was moving back, some clearly more pleased than others.

Greg noticed how captivated his friends were with the Gryffindor witch. Times certainly had changed. He never imagined marrying a Hufflepuff, but could not imagine life without Hannah. She was so sweet and kind, without any hidden agenda; not like most of the witches he'd known from Slytherin. Now Greg was wondering if Hermione would date any of his friends. She had dated Snape, which was a bit shocking, so she was not opposed to Slytherins in general.

"Potter must be excited you're moving back," Adrian observed, cutting his steak.

"I wouldn't know," Hermione shrugged. "We haven't spoken in ages."

"He’ll be excited, though," Draco nodded, spearing a slice of ahi tuna from his plate. He wondered if Hermione had kept abreast of what had happened back home all those years. "He’s missed you."

"You’re friends now?" Hermione asked, eyebrows shooting up. Apparently, she had not stayed in the loop.

"It seems you’ve missed a lot, Granger." Draco grinned smugly, liking that he knew more than she did.

"So fill me in," she huffed before she took a bite of her ravioli. Severus chuckled next to her. She had specifically asked him not to write to her about Ron or Harry unless it was a life or death situation. Severus knew both wizards had tried to owl her soon after she left, but the wounds were too raw back then. Then she got busy and moved on. The wounds were nicely healed now and Severus thought she did want to reconnect with Potter, but she feared he would still side with Weasley.

"Potter and I got friendly a couple years ago. I see a lot of him, especially since he started dating a friend of mine," Draco reported. "They got married two months ago. He and Pansy are very happy."
"Pansy Parkinson?" Hermione choked a bit on her food, surprised.

"Pansy Potter now, actually." Draco smirked.

"Holy Merlin," Hermione went wide eyed. Draco didn't blame her. Like Greg, Draco was sometimes surprised at how much things had changed. "Then which one of you married Ginny Weasley?"

"Now that’s just ridiculous," Marcus said, affronted. All the wizards had some degree of disgust on their faces.

"Ginny Weasley is not married," Blaise informed. "She is too busy being the village broomstick, giving everyone a ride."

"I bet you took that ride at least once," Theo snorted to Blaise.

"Bedding a witch and marrying one are totally different standards!" Blaise defended.

"None of us are married...yet," Adrian supplied. "Greg will be next month, as he mentioned."

"I am certainly free and unattached, if you find yourself in need of...companionship," Marcus smirked. He did not usually pursue witches. He never had to because they always came to him. He also did not pursue a witch in whom his friends were interested. He knew that Adrian, Draco, and Theo were definitely interested. He wasn't sure about Blaise, because he always flirted. Marcus could not bring himself to care about that though.

"Noted," Hermione rolled her eyes, but everyone could see her checks color in a delightful blush. "Tell me about yourselves. What have you all been up to?"

"Greg and I work together at the Ministry," Marcus informed her. "In the Department of Magical Games and Sports."

"I'm a solicitor now," Adrian added. Draco snorted, catching Hermione's attention.

"He is the top solicitor in Wizarding Britain and an expert in magical law." Draco rolled his eyes.

"Though his modesty is refreshing." Hermione smiled at both of them. Adrian had wanted to make himself sound down to Earth, since he did not imagine this particular witch would be swayed by money or power.

"I work with Father running Malfoy Industries," Draco reported. "I run the Research and Development Department. I'm working on adapting Muggle electronics for wizards."

"I became a Master in Charms after Hogwarts," Theo shared. "I work for Malfoy for the time being, developing new Charms for products. You know, I would love to show you what I've been working on to alter Muggle televisions."

"I would love to see it!" Hermione smiled genuinely. Theo beamed. Back in school he had loved working with Hermione. She was a brilliant witch. They were such a good match intellectually. He hoped that fact would get him a date with her. Then he could show her how compatible they were in other areas. "What do you do, Blaise?"

"Work on his tan," Marcus snorted.

"Chase witches," Adrian laughed.
"I’m currently living a life of leisure," Blaise shrugged.

"How decadent," Hermione smiled. Blaise detected no judgment or disapproval in her tone, which was nice. He sometimes got dark looks for his lifestyle choices. He was sure though that Hermione would not adapt to his playboy lifestyle of travel and parties, days with no real purpose. A brilliant witch that was a Master in two fields would need more challenges in her life than Blaise could offer.

"It is." Blaise returned her smile. "If you ever need to know about the hottest restaurant, the most exclusive club, or the best parties then I'm the wizard to ask."

"I will keep that in mind," Hermione chuckled. The other wizards noticed that Blaise did not offer to take her to those places, as he would with most witches. Blaise seemed to have cut out the serious flirting and was just being his usual self, which was strange. Blaise loved to chase witches.

"Where are you staying while you are job hunting, Piccola?" Blaise asked before returning to his salad with grilled chicken.

"I just arrived this morning," Hermione said. "I made reservations at that big new hotel in Diagon Alley."

"Nonsense," Severus scoffed. "You’ll stay with me."

"Well..." Hermione hesitated.

"You’ll have your own room of course," Severus looked a little offended.

"Oh, Sev, that isn't it," Hermione quickly asserted, pressing her face into the older wizard's shoulder. "I haven't had a chance to tell you one of the reasons I came back."

Hermione glanced around the crowded table. Theo had the feeling they were intruding all of a sudden.

"We can go," Adrian said, signaling the waiter for the bill. Adrian had the same feeling Theo had.

"No, stay," Hermione insisted. "Eat your food. It isn't a secret or anything. It is just... unclear. There’s something wrong with me. The Healer I saw in Istanbul told me about a specialist here in London. I have an appointment tomorrow morning."

"What is it?" Severus demanded gruffly. Draco knew that tone. His godfather was scared. Draco could not understand why he also felt panicked at the idea of this witch being sick. Hermione must have known that tone too because she stroked Severus' arm gently.

"I don't know," Hermione responded calmly. "I am hoping the specialist can tell me."

"What are your symptoms?" Greg asked brow furrowed. He hoped it was not anything too serious. He had always liked the plucky Gryffindor, although he never shared fact that with anybody back in school.

"Fatigue, migraines, nausea sometimes, and a few fainting spells," Hermione shrugged. "And my magic is off."

"Off how?" Theo asked. Whenever he felt scared, he fell back on his intellect, getting facts and answers. She just came back, and he didn't want anything taking her away again.
"I can't seem to regulate my power properly," Hermione pouted. "That really is the worst part! My spells use too much power or not enough. The other day, I went to unlock the door of my little house in Istanbul with a simple Alohamora and blew the door of the hinges. Yesterday, I dropped a cup while packing and the Reparo only lasted a few seconds before the blasted thing broke apart again. I didn't do the spells any differently than I had hundreds of times before."

"That is odd," Draco agreed, with furrowed brows. Hermione Granger was a strong witch with exceptional magical control. He'd seen it firsthand. Magical deregulation was not common and tended to be a serious symptom that something was, indeed, wrong.

"It's frustrating is what it is," Hermione huffed.

"How long has it been going on?" Adrian asked. He did his best to look impassive and calm, calling on his exceptional poker face that he used in court. His stomach was rolling and he chided himself for being upset. He barely knew this witch.

"A few months now," Hermione reported, biting into her last piece of ravioli.

"Months!?" Severus yelled.

"Yes, months," Hermione leveled their former professor with a glare. "I'm a grown witch, Severus, so you just watch your tone. It has gotten worse in the last week. My magic wasn't effected before. I did go to a very competent Healer back in Istanbul when the symptoms first started, you know. I'm the one with something wrong. I'm the one who gets to be scared and angry."

"I am sorry. You are right," Severus said contritely after a moment of silence. If the situation had not been so serious, the other wizards would have laughed. Their infamous Head of House did not apologize to anyone, but easily did so after a look and a few choice words from this little witch. "This news has upset me."

"It has upset all of us," Blaise said, looking forlorn. "And we obviously aren't as close to you as Snape, although I imagine some of these wizards would certainly like to be. I know we have never been very friendly, but I for one was hoping to change that. I think I have finally reached an appropriate maturity level to have a witch as a friend, and you, Piccola, have always been an extraordinary witch. I would hate to lose you before we can embark on our new friendship."

"Wow, Blaise," Hermione smiled, her eyes just a bit watery, "I think that was the sweetest thing I've ever heard. I would love to be friends."

"What time is your appointment tomorrow?" Blaise asked.

"Nine o'clock at St. Mungos," she replied.

"I will be accompanying you," Severus said sternly, his tone brooking no argument.

"I would love your support, Sev," Hermione smiled, reaching for his hand and entwining their fingers. "I didn't mean to make lunch so depressing! I'm sorry. Cheer up, you lot! We've had plenty of doom and gloom in our lives. We don't need more over lunch. Let's get dessert! Dessert makes everything better."

Marcus chuckled at the little witch while she asked the waiter for a dessert menu. He had felt very disturbed when she said she was sick, a feeling that was foreign to him and that he did not like. Marcus had a very few people he actually cared about, most of which were the wizards sitting around that table. It troubled him that he was invested in the welfare of Hermione Granger after just having lunch with her. Her ability to handle herself in this situation appealed to him though. He
decided that he agreed with Hermione, dessert would make him feel better.

The waiter brought over dessert menus for everyone.

"Oh, so many good choices!" Hermione studied the options.

"Just bring us two of everything and champagne," Adrian instructed the waiter. Hermione protested that that was too much, but Adrian insisted. "If our witch wants dessert to feel better, then she is going to get it! It’s also a celebration! Regardless of the reason you came back, you’re back. That’s certainly cause for happiness."

"You all hardly know me," Hermione blushed.

"Blaise is right," Adrian smiled. "We want to change that, so be prepared."

"I doubt there is any way to prepare for you all," Hermione smirked.

A troop of waiters brought over twenty desserts and two bottles of champagne. There was cake, ice cream, tarts, pudding, crepes, and fruit. Hermione got first pick, of course, and was encouraged to take at least two.

Greg smiled as he surveyed the table. The smart witch was right, as always. Dessert did make them feel better. The wizards were laughing, joking, eating, and stealing dessert from each other. Even Snape looked in better spirits. When all the dessert that could be eaten was, Hermione and Severus got up to leave.

"Since you all crashed our lunch, you can go ahead and pay for it as well," Severus drawled. "Let's go get you settled at Spinner's End."

"You'll need to Apparate me I'm afraid," Hermione sighed. "The way my magic has been malfunctioning lately, I would probably end up Splinched."

All the wizards stood and made their way toward the petite witch. Blaise got to her first.

"I will see you soon," Blaise said, bringing Hermione's hand to his lips. "We'll have lunch."

"Definitely," Hermione nodded.

"Welcome back," Greg smiled. "It was really good to see you again."

"You too," Hermione smiled. "Please tell Hannah I said hello."

"Absolutely," Greg nodded.

"It really was wonderful seeing you again, Granger," Draco said. He mimicked Blaise and brought her hand to his lips. His kiss lingered on the back of her hand. Even when he removed his lips, Draco kept her hand and rubbed his thumb over her knuckles. "We’ll definitely have to see more of each other, soon."

Hermione blushed lightly at his tone, which was dripping with sex, and just nodded. Theo brushed Draco aside and pulled Hermione in for a hug. He suppressed a groan at feeling her body nestled against his.

"I missed you, you know," Theo murmured in her ear before stepping back. "I look forward to seeing you again, and again and again."
"Me too, Theo," Hermione smiled, squeezing his hands.

"Of course, you will have to set some time aside for me," Adrian grinned, taking both of Hermione's hands in his. He brought them up to his lips one at a time. Instead of kissing the backs, he turned her hands and placed soft kisses on her palms. He smirked when he felt her shiver. "Then we can spend some quality time together, to get to know each other better."

"That sounds lovely," Hermione breathed. Adrian smirked again, knowing he made an impact.

Marcus didn't move in front of her as the others had, but reached out and spun her away from Adrian and to him. Hermione lost her balance a bit, which was Marcus' goal, because he knew she would clutch on to him - and she did.

"And when you are tired of all these lovely, well-mannered wizards then you and I will have our own quality time," Marcus rumbled in a low tone right in her ear while she was pressed against him. She gave a little gasp, either from his words or the gentle nip he gave her earlobe as punctuation to his comment. Chuckling, Marcus set her to rights and was pleased to see her flustered.

"Oh, you are dangerous, Mr. Flint," she smiled, blushing.

"Now that you all have had a chance to maul Miss Granger, we shall take our leave," Severus wrapped his arms around her waist and they left the restaurant.

All six wizards watched them go, staring until they saw them Apparate away.

"So who here is determined to have Hermione?" Adrian asked as they all stared at the vacant spot where the witch in question used to be.

"She's way too good for me, but I meant what I said about being friends," Blaise responded.

"I want her," Marcus grinned.

"Just for a shag?" Theo questioned.

"Definitely for a shag," Marcus nodded. "But I think more, too."

"So much more," Draco agreed.

"Yeah, me too," Theo sighed. "And I am guessing you as well, Adrian, since you asked the question. How do we handle this? You all are my mates, but I'm not bowing out."

"We are all adults," Adrian reached out and paid the bill with a tap of his wand. "We can be mature."

"It should be up to the lady," Blaise volunteered. "You can be yourselves, don't undermine each other, and remember that you care about each other. If she does not choose one of you, be graceful. In the end, it is up to Hermione with whom she spends her time."

"Well put," Theo nodded. He loved his friends and certainly did not want to lose any of them. "Let's agree now that our friendship will not be damaged by whatever happens with Hermione."

"She might not want any of you," Greg smiled, teasing the four suitors.

"Don't be daft, Greg," Marcus scolded. "We've all got something to offer. Ades here is all kinds of pretty and romantic. Draco is former-Death Eater dangerous, while being a gentleman millionaire."

Theo is plain brilliant and sensitive to a witch's feelings and whatnot. And I'm rough and tumble, fun and dirty. Those things all appeal to witches."

"Great," Blaise smiled. "We'll just transfigure you four all together into one proper gent for Hermione."

Greg guffawed with laughter while the other four just glared at the handsome Italian wizard.

Chapter End Notes

Next - St. Mungos & answers
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer- don't own Harry Potter
Now - What's going on with Hermione?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione knew it was not rational, but she hated hospitals and clinics. It was probably because she had spent so much time in them during her adolescence, either for herself or someone she cared about. Now she was sitting on an examination table in a flimsy hospital robe, twisting her hands nervously in her lap.

"Stop," Severus instructed sternly. He took her hands in his own and pulled his chair over to the narrow table.

"What if it is bad?" she whispered.

"Then we’ll fix it," he assured her. "The two of us are smart and stubborn enough to beat anything. I think we've proven that over the years."

Hermione took a deep calming breath and lifted Severus' hands, rubbing them against her cheek.

"I don't like waiting," she sighed. "And I hate not knowing something."

"I know," Severus soothed. "We’ll know soon enough."

They sat a few moments before the Healer entered. Healer Adams was a specialist in magical deregulation and the foremost expert in the Western Hemisphere. He was a very distinguished older gentleman, probably in his seventies - which was just middle-aged for wizards.

"Good Morning, Miss Granger. Oh, Master Snape! Hello!" He was surprised to see Severus, but recovered admirably. "I am Healer Adams. I've read over your records from Healer Korkmaz in Turkey. I know you must be anxious, but please try to relax. I will run some diagnostic tests today and ask you a great deal of questions. Some of the questions are sensitive."

Healer Adams glanced over at Severus.

"That is fine," Hermione smiled. "Severus knows all of my business."

Healer Adams used his wand to run a series of very complicated tests. He checked everything about Hermione’s physical body, scanned every inch of her. At the same time, he asked her an enormous amount of questions about herself; how she grew up, school, the war (especially injuries), what she studied after Hogwarts, where she lived, where she travelled, how much she slept, what she ate, how many people she slept with, and every little detail of her daily routine. It took hours.

"Well, your physical body is fine," Healer Adams pronounced. "I assumed it would be, based on Healer Korkmaz's notes, but I wanted to check. You don't have a virus, infection, or cancer."
"That doesn’t make me happy," Hermione frowned. "I mean, those things would be fixed easily."

"We aren't done yet," Healer Adams soothed. "I am going to run tests on your magic next."

Healer Adams ran a series of even more complicated tests on her magic. He looked at how it flowed, how it responded to Hermione's commands, how well it resettled in her when she wasn't using it, and every activity even remotely related to her magic. He also asked more questions, which did not seem possible because Hermione was certain she had told him every detail of her life - including how often she used the lavatory! Now Healer Adams asked about minute details of her magical development; when she first showed magical ability, the first spells and potions she learned, her favorite charms, and hexes, how often she used her magic, and how she felt about her magic. Severus piped in on occasion, giving third party observations.

They worked for hours, looking at her magic. As he worked and listened to the answers Hermione and Severus supplied, Healer Adams became increasingly consternated. He even started muttering under his breath, which was really disturbing.

"Healer Adams!" Hermione finally shouted, exhausted from all the tests and questions. "What is going on!??"

Severus appeared to be equally put out by Healer Adams' strange behavior.

"It's just...this isn't possible," Healer Adams said unhelpfully, pushing his hands through his hair.

"What is not possible?" Severus snapped, losing his cool - not that it was hard to irritate him. Severus' tone seemed to get through to Healer Adams.

"All the tests, everything you have told me," Healer Adams sighed. "Miss Granger, all your symptoms and the test results point to you being a Sorceress Potentiate."

Hermione and Severus froze, stunned by his words.

"You must be mistaken!" Hermione objected. Sorceresses were almost a whole other kind of witch. They weren’t even around anymore. There hadn’t been a recorded Sorceress in several generations.

“Don’t you think we would have noticed it before? What kind of charlatan are you?” Severus sneered, not giving the Healer a chance to respond. "Sorceresses have elemental magic that goes out of control when they come of age unless it is properly anchored. It isn't possible. Hermione is almost twenty-three, not seventeen!"

"I know!" Healer Adams retorted. "I am an expert on Sorcery. I know exactly how it typically develops! I’m telling you, Hermione's magic is unstable because it is much too strong, too elemental, and has not been channeled. Frankly, I don't know how she has survived for this long without proper anchors! All these years she has been using a fraction of her power. Something must have happened to suppress her magic before she came of age. I just don't know what it was!"

"She is right here!" Hermione snapped. "So stop talking about me as if I weren't!"

"Sincerest apologies, Sorceress," Healer Adams bowed deferentially.

"Oh, cut that out and let's think!" Hermione scolded. "Is there any other possible answer, no matter how strange?"

"No," Healer Adams shook his head. "The elemental magic is there. It is unmistakable. Nothing else could cause it."
"Okay, so how did it get messed up?" Hermione asked. "I was petrified by a Basilisk once."

"No," Severus waved, now pacing the small room so he could think better. "Being frozen likely would have delayed onset, but you probably made up that delay by using that Time-Turner later. It would have to have been something else."

"Dolohov!" Healer Adams shouted. "You said you never did figure out what curse he used!"

"His favorite curse to use on Muggle-borns was one that left them without magic." Hermione said, thinking aloud, the pieces falling together in her brain. Severus stopped pacing and stared at her.

"We assumed he didn't use that one because you still had your magic," Severus said, catching her train of thought. "But maybe he did and it suppressed most of your magic. That would mean..."

"You are a Sorceress," Healer Adams said, awed.

Hermione dropped her head in her hands and groaned.

OoOoO

Blaise happily loitered in the lobby of St. Mungos for hours, flirting with mediwitches. He was nervous about Hermione's appointment, that she could be sick in some way. She'd been in there for hours and still hadn't come out. He didn't know why he was so on edge; he didn't know Hermione very well. Nevertheless, he was worried, so he came to take his new friend to lunch - and hopefully, to find out what was happening. A panicked voice diverted Blaise from chatting up a brainless, buxom reception witch.

"No, Severus," Hermione cried. "This is all too much."

Blaise watched the tiny witch charge toward the front door, and by coincidence, toward him. He would have smiled at the large, dour wizard and an older Healer chasing her if he hadn't been concerned. Clearly, her appointment did not go well if Hermione was reacting this way. Blaise started toward her immediately, making the witch he was chatting with squawk irritably since she was in the middle of a sentence.

As Blaise got to Hermione, Severus reached out to catch her arm. The second Severus' hand closed around her upper arm, his eyes went wide and he let out a pained shout - quickly dropping his hand. Hermione whirled around, looking quite aghast. Severus was cradling his hand, which was very badly burned. The Healer, who had also been in pursuit of Hermione, gently took Severus' arm so he could look at the burn.

"Oh, Severus," Hermione gasped. Blaise could see the tears welling quickly in her eyes. Without thinking, he put his hand on the small of her back to comfort her. Only after he touched her, did Blaise realize that he shouldn't have. He seemed to be okay, however, and not burned.

"It is okay. You didn't mean to," Severus ground out, before looking over at Blaise. "Take her away from here, Zabini. You'll have to Apparate her with you; she can't do it herself at the moment."

Blaise started a little when Hermione turned into him abruptly and flung her arms around his neck, sobbing. Blaise quickly recovered and held the tiny witch closely, a moment later, he Apparated her back to his house. When Hermione did not let go, Blaise picked her up bridal style and carried her into his sitting room. He sat with her in his lap and rocked her gently while she cried. Blaise had no idea what was wrong or what to say, so he murmured soothing phrases in Italian that his Nonni had used when he was a child.
After a while, her sobs turned to whimpers, and eventually she was quiet. Blaise gently pulled her away from his tear-drenched shirt. He conjured a soft cloth to wipe her red, puffy face.

"What is it, Piccola?" Blaise asked, brows furrowed. "What’s wrong?"

“I’m so tired, Blaise,” the petite witch murmured. He could see that she looked exhausted, her eyes half-lidded and sleepy. “So many tests, for hours and hours. I didn’t mean to hurt Severus.”

“I know, Piccola. Severus knows too. Why don’t you lie down?” Blaise shifted so Hermione could lie across his big, soft sofa. “Did they give you bad news today?”

“Ohmm, bad and crazy.” Hermione sighed, closing her eyes. Blaise tucked a cashmere throw around her small body. She looked so vulnerable. “They say I’m a Sorceress, but my magic has never been grounded. So it will probably end up killing me.”

Blaise froze and stared at his new friend, in shock. She had sighed her last sentence as she fell asleep. A Sorceress! Hermione Granger was a Sorceress! They were rare, very rare. Blaise had heard bedtime stories about this different kind of witch. They had a very powerful elemental magic that was unstoppable. Regular witches and wizards could not compare to Sorceresses and Sorcerers.

Blaise's mind raced to recall everything he had ever heard about Sorceresses. In that moment, he wished he were a better scholar with a better library. He knew Sorcery was identified around the time a witch or wizard came of age, not in their twenties. He knew the elemental magic was so strong that it was described as being possessed by wild magic at times, that it was too much for a single person to manage. That is why elemental magic needed to be anchored or grounded through a series of complex rituals. Blaise had never seen one of course; no one living had probably ever seen one since there hadn't been any Sorcerers or Sorceresses in several generations.

Blaise quietly summoned one of his house-elves and instructed him to watch Hermione like a hawk. Blaise quickly ran to his library where he eventually found a book that made mention of Sorcery, even though it was only a short chapter. He brought it back to the lounge where Hermione still slept on his couch. She looked so small and vulnerable. Blaise worried about the toll the strange news had had on her emotions and her already unstable magic. Unanchored elemental magic was very dangerous, especially when emotions ran high. Hermione had obviously not meant to hurt Severus earlier, but her magic was unstable. Blaise asked the elf to light the fireplace, since the day was unusually grey and rainy for early June. He didn’t want Hermione getting cold.

Blaise ordered himself a light snack and tea before he sat down to read about Sorceresses. He had a little picnic on the floor, his back against the couch where Hermione slept. He found out that a Sorceress' magic came from the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water. The book stressed that the elements made Sorceresses dangerous, just like air could be a light breeze or a tornado; this kind of magic could be gentle or, just as easily, wreak havoc. Most Sorceresses showed an affinity for one, sometimes two, of the four elements. She would use that affinity for earth, air, fire, or water to anchor her, so the wild strength of the magic didn't tear her apart.

Blaise read that one of the rituals required another person to help balance the magic, to bind himself or herself to the Sorceress. Despite having to be bound as a sort of servant for life, it was a coveted position to be an Ancillary to a Sorcerer or Sorceress. The Ancillary was charged with caring for all the needs of the Sorceress, but in return, was imbued with some of that strong elemental magic for balance. Blaise wondered what element Hermione would gravitate toward. He also wondered if she had any idea how many wizards, and witches for that matter, would be lining up to volunteer as her Ancillary. Blaise smirked to himself as he thought of four specific wizards that would fall over themselves to tie themselves to the little witch.
Blaise froze at the realization that Hermione might not get to that step. There was nothing in his book about an older Sorceress. In fact, a short passage stressed how important it was that a Sorceress be anchored as soon as her kind of magic was discovered. Clearly, that didn't happen to Hermione. He ran his hands through his hair in frustration then started flipping through his one inadequate book, looking for any clue about what Hermione was in for.

"Blaise, why in Merlin's name are you sitting on the floor?" Draco wondered from the doorway, perplexed.

"And reading a book," Theo pointed out, equally as confused. The two wizards didn't know which behavior was odder for the suave playboy.

"Shhh," Blaise admonished. He glanced behind him to where Hermione slept on the couch. She hadn’t stirred. She was so nestled into the soft couch that, under the blanket, she could easily be mistaken for a pile of pillows. "What are you doing here?"

"Poker night," Theo said quietly and slowly, wondering if Blaise had gone barmy. He never forgot poker night.

"Shite, I forgot," Blaise whispered. "We have to cancel. Off you go!"

Blaise wanted desperately to talk about the situation with his best mates. He knew they would certainly want to know. He did not know, however, if Hermione wanted people to know yet. Really, all Blaise knew were her sleepy ramblings, which did not explain much.

"Did someone say cancel?" Adrian asked, as he and Marcus strolled into the doorway.

"We can't cancel poker night," Marcus said, coming into the sitting room. "I'm looking to win some money off you prats."

"I'll give you money to leave!" Blaise argued. Marcus was making a beeline to the couch to get himself a seat.

"Is that Granger?" Marcus asked, pulling back her blanket slightly.

"Don't wake her!" Blaise hissed, standing up.

Marcus couldn’t help himself and brushed his fingers over her cheek. She looked tired; even in her sleep her brows were furrowed.

The other three wizards left the doorway to come see her.

"She looks pale," Draco observed. He felt worry gnaw at his chest and did not like it.

"She had her appointment at the Healer this morning," Theo noted. He also thought she didn't look very good. Her sleep was not restful enough. She seemed disturbed, even now.

"What's wrong with her?" Adrian asked Blaise. Like Marcus, he couldn’t stop himself from reaching out and touching her. He stroked her arm very lightly and could have sworn she smiled.

"I can't say," Blaise hedged. He found himself pushed away from the couch.

Despite Blaise’s protests, Marcus decided to seat himself. He lifted Hermione’s head so her cheek rested on his large thigh. Blaise had to admit that she didn't seem to mind. She sighed softly in her sleep and rubbed her face against the fabric of Marcus' trousers. Adrian took Blaise's spot on the
floor in front of her, lacing his fingers through hers. She didn't seem to mind that either. She pulled Ades' hand, entwined with hers, to her chest - as a child would clutch a blanket.

Theo went to the end of the couch and slid under her calves and feet. He saw she still wore knee-high boots and gave Blaise a brief exasperated glare. Blaise did feel a little embarrassed. He probably should have taken off her shoes. Theo gently removed her shoes, and then cradled her lower legs and feet in his lap. Theo must have been right about making her more comfortable because she gave a contented sigh in her sleep. Her brow was no longer furrowed and she looked much more at peace.

Draco apparently did not want to be left out and was the most disruptive, by far. He simply climbed over the tiny sleeping witch and settled himself behind her, propping himself up on his elbow. Blaise could see her wiggle herself back toward Draco. Now that all four wizards were touching her, they trained their eyes on Blaise. He had to admit that the combined glare of his four friends was disconcerting.

"What did you mean earlier, when you said that you can't say what is wrong with her?" Marcus demanded with a hint of a growl in his voice.

"I went over to St. Mungo's after eleven this morning," Blaise said softly. He figured he better explain from the beginning. "I was going to take Hermione out to lunch, if she wanted to go. I sweet-talked some witch into checking out whom she was seeing. She was still seeing the Healer, and so I waited. I hung out and flirted with some mediwitches, entertained myself. It was almost two o'clock when I finally saw her. She was rushing out, a panicked look on her face. Snape and some bloke, probably the Healer, were chasing after her. Snape reached out, but touching her arm burned his hand, pretty badly it seemed.

"She was so upset; upset about whatever happened with the Healer and then about hurting Snape. I'm sure it was accident. She was causing quite a scene and Snape told me to get her out of there. I Apparated us here, and she was sobbing. She cried for almost an hour and exhausted herself. Before she fell asleep, she said some things that didn't make sense. She was probably more than half-asleep when she said them. That was a while ago. I have been trying to find something in a book about what she said, but this one doesn't have enough information."

"What did she say?" Adrian asked. Blaise's story was certainly troubling. Whatever she said before she fell asleep must have been something serious for Blaise to have this reaction.

"It didn't make sense," Blaise insisted. "I'm sure Severus will be here as soon as his hand is healed. He was there with her; he should know what is happening."

"Blaise, what did she say?" Theo repeated Adrian's question. "Tell us. Who knows how long Severus will be. Burns take ages to heal because they need to regrow the skin. Maybe we can help make sense of it."

Blaise sighed, defeated. He fell into the nearby armchair. People would find out anyway. If Hermione was right, everyone would know soon enough. Sorceresses were a very big deal. It would be an even bigger deal, because this was Hermione Granger, war heroine.

"She said she was a Sorceress," Blaise finally said, shaking his head.

Adrian and Theo gasped. Draco's eyes went wide. Marcus' brow furrowed.

"But it isn't possible," Blaise continued. "She came of age years ago. She should have been identified as a Sorceress by our last year at Hogwarts, if not earlier."
"Something must have happened to stop it from manifesting when it was supposed to," Marcus concluded. The other wizards all turned and stared at the burly wizard. "What? I know things!"

"She isn't anchored," Draco said, as if she was caught doing something untoward – like wearing the same robes as another witch at a party. "And she doesn't have an Ancillary."

"You know about Sorceresses then?" Blaise asked, looking at the four other wizards, expectantly.

"Of course," Theo nodded, staring at the petite sleeping witch and stroking her legs. "Who hasn't dreamed of finding a Sorceress?"

"My great-great-great grandmother was a Sorceress," Adrian said proudly. "My great-great-great Grandfather was her Ancillary. She had an affinity for Water."

"I didn't know your pedigree was so fancy, Ades," Marcus teased.

"Well it is," Adrian laughed. He looked over at Hermione and sobered. "If she really is a Sorceress Potentiate, then she is in a very dangerous position."

"Potentiate?" Blaise asked. He hadn't seen that word in his book.

"She has the magic of a Sorceress, but it is still wild and ungrounded. No wonder her magic has been off," Marcus sighed. "Until she gets anchored, she is a potential Sorceress. Sometimes they don't live through the rituals that make them a Sorceress, the magic consumes them instead."

"I wonder what element she will find an affinity for," Draco mused after a moment of silence. "No one wanted to imagine that Hermione might not make it through. She was too strong a witch to think that."

"I can't find anything in this stupid book about what would happen with an older Sorceress!" Blaise complained, tossing the unhelpful volume on the floor.

"Given your less than robust academic pursuits, I am surprised your library contained anything useful at all," Severus sneered from the doorway. Severus had stood in the doorway ever since Theo had said they all knew about Sorceresses. The scene had startled him at first, four wizards all managing to touch Hermione in some way. Severus knew she would need an Ancillary and it couldn't be him. As much as he loved her, they simply wanted different things in life. Of course, if he needed to do it in order to save her from her own magic, then nothing would stop him - even Hermione herself. He would do anything for the little know-it-all. However, this picture in front of him made him certain that Hermione would have a number of suitable candidates to be her Ancillary.

"She cried herself to sleep," Blaise quietly informed his ex-professor. "She was asleep for a few hours before these four showed up."

"What did the Healer say, Severus?" Draco asked, from his spot nestled behind Hermione on the couch. "Is she really a Sorceress? If so, how could no one have known before now?"

"Dolohov," Severus responded, crossing the room to see her up close for himself. She looked to be resting well. He was glad. She hadn't slept well the night before. Severus heard her tossing and turning in her room at Spinner's End. "He cursed her fifth year. He was fond of curses that disrupted, drained, or eliminated magic. He was successful in about half of his curses. At the time, we guessed that he was not successful in cursing Hermione, but it wasn't clear because her magic..."
seemed fine. Clearly, it was not."

"So what happens now?" Marcus asked bluntly.

"She will need to go through the rituals," Severus said somberly. He went to sit in the other armchair that flanked the crowded couch. "We have no idea if they will work properly because this whole situation is unprecedented."

"She will need an Ancillary," Adrian said softly, stroking her cheek with his free hand.

"I imagine she will, Mr. Pucey," Severus smirked. "She’ll need at least one, maybe more. Something tells me she will have plenty of volunteers, you four included."

"She doesn't need more volunteers," Marcus growled lowly.

"If Hermione wants to be with one of you, it will be up to her," Blaise reminded the four. He had told them the same thing yesterday, but they seemed to be taking it for granted.

"How are Ancillaries chosen?" Theo asked. "Does Hermione just pick whoever she wants?"

"In a way," Severus responded. "I would appreciate a drink, Mr. Zabini."

"Oh, of course," Blaise realized he hadn't offered anyone anything. "Tea? Or something stronger?"

"I think something stronger is in order," Severus drawled.

Blaise poured Firewhiskey for Severus and himself. He held up the bottle to the other four, asking a silent question. They all nodded.

"What did you mean 'in a way'?" Theo pressed Severus, who had not really answered his question.

"Traditionally, the witch or wizard in question chooses several potential Ancillaries. These are people they generally get along with and find appealing, as they will be bound to them for life," Severus explained. He stopped to sip his drink. "The actual choosing is done during the last of the three rituals. The Sorceress' magic really makes the choice. The elemental magic chooses the person that can handle the power and responsibility of being an Ancillary."

"So Granger doesn't really get the final say," Draco murmured.

"Final say in what?" Hermione asked sleepily. All the wizards in the room froze as her eyelids fluttered open.

Chapter End Notes

Next - What's Harry up to?
Hermione asked her question and then tried to nestle back down. She was so comfortable! She hadn't felt so calm and rested in ages.

"You're awake!" Adrian smiled at her from the floor in front of the couch.

It took her a moment to realize that people were surrounding her. She was holding Adrian's hand to her chest and her head was in someone's lap. She also felt someone sitting behind her on the couch and a fourth person was gently rubbing her feet. No wonder she felt so warm.

"How do you feel?" Severus asked from a chair a short distance away. Her morning came rushing back to her and Hermione tried to bolt up from the couch.

"Severus! How are you? Are you okay? How's your hand?"

Sitting up was proving difficult, because her legs got tangled with the person holding them. Whoever was behind her wasn't letting go either.

"Calm down," Severus soothed. "I am fine. All healed. See?"

He held up his hand, which looked normal - pale and elegant, with long tapered fingers. Hermione let out a sigh of relief.

"I'm so sorry!" She cringed. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"I know," Severus continued to soothe her. "It was an accident."

Hermione nodded, willing away tears that were forming. She loved Severus. He was a dear friend and she had hurt him. It wasn't on purpose of course, but it was clear to her that she was a danger to others.

"You never answered his question about how you feel," Marcus pointed out.

Hermione turned her head to look at the large wizard. His lap had been where she was resting her head before she tried to get up. Hermione took in the situation and worked to untangle herself. She looked down and saw her legs were tangled in Theo's. He helped her free them and she sat up straighter. She looked to see Draco behind her. He helped pull her upright, but also pulled her into his chest - so she was sitting in his lap.

"I'm not sitting in your lap, Draco," she chided.

"Spoilsport," he muttered. He did, however, help her move to sit next to him. Although, he didn’t let go entirely; he wrapped an arm around her, cradling her to him. Marcus was close on her other
side, his muscular thigh pressing against hers. Adrian stayed on the floor, leaning against her legs. Theo, on the other side of Draco reached for her hand.

"Are you alright?" Theo asked, squeezing her hand. That felt nice, comforting. Being surrounded like that felt comforting.

"Yes and no," she sighed. "I am fine at the moment. I guess I needed some rest. I feel good, rested. Why are you all here?"

"I forgot to owl them and cancel poker night, so they just showed up," Blaise admitted. "I told them what you told me, your... diagnosis. I didn't know if I should say."

"I don't mind," Hermione said. "Everyone is going to find out soon enough. I made a pretty huge scene at St. Mungos. I bet the news has already started to spread."

"It will be okay, Granger," Draco said confidently. "It will work out."

"How do you know?" Hermione challenged sharply, turning to face him. Fighting with Draco was familiar; it felt normal, which was nice. Hermione desperately wanted to feel normal right now.

"Because I want it to work out," Draco smirked. "And Malfoys always get what they want."

Hermione couldn’t help but laugh at his self-importance, which was only half in jest. The other wizards in the room chuckled as well. It would be nice if she had the Malfoy sized self-confidence sometimes. She probably wouldn’t be so anxious and worried if that were the case.

“It’s been a very long time since I’ve seen a magical problem I couldn’t solve,” Theo said. “I imagine it’s the same for you. We’ll research this and find the answers that you need. I promise, Mi.”

Hermione squeezed Theo’s hand, happy that he’d used the nickname he’d often used for her their seventh year in school. He was a very intelligent wizard and Hermione was happy to have his help. The subject was so emotionally sensitive to her that she was worried she wouldn’t be able to focus in an objective way. Theo would definitely get anything she missed.

“He’s right, kitten,” Adrian smiled, reaching to squeeze her knee. “We will figure this out together. I haven’t lost a case before the Wizengamot in ages. I am not used to defeat, and I don’t intend to get accustomed to it now.”

Hermione looked down at the beautiful wizard sitting at her feet and couldn’t help but meet his smile. She felt warmth suffuse throughout her chest at the thought of having Adrian on her side. The idea that this wizard would support her gave her a very pleasant feeling.

“I always win,” Marcus informed her, running his finger up her neck.

“Huh, I don’t recall that from all those times Gryffindor beat Slytherin in the school Quidditch pitch.” Hermione smirked, turning to face him. She tried to suppress a shiver. Marcus had a raw, masculine presence that affected her so easily.

“When I fight, I always win. Quidditch was more fifty-fifty,” Marcus grinned. “We’ll fight anyone or anything that threatens you, princess, and we’ll win.”

Hermione laughed and leaned her head on Marcus’ shoulder. The warm feeling she had, spread throughout her whole body. She could use all the fight she could get.
"What in the world is going to happen next?" Hermione sighed. She had felt so overwhelmed that morning and afternoon at St. Mungos, but now she felt better, more relaxed. Maybe it was the comfort of the wizards surrounding her, all letting her know - in his own way - that he was there for her. Not just the four on the couch, but Severus and Blaise as well.

"There are three rituals that must be done in the next three weeks," Severus informed her. Hermione could tell he was trying to explain gently, but everything was just going too fast.

"Why three weeks?" Hermione protested.

"Midsummer is in three weeks," Theo said a little apologetically, lacing his fingers through hers. It felt reassuring.

"The third ritual is either done on the summer or winter solstice if possible, because they are such magically important days," Adrian nodded. "That is when you will bind to your Ancillary."

"This is all so strange," Hermione shook her head. In three week’s time, she would be bound for life, to another person, who would anchor her magic. It was the only way she would be safe around other people. She would have three weeks to get used to the idea, if that was possible. Hermione decided to focus on the rituals in order. "So what is the first ritual?"

"The first ritual focuses and organizes your magic in your body," Blaise spoke up. "It's the most dangerous ritual. If your elemental magic resists working with you, with your physical body, it could..."

Blaise couldn't finish the sentence. He looked away toward the fireplace.

"It could overwhelm you and cause all your internal organs to fail," Draco finished. "On the bright side, if the ritual works, you won't have any of those physical symptoms anymore - fatigue, migraines, and whatnot."

"That's comforting," Hermione snorted. She did appreciate that Draco didn't shy away from the difficult parts. It was like he had faith in her strength. He knew she could handle it. "It's not like I have a choice. I can't go around accidently burning people's skin off. Will this make me less dangerous?"

"No, princess, it won't," Marcus shook his head. His large hand spanned the back of her neck. It felt so good. "If anything it will make you stronger and more reactive. Elemental magic is very different, as I'm sure you know. There is a reason magical humans don't possess elemental magic, it doesn't meld with human physiology. The first ritual will sync it with your body, making you stronger. The second ritual will attune the elemental magic with your mind, giving you more conscious control. If you don't go mad, that is."

"You won't go mad," Severus scoffed. "I've never met anyone with your mental control, or your stubbornness."

"Thanks for the compliment, Severus." She chuckled. Hermione thought about the risks. She went in circles in her mind for a few moments before her rational inner-voice put a stop to it. She really had no choice in this. "So, I go through ritual number one without my insides turning to mush, then I go through ritual two without my mind shattering to a million pieces, and I get to be bound to another person for the rest of my life."

"It won't be so bad, kitten," Adrian said, stroking her leg. "Your magic will help you choose the right match. Your Ancillary will feel compatible, like he's a missing part of you."
"How do you know?" Hermione asked, honestly curious. It was the exact same question she'd asked Draco, but without the hostile tone.

"My great-great-great-grandmother was a Sorceress and my great-great-great grandfather was her Ancillary," Adrian grinned. "Family history says they were extremely happy together."

"That's sweet," Hermione smiled. Her stomach rumbled, loudly, reminding her that she missed lunch.

Blaise jumped into action and had his House-elves start making dinner for their large group. Blaise managed to untangle Hermione from the four wizards on the couch, then ushered her into his dining room. Blaise sat her at the head of the table then put himself and Severus on each side so the other four wouldn't argue to sit next to her.

The elves set out a wonderful array of food and drink that all seven people heartily tucked into. Hermione was famished and had to restrain herself from shoveling food in her mouth in a very unladylike manner.

"You'll have to notify the Ministry," Severus observed.

Hermione sighed and nodded. From what she had heard, the Ministry was far and away a better organization now than when she was younger. It was not as corrupt or short sighted. Kingsley Shacklebolt had been elected Minister a few years ago. Hermione had always got on well with Kings. It was the publicity of it all that was regrettable. Hermione hated being in the tabloids and newspapers.

"Pucey and I can help you navigate the Ministry bureaucracy," Draco offered. "We do it all the time for work."

"Thank you," Hermione said seriously. She really didn't want to do this alone. She knew she'd have Severus by her side, but he could be prone to doing things 'for her own good' because he cared so much.

Over dinner, the seven of them came up with a plan. Severus would owl Kingsley that night and make an appointment to see him first thing in the morning. Draco and Adrian would accompany Severus and Hermione. Meanwhile, Theo would start researching the rituals. Hermione would meet up with him at Pucey Lodge after she was through at the Ministry. They all agreed that Adrian's family library was a good place to start, since there was Sorcery in the family line relatively recently. Wednesday they would tackle the Malfoy family library in the morning, followed by Flint's in the afternoon. They would petition to Headmistress McGonagall to use the Hogwarts library Thursday. Hermione was sure her old mentor would grant her access, especially considering her research subject. Nott would scour his own expansive libraries on his own, as would Severus.

The first ritual would have to be done that weekend, preferably Saturday if everything could be ready by then. Hermione took a deep breath before starting in on her chocolate cake. It felt good to have a plan.

OoOoO

All the wizards at the table felt better because they had a plan of action. Between the six of them, they had varied talents and resources to call upon in times of crisis. And all of them considered the welfare of Hermione Granger of the utmost importance.
Draco knew there would be huge political fallout for her, one she was likely not expecting. Sorceresses were the most powerful beings on the planet. They literally had the power to bring prosperity to a whole region. Malfoys were adept at navigating political waters. As he watched her eat her cake, Draco knew he would employ every diplomatic strategy he knew for this witch. Draco made a note to confer with his father about this at length.

Adrian was sure meeting with the Ministry would not be entirely simple, even if Hermione was an old war buddy of the Minister’s. People, and governments, tended to see Sorceresses as public property, as a boon handed to them from the higher powers. It made sense that Hermione was born when Voldemort was at or near his highest power, during his first ascension. Sorcery could serve to balance an evil or right a wrong in the world. However, Adrian was going to make sure Hermione's rights were protected. She looked so delicate sometimes, even though he knew she was tough as nails. Adrian couldn’t help but want to protect her. She could be an important public figure, yes - but not public property.

Theo found himself mentally sorting through his own library at home. There was so much written about Sorcery, but it would be hard to find things applicable to Hermione. Her path to become a Sorceress was disrupted and delayed for years! Theo would go and personally interview every living Sorcery expert if he had to. Small details of the rituals might need to be adjusted and Hermione's life hung in the balance. The pressure was almost too much. Looking up at her though, Theo knew he could manage it. He would be strong for her.

Marcus furrowed his brow watching his little witch. She sure could put away the food, despite her size. It made him want to smile, but he couldn't. He knew she would be hounded. Everyone would want a piece of her and Marcus was going to keep them all at bay. He was famous for his ruthless treatment of members of the intrusive press and aggressive groupies back when he played Quidditch professionally. Honestly, there were still groupies and reporters that wanted a piece of him now that he worked at the Department of Magical Games and Sports. His own experience was just the tip of the iceberg. There would be thousands wanting to meet her, to touch her, to be her Ancillary. Marcus wasn't going to let them near his witch.

Severus was lost in thought. He knew the Black family adored all things Sorcery related and he wondered if Hermione would go to Grimmauld Place, even though Harry still lived there. The library was bound to be useful. He also knew that Lucius Malfoy had studied Sorcery at length, primarily at the Dark Lord's behest. Voldemort had been slightly obsessed with trying to become a Sorcerer, which was impossible, or locate one for his own use. Anyone with that kind of power would have been a lasting and real threat to him. Severus knew Hermione well and knew she would balk at using Voldemort's research, even if it was applicable.

Blaise wondered if Hermione knew how she would be perceived. Having a Sorceress in Wizarding Britain was wonderful luck for the troubled country. She would be seen as a benefactress, but she would also be feared. Just as easily as she could stay in England and let prosperity bloom around her, she could also leave. She had been gone for four years already. The populace would be worried about her leaving again. Blaise was skilled at marketing himself, at putting out the kind of image he intended. He looked at his friend. She was so tiny, so people may not immediately see her strength. He decided to help her manage her image and deal with the publicity of her new position.

Blaise smirked as he noticed the thoughtful looks on the other wizards' faces. He imagined that they each were thinking of ways to help Hermione, of things they could do for her. If she took them up on their help, she would have an impressive team.

Blaise was jolted from his thoughts by a throat clearing in the doorway. Next to him, Hermione
dropped her fork. It clanged loudly against her plate. All the wizards followed her gaze to see Harry Potter.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your meal," Harry said apologetically. Everyone just stared at him and he started to get uncomfortable. "Did I get the date wrong? I thought I was invited for drinks after your poker game."

"You were!" Draco assured him after another moment of silence. "I'm sorry, Potter, we forgot. We didn't even play poker tonight."

"Um, why don't you sit, Potter?" Blaise offered, gesturing to the empty seat at the end of the table opposite Hermione. "Cake?"

"I don't want to intrude, but I'm also not one to turn down cake." Harry smiled. He sat and looked down the table at the pretty witch with the short hair. Harry wondered if she was one of Blaise's latest conquests, but it would be unusual for his playboy friend to introduce a witch to his mates and Severus Snape. Maybe the little thing was with Severus. She looked so familiar and Harry squinted through his glasses to see her better as a House-elf set cake in front of him. No one was introducing him, which was strange as well. Harry decided to do the honors. "I'm Harry Potter."

A dead silence fell on the table. Draco, Blaise, and Theo made strange sounds in the back of their throats and looked at him incredulously, while the other three wizards looked expectantly at the witch. Harry wondered what grievous error he'd made in introducing himself.

"Really, Harry?" the witch asked him. Her voice! He knew that voice. It was the voice that had guided and soothed him for seven years. It was the same voice he'd missed hearing for four years!

Harry bolted out of his seat, knocking back the chair. Hermione! Of all people and in all places, it was Hermione. Harry couldn't help himself. He ran to her and scooped her up, squeezing her to him. He leaned back to look at her, not letting her go or putting her down. It really was her. He should have recognized her immediately. She was much tanner and all that long curly hair was shorn off, but he should have recognized her immediately.

"You're back," Harry observed softly. She nodded. "I'm so sorry, 'Mione, for what happened. I never should have sided with Ron, never should have said the things I did."

Harry was sorry. It was a serious lapse in judgment. He hadn't known Ron was cheating until Hermione blew in that morning, hexing Ron in all her righteous fury. He'd hardly been able to believe it. He'd wanted his friends to work it out, which was selfish. It wasn't until she'd been gone for several months that Harry found out Ron's cheating wasn't the one isolated incident, but a pattern of infidelity that had been going on all year. Ginny's easy dismissal of Ron's behavior told Harry all he needed to know about his wayward girlfriend's views of monogamy.

"I forgive you," Hermione nodded seriously, her eyes misty with tears. "I want to apologize for waiting so long to give you a chance to apologize. I shouldn't have refused your owls."

"It was good you did for those first months at least," Harry chuckled. "Those were just more of the same."

"If you are going to hold her all night, I'm going to tell Pansy on you," Draco interjected. Harry blushed slightly and set her down.

"So much has changed." Hermione smiled, resuming her seat.

Harry didn't want to be so far away so he Accioed his chair and sat next to Hermione.
"I know," Harry smiled. "Who would've thought I'd marry Pansy Parkinson? You'd really like her though, now I mean. And you a Master in two fields! Have you returned from Istanbul for good?"

"How did you know where I was?" she wondered. Harry cast a furtive glance to Severus, making her turn to face their ex-professor.

"What?" Severus drawled, taking another sip of his whiskey. He loved chocolate with good whiskey. "You said you only wanted life or death news from home. You never said they couldn't have news of you. I only told Potter what you've been up to, not that other one."

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"It looks like I'm back for good," Hermione informed Harry. "Well, as long as that may be."

"That will be a good long time," Marcus said sharply. "You are going to live another ten decades at least."

The other wizards nodded vigorously. Harry was confused.

"What's going on?" he asked.

Hermione sighed and turned to face him.

"What do you know about Sorceresses?" she asked.

The discussion, more like lecture, that followed left Harry with a whirlwind of emotion. Growing up in Muggle culture, there was still historical Wizarding things he didn't know much about. He had heard of Sorcery, but didn't have a lot of details. He understood it all though. One of his oldest friends was set to become the most powerful magical person in the world, if she survived the rituals that is. He was a little comforted that she had these wizards to help her. Harry vowed to himself to do whatever he could, to use his still-considerable influence to help her any way he could.

“I’m a little tired of talking about all this.” Hermione sighed. Harry could see the weariness creeping into her face. He knew Hermione would push herself past the point that was healthy. “Tell me how you became friends with a bunch of Slytherins.”

“Well several months after you left, Ron and I had a…falling out, and Ginny sided with her brother,” Harry explained. “That was the end of that relationship, which – in retrospect – was the best thing that could have happened to me. I was in a pub, drowning my sorrows, when Malfoy here strolled in – looking every inch the ferret he was.”

“Hey!” Draco protested. He hated it when Potter called him a ferret, but Hermione was laughing so he decided to let it go. She needed more laughter.

“Of course, Malfoy started in with the insults, one of which was that I couldn't even get pissed properly,” Harry continued. “We proceeded to try to drink each other under the table. We both won, or lost as the case may be, since we both ended up on the floor that night.”

“I don’t know if I’ve ever been so pissed in my life,” Draco chuckled, sipping his drink. “It took a lot of alcohol to make Potter tolerable.”

“We kept running into each other in pubs, drinking and talking, until we finally made plans to run into each other on purpose,” Harry said, ignoring Draco. “We started hanging out, going to the pub. I join the weekly poker game when they need a fifth. It’s a good thing I’m not in on the regular
game, because I am pants at cards and these gents play for high stakes. I got to know Pansy though, and finally asked her out a year ago.”

“It took you long enough,” Blaise teased.

“How’s married life?” Hermione wondered.

“Wonderful,” Harry smiled. He knew he looked like a grinning, love sick fool, but he wouldn’t have it any other way. “Can you come over to dinner tomorrow night? Around seven? You can get reacquainted with Pansy and we can really catch up.”

“I’d love to,” she smiled brightly. Harry had missed her genuine, guileless smile as well. He was so happy his friend was back, even if it was under strange and extreme circumstances.

“I’m still at Grimmauld Place,” Harry said. “And you are still keyed into the wards, so you can Apparate over.”

“I can’t Apparate,” Hermione said, looking down at her plate. She seemed embarrassed. “My magic is too out of control and I might Splinch.”

“You are also still authorized to Floo,” Harry shared, wondering if she could Floo.

“That should be okay,” she smiled, looking a little brighter.

Harry couldn’t imagine what his friend was feeling. Magic had always been so easy for her. There wasn’t a spell or potion she couldn’t do. She’d been Apparating since she came of age, but now she couldn’t be sure of doing even simple spells. Harry knew she must find it infuriating and a little shameful. He reached over and squeezed her hand in support.

“We better go home,” Severus said. “It is getting late and you need to rest as much as possible. I know all too well how cranky you can be first thing in the morning without a proper sleep.”

Harry quirked his eyebrows at his friend leaving with Snape, this was a new turn of events for bespectacled wizard. He’d known their ex-professor was in contact with his long lost friend; it made sense given her Mastery of Potions, but to stay at his house? And how does Snape know Hermione’s morning behaviors? He was right too. She did get cranky. Harry had a lot of questions to ask her over dinner the next night.

“Don’t think you can start bossing me, Severus, just because I’m not at my best,” Hermione scolded. Her tone lacked force though and they could all see she was tired. “Aren’t you supposed to bow down to the Sorceress?”

“You’d like that wouldn’t you, you naughty witch,” Severus laughed. He stood and held out his hand to her. When Hermione stood, all the other wizards stood up from the table as well.

“I may as well make the rounds,” Hermione grinned, turning to Harry. “It was…well, just wonderful to see you again Harry. I’ve missed you and I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

Hermione reached up and hugged her old friend tightly for several moments. She released him and made her way over to Blaise.

“Thanks for the rescue today, Blaise,” Hermione blushed. Blaise opened his arms and enfolded the small witch.

“Anytime, Piccola, anytime,” Blaise smiled. “I’ll see you soon, I’m sure.”
Hermione nodded and walked to Theo.

“I appreciate the research help, Theo,” she smiled. Theo reached out and pulled her in to him, his arms around her shoulders. Everyone got a hug so far and he wasn’t going to be left out. He squeezed her gently and deeply inhaled her scent.

“It will be just like old times, Mi,” Theo said, pressing his cheek into her hair.

When Theo let go, Hermione turned to see Adrian ready – his arms open. It made her giggle. Adrian wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her slightly, putting her closer to eye level with him. Hermione giggled again and held onto his shoulders.

“Thank you for agreeing to accompany me to the Ministry tomorrow,” she grinned. “I appreciate you taking the time.”

“There is no where I’d rather be, kitten,” Adrian returned her grin. He loved the way her breasts felt pressed against his chest. He didn’t want to let her go.

“Oi, Ades! Put her down,” Marcus demanded from across the table. Adrian sighed, but complied with his friend’s order.

Hermione made her way around the table to the largest wizard. Marcus didn’t bother with a hug. He just leaned down and circled his arms under her bum, lifting her up and bringing her face a little higher than his own. Hermione shrieked with laughter and wrapped her legs around his torso to keep from falling.

“Remember, princess, I’ve got your back,” Marcus said, squeezing her arse. “I’m not going to let anyone hurt you.”

Hermione reached out and pressed her hand to his cheek. He leaned into it. Marcus adored the way this wisp of a witch felt, the warm satin of her skin against his.

“Thank you, Marcus,” she said. “That means a lot to me.”

“Maybe you should just come home with me,” Marcus purred, making Hermione laugh again.

“Not tonight, Marcus,” Hermione grinned. Marcus thought it over, nodded, and set her back down to her feet.

“Don’t keep me waiting too long,” Marcus growled, lightly smacking her arse as she walked over to Draco.

“He’s a Neanderthal, that one,” Draco chuckled. He pulled Hermione to him, enveloping her. She rested her cheek on his chest and Draco decided that she fit perfectly against him. She just felt right. “Remember what I said, it is all going to be okay. Everything will work out.”

“I know, I know,” she teased, still pressing her face into his chest. “If a Malfoy wills it, so must it be.”

“Now you’ve got it,” Draco pressed his lips against her forehead. He wanted so badly to really kiss her, to kiss those plump lips, but it wasn’t the time. Hermione sighed.

“If you’re all through pawing the poor witch…” Severus drawled. “We should take our leave. Malfoy, Pucey – meet us at the Ministry tomorrow at nine o’clock.”
Severus reached out and pulled Hermione closer to him, not as close as the others had done – but close enough to tuck her arm into his. They walked out of the room and everyone heard the pop of Apparition a few moments later. All of them missed her to some extent, some feeling an acute ache that her absence seemed to cause.

Chapter End Notes

Next - Let's go to the Ministry!
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer - I don't own Harry Potter.
I am on vacation so my posting may not be quite as daily as before.

Now - The ministry!

Hermione fell fast asleep almost as soon as they returned to Spinner's End, only having a short talk with Severus. The fatigue was getting worse. The only time she'd felt rested in the past month was after the short nap she'd had at Blaise's house. That had been nice.

Severus fretted over her in his subtle, snarky way. He even tucked her in to bed as if she was a child. Hermione stopped herself from scolding him, because she realized he needed to baby her a little, to make himself feel better; not because he thought she was weak.

"There are at least four wizards already standing ready to be your Ancillary," Severus had drawled as he straightened blankets around her. "As stupid as I find most people, I have to admit, you would be well settled if your magic picked any one of them."

"They are just being flirtatious and friendly," Hermione had dismissed him. "Several of them may welcome a fling, but it's very different to be permanently bound for life. We only met again yesterday after four years! It is too soon to want that kind of commitment."

"Regardless," Severus arched a brow at her and sat on the edge of her bed. "Flint, Malfoy, Nott, and Pucey would all like to be in the running, I assure you. You aren't the same frumpy little witch you were back in school. You are confident and self-assured. So don't be oblivious to your value."

"I may look different and feel more comfortable in my own skin, but I am the same in essentials." She sighed, reaching out to hold his hand. "I am still the same bossy swot. Once they realize that, they will step back."

"You are a bossy little swot," Severus said, trying to sneer, but he didn't have the disdainful emotions to back it up. It made Hermione smile that Severus still tried to scowl and sneer at her, but couldn't manage it these days. "You've matured over the past four years, you've grown. You would've been a highly sought after witch, even if you weren't a Sorceress."

"You're biased because you adore me," Hermione yawned, settling down into the covers.

"That I do," Severus said, leaning down to kiss her forehead. "That's why I'll be there too, if your magic wants me. I wouldn't be as good a choice as others, but I'll be there nonetheless."

"Severus, you'd hate being my Ancillary." Hermione sighed sleepily. "There will be tons of attention and publicity."

"So that should tell you how much you mean to me." Severus chuckled. "Go to sleep. I'll wake you in the morning."
When Severus woke her, Hermione had had over eight hours of sleep but still felt tired. Severus gave her a light breakfast and several cups of coffee to help her become alert.

Hermione dressed in a professional looking royal blue pencil skirt with a crisp white shirt. The shirt had a few subtle ruffles down the front; otherwise, it could have been too plain. She also wore a pair of very high teal suede heels. Hermione realized a few years ago that she felt more powerful in sky-high heels that gave more height to her petite frame.

When she was ready, she and Severus made their way to the Ministry and to the grand entry hall. It was frustrating to Hermione that she couldn't Apparate herself, but she'd have to get used to it for the next few weeks.

Adrian and Draco spotted her before she saw them, coming over to them only a few moments after they arrived.

"You look wonderful." Adrian smiled, taking her hand and clearly ogling the way her shirt stretched across her breasts. Hermione didn't have the heart to tell him the shirt’s strategically placed ruffles made her look...fuller on top.

"Great shoes," Draco murmured, leaning in to kiss her cheek.

Hermione couldn't help but giggle a little.

"Shall we?" Severus gestured ahead of them. Hermione nodded and straightened her spine. She had no idea how her news would be received.

Severus led them through the building, walking in front of Hermione like a shield. She doubted anyone would recognize her when one of her best friends hadn't. No one got a good look, since Severus had the group moving quickly. People moved out of the older wizard's way. His role as a spy was well known by now, but whispers carried stories of how dangerous he must have been to secure a place in Voldemort's inner circle, no matter what his ulterior motive. Draco and Adrian flanked Hermione, each keeping close to her sides. They both cut dashing figures with their startling good looks and expensive, tailored robes. Hermione smirked as they walked. What girl wouldn't want such an escort?

If anyone had recognized her, they would probably have dismissed it as an error. Hermione Granger wouldn't be walking around with three Slytherins, including two of the most beautiful wizards the house ever produced.

The group finally arrived at the Minister's office and was told that Minister Shacklebolt would be with them shortly. Kingsley's secretary looked like the nosy sort. She'd tried to wheedle out their purpose for coming from Severus, but was of course unsuccessful. A sneer and a glare was all it took to shut her up.

Adrian squeezed her hand reassuringly and Draco draped an arm over her shoulders. It felt nice. Hermione was nervous, but felt better knowing she wasn't alone.

After a few minutes, the secretary stiffly gestured to the door and told them they may go in. The wizards resumed their positions, Severus in front and the other two at her sides, as they went into the office. Kingsley hadn't changed much, except a few extra wrinkles around his eyes. The Minister stood up and came out from behind his big desk, his eyes racing over the group before settling back on Severus.

"Snape!" Kingsley smiled. "Good to see you, you old recluse. I thought you were bringing Hermione."

Severus stepped aside, so that he wasn't blocking Hermione so much. She stepped forward and
held her hand out to Kingsley. They'd never been close, but had a very respectful and friendly working relationship during the war. Hermione had trusted him.

"It's good to see you again, Kings," she smiled.

Kingsley stared at her for a moment before he grasped her hand. Hermione didn't mind that he gaped for a second. He'd never seen her looking so polished, she was sure of that.

"Wow! 'Mione, you look...Wow," Kingsley stammered.

"Smooth, Minister," Draco smirked.

"Mister Malfoy, Mister Pucey," Kingsley nodded, furrowing his brow. Hermione imagined he was trying to figure out why those two were there.

"I may as well get to the point of my visit, Kings," Hermione said.

"Please," Kingsley said, gesturing to one of the two chairs in front of his desk. Severus took the other, while Adrian and Draco sat on the couch by the door. Kingsley went to sit behind his desk, looking very official. "I assume you didn't come to see me just to let me know you were back in town."

"No," Hermione chuckled. She appreciated that he was taking her seriously and seemed ready to listen. "I wish it were that simple. I don't know how to say this so bear with me a moment. I came back to England so see a Healer, a specialist for some problems I've been having - both physical and magical. It turns out; well...all the tests indicate that I am a Sorceress Potentiate."

Kingsley gasped and looked between Hermione and Severus.

"But...but you are too old," Kingsley blurted.

Hermione explained their theory about Dolohov's curse and the effect it had on the elemental magic that should have manifested years ago. Kingsley nodded understanding, but also seemed shocked.

"This is wonderful," he finally stated. "A Sorceress! And England could use one so badly. You are planning on staying in England aren't you?"

"I am happy to be home," Hermione acknowledged diplomatically.

"Let's not get carried away, Minister," Adrian interjected. "You have no rights to Miss Granger and her residence has yet to be determined."

"You are her solicitor, Mister Pucey?" Kingsley asked, looking a bit thrown. Hermione understood. Who would bring a solicitor to a meeting with a friend?

"I am concerned about her best interests," Adrian reported.

"Before you go on about how wonderful this is and start making plans for your very own Sorceress," Draco began in a scathing tone, "we need to focus on ensuring Hermione survives the necessary rituals. This is an unprecedented situation."

Kingsley looked at Hermione, for the first time seeming to realize the dangerous situation she was in. He looked appropriately chastened.

"Merlin, I'm sorry 'Mione," Kingsley shook his head. "You must be so nervous about these rituals,
and here I am thinking about what might happen after you are properly anchored. Are these gentlemen going to be your Ancillary candidates?"

"We would be honored to be chosen," Draco nodded in his haughty Malfoy tone. Hermione blushed.

"I have not thought as far as the third ritual," she admitted, her blush deepening.

"We need assistance, Kingsley," Severus stated. "We are researching the rituals, but would benefit from Ministry resources. We also need to find someone to actually perform the rituals."

"Of course," Kingsley nodded. He seemed to put on his all business Minister attitude. He tapped his wand to a speaker box and instructed his secretary to summon the Director of the Department of Mysteries. Hermione raised her eyebrow in question. "The Department of Mysteries has been researching Sorcery for as long as anyone can remember. We can't create a Sorcerer or Sorceress, of course, but the Ministry has tracked those in history. They've used Arithmancy, Divination, and Runes to try to predict the coming of the next Sorcerer or Sorceress. You'll have to ask the Director how successful those efforts have been. They have studied the rituals, trying to figure out the difference between the instances it was successful and those unfortunate times when the Potentiate did not make it through."

"That sounds like exactly what we need," Hermione nodded eagerly. She couldn't wait to get her hands on that research. While she was sure they had wonderfully competent researchers at the Department of Mysteries, whose very purpose was conducting confidential research, Hermione was sure she could find something they hadn't seen - especially with Severus' and Theo's help.

The group discussed candidates to perform the rituals. The witch or wizard would have to be powerful, experienced, and have exceptional control. Hermione was surprised when Draco and Severus suggested Lucius Malfoy. Apparently, he was quite an expert in Sorcery, because he was mandated by Voldemort to become one. That made Hermione slightly uncomfortable, but she wasn't in any position to let her feelings override her intellect. But she wasn't entirely willing to put her fate in the hands of someone that didn't even like her either.

Hermione suggested Minerva McGonagall, a powerful witch whose competence no one could question - and someone who cared what happened to Hermione. There were some other candidates whose names were thrown out, but Headmistress McGonagall and Lucius Malfoy remained the front-runners. Hermione made a list of all the potentials, which made Draco tease her. She reminded him that though she may look different, she hadn't really changed her basic personality. She still liked researching, making lists, being organized, and thinking things through. Draco replied that he expected nothing less and found it quite endearing.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him, looking for more teasing - but Draco looked entirely earnest, while Adrian smiled and nodded. That made Hermione blush, she couldn't help it. These were sought after wizards and she wasn’t used to that much attention. While she was loads more confident than she had been back in school, the seemingly sincere attentions of her Slytherin pack were a little overwhelming. She still believed that they would desist by the time the third ritual arrived, not really wanting to be bound to her for life. They only reunited a few days ago, after all. Hermione imagined them stepping away from her over the next three weeks and felt a pang of heartbreak. She would miss each of them. Hermione scolded herself, telling herself she had no right to or expectations for any of these wizards. She should be thankful for their friendship and support.

"Ah, there's the gentleman we've been waiting for," Kingsley smiled to a new person in the doorway, jolting Hermione from her thoughts.
Hermione looked up at the not quite elderly, portly, bald gentleman. He was a bit disheveled, robes askew and wearing two pairs of spectacles - one perched on his nose and another pushed up on top of his head. He certainly didn't look like the Director of one of the Ministry's most important departments. Hermione had learned not to judge a book by the cover, though.

"This is Phoebus Penrose, the current Director of the Department of Mysteries, and one of the best researchers the wizarding world has ever known," Kingsley introduced the wizard. "Penrose, next to you are Draco Malfoy and Adrian Pucey. Here are Severus Snape and Hermione Granger."

"My, such illustrious personages! To what do I owe this honor?" Penrose asked, his face reddening slightly. Hermione imagined he was much more comfortable with books and facts than he was with other people, which she sympathized with entirely.

"We need everything your department has gathered over the years on Sorcery," Kingsley reported.

"But..." Penrose looked flustered and his eyes went wide. "I have no report...it's not ready. It's just raw data - tables, charts, and notions!"

"I completely understand, Director Penrose," Hermione soothed. She knew first hand why he was reluctant. She hated parting with her work before she deemed it ready to share. "I read your report on Muggle suspicions of magical events. It was thorough and insightful. Having done my share of research, I know how hard it is to share any findings before you think they are ready. Unfortunately, there are extenuating circumstances to consider here. We are not here for just a scholarly review. We have a practical need for this information, a pressing need."

"A pressing, practical need?" Director Penrose questioned, and then his eyes widened in comprehension. "That means a Sorcerer or Sorceress has been found?"

"Miss Granger here is a Sorceress Potentiate," Kingsley nodded. "A curse she suffered in her fifth year during a battle delayed the onset to now, rather than her coming fully into her magic at seventeen or eighteen, as is usual."

"As far as we know, those rituals have never been attempted on someone her age," Severus continued. "We are going to be doing our own research and have unrestricted access to some of the most comprehensive, private libraries of Britain’s oldest families."

"Such as?" Penrose asked eagerly. Most of the old, wealthy wizarding families kept tight control over their libraries - often not even disclosing their holdings. Knowledge was power and no one wanted to show his or her entire hand. One could easily stumble upon a rare book that everyone believed had been destroyed generations ago. Of course, rumors abounded based on what families were thought to have or subject matters they were known to collect.


"And the Pucey library," Adrian added.

"As well as the Flint, Nott, and Black libraries," Hermione nodded.

"And the Prince family archives," Severus said. Hermione forgot about the other side of Severus’ family. He rarely talked about being the heir to the Prince family fortune. It was ironic that it all ended with him, since his mother’s family had ignored him while they were alive.

"That is...amazing!" Penrose breathed, looking envious.

"We will be happy to share what we find with you, if you are willing to work on this project with
us," Hermione offered. She was guessing, given his love of books, Penrose would jump at the chance. "We will need to integrate the Ministry's information with what we find."

"I am sure we can do that," Penrose replied gleefully.

"Are you the Ministry expert, Director Penrose?" Adrian asked. "Or is there another in your department that has more knowledge on this subject?"

"Someone in research, Bronwyn Figgelowe, is our departmental expert," Penrose nodded. "She and I would be the Ministry team on this project. All Miss Figgelowe does is research Sorcery, and I will put everything on hold until Miss Granger is properly anchored or..."

"Or I die," Hermione concluded for him after a moment of silence. It was the unspoken sentiment in the room. Hermione knew it made them all highly uncomfortable. She wasn't doing cartwheels about the prospect either; but she was a firm believer in facing reality. One had to deal with the facts at hand in order to make the best choices. Ignoring or denying things just increased the likelihood of mistakes in decision making.

"Well, let's decide who else is to be part of the Ministry team," Kingsley said after another uncomfortable moment of silence. "Penrose and Figgelowe will assist with research. I can assign a Ministry employee to see to your needs." Severus, Draco, and Adrian began to bristle. Severus shot Kingsley his deadliest glare, Draco his haughtiest sneer, and Adrian was the picture of righteous outrage. Kingsley was quick to backpedal and explain. "Not that you don't clearly have an exceptionally competent entourage! I am referring to an assistant of sorts - someone to fetch lunch, bring your tea, run errands, and procure any items you will need for the rituals."

"I'm not sure that will be necessary, but I guess it couldn't hurt," Hermione reluctantly agreed. She wasn't sure she was comfortable having a lackey.

"Additionally, this is unlikely to remain a secret for long," Kingsley said practically. Hermione sighed, knowing he was right. "The Ministry can provide you someone from public relations to liaise with the press and a security detail of trained Aurors. Until you are anchored and your Ancillary chosen, you will likely face a deluge of applicants."

Draco and Adrian began to look violent at the idea. Hermione thought she heard one of them growl.

"Gentlemen, no offense is intended," Kingsley defended, raising his hands, "but you know I am right. It will happen, despite any claim you may have staked."

"Historically, people come from all over - from foreign countries - to observe the rituals," Penrose spoke up. "It so rarely occurs, so there is a tremendous draw. Also, people flock to the third ritual hoping they will be chosen."

"Doesn't the Potentiate choose a group of candidates for the magic to select from?" Hermione asked, slightly startled by Penrose's implication.

"Well, yes," Penrose replied. "But there have been a few documented instances when the Potentiate's magic found none of the chosen candidates suitable and found a more optimal Ancillary in the crowd. Records show that the magic is always right, by the way. That should be comforting. Your magic will choose your best match."

"Well, I guess I can think about that more later." Hermione sighed, feeling even more out of control. She hated the idea of being bound to a stranger; even if it was someone her magic deemed
a proper match. "I have two more rituals to get through before that is an issue. Regarding more pressing things, I don't like the idea of a stranger speaking for me - even a public relations professional. So let's put that on hold. Same with the security detail. I will let you know if I need assistance."

"I would like to be kept in the loop," Kingsley said seriously.

"Penrose can provide you with daily progress reports," Draco offered. "They are researching the Pucey library today, but will be starting at Malfoy Manor tomorrow. Penrose and Figgelowe can come for breakfast at eight o'clock and present the Ministry's research then assist in the Malfoy library. That gives you the rest of the day to consolidate and organize the Ministry information."

Hermione nodded. It seemed like a good plan. Penrose would have precious little time, but there was a clock ticking so it couldn’t be helped. The group agreed on the course of action for the next day. Penrose hurried to his offices, and probably to Miss Figgelowe, to get started. Hermione was eager herself to meet up with Theo and start looking for definitive information. She and her escorts bid Kingsley farewell, promising to keep in touch. They would see each other on Saturday at the first ritual at the very least.

OoOoO

"You don't have an appointment and you can't go in!" Kingsley's secretary was protesting, rather hysterically just outside the office. Marcus Flint stared down the witch, doing everything he could to intimidate without speaking. If Hermione was hurt or even inconvenienced by what this witch had done, she was going to be sorry. She was so lucky Blaise was there to reign in the large wizard.

"Marcus, Blaise!" Hermione interrupted. "What are you doing here?"

"There is an army of reporters down in the public hall of the Ministry waiting for you," Blaise explained. He felt bad that Hermione's privacy was at an end. It was inevitable, but still regrettable.

"How did they find out?" Hermione almost wailed. Blaise was sure they all had hoped for a few more days of peace.

"It seems someone in the St. Mungo's records department leaked information about your visit to the press," Marcus scowled, before turning to glare at the Minister's secretary. "As to how they knew you were here this morning, maybe we should ask this gossipy bitch!"

"How dare you speak to me like that?" the secretary shouted, turning red - but also not meeting anyone's gaze. Marcus kept her pinned under his stare, though. He knew her type, always involving herself in other people's business.

"Dorcas," Kingsley said sternly from his doorway. The commotion had brought him out of his office. "Did you tell anyone Miss Granger was here this morning?"

"I...I merely mentioned it to Gladys in the Undersecretary's office, to see if she knew what it was regarding," the secretary, apparently unfortunately named Dorcas, stammered. "I had no idea she was a Sorceress. I hadn't seen the morning copy of the Daily Prophet yet. I would never dream of violating the privacy of a Sorceress!"

"Regardless," Kingsley said icily, "all business conducted in this office is to be considered highly sensitive, whether you know what it is about or not. We have done a lot of work to rebuild the reputation of this office in the past five years. It seems the Ministry is not the place for you."

"Or at least not the Minister's office," Hermione blurted. "Maybe a transfer to another department..."
would be prudent."

Marcus huffed and rolled his eyes. He noticed Ades, Draco, and Snape do the same. His witch was too soft. Marcus felt an increased need to protect her. He would be hard for her so that she wouldn't have to change. He snorted when Draco muttered 'bloody bleeding-heart Gryffindors' under his breath. Hermione shrugged off their reactions. Her values were hers, part of who she was.

"You heard the Sorceress," Kingsley nodded after deliberating a moment. "Pack your things and report to personnel. I will memo them shortly."

"I wish to file a formal complaint on behalf of Miss Granger regarding the leak at St. Mungos," Adrian interjected, putting on his metaphorical solicitor cap. He could help Hermione in this way. "I demand Aurors be dispatched to determine the source of the leak and the informant be prosecuted fully. As you are aware, Minister, disclosing privileged medical information violates several laws. We would hate for the Sorceress to feel unsafe in Wizarding Britain, as if she cannot expect the same privacy afforded other citizens."

"Of course, Mr. Pucey," Kingsley nodded. "I will contact Magical Law Enforcement personally and ensure they understand that this matter is of the highest priority."

"And before you jump in to defend anyone," Adrian said, turning to Hermione before continuing, "just let me say this. Whoever released, or more likely sold, this information had the gall to do this to a witch of your standing. Imagine how easy it would be for them to sell other pieces of information about less influential people, people without the resources to stop them. Information can be used to coerce or blackmail people into Merlin knows what."

Hermione stuck out her chin and nodded. Adrian was sure she was going to argue about something, probably getting priority from law enforcement. Instead, she seemed to let it go.

"You can Floo from my office," Kingsley offered.

"It's already in the papers, Kings," Hermione sighed. "I may as well make a brief statement."

"Wait," Blaise said, reaching out to spin her toward him. Hermione looked at him questioningly, but he just surveyed her. Blaise looked her over critically, making Hermione a little nervous. "I was hoping to take you shopping and do a little practice before your first press conference, but we must make do."

Blaise pulled out his wand and magically lengthened the hem of her skirt an inch. He shortened her sleeves, making them cap sleeves. He refreshed her makeup and fluffed her short hair slightly. He also fluffed the subtle ruffles on her shirt.

"Professional is a good look," Blaise nodded. He popped the top button on her shirt and she let out a gasp as she felt her breasts rise up slightly. There was now a hint of cleavage, but nothing vulgar. "Professional, with a healthy dash of sexy. Now, be confident and use short words. The whole world knows you're brilliant, but you want them to understand you. Make strong eye contact and don't smile too much. The public is going to want strong from a Sorceress, not anyone they feel might be flighty - which you aren't in the least, but it's important to strike the right note, make a good first impression."

Hermione nodded along as Blaise spoke. He knew it was a whirlwind of information coming at her quickly. Blaise doubted she'd given much thought to cultivating a public persona, but he certainly had.
"You don't have to entertain questions if you don't want to," Blaise continued, leading her out of the office and down the hall. Everyone followed, even Kingsley. "If that's the case, say it up front that it is just a statement, no questions. If you do want to answer a few questions, I imagine they will ask where you have been, what you've been doing, and get an assurance that you plan to stay. They will probably ask about Potter, since he is still the 'Boy-Who-Could-Do-Nothing.' They may, unfortunately, ask about the Weasel as well."

Hermione grimaced.

"None of that, Piccola," Blaise scolded. He stopped them at the elevator, giving her another look over. "Your facial expression should be the picture of grace, confidence, and strength."

"That's easier said than done," Hermione pouted. The elevator opened and Marcus ordered the few people inside to leave, which they did quickly. She shot the large wizard a glare, but went back to concentrating on the task at hand. In the elevator, she closed her eyes. Draco grasped one of her hands. Adrian reached for the other. Marcus began to gently rub her shoulders. She felt tense to him, but started to relax under his hands.

The elevator door opened to a din of voices, but the wizards surrounded Hermione. Kingsley walked out first. Marcus moved to her front, Draco and Adrian were at her sides, and Severus brought up the rear. Blaise trailed out last. He let out a deep breath. He'd done all he could do with five minutes to prepare. Now it was time for Wizarding Britain to be reintroduced to Hermione Granger.

Chapter End Notes

Next - Is Hermione ready to meet her public?
"Attention!" Kingsley shouted above the noise. His already booming voice was enhanced with a Sonorus charm. The room quieted. "Miss Granger will make a statement if you will all be quiet."

Blaise bet you could hear a pin drop. He stepped forward and transfigured a bench into a raised podium, so everyone could see her. Hermione nodded her thanks and stepped up to the high platform with a helping hand from a stone-faced Marcus. Once she was settled, Marcus took his place near the front of the podium, looking menacing with his arms crossed. The other wizards resumed their positions. Draco and Adrian were at either side, while Severus was a few steps behind her. Blaise joined Kingsley near the front of the crowd, both turned to watch her.

"I will make a statement and will then take three questions, but only three," Hermione said. Blaise thought she looked confident, with only a slight waver in her voice. "I went through an examination yesterday at St. Mungos. The conclusion was that I am a Sorceress Potentiate. It has been theorized that a curse I suffered during a battle at age fifteen disrupted my magic. The elemental magic was delayed, so I did not come into the power when I came of age. I am working with the Ministry experts and with friends to determine how this delay will impact the next steps. I will perform the three rituals over the course of the next three weeks, with the last falling on Midsummer. Raise your hand if you have a question."

Blaise chuckled as every hand in the audience shot up, minus himself and Kingsley of course.

"The witch in the purple robes and green hat," Hermione said, pointing.

"Miss Granger, do you plan in staying here in Great Britain after the rituals are complete?"

"As you may know, I left my homeland four years ago to pursue my studies," Hermione replied. "I have achieved my goals recently and now am a Master in two fields, Potions and Arithmancy. Since completing these, I have the opportunity to return. While I enjoyed traveling and found temporary homes in many beautiful places, I missed Britain. I am happy to be back and hope to put down roots here for the foreseeable future."

As soon as she was done speaking, hands shot up again.

"The wizard in the blue plaid robes and red bowtie," she called out.

"What do your friends, the illustrious Harry Potter and famous Quidditch player Ronald Weasley, think about this development? And why aren’t they here with you today?"

Hermione took an obvious breath. Blaise was glad he’d mentioned that this question would likely be asked so she could mentally prepare. He noticed that the four wizards around her also tensed very slightly.
“I spoke with Harry yesterday and he was very supportive.” Hermione smiled genuinely. "I am having dinner tonight with him and his lovely wife. I have not been in touch with him, as I would have liked over the years, so I look forward to spending time with him again. As for Ronald, I have no clue what he is thinking, or if he even knows of this... development. I have not spoken to him in four years; a choice that I take full responsibility for. As many of you know from the tabloids, Ronald enjoyed a very active sex life, which I was not a part of during our engagement. Since I learned of his ...indiscretions, I have not been inclined to speak to Ronald nor solicit his opinion. I am, however, looking forward to reconnecting with many of my other old friends and acquaintances."

Blaise smiled and nodded at her. It was a good answer. It wouldn't have been genuine if she pretended she was at ease with her bastard of an ex-fiancé. He imagined few would blame her for not keeping in touch. Of course, to some, the members of the ‘Golden Trio’ could do no wrong and were expected to remain together no matter what.

After a moment, all the hands shot up again. Many were waving frantically, as this would be the third and final question.

"The witch in orange," Hermione pointed. Blaise noticed that that particular witch was one of the quieter, more sedate reporters and chuckled. Hermione wouldn't be swayed by theatrics.

"Are these gentlemen that are here with you now your potential Ancillaries?"

Hermione blushed very lightly. Blaise knew he would never break her of that habit, no matter how much they rehearsed difficult questions. He also knew his four Hermione-enamored friends would physically hurt him if he were to train the delicious pink flush out of their witch.

"I have not yet asked anyone if they would be willing to position themselves as an Ancillary candidate," Hermione demurred, still blushing. Around her, Adrian, Draco, and Marcus looked frozen in anticipation. They were all eager to hear what she would say. "These wizards with me today are all outstanding gentlemen and any witch should thank her good fortune to be in their company. Honestly, I am not going to be asking anyone to be a candidate until I successfully complete the first two rituals. As you may know, the process of harnessing a Sorceress’ magic can be dangerous in normal circumstances. I may be at an increased risk due to my age. I will be doing the first ritual this weekend. I will deal with them one at a time and in order."

Blaise smirked. His friends looked stone faced, all giving away nothing. Blaise knew they wanted her to confirm what they had begun planning on their own, that these three and Theo would be her candidates. They would have to wait. It was a good, humble answer that redirected the audience to the more immediate issues. Regardless of his opinion or that of his friends, Blaise knew Hermione had a lot of information to process in a short time. He was certain she would choose her Ancillary candidates wisely, when the task was at hand; but she wasn't going to put herself through that particular stress until it was time.

"I understand finding a Sorcery potential is a rare event and that people wish to know details," Hermione continued. He hadn't expected her to make a closing statement, but it was probably smart to set a good tone with the press. "I am asking the public, as a favor to me, to respect my privacy as much as can be expected in this situation. Please think about how unexpected, overwhelming, and dangerous this all is for me. Imagine yourself or a loved one in my place. After the chaos of the war, all I ever wanted was peace and quiet. So I am asking, if my sacrifices in battles past mean anything to anyone these years later, please let me do this first ritual in private. After the ritual, either myself or, if I don't make it through, another person will hold a conference like this to share information. That is my request. Thank you all for your time."
Hermione turned, stepping down from the platform, once again with a helping hand from Marcus, and walked away. The crowd was silent. No one shouted additional questions. No last minute photographs were snapped. Blaise was impressed. She asked for a basic human consideration that no one would dare deny her, at least in public. Blaise knew most would write of her request with compassion. The bulk of the populace would be on her side and be protective of her, appreciating her blend of vulnerability, determination, and strength.

It didn't hurt that she gently reminded them of her status as a war heroine. The people bloody well owed this witch their lives. She had sacrificed pieces of herself and her childhood for their freedom and peace. Blaise knew he would take every opportunity to remind them all in a much more blunt manner than she had. Hermione would say she couldn't possibly have done otherwise, that she could not have abandoned her friends. She would never demand what she was owed. But then, she was a do-gooder Gryffindor. Well Blaise was not, he was a Slytherin. He had no trouble demanding people give her the respect she is owed.

OoOoO

Hermione was a little surprised her audience let her go quietly. The four wizards surrounding her fell back into place and they headed toward the main Floo area at the front of the Ministry hall. Either the press decided to grant her request and not hound her, or Marcus' hostile, imposing figure in front of her was really scaring people away. The only people that dared follow her group were Kingsley and Blaise. Hermione paused in front of the Floo and turned to her entourage. She felt so thankful for their presence and wanted to express that. It wasn't in her to keep things to herself. Most people knew she couldn't help but offer a correct answer or opinion, but she also had a hard time keeping her feelings under wraps as well.

"Thank you all, so much, for your help today," she said genuinely.

"Thank you for coming today," Kingsley smiled. He grasped both her hands in his. "I know we've got you back under less than ideal circumstances, but I am selfishly happy to have you back at all. If anyone is strong enough to get through this, it's you."

"Thank you, Kings." Hermione smiled and squeezed his hands. “It does feel good to be back. I can’t thank you enough for your support in this. We will keep you informed and I hope to see you soon.”

“Count on it.” Kingsley nodded seriously. He then nodded to the five other wizards and headed back in the direction of his office.

“I will leave you now as well,” Severus announced. Hermione quirked an eyebrow at her friend. She had thought Severus would want to come to the Pucey library to help her and Theo research. “I want to go through the Prince archives this afternoon, so I can bring the information to Malfoy Manor in the morning.”

“Ah,” Hermione nodded. Severus pressed a quick kiss into her temple and walked off to one of the other public Floos.

“I should get back to work,” Marcus announced, reluctantly. He snaked his large arms around her and pulled her into him. Hermione smiled and sighed as he enveloped her small frame. She took a deep breath of Marcus’ spicy, masculine scent. Things felt easy and simple for a second. "I am taking the afternoon off tomorrow, so I will be home when you come over to plunder my family library."

Hermione giggled at his phrasing and Marcus pressed his lips into her hair. His hand wandered
dangerously close to her arse, which seemed to be a habit for him at this point.

"Until tomorrow, princess," Marcus rumbled, his deep voice seeming to drop an octave. Hermione stared as he walked away, entirely aroused by that hulk of a wizard.

Hermione was lost in her thoughts and a little fantasy, but a throat clearing returned her to the present. She blushed slightly.

“You okay, Granger?” Draco smirked at her side.

“Fine, thank you,” Hermione replied, turning to the striking blond next to her.

“I’m afraid I must go as well,” Draco sighed. “There are things I need to go over with Father about your situation. We will be tracking down some additional resources this afternoon, I hope. I will see you tomorrow at the Manor for breakfast.”

Hermione nodded. She couldn’t quite put into words how much she appreciated Draco’s help, especially considering their history. If his father was as willing to assist her as Draco and Severus claimed, she knew she would have to express her gratitude to the elder Malfoy as well. It was not something Hermione would have imagined ever happening in her lifetime.

Draco stepped closer and his hands went up to either side of her face. He brushed his thumbs over her cheeks and lightly kissed her cheekbones, one after the other.

“Tomorrow,” Hermione murmured, her eyes closing at the feel of him touching her face. It sounded oddly like a promise, but Hermione had no idea what she was promising. She felt so muddled lately. All she knew was that she felt better around these wizards, more herself somehow.

Draco’s hands were gone and Hermione opened her eyes to watch his retreating form Floo away. He treated her with a naughty wink and a smirk before he left.

“Ready, kitten?” Adrian asked, sliding her arm through his so they could go through the Floo together.

Hermione nodded. Adrian still made her heart skip a beat. She didn’t know if that was something new, or a remnant of her schoolgirl crush on the older boy. He was so smooth and suave. She looked over to Blaise, who seemed amused.

“I’ll be right behind you,” Blaise grinned. “I am not much of a scholar, but I should be able to help wade through all those books.”

“Thank you, Blaise.” Hermione smiled. It really touched her that he was willing to spend a dull afternoon in a library, when he could surely be out doing more pleasurable and exciting things.

Adrian tossed a handful of Floo powder before placing his hand on hers, which was still tucked in the crook of his arm. He squeezed her hand and gave her a dazzling smile before calling out their destination.

Hermione was never graceful exiting a Floo, but Adrian kept her steady. She took a moment to take in her surroundings. They were standing in an opulent looking foyer. The floors were a lovely rose, grey, and white marble. The walls were cream colored and a large silver and crystal chandelier dominated the room.

“Welcome to my home,” Adrian murmured in her ear, wrapping his arm around her waist. “I hope you will be very comfortable here.”
“It’s lovely,” Hermione said with bated breath. Even though it was decadent looking, it somehow seemed light and soft without being overly frilly or feminine. She heard a noise behind them and watched Blaise glide smoothly out of the Floo. Maybe her lack of grace with Floo travel was a side effect of being Muggle-born and not having done it since she was a small child.

“My mother redecorated the whole house after the war,” Adrian reported.

“It was dark and ghastly before,” Blaise noted, pulling a sour face. “I know you never saw it before, but the difference is remarkable.”

“Yes,” Adrian agreed seriously. He sighed and held Hermione a little closer to him. “My father never wanted anything changed, but died a few months before the war.”

“I’m sorry,” Hermione said. She looked up at the beautiful wizard and leaned into him.

“Don’t be,” Adrian said simply, shrugging. “Hadrian was over a hundred and had been ill. He was eighty when I was born and my mother was only eighteen. Family legend has it that Hadrian first laid eyes on Mother when she was sixteen and was overwhelmed by her beauty. He was exceedingly wealthy and influential. Mother’s parents ‘strongly encouraged’ her to accept him, despite their age difference. They married as soon as she came of age. He wasn’t a bad husband or father, just pompous, proper, and set in his ways. He was a very serious wizard whose only moment of folly was marrying such a young wife. Mother had always wanted a life of lightness and mirth. Hadrian moved us out of Britain when it became clear that Voldemort was gaining power. He was unwilling to part with the money that Voldemort demanded and liked to think himself above the petty squabbles of lesser wizards, as he put it. We were taken on a mandatory holiday in Austria for the conflict. Hadrian had been ailing for years and finally expired shortly before the final battle. Since then, life here feels much lighter, especially for my mother.”

"Well, then I'll say that I admire how well you are adjusting to the loss of your patriarch," Hermione smiled softly. She had seen that circumstance before; when a death was timely and not a tragedy, but still a loss and an adjustment for those left behind. It was hard to know what to say sometimes. Adrian squeezed Hermione tightly and pressed his check into the top of her head, so Hermione hoped she said the right thing.

"Shall we find Theo?" Blaise suggested, breaking their moment.

Hermione nodded her agreement and Adrian loosened his grip, though he didn't release her entirely. Blaise obviously knew his way to the Pucey library, leading the way. The halls and rooms Hermione glimpsed through open doorways all reflected the same elegant, soft style of the main hall.

Blaise opened an unassuming door and ushered them all into a bright, airy library. Hermione inhaled deeply, taking in the familiar smell that seemed to be present in all libraries. It was a very large room with honey colored wood shelves, lots of windows, and fresh flowers all over. Hermione spied Theo at a large table surrounded by several small stacks of books.

Theo saw them after a moment and stood up to meet them halfway.

"Mi! How did it go today? What did Shacklebolt say? Did you see the papers?" Theo asked eagerly, reaching out for Hermione. Adrian loosened his grip to allow the other wizard his turn.

"Relax, Theo," Blaise chided. "We were there for her."

"It went pretty well actually," Hermione told Theo, returning his hug. "Kings offered all the
support of the Ministry. Did you know that the Department of Mysteries has been studying Sorcery for ages? The Director and main researcher are meeting us at Malfoy Manor tomorrow with their data."

"That will be interesting," Theo said, impressed. Hermione knew her scholarly friend would be excited about seeing this privileged research, just as she was. Theo's mind had always impressed her. Feeling his lithe frame pressed against hers was impressive too. "Let me show you what I've found so far, before we have lunch."

Hermione nodded. She forgot about lunch. Her appetite had been off lately, going to extremes. Of course, her companions would need to eat.

Theo had been busy. He must have been up at or before dawn. He scoured most of his own family library between last night and arriving at the Pucey's, making notes on anything Sorcery related. He'd already been in the Pucey library for several hours, locating volumes that might be helpful. He organized the information into four focus areas, each of the three rituals and then general/miscellaneous facts. He had color coded everything with different inks and had spelled a self-updating cross-referenced index system that would bind all their notes together, allowing them to easily add new information.

Hermione had never been more attracted to Theo in her life as when he laid out his organizational scheme. Hermione realized she was staring at Theo quite lustfully when Blaise chuckled.

"I should have guessed advanced research techniques would get you hot and bothered," Blaise snickered. Hermione blushed, tearing her eyes away from the glorious information and the brilliant wizard who created it.

"Everyone has their preferences," Hermione defended. She stole a look at Theo, who looked both aroused and proud.

"Before you tear off his robes, shall we have lunch?" Adrian purred in her ear. He pressed himself to her side and Hermione leaned into him. He smelled so wonderful. Hermione's libido had no idea where to go. Like with her appetite for food, her sexual appetite was all peaks and valleys. Since her press conference ended, it was definitely peaking. She blamed her unregulated magic and all the stress of the morning.

"Yes, let's," Hermione choked out, standing up suddenly. "I just realized that I am famished."

Blaise chuckled at her again, but came to her rescue by offering his arm to escort her out. Adrian and Theo followed, both with predatory looks on their faces. They were such different wizards, but Hermione found them both so appealing. Marcus and Draco were different too, all four of them were really; despite all being friends and all being Slytherins. She very briefly allowed herself to wonder which of them would consider being a candidate for the third ritual if she asked. Hermione quickly abandoned her train of thought. She had two other rituals to get through first.

Hermione was surprised to find herself in a lovely informal dining room, having been lost in thought. It was painted lavender and the round table was dressed with delicate China and crystal. Again, fresh flowers abounded in this room as well.

Adrian directed the seating, placing Hermione between himself and Theo. Hermione was about to ask about the fifth place setting when the most beautiful witch she'd ever seen glided into the room. She was tall and graceful, honey blond hair cascading down her back in perfect, shiny waves. Hermione recognized the high cheekbones and full lips as softer, more feminine versions of Adrian's features. Everyone at the table stood.
"Mother, come meet Hermione Granger," Adrian smiled. "Hermione, this is my mother, Arabella Pucey."

Adrian's mother had the same dazzling smile as her son and warmly embraced Hermione, kissing her on each cheek. The witch certainly didn't look like she was in her mid-forties. Magical folk did age slower, but Hermione would have never guessed this witch had a grown son.

"It is a pleasure, Hermione," Madam Pucey said genuinely. "Adrian has told me so much about you! I can see why he is so enamored of you. You are lovely! Those pictures the Daily Prophet ran of you from years ago don't do you justice at all!"

"The pleasure is mine, Madam Pucey," Hermione replied, blushing slightly at her comments. "I am sure the photos in the paper were accurate for the time. I had have made some changes since I was in school."

"You look charming, and please call me Arabella."

The lunch was light and elegant, just like their hosts. Arabella had an amazing spirit and joy for life. Hermione couldn't imagine her married to a sour centenarian. It was easy, however, to see where Adrian got his grace, beauty, and poise. The conversation was lively and, for once, did not revolve around Hermione's current situation. She appreciated not talking about it for a while, since everything seemed to revolve around the Sorcery lately. Arabella appeared to steer the conversation away from Hermione being a Sorceress. Maybe the older witch could tell Hermione needed a break.

After lunch, Hermione went to the library feeling refreshed. Adrian found dozens of books related to Sorcery, which Hermione and Theo prioritized by apparent helpfulness. Blaise started with the least helpful books, at his suggestion, taking notes on everything he found. Hermione and Theo worked their way through the more knowledgeable, detailed books. Adrian jumped in, randomly reading books in the queue after he felt he'd exhausted the shelves. The sheer volume of information was slightly daunting, but also reassuring. Hermione knew the more data she had, the better off she'd be. Theo had started a very good organizational system that helped put everything in its place. Hermione couldn't help being attracted to Theo in this element. He was studious and brilliant, which was undeniably sexy; especially when combined with his bookish good looks.

Adrian insisted the group break for a brief tea late in the afternoon, chiding Hermione about taking proper care of herself. He was such a sweet and thoughtful wizard. He seemed to be the type of wizard to know a witch's favorite things without having to be constantly reminded. Adrian knew how she took her tea and Hermione was surprised he'd paid that much attention to her habits in the few days of their acquaintance. Hermione knew what a treasure it was to find a wizard who knew the importance of paying attention to the little things.

"Kitten, it's after six," Adrian informed her. They had several productive hours in the library. "If you want to stop off anywhere before your dinner at Potter's, you may want to think about wrapping up here."

Hermione did want to freshen up and change, but she weighed that desire against working for another half hour.

"You need to take breaks to clear your head, Mi," Theo pointed out. "I can pack up what we've got so far and bring everything to breakfast at the Malfoys."
Hermione nodded and stood. Theo was right. She thanked Blaise for his help, both at the Ministry and in the last several hours. Hermione gushed again to Theo about all the work he'd done, and how touched she was. She couldn't help but fling her arms around his neck and kiss his cheek.

Theo held her against him.

"You are important to me, Mi," he said, staring into her eyes. "I hope you'll let me show you just how much."

Hermione blushed and nodded.

"I'll walk you too the Floo," Adrian interrupted after a moment of silence. Theo released her and Hermione took Adrian's arm.

"Thank you for all you've done today," she said as they walked.

"I care about you, kitten," Adrian replied easily, surprising her a little with his openness. They didn't know each other very well and Severus had taught her that Slytherins played their cards close to the vest. When Hermione observed these things to him, Adrian chuckled.

"Some of my mates like to joke I was wrongly sorted, because I'm too honest for Slytherin. I for one don't see the point in keeping everything to myself. I'm not the open book the other blokes would have you believe, but there is no harm in sharing this information. You aren't the kind of witch that would use my affection for your own agenda, so what harm can come from you knowing that I care? And I'm not the only one. You are important to Theo. You've lit a fire in Marcus. And Draco is happily refueling the flames of his old school crush on you."

Hermione scoffed.

"Firstly, Draco did not have a crush on me in school. He hated me. Secondly, it has only been a few days. None of you can have serious intentions towards me, especially given my situation. If I make it through this, I will come out of it with a lifetime bond that I'm not entirely in control of. I'm not in a position to choose one of you to date and see where it goes."

"You will make it through this," Adrian said sternly. They had arrived at the Floo and he turned her to look at him. She could see how serious he was. "We are not going to lose you, not when we've just found you. I can't speak for the intentions of the others, but let me say what I know about myself. I don't care how long it has been since we last spoke. Time can be an immaterial thing. It doesn't take all day to recognize sunshine. Sometimes, when a thing is a fact, it just is and time will not change it. I know I care about you. I know what I am getting into by having feelings for you. I also know that the identity of your future partner is not necessarily your choice, but I also know that I would count myself the luckiest wizard in Britain if your magic chose me."

Hermione felt overwhelmed. She was moved.

"I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything, kitten," Adrian smiled softly, running a knuckle gently down the side of her face. "I know this won't be your choice to make in the end. Your feelings and your magic will choose. My suggestion is to try to have some fun. The next several weeks will be grueling. You have four wizards at your disposal, who all want to help you take your mind off your troubles. Theo was right; you will need breaks to clear your head. Let me take you out to dinner this week."

"That would be nice," Hermione said honestly. He had a good point. If her magic was going to
choose her partner in the end, she could take some pressure off herself and just try to enjoy the flirtations and attentions of some amazing wizards.

"Good." Adrian's smile dazzled. "I want you to lend this to you. It is a journal from the Sorceress in my family. It doesn't have any technical information or things about the rituals you don't already know. I thought you might want to read it to relax. While it won't help with research, she does write about her feelings; about how overwhelmed and afraid she was. You are going through something no living person can relate to. I thought hearing from another Sorceress might make you feel less alone."

Tears welled up in Hermione's eyes. She reverently took the slim leather book from Adrian's hands. This was the most thoughtful thing he could possibly have done. He was correct. Fear and doubt crept in on her, especially at night when she was alone. At those times, she never felt more alone. It was a priceless gift to know that someone else had understood how she felt.

Hermione tried to find the words to express her gratitude, but they all seemed so hollow. She reached up and pulled Adrian to her. She brushed her lips softly over his. He was warm and soft. She wanted to taste more of him and pressed more firmly against his lips. Adrian responded in kind, his arms circling her waist. The feel, taste, and smell of him were a heady mixture that overwhelmed her senses. Hermione lost track of time and pulled away when a stray thought from the recesses of her brain reminded her that she did have somewhere to be later.

"Anything for you, kitten," Adrian said smiling, after Hermione had released him.

"Will I see you tomorrow?"

"I'll be at Malfoy Manor in the morning," Adrian nodded, caressing the side of her face again. Hermione was happy she would see him again soon. She pressed her check into his palm and nodded.

Hermione turned to Floo back to Spinner's End. She hoped Harry and the new Mrs. Potter wouldn't be too upset if she was ten minutes late.

Chapter End Notes

Next - Potters!
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer - I don't own Harry Potter
Now - Potters!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione blew into Spinner's End like a whirlwind. She didn't see Severus, so assumed he was still out researching. She shucked off her skirt and shirt then washed up. A cleansing charm would have been faster, but Hermione didn't trust her magic for even small, simple spells. It was times like this that Hermione was glad she'd cut her hair very short. She ran her fingers through it and went to pick out an outfit. She chose a lightweight pink tunic with a silvery beaded collar that extended onto the shoulders of the shirt. Hermione got it in Turkey. She pulled on grey Capri pants and beaded ballet flats.

Checking the clock above the mantle, Hermione noted she was fifteen minutes late. As she threw the Floo powder in and called out her destination, Hermione decided it was worth being late in order to kiss Adrian.

Hermione stumbled out into the Grimmauld Place kitchen, drawing the attention of the two residents. Harry was standing over an open oven, mitts covering his hands, and Pansy was leaning against the counter top. They all stared at each other for a moment. Hermione noted differences in both Grimmauld Place and in Pansy. Oddly, they were the same differences. Both seemed softer, homier, and less bleak. The house accomplished this with a good cleaning, new paint, and redecoration. Pansy's hair was longer and the cut was less severe than when they were in school. Her expression was not sour and she'd gained some weight, so she no longer looked painfully thin.

"Sorry I'm late," Hermione finally said, breaking the silence.

"Wow, you really do look different," Pansy observed. "When Harry told me about seeing you last night, I called him an utter arse for failing to recognize the best friend he's ever had. I guess I'll have to apologize for that comment at some point now. If I didn't know who you were, it would've taken me ages to place you."

"I'll say...thanks, I guess," Hermione replied. "You seem to have changed too."

"Of course," Pansy laughed. "How sad would it be if we were exactly the same as we were back in school?"

Hermione laughed along with her and Harry seemed to take that as a sign to resume whatever he had been doing with the oven. Something smelled good.

They all sat down and focused on dinner. Harry had cooked a chicken pie, which he served with fresh bread and a green salad. Pansy reported that Harry deserved all the credit, that she was pants at cooking. She had grown up with House-elves that did all the work, while Harry grew up being treated much like a House-elf. He was trying to teach his new wife a few simple recipes. So far, all she’d mastered was tea, scrambled eggs, and toast. Hermione felt that was a very good start. At least Pansy would be able to have breakfast.
Harry opened a bottle of wine and poured them all a healthy amount.

“I’d like to propose a toast,” Harry smiled. “To long lost friends – may they not be lost long. I am glad you are back, ‘Mione.”

Hermione smiled and agreed.

“So tell us what you have been doing for the past four years,” Pansy instructed.

“It’s a bit boring to tell the truth.”

“Indulge us,” Pansy said dryly. Hermione chuckled at the other witch’s sarcastic tone. Maybe she would like Pansy just fine.

“Well, as you know, I did well in my final year at Hogwarts.” Harry snorted at her understatement, but Hermione went on. “I was offered several apprenticeships in various fields with some prestigious Masters. I thought about accepting one, but Ron had been so difficult about me returning to Hogwarts that I knew he wouldn’t react well to me taking several more years to become a Master. Of course, once our relationship was over, I didn’t have to consider him and his feelings any longer.”

“Do you regret the breakup?” Harry asked tentatively.

“I don’t regret breaking up with him at all,” Hermione assured him. “We weren’t well matched. We had very different interests, personalities…morals. I regret that he cheated. I regret that I had to find out about it the way I did. I wish we had ended things earlier and on good terms, freeing me up to pursue my studies and him to pursue his groupies. While he was the worst fiancé, he was a decent friend most of the time.”

“He let the celebrity and money get to him,” Harry sighed, shaking his head. “You know how sensitive he always was about growing up without money and when I got all the attention.”

“I know.” Hermione shared Harry’s sigh. “It’s just too bad our relationship, even our friendship, had to be shattered in the course of him sewing his wild oats.”

“Enough about that prat,” Pansy interjected. “I know about the Weasel. Tell me what you’ve been doing!”

Hermione laughed and went on to tell stories about her training. She had started with Potions. The Master she apprenticed with was based out of Canada, but traveled extensively sourcing fresh and rare ingredients. Of course, Hermione went with him. She’d spent weeks near the Arctic Circle, several very pleasant months in the Caribbean, and the hottest six weeks of her life in the Brazilian rain forest at the peak of their hot season. That was where she cut off her trademark long, curly hair. It had been so steamy that her hair was plastered to her constantly, like a thick scarf. She tried to braid it back and put up, but the humidity made curls spring out everywhere.

Harry and Pansy laughed at her descriptions. Pansy even commented how much better she looked. The other witch reported that Hermione's bushy mane had always distracted from the rest of her. Now they could see her delicate bone structure and large whiskey colored eyes.

Hermione told stories about her eccentric Potions Master, Marc Bouchard. He was in his eighties and had some pretty revolutionary ideas. He melted or blew up a cauldron at least once a month trying some experimental thing. Hermione was more a plan ahead, think things through person than a trial-and-error and ‘let's just see what happens’ person. Master Bouchard helped her learn to be more experimental, to understand that she didn't have to know how things were going to turn out
before giving it a try. Harry agreed that that was a good thing for Hermione to learn.

While working on her Master in Potions under Bouchard, Hermione met some of the world’s most prominent scholars and up-and-coming intellectuals. Another of Bouchard’s revolutionary ideas was cross-discipline consultation and experimentation. Herbology and, to a lesser extent, knowledge of magical creatures had always factored largely in Potions. Bouchard also loved to see how Transfiguration, Alchemy, Charms, Runes, and Arithmancy influenced Potions. It was through these interactions that Hermione got to know Selma Turan, a Turkish witch and one of the top Masters of Arithmancy in the world. Hermione described Selma as a kindred spirit. She was only about ten years older and was just as invested in learning as Hermione. Harry laughed, saying that was not possible.

When she had achieved her Master of Potions, Hermione went to visit Selma in Istanbul and then stayed on to do a second apprenticeship to Master in Arithmancy. Once in Turkey, Hermione didn’t travel around as much as she had the previous two years. She was still surrounded by fellow intellectuals, however, as Selma was a popular, cutting edge Arithmancer whose services were in high demand.

Hermione felt like she’d been talking for ages, but both Harry and Pansy seemed to very interested and asked loads of questions. Their plates were empty and the second bottle of wine was half-gone.

“So, with all the hobnobbing you were doing with all the smartest people of the world, did you find a wizard to replace the easily replaceable Weasel?” Pansy asked, a teasing tone lacing her voice.

“Pansy!” Harry scolded.

“What? It is a perfectly reasonable question,” Pansy defended. “We are hearing about what your friend has been up to. She is a smart, pretty, grown witch. I doubt she’s refrained from fraternizing with wizards, or maybe it was witches, for four years!”

Hermione laughed, but Harry just rolled his eyes and started clearing the table.

“I did not ‘refrain from fraternizing,’ as you said,” Hermione said, chuckling. “I engaged in some very nice…flings, and a few relationships.”

“Anybody we would have heard of?” Pansy asked eagerly, leaning forward.

Harry snorted from across the kitchen, where he was setting cleaning charms to wash their dishes. For some reason his disapproval of the conversation made Hermione laugh again, well that and all the wine she had drank. She figured they were all nicely tipsy.

“What kind of witch would I be if I kissed and told?” Hermione teased Pansy. She knew Harry didn’t want to hear details about her sex life, since he’d always seen her as a sister.

“The normal kind who dishes with her friends,” Pansy scoffed. Hermione had never had many close female friends. Selma was the closest female friend she had, and they didn’t often dish about wizards for various reasons. Of course, living with Lavender Brown and Pavarti Patil, Hermione was very familiar with the practice. She’d just never had anything to add back then.

“Well, I guess there was someone well known,” Hermione said, grinning and blushing at the same time. “I spent a lovely few weeks with Heathcote Barbary in the Caribbean when I was there with Bouchard.”

“Heathcote Barbary!? From the Weird Sisters?” Pansy was bouncing in her seat.
“A rock musician, Hermione?” Harry chided, although his tone was more teasing than anything.

“It is a fantasy most witches have,” Pansy grinned. “How was it?”

“Just loads of carefree fun,” Hermione replied. She smiled remembering. Heathcote knew how to have a good time, which wasn’t entirely surprising given his profession. “I had a few flings like that over the years. Of course, Heathcote was the only famous rock star. The others were more along the lines of regular wizards; a winged-horse breeder on the United States west coast, a lesser Count in the Danish wizarding royal family, a wizard in our security detail in Central Africa, and another apprentice visiting with his Master. He was a Metamorphmagus studying Transfiguration, which was very interesting in the bedroom.”

Pansy cackled with laughter.

"A rock star, a real American cowboy, a Prince, a bodyguard, and someone who could literally look like anyone during sex? I am so jealous right now."

"Hey!” Harry protested as he sat back down at the table.

"I was just admiring her sewing her wild oats," Pansy soothed, stroking his arm. "Not every witch has such adventures before she settles down."

"No one has such adventures," Hermione scolded. "The horse breeder was not a cowboy, the Count wasn't a Prince, the Metamorphmagus usually looked like himself, and the security wizard...well, he was a bodyguard. But the rest is exaggeration."

"Maybe, but that’s how you should tell it from now on," Pansy advised. "It would be sexier that way."

"You mentioned actual relationships," Harry said, rolling his eyes lovingly at his wife and obviously trying to change the subject.

"Just two really," Hermione reported. "Both lasted about six months."

"And who were these delicious wizards?" Pansy asked. "A billionaire playboy and the Prince of Morocco?"

"No," Hermione laughed. "Just a former Potions professor and a former Quidditch player."

Hermione could see the wheels turning in Harry’s head before his eyes bugged out. He'd obviously known she and Severus had been in touch over the years, but Hermione knew Severus would never have disclosed his own personal business to Harry.

"No!" Pansy gasped, looking gleeful. "Snape?"

Hermione nodded.

"I am so jealous! Snape is so sexy," Pansy squealed. "All the Slytherin witches have had a crush on him at some point during Hogwarts. As far as I know no former students had ever managed to catch him, until now!"

"Snape?!" Harry questioned incredulously. "Snape is sexy?"

He looked back and forth between the two witches, who were both nodding enthusiastically.

"He is powerful, dark, and mysterious," Pansy said as if it were the most obvious thing in the
world. "Plus he has that deep, silky voice that is sexy as hell."

"Don't forget his hands," Hermione interjected.

"Right! He has those long, tapered fingers and his hands look so...capable."

"You are both very disturbing," Harry reported, giving a shake as if he were shivering. Hermione just chuckled and rolled her eyes.

"Why didn't it work out, if you don't mind me asking?" Pansy asked a little gently.

"Now you ask permission to be nosy?" Harry scoffed.

"We wanted different things," Hermione shrugged. "Severus doesn't want to have children ever; while that is still something I want one day. It ended years ago. So now, we are just good friends."

Pansy nodded knowingly. Sometimes, no matter how much you care for a person, it just isn't a good match.

"So was the other relationship you had with Lockhart or Trelawney?" Harry teased. Hermione made a face. What disgusting notions.

"No," she said pointedly. "Viktor Krum. Bulgaria borders Turkey you know. He retired from play last year and he came to look me up in Istanbul. It was nice dating as adults. He has always been one of the sweetest wizards I've ever known."

"What happened there?" Harry asked, sounding a little disappointed. Hermione knew Harry always liked Viktor. Even though they competed against each other in the Tri-Wizard Tournament, Harry confided in Hermione that he wouldn't mind if Viktor won because he was always so sweet to her.

"It was similar to what happened with Severus," Hermione sighed. "Viktor had retired because he wanted to get married and start having children, away from the spotlight. He found me because I was, in his words,' the most quality, best witch' he'd ever dated. It was just all too fast for me. Sometimes I got the feeling it was a family Viktor wanted most, not me. I was just his top choice for a wife and mother. I suspect I was right, because he got engaged last month to a very sweet, family oriented Romanian witch. She was a former athlete too, a gymnast I think, and so they have loads in common."

This time both Harry and Pansy nodded knowingly.

"I've been talking about myself all night!" Hermione scolded. "You are supposed to tell me about yourselves and fill me in on the gossip here! Severus is pants at gossip."

"I'm surprised Draco and Blaise haven't filled you in," Harry chuckled. "They are two of the biggest gossips I know."

"Worse than Lavender?" Hermione laughed.

"Much!" Harry confirmed.

"Well, they've been focused on helping me with this Sorceress business," Hermione pointed out. "But I want to forget about that for a while. You two can tell me where everyone from school is now and what they are doing."

"You've found yourself nestled in quite the snake pit," Pansy observed, looking at Hermione
speculatively. Hermione blushed slightly thinking about the four wizards she was so attracted to. Pansy just watched her reaction. "We will have to talk about that later. In the mean time, you've come to the right place for information. Let's take dessert in the lounge and we'll get you caught up."

Dessert turned out to be Harry's favorite treacle tart. Pansy was right; Hermione did come to the right place for information. Between Harry and his wife, they knew tidbits of information about everyone.

Harry basically enjoyed being an Auror. He was disappointed at first because he never got to go out on covert or undercover operations. He wasn't even assigned surveillance. It made sense really. Harry had one of, if not the, most recognizable face in Wizarding Britain. Instead, he was assigned to do a lot of public outreach, talking to citizens and children about Magical Law Enforcement. He found he actually liked listening to people's concerns and problems. Often, Harry could help do something to help. That's really all he ever wanted, to help people.

Pansy had studied to be a Healer, specializing in spell damage. She'd finished her training last year and now worked in the St. Mungos, most often in the emergency room. All the damage and death she'd seen during the war had made a profound impact on the young witch. She'd felt so scared and helpless in Hogwarts, unable to help Harry's side and unwilling to fully align herself with Voldemort as her family had done. The wonderful thing about being a Healer was she could treat everyone that needed help, regardless of politics. She made them better, and then left it to law enforcement to sort out the rest.

Pansy worked with Anthony Goldstein, Justin Finch-Fletchley, and Daphne Greengrass, who were all Healers too. Daphne was engaged to Terrance Higgs. Harry said Katie Bell and Cormac McLaggen were field Aurors. Dennis Creevey and Romilda Vane worked with the Aurors in supply and support.

Lavender Brown and Colin Creevey both worked for the Daily Prophet, she as a gossip columnist and he as a photographer. Seamus Finnigan opened up a pub in Diagon Alley that did very well. Neville Longbottom had apprenticed under Professor Sprout and became a Master in Herbology. He was set to be the new Herbology Professor in the coming fall, since Sprout had announced her retirement. Neville had become quite the heartbreaker over the years, really coming into his looks. It turned out as witches got older some of them realized they did like nice, sweet wizards. He hadn't settled down yet though.

Pavarti Patil ran off with a very much older and very wealthy wizard from Russia. She moved around a lot, going from villa to castle to beach house. The last Gryffindor from their year, Dean Thomas, was a solicitor for the Ministry. He was in the papers a few months ago, when his engagement to Ginny Weasley imploded quite spectacularly. It turned out Dean had an on-again, off-again relationship with Michael Corner that Dean’s family had never approved of. In the end, Dean decided his loving relationship with Michael was the one he really wanted. Ginny shouldn’t have felt too scorned, since she was seeing Terry Boot on the side; but that was not the case and she made sure the press heard about it. Pansy guessed that Ginny had rushed to get engaged to Dean because Harry had married.

"Do you want to hear about the Weasleys at all, 'Mione?" Harry asked tentatively.

"I don't mind," Hermione assured him. She really didn't feel much about Ron anymore. It didn't hurt her to hear of him. "I saw Charlie a few times in Romania in the past four years. Bouchard liked the dragon scales that came from his preserve. I thought it would be awkward seeing him, but it wasn't really. After that, I always made it a point to stop by and see him when I was in Romania."
We mostly talked about dragons and other things not related to home. We didn’t talk much about the family. He did tell me about Molly and Arthur, though. When I was there last year, I got the impression he wasn't happy with Ron."

"That's an understatement," Pansy snorted.

"Ron...well, as I said, Ron let fame and money go to his head," Harry explained. "He kept up his ways, spending his time with groupies and gold-diggers. About two years ago, a witch came out of nowhere saying she’d had Ron's baby. It was a little boy. It turns out Ron always felt it was the witch's job to manage the contraception. It didn't seem to occur to him that some unscrupulous witch might want to trap him with a child."

"Poor, stupid, stupid Ron." Hermione shook her head. It seemed that he got his due. Maybe he would learn a lesson about how he treated others.

"Well, it gets worse," Harry sighed. "Ron didn't marry that witch, but does financially support her and his son. Last year another witch surfaced. This one wasn't toting an infant, but was six months pregnant. Molly had been livid the first time around, but opted to heap most of the blame on the witch. This most recent time though, she felt Ron should have known better. All of his brothers are extremely disappointed. They thought he’s shown incredibly bad judgment."

"Well, he has," Pansy sneered. "Any wizard worth his salt can do a contraception charm in a matter of seconds. I think he just didn't bother."

Hermione just shook her head. Ron had two children. It was going to take her a while to wrap her head around that idea. She just couldn’t picture him as the responsible, father type.

"He does live with this last witch, Ginger," Harry defended, though it clearly was hard for him to do so. “Ginger had a little girl, Melody, and since then Ron has really been trying. I’m trying to give him credit for that, rather than just assuming he isn’t going to change.”

Pansy rolled her eyes and Harry looked at her sternly.

“I don’t say anything in front of him when we’ve seen him,” Pansy defended herself. “I do feel a little sorry for Ginger. She seems to have real affection for the Weasel. I get the feeling he is just trying to do right so he doesn't disappoint his family, again. Ginger is a bit dim, but she isn't the bad sort. Unfortunately, the entire Weasley clan still seems miffed at Ron for losing you.”

"Me?" Hermione was surprised. She had loved Ron's parents and brothers. She keenly felt the devastation along with the family when Fred died in battle. But of course, she knew Ron got to keep them in the breakup.

"Most of them prefer you as a person I'd wager," Pansy smirked. "They have to love him and stand by him when he behaves like a moron because he’s family. Molly especially wanted you as an official family member. Poor, dim Ginger suffers in comparison."

"How are the rest of the Weasley children, besides Charlie?" Hermione asked, changing the subject. The best thing about Ron had been his family and she missed them.

"Ginny plays for the Hollyhead Harpies and quite likes it," Harry reported. "She's good too. It's just her personal life that is a mess."

"I'm all for a witch getting some of her own," Pansy put in. "Ginny is single, young, and pretty. There's no reason she shouldn't enjoy the company of as many wizards as she wants as well as a posh lifestyle. She has a holier-than-thou attitude that rubs me the wrong way, as if she is above
wanting sex, money, and attention. If you are going to do it, own it. That's all I have to say.”

"Doubtful," Harry teased his wife before continuing. "Percy is doing well. He works for Kingsley at the Ministry. That first year without Fred was hard on George, as you know. I didn't know you wrote him from Hogwarts. He told us later that your letters were his saving grace. Apparently, you struck the right balance of sympathy, practicality, and hope. Leaving Ron to pursue your goals inspired George in a strange way. He said bad things happen, but smart, strong people must move on; that when life doesn’t go the way we plan, you have to adjust the plan. He began working on new products again, ones he and Fred had just started to dream up. Lee Jordan is now George's full partner. Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes opened a second store in Hogsmeade over a year ago. They are doing very well. Bill and Fleur have two children now, a girl and a boy. They both work at Gringotts and are still living at Shell Cottage. Now that you are back in town, I am sure George, Arthur, and Molly will want to see you soon."

"That would be nice," Hermione agreed. She didn't particularly want to run into Ron yet, but that would be an easy thing to avoid with a little planning.

They talked a little more about mutual acquaintances. Harry and Pansy relayed the highlights of scandals, funny things that happened, and some sad things. Hermione was glad to hear it all. She was under no misunderstanding that life back home had been on pause the years she was gone.

A third bottle of wine was mostly empty when Harry and Pansy's stories began to focus on Hermione’s new Slytherin friends. Of course, there were plenty of stories about Adrian, Blaise, Draco, and Marcus’ misdeeds. There were fewer stories about Theo, as he seemed to be slightly better behaved than his friends. It did seem that when Theo really got in his cups, he became overly brave and confident. That sort of thinking had him challenging Aurors to duels in the street and stripping off all his clothes in the middle of a Quidditch match. Marcus, not surprisingly, was known for fighting. Pansy and Harry stressed that Marcus didn’t tend to start fights, but that he was often targeted due to his size and reputation, and Marcus wasn’t one to back down.

Other than Theo’s drunken exploits and Marcus’ reputation for fighting, most of the stories had to do with witches. It seemed that none of them had really been in any long-term relationships. In fact, they seemed to treat witches as generally disposable, which gave Hermione some pause. Adrian had said he would be honored if her magic chose him to bind to her, but none of them had really ever tried to be with one witch for any time. Hermione knew she wouldn’t be able to share her wizard with other witches. Throughout all these stories, Hermione saw Pansy watching for her reactions.

"So, are you going to have a go with one or more of them?" Pansy finally asked, her words slurring slightly from all the wine.

"Oh I don’t know," Hermione groaned, flopping sideways on the sofa where she had been sitting. She buried her face in the cushions.

"Well what are you thinking?" Pansy pressed. Hermione rolled over on the sofa and faced Harry and Pansy.

"That Adrian is an amazing kisser," Hermione sighed. "Marcus is so hot I want to climb him like a tree. Draco pushes every single button I have, including the naughty ones. And Theo is the perfect mix of brains and body that I almost jumped on him and snogged him in a library today."

"So it is fair to say there is some attraction there," Harry laughed.

"It isn’t funny," Hermione scolded. She knew she was pouting. It was the drink that was bringing
out her immature side, she was sure. “Adrian said that with everything else going on, I need to just let them distract me and have fun.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Pansy asked, slumping slightly against Harry.

“I don’t get a choice really if I make it to the final ritual,” Hermione said somewhat bitterly. She rolled off the sofa to sit on the floor. Being upright felt better, like she was less pissed. “What if I find I really like one of them for the long term, but then my magic binds me to someone else? What if I have a little taste of something that I can never have again, and I am stuck missing it for the rest of my life? What if they are happy having some fun now, but none of them will come to the third ritual because they don’t want to be chosen? Being an Ancillary is a lifetime commitment!”

“Sounds like you are over thinking this, ‘Mione,” Harry slurred. “You do that too much. Adrian is right. Just try to have some fun. You deserve it! If you feel yourself starting to get too attached, back off if you need to.”

“You might not make it through all this,” Pansy pointed out.

“Hey!” Hermione and Harry both protested.

“Just think of it this way,” Pansy argued. “If these are your last three weeks of life, are you going to regret spending time with these blokes no matter how it turns out? On the other hand, if you chose to keep them at arm’s length, are you going to regret not knowing what you could have had?”

Hermione was quiet while her intoxicated brain processed what Pansy said. She really had nothing to lose here. It was entirely possible she had only a few weeks left.

“You are a devilishly smart witch you know that?” Hermione said told Pansy. She tried to stand, but a wave of exhaustion coupled with all the wine made her plop back down on her bum.

“I know,” Pansy nodded. “I’ve also been told I’m a terrible influence.”

“She is,” Harry agreed. He dragged himself to a standing position. “I’ll Floo-call Severus and let him know you are staying the night here. You are much too pissed to be traipsing back to Spinner’s End on your own.”

“I’ll show you to the guest room!” Pansy offered brightly, swaying slightly as she stood.

“I’ve got to be at Malfoy Manor in the morning for breakfast,” Hermione said to no one.

“I’ll Floo-call Severus and let him know you are staying the night here. You are much too pissed to be traipsing back to Spinner’s End on your own.”

The two witches made their way upstairs slowly, leaning on each other. Pansy pushed Hermione gently toward the bed in the guest room.

“Just remember,” Pansy advised, “do what feels right and don’t worry so much about the consequences when it comes to those wizards. You already have the Sorceress thing to contend with. Choosing to snog or shag some blokes is really a minor thing in the grand scheme, now isn’t it?”

Pansy shut the door and Hermione ran Pansy’s advice from that evening through her mind several times. It did seem like a silly thing to worry about. If she was going to be a bloody Sorceress she
may as well try to have some fun along the way. The only question was, where or with whom to start?

Chapter End Notes

Next - Malfoy Manor
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer - It's probably best I don't own Harry Potter, I'd make them do odd things.
Now - Malfoy Manor!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Draco paced a bit anxiously in front of the Floo. He was walking slowly under the pretense of stretching his legs. Adrian and Theo didn’t challenge his reasoning, just as Draco didn’t point out that Theo was biting his fingernails or that Adrian’s leg kept bouncing up and down. She was coming soon and none of them wanted to wait any longer.

Of course, not everyone in the room was so kind as to ignore their obvious impatience.

“Draco, sit down,” Lucius instructed imperiously. “Theo, stop that this instant. Adrian, if you insist on jostling so much, then go sit in one of the chairs. You are shaking the sofa. What has got into you all?”

“They’ll be this way until she arrives,” Blaise explained. Draco shot a glare at his friend.

“I am curious to see how the little chit has turned out,” Lucius mused, his lips curling to a slight grin.

Draco had talked to his father at length now about Sorcery and all that Lucius had discovered for Voldemort over the years. He knew that any hesitation his parents may have had about Granger’s ‘lack of breeding’ was immediately wiped out because she would be the most powerful magical person in the world. Lucius and Narcissa retained some prejudices about Muggle-born and Muggle-raised people. It wasn’t so much a blood purity issue, as social snobbery. They wanted Draco to marry someone within their social circle, with the same long history of money and wizarding culture in their family. They looked down at the newly wealthy as well. They were really your run of the mill elitists.

Of course, parental approval was not one of his concerns when it came to Granger. Not just because no one could possibly deny a Sorceress her chosen Ancillary, but also because he didn’t care. Draco would deal with friction in the family if it meant he got Granger.

Draco wondered if she would ask him to be an Ancillary candidate. He hoped so. The more he thought about it, about her, the more certain he became that this was what he wanted. Regardless, he would be there even if she didn’t invite him. Her magic might pick him, even if he was outside the Ancillary candidate circle. He was certain Theo felt the same way. He was pretty sure about Ades and Marcus, too. They weren't the sort for monogamy and commitment, but then again neither was he until Granger came back. They had both showed an unprecedented amount of interest in Granger. Draco would bet she had at least the four of them for her Ancillary circle. He wondered if she would need more, if she would want more wizards for her magic to choose from.

Finally, the Floo flared to life. Granger stepped out with a little stumble. Draco reached out to steady her and then basked in the glow of her grateful smile. She looked amazing. She was wearing black cropped trousers, a gauzy draped cream-colored top, and what looked to be silvery-gray
Basilisk skin flats.

“Thank you, Draco,” she said.

“Anytime,” he purred, pressing his lips to her temple. Granger leaned into him, which Draco appreciated. He also saw that Adrian and Theo were on their feet and headed toward them.

“Good morning, Mi,” Theo smiled broadly, grasping her hands in his. She returned his greeting, appearing just as happy as he was.

“Wonderful to see you again, kitten,” Adrian grinned, snaking his arm around her on the opposite side from Draco. Granger blushed slightly at Adrian, and Draco had to wonder what that was about.

“Don’t make me lose my stomach before I even eat breakfast,” Severus sneered at the wizards as the glided easily out of the Floo. Draco reluctantly took half a step back, as did the other two wizards.

Hermione greeted Blaise warmly and then her eyes settled on his father. Draco froze for a moment, wondering what she would say and do. His father rose up from his seat gracefully. They stared at each other for a moment.

"Mister Malfoy," Hermione nodded coolly.

Draco watched his father bow deferentially and was more than a little surprised.

"Sorceress Granger," Lucius nodded.

"I'm not a Sorceress yet, Mister Malfoy," Hermione snapped. She then softened her tone. "Thank you for opening up your home to us today and for lending us your considerable expertise in this matter."

Lucius nodded and offered Hermione his arm. Draco wished he'd thought of that. As the hosts, it was their duty to escort and see to their guests.

"We have breakfast ready in the morning room," Lucius reported. Hermione paused, but then tucked her arm into his. "I am honored to be of assistance at this time, Miss Granger. I have amassed a considerable wealth of information about Sorcery over the years. As Severus may have told you, it was a directive rather than a personally chosen area of study. Despite that, I could not help but find the subject fascinating. I have always found powerful magic interesting, sometimes to my great detriment."

"Indeed," Hermione agreed. Draco chuckled at his father's reference to his time following Voldemort. Detrimental was certainly an understatement. Lucius had been young, rash, and immature when he first aligned himself with the Dark Lord. The crazy wizard’s agenda changed considerably over time, eventually coming to focus on genocide and world domination. Draco had read that the Muggles had a similar problem with a world leader in the last century. He'd always been curious about how they had handled it. Maybe he would ask Granger. He figured she would appreciate his showing an interest in Muggle history.

"As to your not being a Sorceress yet, Miss Granger," Lucius continued, "given the sheer intelligence and determination of yourself and your close friends, I can't imagine this will be unsuccessful."

"I wish I had your faith, Mister Malfoy," Hermione laughed dryly.
They entered the morning room where a decadent looking breakfast was laid out on two long sideboards. Three gleaming silver tea services were spread out along the dining table.

"Let’s not wait on the others," Lucius instructed, gesturing for Hermione to begin. "They can help themselves when they arrive shortly."

"Will Mrs. Malfoy be joining us?" Hermione asked as she picked up a plate.

Draco slid into line behind Hermione, so he could be closer to her. His father just smirked at Draco for cutting him off.

"No, Mother is with Blaise's mother having a spa week in Switzerland," Draco supplied. He watched her make food selections and noted what she liked and what she avoided. "They won't be back until tomorrow evening."

The group settled around the large table with their breakfast and tea. Draco snagged a chair next to Granger and Theo managed to get the other before Adrian. Draco tried not to laugh aloud at Ades' clear disappointment, but he did let out a little chuckle. Draco's laughter was short-lived, however.

"My mother sends her regards, Hermione," Ades smiled from across the table. "She knows you are busy, but was hoping to see you again if that is alright with you."

"That would be lovely," Hermione replied. "Arabella is a delightful witch. I very much enjoyed her company. And as you told me, I need to take some breaks to have fun, because the next several weeks will be grueling."

"Does that mean you will go out with me tonight?" Ades turned his smile up several degrees. Draco had heard witches comment on his dazzling smile and fairy-tale good looks. Draco froze up waiting for Granger's response and he saw Theo do the same. Blaise, Severus, and his father just looked on with amusement.

"I have no plans tonight, so that would be lovely," Hermione said sweetly. "I thought about what you said yesterday. Harry and Pansy, well mostly Pansy, agreed with you, Adrian. I have three weeks until I am bound for life to a wizard not necessarily of my choosing. There is no reason not to have fun and enjoy the company of friends before that time, especially since I have the good fortune to have such delightful new friends."

Draco silently blessed Pansy. She was just the type of witch to advise Hermione to relax and have fun. Since the war, Pansy advocated living in the moment and enjoying life.

"Delightful and handsome friends," Draco corrected her, taking a sip of his tea. Granger laughed her wonderful, melodic laugh.

"And smart," Theo put in, smiling.

"Right," Hermione agreed, "Delightful, handsome and smart friends."

"Getting back to business at hand," Severus said, rolling his eyes at the beaming wizards, "who else are we expecting today? Just the Ministry contingent?"

"I believe so," Hermione nodded. "It should be Director Penrose and Ms. Figgelow, the Sorcery research expert. Healer Adams wants to consult, as do several others, but I don’t want to be overwhelmed by too many people. After breakfast, we can begin to compare notes."

A few minutes later, an impeccably dressed House Elf entered and announced the arrival of the
Ministry staff. Everyone stood as Director Penrose entered, followed by two others. He’d brought a very tall and thin black haired witch and a familiar looking wizard with a shock of unmistakable red hair.

"Percy!" Hermione exclaimed, going over to the Weasley. Draco suppressed his desire to roll his eyes. It always seemed as if Weasleys were everywhere. "What are you doing here?"

"I’m here to assist you, ’Mione," the redhead smiled, giving her a quick hug. "Minister Shacklebolt said you would need an assistant, so he assigned me."

“Right, I’d forgotten about that.” Hermione smiled. She turned to Lucius next. “Mister Malfoy, do you mind if I introduce everyone?”

Draco puffed up slightly with pride and gave his father a knowing grin. Lucius would have forgiven Granger if she had no manners because she was a Sorceress. She was, however, a witch of intelligence, beauty, and grace. Draco liked that his father would see it, would see that he could set his snobbery aside. As the Sorceress, she hadn’t needed to ask the host permission for anything. Technically, it was her party; Lucius was just hosting it.

Lucius nodded deeply and made a gesture of deference. Hermione introduced Lucius, Severus, Adrian, Blaise, Draco, and Theo. Then she introduced herself, entirely for that Figgelowe witch’s benefit, since everyone else knew her.

Director Penrose followed suit and introduced himself, Percy Weasley, and researcher, Bronwyn Figgelowe. Draco’s eyes perused the new witch in the room. At one point in his life, he would have been sizing her up to decide if she was worth shagging. Of course, now, he couldn’t care less. The only witch he wanted to shag was Granger. The new witch was passable. She was probably a few years older than him, maybe Adrian’s age. She was quite tall for a witch and very thin in that willowy sort of way. Her hair was pitch black and her face was pretty enough, or it would be if she didn’t look so pinched.

“Now that we all know each other, please join us for breakfast,” Lucius invited.

OoOoO

The three newcomers helped themselves and sat down at the table. Theo went back to his breakfast. He registered the fact that Figgelowe sat next to him, Percy between Adrian and Blaise, and Penrose seemed most comfortable by the older wizards.

“So, Ms. Figgelowe, please tell us about yourself,” Hermione invited, smiling at the witch. Theo loved her smile. She was such a warm person. Theo hadn’t had much warmth growing up. His father was wonderful, but he grieved over his wife’s death for so long. Theo was left with a sad father and no mother.

“Please, call me Bronwyn,” the witch replied. Theo turned to look at her, taking a moment to study her for the first time since she came in the room. Her voice was a bit too high pitched, which Theo imagined would become grating over time or harpy-like if the witch was in a temper. She also looked haughty, her nose stuck up slightly. Theo decided to give her the benefit of the doubt. This new witch found herself in infamous company. She might be trying to look more confident than she felt, but was erring on the side of arrogance rather than confidence. “I graduated from the Salem Institute seven years ago. I was Valedictorian and top of my class. I spent the next three years working in the Wizarding Intelligence Agency in Washington, DC. After your war was over, I came to work at the Ministry of Magic in the Department of Mysteries.”
“What brought you to England?” Hermione asked.

“My mother is British, so I used to come here to visit as a child. She moved to the States after she met my father. He’s non-magical. He is a tenured professor in mathematics at MIT and recipient of the Fields medal,” Bronwyn reported loftily. As she talked about herself, Theo thought she looked more and more arrogant. He didn’t know what an MIT was or if a Fields medal was prestigious.

“I’ve heard such wonderful things about the Salem Institute,” Hermione said, sighing. Theo smirked. The American school for witchcraft and wizardry was teaching some fairly cutting edge concepts, particularly in areas that merge magic with Muggle technology. Theo had gone to an interesting summer seminar series there on the subject last year. Of course, he was still partial to his own alma mater. Hogwarts might not be the most innovative place, but it taught the necessary basics and it did a top-rate job at that. Theo strongly believed young witches and wizards needed solid basics more than they needed experimental ideas. Once they had good basics, they could study those other things later. Without the basics, they would have no theoretical background from which to grow.

“It is the premier school for magic in the world,” the new witch said with certainty. Theo felt himself bristle and noticed most others do the same. For all her arrogance, Theo didn’t think this Bronwyn tart wasn’t very smart. At least the Bronwyn witch noticed the narrowed eyes focused her way. “But I have heard that Hogwarts is quite…classic and quaint.”

“They do a good job of teaching the fundamentals, which I appreciated,” Hermione nodded. She didn’t seem too fazed by this new witch insulting their school. “They could use some changes, as I am sure most old institutions could. What made you interested in Sorcery?”

“Sorcery covers multiple disciplines,” Bronwyn reported, as if she were starting a lecture. Theo rolled his eyes and focused back on his food. They had a lot of work to do today and the sooner they were done with this little social hour, the better. “It requires Charms, Potions, and the use of very strong, precise spell casting. I excel at those things, as well as Arithmancy. I have been using Arithmancy over the past several years to work on generating the statistical prediction of the date and location of the next Sorcerer or Sorceress.”

“What a good idea!” Hermione smiled. “Have you been using the Mandelbrot Set or Cantor’s Probability Theorem in your calculations?”

“Neither,” Bronwyn reported. “I’ve used the Strazinsky Principle.”

Theo felt her tone toward Hermione was condescending and he stared at the witch, incredulous. Did this Figgelowe chit not know with whom she was dealing? He noticed that Lucius and Percy shared his look of incredulity. Draco and Severus were sneering at the witch scathingly. Blaise and Adrian looked irritated. Director Penrose just looked embarrassed by his employee.

“But that’s for factoring probability with at least two known mathematical constants,” Hermione said, looking perplexed. Theo snickered. He couldn’t help it. He wasn’t laughing at Bronwyn, although she deserved it. He was laughing over the fact that Hermione had assumed that this witch would be as smart as she was, or at least close, because of her job. “Nevermind. I guess there is no use in predicting the location of the next Sorceress now.”

Most people chuckled, breaking the tension this new person had created in the room.

“If everyone is finished eating, we may as well get started,” Hermione continued. “Shall we adjourn to the library? Mister Malfoy, if you would be so kind to lead the way?”
Lucius led them and Draco took the opportunity to guide Hermione. Theo wasn’t entirely sure what to make of his feelings. He wanted Hermione, more than anything. He wished, hoped, and dreamed that her magic would choose him, and that he would be with her always. Despite this fervent desire, he wasn’t bothered by the fact that his friends wanted the same thing. The jealousy he felt about her going on a date with Adrian later wasn’t because she was with someone else, but because it wasn’t his turn yet. Theo knew he had the best arrangement though. He got to spend every day with her researching. And, as he saw yesterday, she was attracted to his intelligence and scholarship. He tried not to get too distracted imagining shagging her on the table in the library the day before, but it was an irresistible fantasy.

Theo had been in the Malfoy library before and it was truly impressive. He watched Hermione’s eyes widen and take in the splendor. Director Penrose had a very similar look on his face, but Theo didn’t care so much about that. Draco looked proud to be able to give this to her. Access to this library was one of the best things Draco could offer Hermione as a gift if really wanted to court her. Finally, Hermione and Penrose got over their awe enough to settle with the others around the large oval table.

Theo set down his large case, full of the research they had done so far. It had several lightening charms on it as well as undetectable extension charms; otherwise, he would not have been able to lift it. He snorted softly at the sight of Bronwyn hefting her similar looking case, which was clearly too heavy for her. If the chit ‘excelled’ at charms as she claimed, she shouldn’t have had trouble.

“Thank you, everyone, for coming,” Hermione announced. “I would like to start with discussion of the first ritual, although I’m open to suggestions regarding the order.”

“Shouldn’t Director Penrose be leading this meeting?” Bronwyn interjected.

“Why would he?” Hermione asked, honestly curious.

“Isn’t the Ministry organizing the rituals for you? The details of what goes into the rituals are complicated. You needn’t try to understand it all. All you have to do is be on time and follow our directions,” Bronwyn explained. Her condescending tone was thick and unmistakable. Theo’s mouth hung open in shock. He looked around and saw that Adrian, Blaise, Draco, and Percy’s expressions matched his own. Severus and Lucius looked strangely amused. Severus even leaned back, as if he was settling in to watch something very entertaining. Penrose looked so embarrassed that his entire face was beet red.

“I’m afraid you are entirely mistaken,” Hermione corrected. Her voice was firm and clear, so as not to be misunderstood. “This is my life hanging in the balance. This is my future. I will be making all final decisions regarding every detail of the rituals. You are consulting and providing information as well as advice, which I will consider when making my decisions. I am very much in charge here.”

Theo was so turned on by Hermione right now. She was such a strong witch. It would be so thrilling if she would allow him to take charge of her. Not many people knew that Theo enjoyed being commanding in the bedroom; he was a complicated wizard.

“It seems silly not to leave it to the experts,” Bronwyn snorted. “I’ve heard you were a bright witch, and I imagine at Hogwarts you were. I am sure fame and being friends with Harry Potter gave you opportunities that you wouldn’t have had otherwise. I expect people have exaggerated your accomplishments with every retelling because you are a war hero. However, this is not the time to fall back on your image. Don’t believe your own hype. This is serious business for serious people.”
Theo whipped his head around to look at Hermione. She looked shocked. He was so angry, and he wasn’t the only one. All the wizards in the room started talking at once, simultaneously defending Hermione and denouncing this Bronwyn witch as an imbecile.

“Gentlemen!” Hermione finally shouted above the din. They all stopped to look at her. “Quiet, if you please.”

It was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Hermione actually began to smile, confusing Theo and most others.

“It’s really interesting to get an outsider’s opinion of oneself,” Hermione said calmly. “I had no idea that I was subject to such speculation. I know it happened to Harry all the time. People were always whispering that he couldn’t have possibly done the things he was reported to have done. I just hadn’t ever considered people were doing the same about me. I honestly have no idea what strangers say about me. There may be exaggeration mixed in among the truths. So let me tell you about myself, Miss Figgelowe.

“Frankly, I am probably as intelligent as you’ve heard I am. I don’t tend to brag about myself, but I’ve worked hard and am proud of my accomplishments. If school scores mean anything, I was the smartest person at Hogwarts, because I got the highest marks and the most N.E.W.T.s. I also tied with five other people for the most N.E.W.T.s in the history of Hogwarts, which I am sure you know, has been around far longer than the Salem Institute, so that makes it more of an achievement. I went on to apprentice with Marc Bouchard and achieved a Master in Potions because of my work, not because of my name. I got a second Master in Arithmancy studying under Selma Turan, also because of my work. I am sure you would not impugn the reputations of either Master Bouchard or Turan by implying they granted me completion due to such a trivial thing as fame. I have had the good fortune to work with some of the most brilliant people in the world. That has taught me the value of trusting my own intellect and knowing when to ask for help.

“I’m certainly smart enough to know what it is that I don’t know. Therefore, I’ve assembled a team to help me. I will be bringing in others to consult as we progress. For example, if we need a Herbology Master to answer questions about some ingredient in the ritual, we will ask one. You are invited to be on my team, Miss Figgelowe, because you have spent time researching Sorcery and I am hoping you have some knowledge on the subject. I’m the captain of this team. If you have a problem with that, feel free to excuse yourself from this project. Minister Shacklebolt and Director Penrose have already committed the resources of the Ministry, including all pertinent information. You may leave your research and go, if you wish.”

The room was silent and all eyes trained on Bronwyn, who looked like she was having an inner-battle with herself. Theo wanted Hermione to get the best information, but he didn’t particularly want to work with this shrew. So he was torn about her staying. Others didn’t look so torn. Draco looked ready to toss the witch out of his house.

“I am ready to proceed,” Bronwyn reported woodenly.

“How nice,” Hermione smiled. Theo sighed and sat back in his seat. They didn’t need to like the witch. She just needed to bring the information they needed. “We will need to integrate the information that Theo and I have, with Mister Malfoy’s research, and with that of the Ministry. I am sure we have all uncovered much of the same basic materials, so in the interest of time, let’s focus on the first ritual. Why don’t Theo and I get started, then you all can jump in with information?”

Theo opened his case and began pulling out materials. It took several minutes because they had amassed a lot. Seeing how impressed Hermione had been with his organization, he went ahead and
did more. If she found this type of thing sexy, there was no way Theo was going to miss out on that opportunity. After all, he was really good at studying and organizing. Why shouldn’t he make it work for him?

Theo had bound all their notes into volumes that were charmed to allow new pages and sections to be added. He’d used a duplication charm to make several copies of their research. Hermione’s copy, his copy, and Severus’ copy were the only ones that material could be added or removed. Theo had made a Ministry copy, but he hadn’t trusted them to make changes. All four copies would be eternal duplicates of each other. For example, if Severus added a note to his volume, then it would also show up in the others and be highlighted in the index until Hermione accepted the new information.

As Theo explained what he’d done and how they had organized the material, he kept an eye on Hermione to see if she reacted the same way she had the day before. It appeared she had. Theo saw her eyes dilating and glaze over slightly with lust. She licked her lips as he hauled the bound research volumes from his case.

“What’s got Granger all bothered?” Draco whispered to Adrian, his voice husky. Adrian knew Draco was turned on by seeing Hermione that way.

“Here’s your copy, Mi,” Theo said, trying to look innocent as he took the few steps needed to place the volume in her hand. Hermione leaned into him as she accepted it. Theo leaned in close and whispered in her ear. “You look delicious today, by the way.”

OoOoO

Adrian watched amused as his witch got worked up over Theo’s research and organization. He didn’t mind at all and didn’t begrudge Theo for using his strengths to entice the sweet little witch they all wanted. Adrian knew there were things about him that got Hermione just as excited. He was still proud that he was the first one that got a date with her.

“‘What’s got Granger all bothered?’” Draco whispered back. “It gets her hot.”

Draco’s chuckle seemed to bring Hermione back to the task at hand and they got to business. Theo pulled a shrunken chalkboard from his case and enlarged it. Adrian watched Hermione try not to swoon. As Theo and Hermione talked through the ritual, they made notes and diagrams on the board.

The ritual would take place at five o’clock on Saturday. That was the time when the body was at peak cardiovascular efficiency and muscle strength. Adrian was worried about the toll this would take on Hermione. This first ritual sounded like it would be physically draining and take all his little witch’s resources. It was important that they hold the ritual in a location that had all four elements present. It would be outside on the bare earth and out in the open air. A body of water should be nearby and to the north, while a bonfire would be lit at the southern corner of the ritual space. It would be best if there was strong magical energy in that location as well.

The Potentiate always had a person with them in the ritual space to perform the spells. Hermione would perform some on her own, but as the magic took its toll, she would need another to assist and then take over. Lucius found mention in one of the oldest written records of there being two others present, because the ritual had been delayed several months and the Potentiate’s magic was very erratic. The group agreed that Hermione would need at least two people to help perform the ritual. Lucius was pleased that his name was on the short list and reported that he would be honored.
The group discussed every detail, from what Hermione would wear to the ingredients in the potion being used to the order of events.

Not every ritual throughout recorded time was exactly the same. Sometimes certain supplies weren't available and substitutions were made, to varying effect. There was a healthy debate about what should work best for Hermione because of her extreme lateness doing the rituals. While Adrian was a very smart wizard, he really had no way of knowing if powdered Bloodstone was better than crushed Bloodstone. He also had no opinion about whether including dried eucalyptus on the bonfire would be better than just using a traditional mix of hawthorn and holly branches. Apparently, he was one of the only ones without an opinion. Debate continued about these small matters for most of the day.

Adrian knew the benefits of healthy discussion, but in the end, there needed to be conclusion. Maybe that is why he became a solicitor. Adrian liked when things were tied up and concluded in the end.

"If I may interject, kitten," Adrian said to Hermione, halting the current debate. The Bronwyn shrew arched a brow at his pet name for his witch. Adrian had decided at breakfast he didn't like the snotty, self-important witch.

"Of course, Adrian," Hermione smiled brightly at him. It warmed his heart quite thoroughly. "Did you have an opinion about the Milk Thistle and Goldenseal in the cleansing potion?"

"I'm afraid not, kitten." Adrian grinned at her enthusiasm. "I wanted to make an observation. This debate is highly theoretical and most of you have scholarly backing for your position. Unfortunately, we won't know for certain how it will work until the ritual. If I am not mistaken, there is a field of study that allows a person to predict the outcome of a situation using numbers and equations."

"Of course!" Hermione exclaimed. "Adrian, I could just kiss you!"

Adrian went to stand up to collect on Hermione's statement, but he felt Draco push him down with a hand on his shoulder.

"Save it for your date tonight," Draco snorted with amusement. Adrian settled his gaze on his witch, his eyes full of promise for later. Hermione blushed a delightful shade of pink.

"I can run equations with and without all the variables we have been discussing," Hermione beamed. "Then we will know which is most likely to be effective in our situation. I can owl them to Selma, just for verification."

"I'm afraid I must return to the Ministry for the afternoon," Director Penrose said regretfully. Adrian imagined this meeting was very intellectually stimulating for the older wizard.

"Oh, yes," Hermione nodded. "I know most of you have other obligations to attend to. Besides, I feel we really have a good handle on the first ritual."

"My employer has been so kind as to grant me extended leave to assist the Sorceress," Theo grinned, looking over at Draco. Adrian chuckled. While Draco was technically Theo's boss, he never acted that way. They were much more colleagues than anything. "I wouldn't leave you to tackle Flint library on your own, Mi."

Theo set about packing up his materials to transport to the Flint home.

"I'm afraid I must go into the office with Father for a few hours this afternoon," Draco said,
apologetically. Adrian knew how he felt.

"I do as well, kitten," Adrian admitted. "I've moved all my cases that can be moved, but I still have a few things that need attention."

Adrian knew his guilt was a little unreasonable. He couldn't be with Hermione all the time, he just wanted to be. He also knew his presence wouldn't add much to the research effort. Too many elves spoil the soup, or so the saying went.

"What time will I see you tonight?" Hermione asked softly, coming over to him. Adrian wrapped his arms around the petite witch and pressed his cheek into her hair.

"How about seven?" Adrian offered. "I can pick you up at Spinner's End or at Flint's place. Wear one of those adorable dresses you have."

Hermione giggled lightly and Adrian squeezed her tighter. He was so excited to spend some alone time with his witch.

"Since you have the research well in hand, I am going to go make the base potion for the ritual now," Severus reported. "It is complicated and needs to set for at least twenty-four hours. I've been in touch with your old Master, Bouchard, to discuss some of the finer points. He is somewhere in the northern tundra, but is traveling to get a Portkey. He'll be here by Friday."

"Thank you, Severus," Hermione grinned. She pulled his face down and stood up on her tiptoes so she could put a kiss on his cheek. "You are a wonderful friend."

Adrian smiled as Snape rolled his eyes and made his robes billow as he stepped away. Most people in the room knew how much he cared for the small witch, but he did try to keep up appearances that he was a heartless, unsocial wizard.

"Lucius and I will meet you at Hogwarts at lunch time," Severus announced before leaving the room.

"I suppose I will see you tomorrow, Miss Granger," Lucius smirked. "Severus has never had the best manners. It was a delight to see you today."

"Thank you for allowing us the use of your library and home," Hermione said graciously.

"Anytime," Lucius smiled. Adrian saw Lucius give Draco a wink as he approached Director Penrose. "May I show you out, Director?"

"Of course, Mister Malfoy," Penrose nodded. "Miss Figgelowe, Mister Weasley, the Minister has determined that you are to assist Miss Granger as long as she needs you."

Then Penrose left, so Bronwyn and Percy looked to Hermione.

"Why don't we break for lunch?" Hermione suggested. "You can Apparate to the Flint house at one o'clock and we can keep working. Do you know where it is?"

They nodded.

"Is there anything you need me to pick up?" Percy asked. "That is my job, remember? The Ministry has furnished me with funds to buy any supplies you need for the rituals or the preparation."

"You know what I'd like? Three of those Muggle dry erase boards," Hermione said after a moment.
Adrian had no idea what she was talking about, but Theo nodded and Percy seemed to have some idea. “You get them at a Muggle office supply store. The markers used to write on them come in all sorts of colors. Try to get at many different colors as they have.”

Draco came and offered Hermione his arm, then led them all out of the library back to the Manor’s main Floo. Adrian knew Blaise and Theo were going with Hermione to Marcus’ house. The Ministry employees were going to go wherever they needed to go and Adrian was going to Floo over to his offices. Draco pulled Hermione in for a tight embrace and whispered some things in her ear that made her nod and blush. Then he ushered her through the Floo, followed by Blaise and Theo. Percy went next. The Bronwyn witch headed to the Floo and Draco snagged her elbow. She looked over at him with curiosity.

“You will watch your tongue, Miss Figgelowe,” Draco hissed. “If I ever hear of you disrespecting Hermione Granger again, you will have to answer to me. I know you aren’t from around here, so you may not know my reputation or that of my family. Feel free to ask around. I assure you, what you hear is not exaggeration. You don’t have to like Granger, but if you speak ill of my witch, you will regret it.”

The witch’s expression grew pale and wide-eyed as Draco talked. Adrian would hazard a guess that she was well aware of the Malfoys and their reputation, even if she wasn’t around during the war. They were still a powerful and feared family. When Draco finished, she looked over to Adrian, as he was the only other person left. Adrian expected she wanted him to intervene. Well, that certainly wasn’t going to happen.

“I wouldn’t doubt him if I were you,” Adrian said sternly. “We are quite…protective, of our witch. Understand?”

Bronwyn nodded quickly and disappeared through the Floo. Adrian chuckled.

“What an unpleasant witch,” Adrian observed.

“Don’t you dare mention this to Granger, but her know-it-all attitude reminded me of our little swot back when we first started Hogwarts.” Draco grinned.

“She wasn’t that bad,” Adrian protested. “And she grew out of that over time. Hermione was just a girl then. This Figgelowe shrew is a grown witch.”

Adrian waved goodbye to his friend and set off for his office to wade through some work. He knew his mind wouldn’t be on his tasks, but would instead be thinking of the evening ahead. He had big plans for his witch.

Chapter End Notes

Next - Flint Lodge and of course Marcus
Hermione stumbled out of the Floo into the waiting arms of Marcus Flint. True to form, Marcus swung her up into his arms. One by one, he reached and pulled her legs around his waist.

"Mmm," Marcus rumbled into her neck. "I've missed you, princess."

Hermione was immediately lost in the overwhelming feel of Marcus against her, his body heat and scent saturating her senses. It became harder to think of anything else besides Marcus when he began placing soft, wet kisses along her neck. Hermione groaned and clung to him tighter.

"If that's what you two plan to do for lunch, what are Blaise and I supposed to have?" Theo chuckled.

Hermione pulled away from Marcus and blushed. She appreciated that Theo didn't seem bothered or overly jealous. In fact, none of them did. When she'd agreed to go out with Adrian, Draco and Theo looked pleased. Either they didn't mind her dating them all at once, or they were very good at hiding their emotions. They were Slytherins, so the later really couldn't be discounted. Hermione knew she wouldn't be able to share a wizard with another witch; it just wasn't in her nature. She wondered if she could talk to them about it.

"Darling, why don't you put Miss Granger down so we can have lunch?" a female voice asked. Hermione squirmed to get down, her blush turning beet red. She looked over at the older, athletic woman and tried to suppress the urge to bury her face in Marcus’ shoulder in embarrassment.

"I don't need lunch," Marcus said, holding on to Hermione a bit tighter. Hermione pushed harder against Marcus’ chest and gave him a scowl. He reluctantly set her to the ground with a sigh. “Hermione, this is my mum, Inge Flint.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Flint,” Hermione greeted, stepping away from Marcus. Inge Flint was very tall, almost six feet, and broad shouldered. Rather than looking overly masculine, she was handsome and statuesque. Hermione thought Marcus had her lovely blue eyes and full lips, but Inge was a blonde. A burly man, only slightly smaller than Marcus, entered the hallway as well. This was clearly Marcus’ father. They had the same dark hair and olive toned skin.

“I’ve heard so much about you, Miss Granger,” Inge smiled. “This is my husband, Pius Flint.”

“Mister Flint,” Hermione nodded.

“Please,” the elder Flint scoffed. “Call us Inge and Pius! I’ve wanted to meet the famous Hermione Granger for years now. Your exploits during the war caused Voldemort’s unending torment. It was the highlight of those years for me. You bothered Voldemort more than the others because you
were Muggle-born. You outsmarted him and your magic was just as good, if not better, than those in his command. It was wonderful.”

Pius’ voice was wistful, close to joyous. Hermione wanted to laugh at the contradiction between the large older Flint’s imposing stature versus his carefree manner of speaking.

Pius offered Hermione his arm as he spoke and escorted her to the dining room. Marcus similarly escorted his mother. Hermione was entirely surprised that the Flints were so jovial and warm. Marcus had always seemed so reserved and quiet. When Hermione observed this to the group as they sat for lunch, everyone just laughed.

“You try getting a word in edgewise with these two,” Marcus growled in mock protest. He clearly loved his parents, even if they had very different personalities.

“It was hard for Marcus,” Pius pointed out, looking at his son with an expression that could only be described as apologetic. “Inge and I were never very interested in politics. My father, however, was very different. To say that he wasn’t a nice wizard would be putting it mildly. He would do any unscrupulous thing to advance his wealth and power. He promised me to Voldemort when he first came on the scene and I was forced to receive the Dark Mark. All I ever wanted to do was play Quidditch and spend time outdoors. As a result of my induction, Inge and I never could open up and be ourselves in our society. It was confusing for Marcus as a child, because we were one way alone with him, and another way around others.”

“I think, as a default, Marcus just decided not to speak outside the house, because he had no idea what to say,” Inge continued where her husband left off. “You can’t expect a child to understand something like politics. We tried to shield him as best we could. Dumbledore even agreed to keep him at Hogwarts an extra year because Voldemort had his eye on Marcus. Big wizards like Pius and Marcus don’t go unnoticed, even if they try to keep quiet and out of the public eye.”

"In private, Marcus is an opinionated prat." Blaise chuckled. Marcus shot him a glare.

"Since my father and then Voldemort died, we’ve been able to be more... genuine," Pius smiled, "thanks in part to you and your friends."

"I'm glad," Hermione grinned. Marcus was clearly disconcerted at his parents’ willingness to open up and share this information with someone they’d just met. Hermione wondered if he got embarrassed by his parents, as most children did. It must be hard for such a quiet, reserved person to have such outgoing, chatty parents.

"So are we." Inge smiled; a mischievous look on her face. "Marcus is quite taken with you. He never lets us meet any witches."

"I've never known a witch worth inviting home until now," Marcus remarked, giving Hermione a leer that heated her cheeks - and other places.

Lunch with the Flints was wonderful. The food, like the family, was healthy and robust. It looked simple, but was actually just subtle and lacked unnecessary adornment. Hermione felt the warmth of being around a close, loving family. It was something she’d missed since leaving Ron.

Inge and Pius excused themselves when lunch was over, leaving Marcus to show them the library. The older couple admitted that they didn’t really spend much time in there, that it had been Marcus’ grandfather that managed and expanded the family library. Given his reputation, Hermione knew they would find a fair amount of books on dark magic, not that the Malfoy library hadn’t had an impressive supply as well.
As they were exiting the dining room, a House Elf announced the arrival of Bronwyn and Percy. Hermione heard Theo groan and looked at him questioningly.

“I was hoping Bronwyn would decide not to come; the impertinent witch,” Theo murmured.

Hermione shook her head. She didn’t want to be uninviting. She wanted to show that other witch what it looked like to be gracious and above petty squabbles. Hermione only hoped the other witch didn’t provoke her too much. She knew her temper was legendary, but with her magic being so off kilter, Hermione didn’t want to risk another episode where she accidentally hurt someone; even Bronwyn Figgelowe. Theo’s words were soft enough that only she, Blaise, and Marcus heard them. Blaise had nodded his agreement and Marcus looked very suspicious, his eyes narrowed and focused on the new witch in the room.

“Percy, Bronwyn, this is Marcus Flint,” Hermione said. Marcus draped his arm over Hermione’s shoulders and pulled her close as he assessed the newcomers. Hermione rolled her eyes at his protectiveness. “Marcus, Bronwyn is a researcher in the Department of Mysteries. She has been studying Sorcery for several years. Percy works for Kingsley. He’s meant to be my assistant for the next three weeks.”

Marcus nodded stiffly.

“This way to the library,” Marcus announced. He kept his arm around Hermione as they walked and she found she didn’t really mind at all. Bronwyn stared at her hard for a moment, looking like she was trying to figure out the situation in front of her. Hermione certainly wasn’t going to explain why one wizard had his arm around her, while she had a date with a different wizard later that night.

The library was fairly dark and musty. Marcus called for a House Elf named Pippy. Pippy soon banished most of the dust and had the windows sparkling in seconds, letting in more light. It turned out that the elderly elf, who had been with the Flint family for generations, knew everything about the library. Marcus reported that he certainly knew more than the current family members did. Indeed, Pippy was instrumental in pulling books that may apply to their subject.

As volumes piled on the table, Percy got out the supplies he’d purchased during the lunch break. They set up the three boards, one for each ritual. Marcus took a black marker and labeled each one. He wrote #1: Body, #2: Mind, and #3: Soul. Hermione snorted at the way he’d simplified things. Marcus tended to do that, which she appreciated. Hermione knew she had a habit of making things more complicated than they sometimes needed to be. They took turns writing notes and thoughts for each ritual using Theo’s color coding system, focusing mostly on the Body board.

Hermione loved watching Theo hard at work. He really was brilliant and his bookish beauty was distracting. Hermione rested her chin on her hand as she watched Theo make several points, referencing a new book in the Flint library. He was so adamant. His coppery brown hair was a little shaggy and fell in his eyes, forcing him to push it aside. He stuck a quill behind his ear that he had clearly forgotten about. Theo had rolled up the sleeves of his shirt and the top few buttons were undone.

“You are staring, princess,” Marcus murmured in her ear. He pulled his chair close to hers. The others kept reading, debating, and occasionally writing something down. No one seemed to notice Marcus so close and whispering in her ear.

“He’s so…smart,” Hermione sighed. Marcus chuckled. Hermione liked the sound and leaned toward him. She felt Marcus’ hand on her thigh.
“Adrian mentioned that you find Theo…exciting,” he whispered. “He also said he was going to ask you out for tonight. Did he?”

“He did,” Hermione nodded. “He said to wear a dress.”

“He’ll take you somewhere romantic. Ades is sweet like that,” Marcus said, moving his hand up her thigh. Hermione looked over at the others. Blaise was trying to make it through a dense looking book. Theo was arguing with Bronwyn about the meaning of the word ‘elaborate’ in the phrase ‘the wizard performing the ritual wore an elaborate green robe.’ Percy was making notes from a text in which he seemed engrossed.

“You aren’t being very sweet, Marcus,” Hermione whispered, trying to keep her voice steady. His hand had made it to the juncture of her thighs and pressed against her trousers.

“I’m not the sweet one, princess,” Marcus purred. “You’ve got Ades for that. You’ve got Theo to discuss and debate. And you’ve got Draco for the drama and flash of society life.”

“What’s left for you to do?” Hermione breathed. She was sure Marcus could feel dampness through her knickers and the fabric of her trousers.

“You’ve got me to be naughty with,” he said, his deep voice even lower than usual.

“And you don’t mind if I see the others?”

“Not if they make you happy,” Marcus replied. He began rubbing her firmly. “I just want my princess happy and cared for. Those blokes are my closest mates. I trust them to give you what you need, to do right by you. I can’t promise to feel the same way about some other wizard, if you are interested in adding to your little harem.”

Hermione snorted. As if she’d have time for more wizards in her life. She would have to process what Marcus was saying later. At the moment, she was almost entirely fixated on what his hand was doing between her legs. She was desperately fighting the urge to rock against his hand to get better friction. That would definitely give away what was happening under the table to the others. Marcus rubbed faster. She tried to bite back a groan, but it came out as a weird cough. Blaise looked her way to see if she was okay. All of a sudden, Marcus’ hand was gone.

“I need a break,” Marcus announced, pushing back from the table. “I don’t think I spent this much time in a library when I was at school. I’ll go to the kitchens and order up tea. Come on, princess, I can show you where the loo is on my way.”

Hermione shot up from her seat and Marcus tugged on her hand, pulling her out of the room. He did bring her to the loo as he promised, but ushered her inside with him right behind. As soon as the door shut, Hermione pulled his face down hers. Their lips crashed against each other, sucking and nibbling at each other. Hermione’s hands roamed over as much of Marcus’ torso as she could reach. His shoulders were so broad and his chest incredibly firm. She could feel all the muscles in his back as well. Never had she seen a better, more solidly built wizard. He may have stopped being a professional athlete, but that certainly didn’t show in his physique.

“You taste so good, princess,” Marcus groaned, licking her neck. “I need to taste more.”

Marcus tugged at the closures on her trousers and pushed them down over her hips to her thighs. He lifted her onto the sink and pulled the garment off the rest of the way. Before Hermione could even think, he pushed her legs apart and was down on his knees. He buried his face between her thighs. She knew her knickers would be drenched from his playing earlier under the table. Marcus
inhaled deeply and moaned. He pushed the wet fabric aside and ran his tongue over the length of her slit.

“Gods, yes,” Hermione gasped, leaning back slightly. Marcus’ tongue felt so good. He took several moments to explore, licking every fold. She knew she wouldn’t last long. Staring at Theo really had her worked up, and then Marcus fanned that fire in the library. Marcus moaned as he lapped at her and Hermione saw his hand down the front of his own open trousers. She tried to lean forward to get a better look at him, but that was when he latched on to her clit and began sucking hard.

Hermione threw her head back and groaned a few expletives. Marcus may not talk much, but he had a talented mouth. After a minute or two of his concentrated efforts, Hermione felt herself start to break apart. She reached out and grasped his head as he kept working between her legs. She needed to hold on to something. Hermione felt the waves finally peak and she screamed her release. Marcus’ mouth never slowed as she came and his tongue pushed inside her clenching channel, as if he wanted to capture all the liquid.

All of a sudden a blinding white light encompassed them and Marcus was shoved hard against the door.

“Oh, shite! Marcus!” Hermione’s eyes went wide as she watched him fly the short distance across the small room. It seemed that an uncontrolled magical discharge accompanied that wonderful orgasm she had. She hopped down off the sink ledge and knelt down next to the large wizard. “Are you okay? Say something!”

“That was amazing,” Marcus laughed.

“Are you hurt?”

“Just a bump on the back of the head. Don’t fret, princess,” Marcus soothed. He sat up and shook his head slightly. “I’ve been dealt far worse and under much less pleasurable circumstances.”

“How can you make light of it? You could’ve been hurt!” Hermione’s eyes began to water. Her whole body was betraying her lately. She couldn’t do any magic without everything going wrong. Getting angry had accidently burned Severus. And now, her orgasm tossed Marcus Flint, an enormous wizard, as if he were a rag doll.

“Shhhhh, princess, don’t cry,” Marcus cupped her face and brushed away a stray tear with his thumb. “I’m fine, I swear. I was coming so hard, I barely noticed.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“I am made from tougher stuff than that. I would do it again in a second.” Marcus smiled. He looked entirely genuine. It did make her feel better. He didn’t seem upset or hurt. “There’s no where I’d rather be than between those lovely legs of yours, princess. If it makes you feel better, I’ll bring my old Quidditch helmet and padding for when we shag.”

“Oh, we’re shagging now?” Hermione asked, eyebrow raised.

“Of course.” Marcus smiled. He leaned in and kissed her cheeks, taking away any lingering tears. “You can’t resist me. And why would you want to? Your date with Ades is tonight, but how’s tomorrow?”

“Draco asked me out for tomorrow before I Flooed over here,” Hermione reported. Draco had held her tightly before she left Malfoy Manor and whispered in her ear. He asked her if he could have the pleasure of her company the following evening, saying that he’d been wanting to ask her out on
a date for a decade now, and that she’d been well worth the wait.

“I’ll take Friday night then,” Marcus stated confidently. “I’ll help you blow off some steam and relax before the big day.”

Hermione blushed, despite what they’d just done, and nodded. Marcus stood and then reached to help her up. A quick Scourgify by Marcus and they were both perfectly presentable. He found her trousers and Hermione steadied herself against him as she stood on one leg, then the other, to get them back on.

“Relaxed, and ready to get back to work?” Marcus asked, grinning at her. She looked at him curiously. “You looked like you were getting too distracted by Theo. You should be okay now for another couple hours.”

Hermione swatted him on the arm because he was right, but it was impolite to point out such things. Marcus just laughed and pulled her close. He leaned down and pressed his lips into her forehead.

“I really am going to go see about tea for everyone, so I’ll see you back in the library later.”

Marcus gave Hermione a light swat on the bum as she walked away.

OoOoO

Marcus left the kitchen with an apple to eat on the way back to the library. He ate a lot, but he was a big wizard, so it stood to reason that he’d need more food. He couldn’t keep the smile off his face and he didn’t care. His princess was all that he imagined. She was as sweet as he knew she’d be and just as responsive as he’d hoped. He kept licking his lips afterwards, even when the taste of her was gone.

Marcus realized that he’d give anything, do anything to have her. He knew that he was smitten from day one, but each time he saw her, he became more and more certain she was his one and only. He had meant what he said to her earlier, that it didn’t bother him that she dated his friends. He was never a particularly possessive wizard. He would know, because witches always tried to make him jealous in one way or another. Of course, he didn’t care much for those witches, if at all. He did care about Hermione. He felt better when she was around. He wondered if there was any way to increase his chances of becoming her Ancillary. Probably not.

The apple was eaten by the time Marcus returned to the library. He really didn’t care to be cooped up all day for any reason, but he would manage for Hermione. Being in the same room with her was worth it, no matter what they were doing.

“Tea will be up shortly,” Marcus announced, taking his seat at the table. Hermione flashed him a beautiful smile and went back to scrutinizing the book in front of her. The smile Marcus already wore widened.

Theo slid a book over towards him and Marcus heaved a sigh before cracking it open. He was so glad Hermione had Theo for all the book things. He loved it just as much as she did, so it made sense Theo handle that part of her personality. Marcus just wasn’t the best wizard for that job. He looked around at the others, procrastinating.

Blaise wasn’t much better than Marcus when it came to this sort of thing, but he cared about Hermione and knew how much she was coming to mean to his friends. Marcus appreciated Blaise taking the time. The Percy bloke seemed all right. Hermione liked him, and that was all Marcus
cared about. He didn’t share Draco’s irritation with Weasleys, but he didn’t have any affinity for them either. He would happily break Ron’s jaw for Hermione if she asked, but she’d never ask. Marcus didn’t much care for Ginny Weasley, because on several occasions, she had assumed Marcus would fall at her feet and offer himself to her. Of course, that never happened and the redhead had the gall to be offended that she never got something she was never entitled to – him. Now that Hermione was in his life, there was no one for him but his princess.

Marcus stared at the new witch, this Figgelowe witch, thinking about Blaise and Theo’s reaction to her earlier. She seemed smart enough, not brilliant like Hermione, but generally competent. She saw him staring and began batting her eyelashes, sending him coy looks. Marcus ignored her and went back to his book. He tried to focus, but it seemed there wasn’t anything here that they didn’t already know. Marcus imagined Theo gave him that book on purpose. He was much more invested in thinking about his date Friday night. He wanted her to relax, to take her mind off the ritual. He knew exactly how he wanted it to end, but was mulling over various options for early evening activities. It wouldn’t do to get straight to bed. Hermione deserved something planned especially for her.

The Flint library had an impressive array of maps. Hermione set Percy and Bronwyn to searching for a good location to hold the ritual. Marcus and Blaise discussed security for the ritual and after, in case Hermione needed to convalesce. The press seemed receptive to her request for privacy, but Marcus didn't trust anyone when it came to his princess. Well, he trusted a few people. Ades, Draco, Theo and Severus would do anything to protect her; Blaise too, to a lesser extent.

"Spinner's End isn't the most secure location," Marcus mused.

"No, it's not," Blaise agreed. "More than anything, people stay away simply because Snape is so unpleasant. But that won’t stop someone who is determined to see her."

"Most of us took down the extensive wards and protections on our houses after the war," Marcus commented, thinking.

Pippy brought in the tea. Percy and Bronwyn paused to serve themselves. Bronwyn lingered near Marcus, trying to flirt. She returned to her maps when she got no response.

"Except Nott and Malfoy," Marcus continued, pouring a cup of tea. The Malfoys were a... high profile family during the war, so kept their wards in place because of the fallout. Nott Senior valued his privacy and tended to keep to himself, so he never bothered with removing the security.

Marcus made a small plate to go with the tea and set it all in front of Hermione. She looked totally focused on her work. When she finished something, she passed it to Theo to read over. To Marcus, it was a virtually incomprehensible mass of numbers and symbols.

"Keep your strength up, princess," Marcus instructed, pressing a kiss into the top of her head.

"Thank you," she smiled up at him, reaching for her cup.

"Where's mine?" Theo asked, his eyes twinkling with amusement. Marcus scowled at his friend.

"Get your own, you tosser," Marcus snorted.

Marcus made up his own tea and sat back down next to Blaise.

"Potter's house is secure I bet," Blaise observed, as if they hadn't stopped their conversation. Marcus nodded. The old Black place was unplottable and had been the headquarters for the Order of the Phoenix. Potter had obviously allowed more people access since then, like his wife and her
friends, but it was still almost impossible to Floo over there or find it if you hadn’t already been there. It was still a pretty busy place and Marcus wondered if it would be as quiet at Nott's or Malfoy's homes, which were much more rural. At Potter's, she wouldn't really be able to go outside.

Percy and the Bronwyn witch reported that they’d covered the Flint maps and had more at the Ministry that they’d like to consult. Hermione approved of their plan and asked them to meet her in Hogsmeade the next day at nine o'clock in the morning.

Marcus got to his feet and offered to show them to the Floo. Blaise decided to leave then too, saying he had plans for the evening with some random witch he’d found. Marcus would never give permission to either of the Ministry employees to Floo into his home, but they could use it to exit. He and Percy chatted for a moment about people they knew from school, but they hadn't really run in the same circles.

Blaise left first, and then Percy went through. The Bronwyn witch lingered. Marcus folded his arms across his chest and waited for her to speak.

"So, do you have a girlfriend, Mr. Flint?"

"There's a witch in my life."

"We could spend some together and she wouldn't ever need to know," the Bronwyn witch said, reaching out to touch his arm. "I imagine you're too much wizard for just one witch."

Marcus looked down at her hand then stared at her until she removed it.

"Not interested."

"Whoever she is, she'll never know."

"I am not interested in you, regardless of any other witches."

Bronwyn didn't look as if she was listening. He knew that look. This witch thought he wanted her to change his mind, to do something to convince him. Marcus pointed to the Floo and she finally left. Marcus rolled his eyes and walked back the library.

Marcus strolled back into the room and froze. After a moment, a grin spread across his face. Hermione had moved from her seat and was in Theo’s lap. She was snogging the daylights out of him. Marcus walked quietly around the table so he could see them better. Hermione was straddling Theo’s lap, her hands buried in his hair. Theo had one hand on her arse and Marcus watched him sneak his other hand up her torso. His hand traveled over her shirt, up her ribcage and then stopped at her breast. Theo rubbed and gently squeezed, making Hermione moan and press herself into him. She was such a responsive witch.

Marcus loved watching her. It didn’t bother him that it was another wizard bringing her pleasure; it was hot as fuck to watch. Marcus had never really considered himself a voyeur before. Though, during his Quidditch days, he’d been involved in a few sexual experiences that had more than the usual two people. Marcus wondered if Hermione would be interested in such a thing. Of course, having a threesome or more with him and his friends should probably wait until Marcus has had the opportunity to shag her one on one.

Theo moved down to kissing and nipping Hermione’s neck. She threw her head back, groaning, and rhythmically moving on Theo’s lap. Marcus felt himself getting hard and moaned. Hermione whipped her head to look at him, hearing his moan.
“Don’t stop on my account,” Marcus smiled. “You look so hot.”

Hermione blushed and extracted herself from Theo. The other wizard looked none too pleased.

“I have to get going,” Hermione explained. “Adrian is coming over at seven and I need to…get cleaned up.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow morning in Hogsmeade,” Theo stood and nodded.

“Want to meet at eight instead of nine and have breakfast?” Hermione asked.

“That would be wonderful, Mi,” Theo responded, grinning. He pulled their witch in for a hug. She gave him a sweet kiss on the lips before turning to Marcus.

“Come, princess,” Marcus invited, tucking the small witch under his arm, close to his body. “I’ll walk you to the Floo.”

Marcus held her as tightly as he could, while still allowing them to walk. He inhaled deeply. He loved her scent. It was light and floral without being too clingy and girly.

“I can’t imagine I’d be any use at Hogwarts, and I have some work I have to get done,” Marcus sighed. He would like to go just to be near his princess. “But I am free Friday afternoon.”

“Then I will see you on Friday,” Hermione smiled. “I’m looking forward to our date.”

“Mmmm, me too, princess,” Marcus rumbled in his low, sexy voice. All too soon they were at the Floo. Hermione gave him a soft kiss on the lips that did not last nearly as long as Marcus thought it should.

“Good night, Marcus.” Hermione waved as she stepped through the Floo.

Marcus returned to the library. He had a concern that he wanted to run by Theo.

“Want to go out to the pub?” Theo asked when Marcus arrived. Theo had almost finished packing up.

“Sure, I could use a pint,” Marcus sat at the table. “That Bronwyn witch came on to me before she left. It was disturbing.”

“She’s horrid,” Theo said, making a sour face.

“Hermione’s a passionate witch, isn’t she?” Marcus leaned back in his chair, a knowing grin on his face.

“Most definitely,” Theo smiled, looking wistful. “I noticed you took quite a long time to show her to the loo earlier and to arrange what turned out to be a basic tea that wouldn’t merit such a long errand.”

“How do you think I know she’s so passionate?” Marcus smirked. Then his brow furrowed.

“Problem?”

“I…I don’t know,” Marcus said. He wasn’t sure how to voice his concern. He couldn’t decide if he was just being ridiculous. “I don’t know if she likes me.”

“Likes you?” Theo looked surprised. “Of course she likes you. Why would you think she doesn’t
“When we were in the loo and she reached that pivotal moment, her magic discharged and threw me back against the door,” Marcus reported, brow still furrowed.

“You know her magic is off and it is going to be off until the rituals are over.”

“I know, I know,” Marcus sighed, frustrated. “But, was that evidence that maybe her magic doesn’t like me? It pushed me away. What if her magic doesn’t think I’m a viable Ancillary?”

Theo sighed and shook his head.

“None of us know what’s going to happen in that last ritual,” Theo said, looking sad. “I wish we had some idea, but we don’t. We have the next three weeks, that’s it. Even if one or two of us are chosen, what about the other two? If it’s me and you for example, Ades and Draco will be crushed. Maybe I am assuming too much about how they feel. I would be crushed. They would at least be extremely disappointed.”

“So we better make the best of our time.” Marcus nodded. It was a depressing train of thought to follow. Marcus wanted to be picked, of course, but these other blokes were his mates. He didn’t want them to be broken up. “Let’s not worry too much about something we can’t control.”

“And spend quality time with Hermione while we can,” Theo grinned. “So, in the loo? That’s classy, Marcus.”

“I didn’t shag her in the loo,” Marcus defended. “When I do shag her it will be in a proper place.”

Theo laughed and the two wizards headed out to find Draco to see if he wanted to join them for a pint.

Chapter End Notes

Next - Adrian!
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer - don't own Harry Potter :-)
Now - Adrian

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione stumbled into Spinner’s End and looked around for Severus. The light at the top of the stairs to the basement was red, so she knew he was still down in his lab. While Hermione was a Potions Master in her own right, she wasn’t sure how her magical deregulation would affect brewing. She was enormously grateful that she had Severus in her life, and not for the first time.

Trudging up the narrow stairs, Hermione thought about what to wear on her date. She spent a very long time living out of a trunk or a suitcase. While she loved her time at Hogwarts, all her things had to fit in her trunk and she shared a room with other girls. She had space that she used, but it was never really her own. During wartime and out hunting Horcruxes, Hermione got used to traveling light and living out of bags. After Hogwarts, she had been hoping to settle down for a while, but Master Bouchard rarely stayed in one place very long. In that situation, Hermione was able to globetrot, see amazing places, and meet extraordinary people. She didn't mind living out of a suitcase as much, since their accommodations were usually better than a tent and she wasn't afraid for her life. Turkey had been more stable, but Hermione knew she probably wasn't going to live there long-term, so she didn't really put down roots.

Hermione found the dress she had planned on wearing and hung it in the bathroom to let the steam from her shower straighten it out a bit. Living out of a suitcase made everything wrinkled. She didn't dare use magic to press it because, at the rate she was going, she would burn a hole through the thing or there would be some other nasty consequence. It took a bit longer to find the shoes and bag she wanted because she couldn't just Accio them. Hermione stripped and went to have a nice steamy shower.

Water took a while to heat up in Severus' old house. He didn't seem to mind it. As she washed up, Hermione thought about getting a house for herself. Her Order of Merlin had come with a tidy sum that had done nothing but sit in her vault for years. She'd always wanted one of those old English cottages with lovely gardens. Hermione decided to look into finding her own home after the first ritual, if she came through it all right. It would be nice to be settled for a while.

Walking back into her bedroom, wrapped in a towel, Hermione felt a wave of exhaustion hit her. She'd had these episodes at least once a day, except for the day before. Hermione had hoped they had passed, but apparently not. She still had forty minutes until her date and thought a short twenty-minute nap would set her to rights.

Hermione woke to someone gently shaking her. The masculine voice sounded soothing and made her feel more comfortable, so she tried to snuggle back down on her covers.

"Kitten, wake up," the voice said more insistently.

Hermione blinked open her eyes and saw Adrian's lovely face hovering above her own.
"You're early," she sighed.

"I don't think so, kitten," he said, amused. "It's a little bit past seven."

"Oh!" Hermione sat up; surprised she had slept so long. In sitting up, the towel she had wrapped around her when she fell asleep, dipped significantly. Her chest wasn't entirely exposed, but it was certainly more than she usually showed. Adrian's eyes went right to her bare skin. Hermione tugged at the towel, inadvertently pulling her towel up and showing an expanse of thigh and part of her bum.

"Oh!" Hermione exclaimed again. Adrian chuckled.

"If you need to rest, kitten, we don't need to go out."

Hermione smiled at his concern.

“No, I was just very tired for a moment," Hermione explained. "I feel much better, really. The exhaustion hits all of a sudden, but a nap often fixes the problem. Just give me a moment to dress and I'll be right with you."

Adrian looked skeptical, but nodded and left the room. Hermione rushed to find her under things. There was no guarantee that Adrian would see her bra or knickers, but she wanted them to be nice ones, just in case. She settled on a light blush pink lacy set that contrasted well against her tanned skin, still bronzed from her time in Turkey.

She quickly assessed her reflection. A few brushes of her short hair smoothed the parts that stuck out oddly. Hermione kept her makeup simple, focusing on smoky, lined eyes.

Hermione pulled on her dress. It was bright teal with a plum lace overlay. It had a conservative neckline and cap sleeves, but was quite short. The dress was brightly colored; so Hermione stepped into her nude colored high heels and snatched up the matching clutch purse. Not having thought about jewelry, Hermione just grabbed a metallic pearl bracelet and put it on as she rushed downstairs.

"Wow," Adrian said, looking slightly awed. It made Hermione blush. He came over to stand close to her. "You look amazing."

"Thank you, so do you," she grinned. Adrian was wearing dove gray trousers and a beautiful robe of gray, blue, and green. It was colorful, but understated and masculine. It reminded Hermione of the ocean. She resisted an urge to step into his arms and wrap herself in his lovely robe.

Apparently, Adrian felt no desire to resist a similar urge and pulled Hermione close. He stared into her eyes for a moment. His blue green eyes were also the color of the ocean. Adrian tipped her face up and bent down to kiss her. His kisses were firm, but gentle and sweet. He made her feel cherished.

The sound of a door opening made Hermione pull away from the beautiful wizard. She watched Severus finally emerge from his laboratory.

"So you've come up for air?" Hermione teased. Adrian still had held her, but loosely. He rested his chin on the top of her head.

"I could say the same about you," Severus commented, his brow arched and his eyes showing his amusement. Hermione had been worried for a moment that spending so much time with Severus would be awkward. It had been years since they were together and Hermione was glad to see the
friendship they’d developed since then was sturdy. Though she was his ex, Severus didn’t mind seeing her dating. He was happy if she was happy; just as Hermione would be happy for Severus if he found a witch that made him happy.

“Well, we are off.” Hermione smiled. "Have a good evening."

“I won’t wait up,” Severus smirked.

Hermione rolled her eyes and Adrian beamed. She tucked her arm through his and he escorted her past Spinner’s End Apparition boundaries.

“So, where are you taking me?”

“I wanted to have you to myself, for some reason.” Adrian smiled, his eyes twinkling. “You are a hard witch to get alone sometimes. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” Hermione smiled.

“Good,” Adrian grinned. He wrapped his arms around her and Hermione felt the pull of side-along Apparition.

When her head cleared, Hermione saw that they were on a gravel path in a garden. It was beautiful. The sun was setting and lanterns hung from the trees. Flowers were blooming all around the path and the air was fragrant with their scent. It looked like a fairy tale.

“This is lovely,” Hermione breathed as she took in their surroundings.

“I’m glad you like it. You’ve been under a lot of stress, so I wanted to bring you somewhere peaceful. Our first destination is just up ahead.”

Adrian held his hand out to her and they walked down the lane together. Up ahead was a large gazebo, covered in tiny lights. In the center of the gazebo was a couple dressed in formal wear. There was a quartet of musicians to the side of the gazebo and the couple was gliding around in a kind of dance.

“Do you dance, kitten?” Adrian asked as they approached.

“A little, but not as well as they do.”

“Few people dance as well as they do,” Adrian chuckled. “They’re professionals.”

Adrian led Hermione up the steps and they watched the dancers. The wizard twirled the witch, and then lifted her in the air. It looked fluid and effortless, but Hermione was sure that was not the case. The song ended and the dancers made their final move. Hermione began clapping and Adrian joined her. The dancers smiled and bowed. Adrian stepped forward to make introductions.

“May I present Hermione Granger? Hermione, this is Valentin and Esmée Moreau,” Adrian gestured to the couple. “They are award winning performers of classic wizarding ballroom dancing. They are going to show us a few things this evening, if you wish to learn.”

“I would love to learn,” Hermione beamed. No one had ever taken her dancing like this before, outside of the Yule Ball back in school. That had been the only time she’d ever had formal instruction in dancing as well. “It is a pleasure to meet you both. You looked amazing!”

“Thank you.” Esmée bowed. “And you will look amazing as well.”
“I don’t know about that,” Hermione snorted, laughing. She didn’t consider herself clumsy, but the Moreaus were the epitome of grace.

“Ah, you will be wonderful,” Valentin assured.

Valentin and Esméè showed them several easy steps to start, and then the moves got more complicated. Hermione was having so much fun. She and Adrian danced and laughed. The Moreaus were charming, entertaining, and made learning fun. They cut in and separated Hermione and Adrian to show them things, so there was a lot of moving around. Valentin was an exceptional partner, but dancing with Adrian was better. He was smooth and self-assured, leading Hermione around the gazebo with gentle firmness. She got to hold on to him and watch his beautiful face and body while they danced.

After about forty-five minutes of lessons, the Moreaus left with hugs and kisses on the cheeks. The musicians stayed and Adrian extended his hand to her. They danced together for another half hour. Adrian held her close, twirled her, and never let her go. Hermione was getting a little overwhelmed by the romance of it all. He was looking at her as if she was the only witch in the world and the setting couldn’t be lovelier. Adrian seemed to relish having her in his arms, running his fingers down her arms, along her collarbone, up her neck. His fingers grazed every bit of her bare skin that he could reach.

Hermione had never felt so special and she was more than a little aroused. Her lust increased with every pass of his hands on her skin. Adrian’s gaze was turning more and more heated as well. Finally, when Hermione came back into his arms from a twirl, Adrian leaned down and captured her lips. All of the tension that had been building up as they danced went into that kiss. Hermione thought she might combust. She was pressed against Adrian, her hands wrapped around his neck, but she didn’t feel close enough to him.

Hermione was seconds away from jumping up on Adrian and wrapping her legs around him when the gorgeous wizard pulled away. She began to pout when Adrian nodded to the musicians.

“You may go,” Adrian addressed them. “Thank you. You performed beautifully.”

“Yes, thank you,” Hermione said, blushing. She’d forgotten they were there. “The music was wonderful.”

“Come, kitten,” Adrian smiled, taking her hand. “We have one more stop to make.”

They left the gazebo and Adrian led them down another path, also lit by lanterns. It was a gorgeous spring night and Adrian was wonderful company. After a few minutes, they arrived at a small lake. Hermione took a deep breath of the fresh air at the beach. The moon shone on the flat water. Looking up, Hermione could see so many stars. She noticed something floating out on the lake, like a raft with lights on it.

“Ready for dinner, kitten?” Adrian asked, placing a soft kiss on her nose and wrapping his arms around her.

Hermione smiled and nodded. All of a sudden, she felt the pull of Apparition again. She found herself out on the lake, on that raft she had noticed from the shore. It was a floating wooden platform with a table for two. Each corner of the platform had posts with hanging lanterns and the table had small round candles clustered in the center.

Adrian held out a chair for her and Hermione sat down.
“This is spectacular, Adrian. How did you do all this?”

“Magic,” Adrian winked. He reached over to a bucket on a pedestal and pulled out a chilled bottle of wine.

After Adrian poured them wine, the appetizers appeared on the table. It was just like at Hogwarts. They started with seared tuna, which was followed by an arugula salad. Conversation flowed easily. Adrian asked about her years away from England and told her about his work. They talked about their pasts, their families, and what they wanted out of life. Talking to Adrian was so easy. He listened and really seemed to care about her responses. Adrian asked about her past relationships and she told him.

The entree arrived and they still managed to keep up the conversation as they ate the perfectly cooked petite filet mignon.

"I don't think I've been on a date where I've been asked to talk so much about myself," Hermione chuckled.

"I want to know you, kitten, to really know you," Adrian explained sincerely. "And I want you to know me, so ask me anything you want."

"Have you ever had a relationship?"

"Not a serious one," Adrian shook his head. "Some of my liaisons lasted a long time, up to six months. They may have met my friends, been to my home, but it was all in fun, never serious. I've never wanted to be with anyone long-term until you."

"You do know how to take a witch's breath away." Hermione's brow furrowed.

"Is it too much?" Adrian asked, looking a little worried. He didn't seem worried about the idea that he wanted to be bound to her for life, but that he may have overwhelmed her by telling her about it.

"Yes and no," Hermione responded, sighing. "I am definitely drawn to you. You make me feel special, comfortable, and safe. You are the sweetest, most romantic wizard I've ever met. You are also achingly beautiful, as I'm sure you know."

Adrian chuckled at that.

"How could I not want you?" Hermione continued. She looked down at her plate. Adrian had treated her as if she was the only witch in the world. He told her that she was the only one he wanted. Hermione wanted him, badly. But how could she tell him that he wasn't the only one?

"But?"

"But I am drawn to other wizards as well."

"Marcus, Draco, and Theo?"

Hermione looked up and saw that he was amused.

"Yes," Hermione said, a little perplexed. Marcus had already known as well. How did they do that? "How did you know?"

"We've talked about it," Adrian said simply. "We've been mates for ages. We've known each other since we were small. It was clear that we were all interested in you, seriously interested. If one of
us just wanted you for a shag, he would've backed off out of respect for the others. I think Blaise was thinking along those lines when he first saw you that day you came back."

"Do you mind that I have a date with Draco tomorrow and Marcus on Friday?"

"No," Adrian smiled. "I don't mind, kitten. Of course, I want to spend as much time with you as possible, but I understand the others do as well. When we all decided to pursue you, we agreed that if you did choose one of us for the long-term that the others would respect your decision."

"But I won't really get to choose," Hermione said, shaking her head.

"Your magic will make the best choice for you," Adrian said with complete confidence. "You know, some Sorceresses have had more than one Ancillary. Having two is not uncommon. Maybe I'll be one of them. I don't mind sharing you with other wizards, as long as I get to have you as well."

Hermione smiled.

"Well, you're a better person than I am. I don't know that I could share a wizard I cared about with another witch."

"You are an amazing person, kitten."

Their empty plates disappeared and were replaced by crepes, dusted with powdered sugar. There were little pitchers filled with different sauces to pour over the crepes. Hermione chose the chocolate and the strawberry, while Adrian picked raspberry and toffee.

Hermione was glad they talked about so many things, including the other wizards in her life. She hated the idea that any one of her wizards would feel like she was lying to him, even through omission.

They kept talking as they ate dessert. It was delicious and their plates were soon empty. Adrian stood and offered her his hand. When she stood, the table and chairs disappeared. A soft, fluffy blanket appeared under their feet.

"Would you like to star gaze?" he asked.

Hermione smiled and sat down on the blanket. She lay back, staring up at the stars. Adrian joined her, pulling her to his side. Her head rested on his bicep, making a delightful pillow.

Adrian pulled out his wand and whispered Nox. The lanterns extinguished and Hermione could see millions of tiny, twinkling stars in the pitch-black night. The subtle rocking of the platform on the water was soothing as well.

"This is amazing, Adrian," she whispered.

"I'm glad you like it."

Hermione pressed herself into him, relishing his body heat. They lay in silence for a while, listening to the gentle lap of the lake and the sounds of the night.

"Look, kitten," Adrian whispered urgently. She moved her gaze to the East, and saw a series of bright streaks in the dark sky.

"Shooting stars," she breathed. "Do wizards wish on shooting stars?"
"Of course," Adrian said softly, turning his head to face her. "I made my wish."

Adrian's voice had turned husky with lust. Hermione closed the short distance between them and pressed her lips to his. He tasted a little sweet from the dessert they had eaten. Adrian lips were as soft and perfect as they looked. She didn’t know if she would ever get tired of kissing him. He let her take the lead and Hermione ran her hands all over as much of his lithe, muscled body as she could reach. She reached under his beautiful robes to his thin white button down shirt.

Adrian eagerly kissed her back and ran his hands up and down her bare arms. Hermione pressed herself closer to him, trying to envelop herself in his warmth. Like earlier when they were dancing, Hermione wanted to get as close to him as possible; and this time there was no audience to stop her. She unbuttoned some of his shirt and slipped her hand inside, feeling him with her fingertips. Adrian broke the kiss, groaning.

"Touch me, kitten," he rasped. Hermione unbuttoned the rest of his shirt and let her fingers dance lightly over his impressive torso. It was hard to see him in the darkness, but she could feel the firm perfection of his muscles, the ridges of his abdomen. Adrian remained passive while Hermione explored. After several minutes though, he was panting and his hands seemed to be twitching where he held them on her hips.

"You can touch me too, you know," Hermione whispered in his ear before nibbling gently. She was touched that he was letting her do what she wanted, was holding back to let her go at whatever pace she chose.

As soon as she gave him permission, however, Adrian began caressing her. He ran his hands up her back to the nape of her neck, then down again, palming the swell of her arse. His hands were firm and strong. He moved his hands to the front and ghosted his hands over her breasts. Hermione was desperately wishing her dress opened in the front.

She moaned, leaning her head back. Adrian began softly and lightly kissing up her neck.

"You smell delicious, kitten," he groaned. "And you feel wonderful."

Hermione reached around him, underneath his shirt. Her hands mapped the muscles of his back and traced his spine.

"I love feeling your hands on me," he whispered. His tongue traced the shell of her ear.

Adrian's hands found the zipper and he began slowly pulling it down, excruciatingly slowly. Hermione gripped his back and tried to pull him closer, but there was already no space between them.

"If I am going too fast for you, kitten, just tell me."

"I want to feel your hands on my skin," she replied, a little surprised by the raspy huskiness of her own voice.

With the zipper down, Adrian pushed her dress off her shoulders and then slowly down her arms. His lips touched every area he exposed. He traced his tongue lightly over her collarbones. He placed open-mouthed kisses on her sternum and in the valley between her breasts. Her dress came to a stop at her waist and Adrian peppered kisses along her belly.

Hermione arched her back, silently urging Adrian upwards. He had totally bypassed her lace-clad breasts on his trek down to her stomach.
Adrian kissed his way back up. The evening air made her skin tingle along the wet trail he left. His hands finally cupped her breasts, his thumbs brushing her tight nipples. Hermione groaned and scraped her nails lightly down his bare chest. Adrian hissed and pulled down her bra, fully exposing her. His mouth captured one breast, while his hand stroked the other.

Hermione's hips pushed toward him almost involuntarily. He tried to angle away from her, but Hermione was having none of that. She liked feeling his arousal through his trousers; it made her even damper. Hermione rubbed her thighs together, moaning as Adrian's talented mouth suckled on her breasts.

She reached her hand down and traced lightly over the front of his trousers. Adrian moaned and rocked toward her hand. He detached himself from her breast and slammed his mouth into hers. Her tongue pressed against his and she groaned. His hand cradled the back of her head, while the other stroked her thigh.

Hermione's fingers toyed with the top of Adrian's trousers, running along the inside of the waistband. Adrian nudged her thighs and ran his fingers up the inside of her leg, brushing lightly against her knickers. Hermione gasped and spread her legs wider. His light touches were driving her mad.

Deciding to take the bull by the horns, so to speak, Hermione opened Adrian's trousers and reached inside. Her hand closed around his warm shaft, her fingers not quite making it around him. Adrian drew in his breath sharply. He felt wonderful, pulsating, and thick. Hermione wished she could see him, but it was too dark.

"Yes, kitten," he groaned.

Hermione explored him, from the base to the tip. As she worked her hand, she nuzzled her face into his neck, licking and sucking. Adrian was breathing heavily. As he panted, Adrian’s hand found its way back to her knickers. This time, instead of a light touch, Adrian rubbed between her thighs firmly. Hermione moaned and scraped her teeth along his neck. Merlin, it felt so good. She tightened her grip around him and made her movements more purposeful. Adrian pushed aside her wet knickers and began exploring her folds, his nimble fingers working her into a frenzy.

Soon, Adrian wasn’t the only one panting and gasping for breath. He pushed a finger into her tight channel then added another, pumping in and out. Hermione could barely think straight, but she did manage to stroke Adrian in the same rhythm he was using. All she could hear was their combined moaning and groaning. All she could think about was Adrian, and how he was making her feel. When he began flicking her clit rapidly with his thumb, Hermione let out a keening sort of wail. She could feel the tension building in her abdomen, her muscles getting tighter and tighter. Apparently, as she was finding her peak, her stroking became more frantic and pushed Adrian over the edge. He gripped her tightly as he came, yelling her name. Warm liquid coated her hand.

All of a sudden, her tension broke and Hermione’s muscles went taut. She clenched down on Adrian’s fingers and shouted his name as she came. She didn’t even think about her magic until it was too late. As the bright light erupted from her, Hermione clutched to Adrian as tightly as she could so he wasn’t flung off the raft platform into the lake. Hermione heard a loud crack.

“Oh, Adrian, I am so sorry! Are you okay?” Hermione’s eyes welled up with tears. She should have been more careful. Adrian could be hurt. That loud crack could have been his spine.

“I’m fine, kitten,” Adrian replied, breathless. “What was that?”

Hermione let go of the beautiful wizard. She didn’t deserve to touch him right now. She’d known
what was going to happen, that she was endangering Adrian, and she didn’t even warn him. She was carried away by him, by the romance and the beauty of the night. If his goal was to make her forget her problems, then he did too well because she had. It was irresponsible and stupid of her.

“It was me, my magic,” Hermione explained, rushing to put her clothing back to rights.

“Oh, shite!” Adrian exclaimed, sounding panicked.

“I know, I know,” Hermione wailed. He had every right to be panicked. “I don’t blame you if you are angry.”

“Angry? What are you talking about, kitten? The platform, it’s sinking! We’re sinking!”

Sure enough, Hermione felt that the blanket they were on was soaked and getting a little chilly. She felt water starting to cover the hand she had pressed into the blanket.

“Do you have everything?” Adrian asked urgently. Hermione felt around in the dark for her bag and held it to her chest. Adrian wrapped her in his arms and she felt the immediate pull of Apparition take them away from their disaster at sea, or disaster at lake as the case may be.

Hermione blinked against the soft light in the room they entered. It was a bedroom; a lovely bedroom, richly furnished. It was masculine without being overwhelming. It was obviously Adrian’s room.

“We better get out of these wet clothes,” Adrian said, shrugging off his opened robe and unbuttoned shirt. His trousers were still undone at the top. Now that she could see him shirtless in the light, he took her breath away.

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut and turned away from him. She couldn’t let herself get carried away again. It wasn’t safe, not while her magic was so volatile. It broke her heart a little that she could have hurt his amazing wizard and she stifled a sob.

“Hey, kitten, what’s wrong?” Adrian asked, concern lacing his voice. He came up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders, turning her to face him. “Are you crying? Are you okay? Did I hurt you?”

“I’m so sorry, Adrian,” Hermione responded, trying to hold back the tears. One fell anyway. “I better go.”

“Sorry? Sorry for what? Kitten, what are you talking about?” Adrian looked very worried now.

“My magic, it’s too dangerous. When I came…I could have hurt you. I broke that solid wood platform. What if that had been you?”

“Kitten, no. You can’t think like that. We are both fine,” he soothed. “You couldn’t have known that would happen.”

“But I could and I did.” Hermione hung her head, feeling ashamed of her carelessness. She crossed her arms over her chest and hugged herself tightly. “It happened earlier today, with Marcus. He was thrown across the room and hit his head against a door. I didn’t know then, but I should have figured out that it was likely to recur in a similar situation. I should have known better, but I didn’t think. I got carried away and you could have been hurt. There is no excuse.”

Adrian came over and wrapped his arms around her. She tried to step away, but he held her too securely.
“You are being too hard on yourself, kitten,” Adrian crooned, rubbing his cheek against the top of her head. “It happened once. You couldn’t know it was definitely going to happen again. Now you know that it’s a pattern and may happen again in the future. Marcus already knows, so we’ll tell Draco and Theo. I’m going to hazard a guess that they won’t care, though. If you had told me before hand, I wouldn’t have done anything differently.”

Hermione looked up at him, brows furrowed.

“I just don’t think your magic wants to hurt me,” Adrian explained. “I think it, and you, like me. You like Marcus, Draco, and Theo too. Since one or more of us has been around you the past few days, you said you’ve been feeling better. The exhaustion spell you had today was the first one you had since Monday and it was minor compared to others you described. Maybe it is just wishful thinking on my part. Eventually, your magic will know which one or two of us is best for you and might choose us as your Ancillary.”

“You can’t know that with enough certainty to risk your safety,” Hermione scolded. “I don’t want to be responsible for hurting you, any of you!”

“Marcus was fine, wasn’t he?”

“He hit his head!”

“Was he bleeding?” Hermione shook her head no. “Then he’s fine! He has a thick skull, always has! Moreover, in case you hadn’t noticed, I’m fine too. A little wet, but fine. In fact, I’m better than fine. I just had a perfect date with the perfect witch.”

Hermione still felt guilty.

“It was a perfect date and I ruined the ending.”

“The ending was my favorite part,” Adrian purred. He was unzipping her dress. “You are going to catch a chill in those wet things. Sleep here with me tonight, please? I want to keep you close.”

Hermione let him drop her wet dress to the floor and lead her over toward the bed. He then removed her bra and knickers. Adrian stood there for a moment, staring at her. She was naked, wearing only her shoes. Needing something to do, she stepped out of her shoes and set them over by her bag. Goose bumps starting breaking out on her skin and her nipples pebbled. It was partly because of the chill, but mostly because of the way Adrian was looking at her.

“I’m sorry, kitten, you must be cold.” Adrian swung her up into his arms and deposited her in the fluffy bed. He found his wand in his robe pocket and set it on his nightstand. He dropped his trousers on the floor and kicked off his shoes before sliding into bed beside her. A quick flick of his wand and the lights were extinguished. Adrian moved toward her and pulled her to him, so they were spooning in the middle of his large bed.

“Thank you for a wonderful night,” Adrian whispered, nuzzling the back of her neck.

“Thank you, Adrian,” Hermione whispered back. She wanted to genuinely thank him for so much; for the date, for being so sweet all night, and for still wanting her around. She didn’t know how to quite say all that and she was beginning to feel exhausted like she had earlier. Two uncontrolled magical discharges in one day would take a lot out of her. She settled back into him and fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes
Next - Let's go to Hogwarts!
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer - don't own Harry Potter! All I own is the cold I brought back from my vacation. ;-)
Now - Hogwarts and Theo gets scientific

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Theo loitered at the Hogsmeade Apparition point. He was early to meet Hermione for breakfast. While he was waiting, he let his mind replay their kiss from yesterday.

Their heads were bent together looking over her Arithmancy equations. Theo continued to be impressed by Hermione's brilliance. He was in the middle of a question when he turned his head to look at her. The look on her face made him stop speaking. Then she leaned in and kissed him. Her lips were soft and warm. Theo froze for a half second before kissing her back. As it became more heated, Theo pulled her out of her chair and into his lap. He needed to be as close to her as possible. Her scent and body heat swirled around him in the air. He was so focused on her, on feeling and experiencing her that he wasn't surprised he hadn't heard Marcus come in. One thing was for sure, Theo couldn't wait for a repeat.

Hermione appeared with Adrian at eight o'clock on the dot. Theo internally chided himself for forgetting that she couldn't Apparate on her own. He should've offered to pick her up rather than meet her.

Hermione looked sweet and professional in a gauzy teal pleated skirt that came past her knees. She had on a white top with a big bow near the neck as well as a small cream-colored sweater. Theo liked when she wore heels, like the tan ones she was wearing now, because it put her face a few inches closer to his own.

"I've brought you our witch, Nott." Adrian grinned. Hermione rolled her eyes, but managed to look amused. "Have a good day, kitten. I doubt I'll see you again today, but I do want to come to your Friday meeting so owl me the time."

"I will. Have a good day at work," Hermione smiled. Adrian leaned down and gave her a kiss before Apparating away.

Hermione turned to Theo with a big smile.

"Good Morning," she chirped. Theo was glad she was a morning person, because he was too.

"Good Morning, Mi." Theo reached out and took her hand. "I thought we could go to a place that opened a few years ago. I think you'll like it."

They walked down the street, holding hands. Theo talked about the new shops as well as the old ones that Hermione knew. She lit up at the sight of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, but of course, they didn't open until later in the day.

"Oh, they finally put in a book store!" Hermione enthused. Theo had brought her to a stop in front
"It opened a few years ago and they have a little cafe that serves a decent breakfast," Theo said, opening the door for her.

Theo watched Hermione pause and take in her surroundings. It was a good book store created by someone who loved books. The walls were Ravenclaw blue with bronze accents. There were large windows and shelves of books.

"You can browse after breakfast." Theo smiled and pulled her toward the cafe in the back. Theo held out a chair for his witch and sat across from her.

"How was your date last night?" Theo asked.

"Wonderful," she smiled, "and entirely romantic."

"That's Ades for you," Theo chuckled. Theo could be romantic, but Adrian seemed to have an innate sensibility for it. Aesthetics, beauty, and sentiment were priorities in his life, so he was very good at romance. To Theo, a romantic date would be bringing flowers and taking a witch to a lecture.

"There was something that came up that I wanted to talk to you about." She looked worried and Theo reached across the table to take her hand.

"You can talk to me about anything, Mi. You know that right?"

Hermione nodded, but still looked a little worried. She was biting her bottom lip, so Theo leaned across the table to brush his thumb over her lips. She smiled then.

Theo didn't notice anyone approaching the table until two menus dropped unceremoniously between him and Hermione. Theo looked up and groaned inwardly. He'd dated this waitress for about three months, but she hadn't really held his interest so he stopped seeing her a month ago. For a Ravenclaw and a generally smart witch, she had been pretty stupid about their breakup. She had denied that he was allowed to end things with her, insisting that she had a say in the decision as well. He knew she worked here, but she never had the morning shift. She was not a morning person and definitely looked out of sorts now.

"Good Morning, Lisa," Theo said casually, leaning back in his chair. "This is Hermione Granger. Hermione this is Lisa Turpin."

"Theo's girlfriend," Lisa hastily added, venom dripping from her voice.

"You're not my girlfriend," Theo contested, still speaking calmly. "We stopped dating a month ago. We can go elsewhere for breakfast."

They both stood and Theo extended his hand to Hermione. They started to walk away when a voice interrupted them.

"Hermione? Is that you?"

They turned to see Penelope Clearwater rushing across the store.

"Penny?" Hermione responded, smiling at the blonde.

"It is you!" Penelope reached Hermione and gave her a big hug. "I read in the paper that you were
back. You look so good! Are you here for breakfast? How do you like my store?"

Hermione gushed about Penelope's store and the two witches chatted for a few minutes.

Theo took a moment to pull Lisa aside. He made it clear that she was being insane and that he wanted nothing to do with her. She had been owling him and trying to visit him at work, which he ignored. He could handle Lisa's crazy, but he wouldn't tolerate the mad bint making Hermione uncomfortable. Theo was generally a passive person, with a tendency to float along contentedly and not let much bother him. However, he had a limit, and when it was crossed, he became a totally different person. Blaise had given angry-Theo the nickname Hurricane, because the recipients of Theo's wrath couldn’t stand it for long and Theo destroyed everything in his path. Lisa had never seen him like that, few people had, so after a few minutes she was just standing slack-jawed and speechless.

Theo walked away from her and back to his witch, who was laughing with Penelope.

"Theo, Penny wants to order us her recommended breakfast. Do you mind?"

"Sounds good." Theo smiled a little stiffly. He slid his arm around Hermione's waist and felt better. When he did get angry, it took him a while to calm down again. Like a Hurricane, there was little use trying to control it and there was nothing to do except let it self blow itself out.

Penelope happily went back to the kitchens and Hermione led Theo back to their table. She sat next to him, rather than across from him, which Theo appreciated.

"Okay?"

"Yeah." Theo nodded and sighed. "The guys always say I let things go too easily. I dated that witch for a couple months, but broke it off a month ago. She didn't agree with my decision, owled, and came by my office. I may be laid back, but I'm no push over. I'm not going to keep seeing someone I don't want to see. I just ignored her. But today she made me angry. I think she's finally got the picture."

"I'm glad you worked it out," Hermione said. "I imagine any witch would be quite upset to lose you."

Theo grinned and reached to squeeze her hand.

"I like that you are laid back," she continued. "You do get intense about ideas and your work. But not everyone needs to get worked up over everything. It's an admirable trait to be calm and not easily flustered. I can't imagine you being a push over, though."

Theo leaned over and kissed her softly.

"Thank you," Theo smiled. He was glad she understood. Adrian could be intense and Draco was never laid back about anything. Marcus had his relaxed moments, but he was about as subtle as a rampaging ogre. "Now, what did you want to talk about?"

Hermione opened her mouth, but was interrupted when Penny brought them their breakfast. They each had a piece of quiche, sausage, fruit, and tea. Penny left them, asking them not to hesitate to call her if they needed anything. Theo watched Hermione pour them tea, adding what they each liked, cream for her and lemon for him. He would wait.

"So, a certain... phenomena has occurred twice now," she said, sipping her tea. "It happened yesterday with Marcus in the afternoon and then with Adrian last night."
She paused and bit her lip again. Theo had a pretty good idea what she was talking about.

"Marcus mentioned yesterday that your magic reacted strongly when the two of you were...alone together," Theo said.

"He told you about that?" Hermione blushed.

"He didn't go into details, but he was worried," Theo explained. Her brow furrowed and she looked concerned. "He was afraid it meant that your magic doesn't like him, or that part of you, deep inside didn't like him."

"That's ridiculous!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Great big wizards like Marcus get insecure too, Mi," Theo gently chided. She looked thoughtful, so Theo continued. "When it happened last night with Ades, was it in the same context, when you...you know."

"Had an orgasm? Yes." Hermione's eyes danced with amusement. Theo rolled his eyes at her teasing.

"Do you think it's your unregulated magic getting expressed because it finally has the opportunity to do so?" Theo was analyzing this as they spoke. "I mean, you are doing a good job of trying to suppress these unintended outbursts and, so far, your control has been impressive. You haven't allowed yourself to use magic or to fully relax. But in those situations with Marcus and Ades, you let yourself go, there was no control."

"So the magic finally had a way out," Hermione nodded. "I hadn't thought of it that way."

"We should do an experiment," Theo said, thinking of the variables, "Recreate parts of the situation and see what happens.

"You want to make me come?" Hermione's eyes were twinkling with amusement again, that and lust.

"No! Well, yes," Theo was blushing. "That's not what I was going to suggest though. I was wondering if the same thing would happen if you did it yourself."

"Hmm. I don't know." Hermione looked thoughtful. "I haven't done that in a while."

"So, we'll take some time later and see what happens," Theo decided.

Hermione nodded and they set about finishing their breakfast. Hermione only had a few minutes to browse before they had to meet Percy and Bronwyn. The pair from the Ministry was waiting near the Apparition point and the four of them walked up to Hogwarts.

When they reached the front door, Headmistress McGonagall was waiting for them.

“Hermione!” the older witch enthused, coming out to embrace Hermione. Theo smiled. McGonagall had always had a soft spot for her brilliant student.

“Minnie!” Hermione responded in kind. “It’s so good to see you!”

“Come in, come in, all of you,” the Headmistress gestured. “Mr. Nott and Mr. Weasley, welcome back to Hogwarts.”

Hermione introduced Bronwyn, who for once was schooling her features and behaving herself. The
school was fairly quiet since it was the first week in June, final exam week. Most students were sitting for exams during the morning and then may have another that afternoon.

McGonagall showed them to a room they never knew existed, a faculty research room off the library. Theo grinned because Hermione seemed a little miffed that there was something about the Hogwarts library she didn't know. It made sense though. Theo rarely saw professors using the library and it stood to reason they would need to.

Madame Pince glided in, a pile of books in her arms to add to the already considerable stack on the table. Theo knew Hermione and the librarian came to an understanding after the war. Pince had never appreciated Hermione sneaking in after hours and taking or accessing books that she was not yet allowed to read. After the battle at Hogwarts though, Hermione returned to find a tearful Madam Pince sorting through the rubble, trying to create some semblance of order. Hermione spent hours of her free time that summer helping to inventory and assess the damage. When the school year started, the library looked almost back to normal. Despite her full workload, Hermione would take damaged books to restore. Theo remembered teasing her about her excessive reading and she'd explained the situation to him. He felt a little bad. He hadn't considered the extent of the damage. Since everything looked close to fine, he'd assumed it was. Theo got really good at repair and restoration charms that year.

McGonagall invited them all to have lunch in the Great Hall later, and then left them to their business.

Percy and Bronwyn presented maps of possible locations they'd found for the rituals. Theo listened for a while, but he was finding he really hated the Bronwyn chit and her shrill voice. He began imagining her hitting on Marcus, which the other wizard had described in detail to him and Draco at the pub the night before. Theo started chuckling at the memory of Draco's impression of the American witch as he clutched at Marcus, making filthy propositions in what was actually a reasonable copy of Bronwyn's accent and voice. Theo covered up his laughter with a fake cough and got up to look out the window.

The lake glittered not far below, the giant squid splashing happily in the shallows.

"Why isn't Hogwarts on the list?" Theo interrupted the others. "It's a good location for the ritual. There is a body of water and is a naturally magical location, which is why they built the school here."

"It isn't public nor is it Ministry property," Bronwyn said, her tone implying that Theo was slow. "During the school year, the Ministry is forbidden from holding non-school related events on the grounds, for the safety of the children."

Theo rolled his eyes.

"The Headmistress will give Hermione permission to do anything she wants here," Theo returned, staring down the witch. "If Hermione took a notion to run illegal dragon races out of the Astronomy tower, McGonagall would just ask that she try to keep the noise down."

Hermione scoffed.

"Percy," Theo continued, "Expand the search to include private property. Between the Granger, Potter, and Malfoy names there is nowhere we can't go. People that won't give the Ministry the time of day will accept a request from one of them."

The four got back to work. Pince had already organized the books by likely pertinence and then by
age of the book. It was actually very helpful and sped up the research process.

A few owls arrived as they worked. Hermione got feedback from her old Arithmancy Master, Selma Turan, which had a few suggestions about how to fine-tune some of the equations to possibly make them more accurate. Master Turan also reported that she insisted on coming to be of assistance and support Hermione through these rituals. She groaned softly.

"Not excited to see your friend?" Theo asked quietly.

"It's not that," she grinned wryly. "I can't have guests when I am a guest myself. Spinner's End is not that big. I was just thinking yesterday that I need to get my own place. Severus is wonderful and I know there are lots of people I could stay with, but I'm tired of living out of suitcases and boxes. Next week I can take some time to go house hunting."

"Remember that you have an assistant now," Theo reminded her. He didn't want her doing too much and over extending herself. She may not look it, but she was fragile at the moment. "Percy can gather information for you."

Percy looked up at the mention of his name.

"It's my job to help you, 'Mione," Percy scolded. "You don't want me to look bad do you?"

Hermione chuckled, but agreed. Percy was going to contact some realtors and put together information about available properties for her to look at after the ritual. Hermione expressed her desire for something with a cozy cottage feel to it. Theo reminded her that she would have what basically amounted to a husband, possibly two, in less than three weeks. Any home she bought would have to be big enough for an unusually large family. Plus, Hermione wanted rooms for guests.

Hermione also gave Percy a list of people to owl, inviting them to the last planning meeting the Friday afternoon before the ritual. One of the earlier owls had been from Potter. He'd offered Grimmauld Place for the meeting, since they would already be there tomorrow morning using the library.

The rest of the morning went by smoothly. Theo lost focus a few times, but not very often. He was a diligent scholar, but the idea of observing Hermione 'experiment' to see if she could create a magical discharge on her own was exceptionally distracting. He was also trying to think of an impressive date, even though he had yet to ask her out. He knew Draco and Marcus had booked her next two evenings. From what Draco said last night at the pub, Hermione was in for an amazing evening. Theo knew he wouldn't be able to compete with the exciting dramatics Draco had planned. He also knew that he wasn't ever going to be able to pull off anything as romantic as Ades would do. Theo sighed. It wouldn't work to try to emulate one of them. He had to be true to his own style. He and his friends had different personalities and they were each playing to their own strengths; Theo would do the same.

OoOoO

Hermione was startled when Theo told her it was time to break for lunch. The morning had gone by so quickly. She stretched and put away her things. She would come back to them that afternoon. On the way down to the Great Hall, Percy caught her attention.

"I know you're busy, 'Mione," Percy began, looking a little embarrassed, "but Mum, Dad, and George are very eager to see you. They were hoping you would have time to see them next week."
"Why not Saturday?" Hermione offered. "Are they free then? We can meet somewhere for lunch."

"But Saturday is the ritual," Percy said, looking confused.

"Not until five o'clock," Hermione reminded him. "I can't just sit and wait all day, the anticipation will kill me. Besides, I'd really like to see them before, in case...in case it doesn't go well."

Hermione noticed Theo stiffen at her comment.

"It will go well," Percy stiffened confidently.

"You all have read about the unsuccessful rituals, just like I have," Hermione said seriously. "I think we have a good plan and are getting as prepared as we can be, but it would be silly to ignore a real possibility, even if it is unlikely. My point is, see if they are free on Saturday around noon please, Percy."

The redhead nodded. Hermione sighed. She hadn't meant to make them so glum, even though Bronwyn didn't look affected by the idea of Hermione turning into goo. Theo took her arm and tucked it into his and the group walked silently the rest of the way.

The Great Hall was buzzing with students, all sitting and talking, waiting for lunch. When Hermione and Theo entered, followed by Percy and Bronwyn, the room became silent. Hermione began to feel a little self-conscious. She was just a student here four years ago. She'd been here with the current fifth, sixth, and seventh year students. Theo gave her a little tug and she kept walking toward the faculty table where Minnie was waving her. Hermione stopped thinking of the students and surveyed the staff tables at the front. Minnie was beaming at her. Hermione knew her old mentor would be happy to see her. Hagrid was clearly holding himself back from running across the hall toward her. She smiled. She had missed Hagrid. Severus and Lucius Malfoy were also at the table. There were two empty seats between Minnie and Severus and another two over between Professors Flitwick and Trelawney. Hermione headed straight for the seats by the Headmistress. Minnie stood.

"Now that everyone is here, we shall begin," the Headmistress announced. As soon as she sat back down, platters of food appeared on all the tables.

It was so nice to be back at Hogwarts. Lunch was good, as usual, and Hermione was able to catch up with her old professors. They asked for stories about the places she'd been, people she'd met, and things she'd learned since she'd been gone. Professor Vector wanted to meet another time to discuss advances in Arithmancy. Hagrid also invited Hermione to come for tea. Similarly, Hermione wanted to hear all the news about the school over the years.

After lunch was over, Minnie, Severus, and Lucius accompanied them back to their research room. Percy left after lunch to study maps of private land for possible ritual sites. Bronwyn stayed. Hermione had to admit that the annoying witch was better today. She continued to challenge and question Hermione at every turn, but Hermione thought that was a good thing. Most people working on this project with her were her friends, and Hermione was afraid they might keep some comment or criticism to themselves because they didn't want to upset her. Bronwyn had no such issue.

Hermione explained that they needed two people to perform the ritual and asked Minnie to be one of them. The Headmistress was honored and agreed. Hermione officially asked Lucius to be the other, although with less enthusiasm. There were spells they would need to practice and preparations they would need to make for Saturday. Severus gave them copies of the ritual they'd drafted thus far to study.
Theo asked about using Hogwarts grounds for the ritual and Minnie agreed without reservation. Hogwarts was their first choice so far, unless Percy uncovered a better site. They discussed the ritual in general for a while, and then Minnie had to get back to work. Severus and Lucius also left.

Hermione surveyed the few books that remained. She wondered if they'd found all that they could. Theo and Bronwyn focused on the books, while Hermione reworked some Arithmancy equations and did some additional problems for new information.

While she was working, she got several owls. Percy confirmed lunch with Arthur, Molly, and George for Saturday. They'd meet in Hogsmeade at noon. The next owl was from Adrian. He wanted to let her know that he was thinking about her and that he missed her. Marcus' owl contained a similar sentiment, but his language made her blush. Draco's owl was the last one. He said to meet him at the Three Broomsticks at six and not to bother going home to change. Hermione liked an occasional evening at the pub as much as the next witch, but she thought Draco would plan something more impressive for their first date.

Hermione tried to focus on the work, but she found Theo distracting. He was bent over several books, parchments scattered around him. He'd left a quill behind his ear again and his collar was crooked. Hermione found him so attractive, especially at times like this when he was intent on his work. He was a wonderful kisser. She couldn't watch him writing without imagining what those long, tapered fingers could do to her. Hermione sighed, drawing Theo's attention.

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Theo smirked at her and Hermione knew she blushed a little bit.

"Come on, Mi," Theo said, standing up and extending his hand. "You need a break."

Theo turned to Bronwyn.

"Go ahead and wrap up what you're doing," he instructed. "Meet us tomorrow morning at Grimmauld Place. Percy knows how to get there."

Theo pulled Hermione out of the room and then away from the library, away from a scowling Bronwyn.

"Where are we going?" Hermione asked, as he led them toward what had always been a mostly unused wing of the castle.

"To do an experiment," Theo smiled.

"Now?" Hermione was blushing now, she was certain.

"Why not?"

Theo set about opening a few doors, looking for something. Finally, he found a room he approved of and pulled Hermione inside, grinning. It was an old classroom that was clearly unused. There was a teacher's desk and a few student desks; otherwise, the room was empty.

Theo put his hands on her hips and lifted her onto the big teacher's desk. He stood in front of her, cradled between her parted legs. He ran his hands over her thighs, still covered by her skirt.

Hermione pulled him forward, leaning to kiss him. Theo kissed her back. He ran his tongue along her lips and she parted them. She caressed his tongue with her own and pulled him closer. Now, he was pressed firmly between her thighs. Hermione didn't want to release his lips for anything. Theo was exploring with his hands as they kissed. He ran his hands up and down her back, over her arms, up her torso, and finally to her breasts. He pulled off the light cardigan sweater she'd worn
and then he unbuttoned her shirt. His long fingers danced along her bare skin and he palmed her breasts through the thin bra she wore.

Hermione moaned into his mouth. She rocked her hips against him a little, making him moan as well. His fingers began to pluck at her sensitive nipples. Theo's hands, everything about him, felt so wonderful. Hermione rocked her hips into him harder, with more purpose. She wanted him so badly. Working with him for days on end had been wonderful, but frustrating.

One of Theo's hands disappeared from her breast and began making its way up her skirt. He stroked her thighs, and then toyed with the edge of her knickers.

Theo leaned back and broke their kiss. Hermione moaned at the loss of his lips and tongue. He maneuvered her knickers down her legs. Hermione saw the gauzy lavender fabric disappear into his pocket. He brought his hand back up her skirt and lightly teased her wet slit.

"Mmmmm, so wet," Theo groaned. Hermione pressed herself into his hand, wanting more.

All of a sudden, Theo was gone. He'd taken several steps backwards, away from her. Hermione immediately felt the loss of him and looked at him, confused.

"The point of the experiment is for you to do it yourself," Theo reminded her. He sat at one of the student desks, as if eagerly awaiting a lecture. "I'm just here to observe."

Hermione suddenly felt shy and she blushed. She didn't think she'd ever brought herself off in front of anyone before.

"Pull your skirt up, Mi," Theo instructed. His voice was rough with lust, but firm. "I want to see you."

Hermione obeyed. "Now reach your hand down and touch yourself," he continued sternly. "That's good. Do you feel how wet you are?"

"Yes," Hermione sighed, feeling a little breathless. She was already so worked up from the earlier kissing and touching.

"Put your fingers inside yourself. Yes, just like that. I bet you feel so good. I can't wait to be inside you, Mi. Do you want that? Do you want me inside you?"

"Yes," she panted. She brought her free hand up to her breasts and began caressing and pulling gently on herself.

"Pull your bra down, Mi," Theo ordered, his voice gravelly. "Let me see your beautiful tits."

Hermione did as he said. She pinched and squeezed her exposed nipple, watching him. His eyes were dark and almost feral looking. His hands moved under the desk and she knew that he'd freed himself from his trousers. She wished she could see him stroke himself.
"Make yourself come, Mi. Picture me fucking you right on that desk." She began rubbing her clit hard. "I’d push my cock into that wet, sweet little pussy of yours. It’ll feel so good. I would pump in and out of you, hard. You'd want me to go hard, wouldn’t you? I’d hold your legs up, putting your ankles on my shoulders so I could pound into you. Your beautiful tits would bounce as we fucked and you would scream for me. You would scream my name as you come."

Hermione did come, screaming his name just as he said. She loved every naughty thing he said. Again, a white light of magic shot out of her in all directions and Hermione wasn't able to bask in the glow of her orgasm. She was looking around, assessing for damage her magic had done.

"Theo! Are you okay?" she asked urgently. He was in his seat, head thrown back.

"I don't think I've ever come so hard in my life," he groaned. "Merlin, that was fantastic."

Hermione looked around and didn't see anything amiss. She was beginning to calm down, to think that maybe everything was all right, when the desk she sat on gave way.

"Oof!" Hermione slid awkwardly into the center of the broken desk. It looked as if it had been sawed in half, right down the center.

"Mi! Are you okay?" Theo jumped up and tucked himself back into his trousers.

"Fine, fine," she huffed as she let Theo help her out of the broken desk. She stood and set to buttoning back up her shirt. Theo picked up her sweater for her.

"Well, I guess we have strong evidence that whenever I orgasm, my magic shoots out destructively," she said, frowning.

"Not entirely," Theo grinned. She looked at him, waiting for him to explain. "You made me come too."

"Well, I'm glad you enjoyed yourself, but that doesn't really-"

"No," Theo interrupted, chuckling. "I was enjoying myself, but I wasn't close to coming. I was still several minutes away, most likely. Your magic though, when it went through me, I was coming too and couldn't have turned back if I wanted to."

"I'm not sure what to make of that," Hermione said honestly.

"I will hypothesize that your magical discharge is a happy, loving magic," Theo responded, smiling. "The intensity might damage something you were touching, but it makes other people around you as happy as you are."

Hermione pondered it. Marcus had come when it happened and Adrian had just come a few seconds earlier. So far, no one had been really hurt, but she was still going to be careful. Hermione wondered if it was going to be an issue on her date with Draco. Probably. She'd had a tiny secret crush on the Slytherin Prince for ages. There were years of pent up frustration, combined with the fact that no one could get under her skin and drive her mad like Draco could. If that didn’t lead to sexual tension, she didn’t know what did.
Next - Dramione abounds
Chapter 12

Draco waited at the Three Broomsticks for his date. He was a few minutes early and more than a little nervous. Granger was either going to be angry with him or love what he planned. Who was he kidding? She'd be angry and she'd love it.

Draco was toying with the napkin under his half-full glass of butterbeer when Hermione arrived. She looked like heaven. She was dressed so properly, her skirt going past her knees, a crisp white shirt, and a sweet little sweater. Draco had an urge to get her a pair of spectacles and play librarian. He chuckled to himself. She wouldn't be so proper looking shortly, if Draco got his way; which he fully intended.

"Am I late?" she asked, looking down at his drink.

"No, I was early. I'm excited." Draco grinned and stood. She smiled back. "Are you ready, Granger? We are on a tight schedule."

"Ready for what?" She looked skeptical, which was understandable.

"You'll see." He smirked. "Just promise you won't try to kill me until the night is over."

"I make no promises." Her eyes narrowed. "But, I will try to keep an open mind."

"Good. Here's our Portkey." Draco pulled an old cork out of his pocket. It was set to go in about thirty seconds. He made sure the shoulder bag he had was secure. Granger placed a finger on the small thing and Draco put his arm around her. He didn't want to lose her in transit somehow.

"Will you at least tell me our general destination?" she asked. Granger loved knowing things, planning ahead. That's why she was going to love and hate what he had planned. He wasn't going to give her a chance to over think anything.

"Paris," Draco grinned devilishly. He watched her eyes go wide and then felt the hook of the Portkey, pulling him by his navel.

They arrived with a bit of a tumble, but Draco held onto his witch.

"Okay there, Granger?"

"Yeah," she nodded, brushing off her skirt. Draco watched her get herself back in order. He wanted to see her face when she took in their surroundings. Finally, she looked up and saw the multicolored tent and all the lights. A bright smile filled her face. "The circus! We're at the circus!"

"Cirque du Magie," Draco confirmed. The French wizarding circus was well known. They were
based in Paris, but had a number of shows that traveled throughout the world.

"I've always wanted to see this!" Granger looked so excited. He hoped that excitement would persist.

"Come on, I've arranged for something special." Draco took her hand and led her toward the tent. There were people milling about, sipping on wine, eating snacks, and browsing the souvenir area. The main tent hadn't opened yet. Draco pulled her around to a side door that was guarded by a rather large wizard.

"Malfoy and Granger reporting," Draco informed the guard. He stepped aside and Draco ushered his witch inside. Hermione gave him a quizzical look, but Draco just grinned.

He finally got to the area he was looking for. Hermione gasped. A relatively small silvery-blue dragon soared through the big tent. On its back was a couple, a witch and wizard dressed in sequined blue and silver costumes. They held on as the dragon flipped and did a few minutes of some spectacular acrobatics. The dragon glided steadily toward the ground and the couple stood on its back, using ropes to hold themselves steady while the animal flew. The dragon landed and the couple bowed to the empty stands. Hermione started clapping.

"That was amazing," she gushed.

"There you are!" The tall, thin wizard greeted them happily. "You must be Hermione Granger. I am Gavril and this is my sister, Cosmina."

"Delighted to meet you." Granger reached out and shook their hands. "That was beautiful. Did you train him?"

"Yes," Gavril replied proudly. "We have been working with dragons since we were children in Romania."

"He's a Swedish Short-Snout, right?" She even knew all about dragons. Why was Draco not surprised?

"You know your dragons," Cosmina smiled. "Most get this breed confused with the Opaleye because of the color."

"I have a friend that works at the Romanian dragon preserve," Granger explained. "Whenever I went by to visit, he put me to work."

"Ah, then you will be comfortable with your dragon," Gavril nodded approvingly. He gestured toward a scarlet red Chinese Fireball across the tent. "She is a sweetheart and will give you no trouble."

"You both better change though, so we can go through the routine once before we open the doors," Cosmina said. "The changing room is right through there." 

"Wait, what?" Hermione looked confused. She finally looked at Draco expectantly.

"Surprise!" He smiled. Yeah, she was going to kill him. "Come on, Granger. Let's get dressed!"

Draco figured she wouldn't want to kill him in front of the nice Romanians. Indeed, she let him pull her into the changing room.

"What have you done?!" she shouted as soon as the door was shut.
"We are going to be part of the opening act. The theme of the show is Fire and Ice. We are fire," Draco said calmly. He surveyed the costumes. Whereas the Romanians had a silvery-blue dragon and sequined costumes that matched, he and Granger had the red dragon with red and gold sequined costumes. Hermione's dress was fuck hot with thin straps, a plunging neckline, and a ragged hem that looked like flames. "It's just the first few minutes of the show. Afterwards, we can change and watch the rest of the acts."

"I can't believe you did this!" She crossed her arms sternly over her chest.

"It'll be fun!" Draco defended. "It's a once in a lifetime opportunity, Granger."

"You should ask beforehand!"

"Why? So you can over analyze it? Let loose! Live a little. Have some fun, you deserve it." Draco paused to let his words sink in. "Are you scared?"

"No!" She snapped. "I've ridden dragons before. It's riding on brooms I don't like."

"So there's no problem, then. We are the only ones here. Without us, it wouldn't be Fire and Ice, it'd just be Ice. Do you really want to let all the nice people down?" Draco smiled. He knew he had her, from the look on her face. He shucked off his robes and began unbuttoning his shirt. The red and gold sequins were flashier than his normal clothes and definitely more Gryffindor looking, but Hermione would look amazing, so it was worth it.

Hermione watched him undress for a moment before turning her attention to her dress.

"I can't wear this," she said softly, chewing on her lip.

"You'll look sexy and it's even in Gryffindor colors. I'm the one who'll look like a poof," Draco grinned wryly.

"No, it's not that. It's just... well, I'm not wearing any knickers. I lost them earlier and this is not the kind of dress you can wear without knickers." She was blushing as she spoke.

"You lost your knickers?" Draco laughed. This whole time she was bare under that skirt. There was nothing between him and the sweet honey that was Hermione Granger except one flimsy looking skirt. Draco loved it.

"Well, they're not entirely lost," she defended testily. "I know where they are, I just don't have them."

"Where are they?" Draco couldn't stop laughing.

"In Theo's pocket," she muttered. "That's really not the point though."

Draco found a red scarf near the dress and transfigured it into a pair of knickers.

"There," he said, chuckling. "This should last long enough."

Draco became less amused and more turned on as he watched her pull on the red knickers he gave her. She caught his eye and smirked. Hermione slid off her sweet looking little sweater and set it aside. She slowly unbuttoned her crisp white shirt. Draco could swear she was being purposefully seductive. She revealed a thin lavender colored bra. He could see the darker color of her nipples. She unzipped her skirt and let it fall to the floor, her new knickers hugging her arse beautifully. Hermione turned her back to him and removed her bra. Draco stared at the expanse of naked skin
and salivated. Her skin was tanned and perfect. Draco wanted to run his tongue along her spine. Too soon, it was all covered as she slipped the sequined flame dress over her head. When she turned back to him, Draco saw that the plunging neckline looked perfect on her.

“Amazing,” Draco breathed.

“You need to finish yourself,” she pointed out, smirking. Draco buttoned his blinding shirt and put on the matching gold shoes. Granger removed her shoes and put on her own gold shoes. Hers were sexy heels with straps that went up to circle her ankles, though. It wasn’t fair. While she got to look like a sex goddess, he looked like a poofter.

Decked in their red and gold flames, Hermione and Draco went back out. Cosmina produced gold masks that would hide the top halves of their faces. She and Gavril had matching ones in silver. Draco was glad. It would make it harder for people to recognize him in this ridiculous outfit. Not that anyone would be looking at him with Hermione by his side. Gavril was certainly having a hard time not ogling his witch.

Practice went smoothly. Riding on the Chinese Fireball was thrilling. They were in the air at the same time as the Swedish Short-Snout, the two dragons going through a choreographed dance in flight. Granger clung to the beast for dear life, but she persisted like the warrior she was. When the dragon began to glide down to the ground and they stood, Hermione gripped Draco’s arm and the rope so tightly her knuckles turned white.

A heavy curtain came down around the two dragons and four people to hide them while the spectators filled their seats. They only had about fifteen minutes. Two groomers came in to give the dragons one last look. Gavril and Cosmina gave Hermione and Draco some tips and advice as well. Gavril kept staring at Hermione in her costume, making Draco glare at the Romanian. Draco pulled his witch aside and wrapped his arms around her.

"How do you feel?" Draco asked.

"Anxious, but excited," she grinned. "What in the world made you think of doing this? Are we living out your childhood dream of running off to join the circus?"

"Partly," Draco laughed. "I was mainly looking for something neither one of us had ever done before, either on our own or with another person. This is something we'll share, just the two of us."

"That may be the sweetest thing I've ever heard," Granger said softly. She reached her hand up to cup his face.

"Well, that, and I wanted to do something that would drive you crazy," Draco grinned, pressing his cheek into her hand. "I wanted something so exciting, so out of the ordinary, that it would take your mind off your real life. And if I got you riled up, all the better. You always were sexy when you were cross with me."

"You've accomplished your goals then," she laughed. "I'm too nervous about the next half hour to worry about this Saturday. And, right now, I find you to be the most vexing wizard I know."

"Perfect!" Draco said. "As long as you also find me irresistibly sexy as well."

Hermione threw her head back and laughed.

"In that outfit, how could I not?" she kept laughing. Draco scoffed. He was still hot, even dressed up like a silly tosser in blinding sequins.
"Thirty seconds!" Cosmina shouted.

They got into position next to their Chinese Firebolt, holding hands. Draco leaned down and planted a soft but heated kiss on her lips.

"You'll be perfect, Granger," he smiled.

Before she had a chance to respond, the curtain rose. They were surrounded by thousands of witches and wizards in the stands. The applause was thunderous.

A voice boomed loudly, welcoming everyone to that evening’s performance of Fire and Ice. The ringmaster announced Gavril and Cosmina as the famous Radu siblings, whose family had been training dragons for generations. Then he announced their guest performers from Britain, the famous Hermione Granger and her escort. She grimaced almost imperceptibly at being called famous, while Draco was thrilled to be anonymous, especially in this costume.

They raised their arms up and then bowed to the crowd before mounting the dragon. Draco sat behind Hermione, making sure she was secure, and the Firebolt took off for the top of the tent. She and the Short-Snout flew in an intricate pattern, getting close to each other and flipping around in the air. Draco barely registered the crowd ‘oohing’ and ‘aahing’ at the spectacle, the ride was so thrilling. At one point, the Firebolt let loose her scarlet flame at the same time the Short-Snout shot out her blue flame. Draco was sure it was breath-taking to see from the seats, but it was almost overwhelming to be so close. They hadn’t practiced the fire in rehearsal to save the dragons the effort. Draco heard Hermione gasp. Soon the acrobatics were done and the dragon began its steady, gliding descent. That was their cue to stand on the dragon’s back. Hermione rose up gracefully and Draco was right behind her.

The Chinese Firebolt landed softly and the crowd roared. Draco slid off the dragon then helped Hermione down. They bowed for the excited crowd. Hermione was smiling broadly, her eyes shining with excitement. Dragon handlers dressed as clowns came out and pretended to be afraid of the dragons, falling down and making people laugh. Draco and Hermione made their exit back to the dressing room.

As soon as Draco closed the door behind them, Hermione jumped on him wrapping her legs around his waist.

“That was exhilarating! It was like nothing I’ve ever done!”

Draco laughed at her exuberance, his hands on her arse, holding her up. She put her arms around his neck, smiling mischievously.

“Thank you, Draco,” she said, leaning in close to him. Her lips were only inches away from his. Draco quickly closed the distance, kissing her hard. He was pretty exhilarated too and having her in his arms was almost too much.

Hermione kissed him back with equal enthusiasm. His witch was passionate, Draco had always known that. He turned them so Hermione was pressed up against the door. Her hands were tangled in his hair. They still wore their gold masks so the leather rubbed together as they kissed. Draco felt as if they were on fire. Her body was hot against his.

Hermione pressed herself into him, rocking her hips slightly. Draco snaked one of his hands up to the top of her dress and slipped it under the plunging neckline. She had perfect tits. They fit his hands exactly. Draco wanted nothing more than to free himself from his ridiculous sequined trousers, vanish Granger’s knickers, and shag her up against the door. It occurred to him that they
might spontaneously combust and burn down the tent.

Reluctantly, Draco pulled away, panting. He knew this was a possibility. They had so much history. Their shared history was like embers that had finally caught and became a full flame. Draco didn’t want to burn fast and then go out. He wanted her forever. That meant a proper first date, not stopping the date halfway through to have a quickie shag in a semi-public place. This was Hermione Granger, not a slag he picked up for some action.

“I’m to take you on a proper date, Granger,” Draco rasped. “If I don’t stop now, we won’t get to finish our date. Instead, I’ll shag you here in this glorified broom closet.”

Hermione giggled and pushed against his chest. He dropped her down to the floor.

“But make no mistake,” Draco said, his finger on her chin, tilting her face up to his, “after we’ve had a proper date, anything goes.”

“Anything?” she asked teasingly, arching her brow. Hermione scooted out from between him and the door.

“Anything,” Draco replied, grinning at his saucy witch. He gave her a swat on the backside as she went in search of her regular clothes. Draco couldn’t wait to get out of his costume. He reached for his bag. “Hold on there, Granger. I brought you clothes to change into.”

Draco pulled out a small bundle and tapped it with his wand to enlarge the items back to their regular size. Hermione took the pile from his hands and went behind the screen discreetly set in the corner of the room. Draco huffed a little. He had hoped to watch her change again. It was probably better that she dress alone though, given how ready they both seemed to be to throw propriety to the wind and shag already. Instead of picturing Hermione naked, Draco focused on changing back into his normal, elegant and understated clothes.

Moments later, Granger emerged in the black, white, and grey halter dress he had brought her. It was black on top, and then the black gave way to diamond shaped pieces of grey fabric, before ending in a white full skirt. She wore the black heels with thick cuffs that buckled around her ankles. Despite the lack of color, the dress had a circus flair to it, but still looked elegant. To be fair, his mother had provided considerable input on his choices. Narcissa did have impeccable taste, as did all Malfoys.

“You look stunning,” Draco said honestly, handing her a silvery grey wrap.

“Thank you,” she said. “The dress is beautiful.”

“Shall we?” Draco offered her his arm.

“Yes,” she agreed, taking his arm. “But first, will you transfigure this back? I don’t want to take something that doesn’t belong to me.”

Draco’s eyes glazed over a little as she held out the red knickers. He nodded mutely and tapped them with his wand, turning them back into a scarf. Rather than adding it to the costume, though, Draco pocketed it. Hermione rolled her eyes, chuckling, and they left. All Draco could think about was that she was knicker-free for the rest of the night.

OoOoO

Hermione couldn’t help but laugh at Draco taking her former knickers. What was with these wizards and her underclothes? She didn’t have time to think about it further because they were
back out where she could see the show. A group of six wizards were performing tricks on broomsticks, racing around the tent. It looked very dangerous, but also beautifully complicated. She was barely looking where she was going. She didn’t want to tear her eyes away in case one of them fell, which seemed entirely possible. Thankfully, Draco led the way. He settled them in their own little booth, right in the center of the stands. Their seats had cushions and there were tables next to their chairs. The view from those seats was amazing.

“What? Oh, yes. A drink would be nice,” she nodded absently. Hermione had never been to the wizarding circus before and she didn’t want to miss anything.

The box seats had their own waiter and Draco ordered drinks and snacks. Food appeared while Hermione was distracted by the next act; a group of trapeze artists that she guessed used a combination of Levicorpus and lightening charms to do their tricks. No Muggle could possibly do what they did. Draco handed her a glass of pink champagne as Hermione watched the show. In between acts, a troupe of clowns came out for a few minutes to allow the next act time to set up. They were funny and made both her and Draco laugh.

Hermione took note of the food Draco had ordered and laughed more. It was all carnival food, but done in a fancy, adult way. Little mini hamburger bites were on a bright red and white striped plate. Chips, seasoned with tarragon and sea salt, were in a lime green paper cone and held in a silver stand. There was also fresh fruit arranged to look like flowers, pineapple centers with strawberry petals and melon centers with multicolored blueberry and raspberry petals. The other table had pink and purple puffs of candyfloss on sticks. Next to those were chocolate covered banana slices and apple slices drizzled with toffee. Little rounds of fried dough about the size of biscuits were covered in powdered sugar.

Hermione indulged in everything Draco handed her, along with a healthy amount of the bubbly pink champagne.

The trapeze artists were followed by an amazing acrobatic group with an impressive floorshow. The gymnasts were followed by a pair of contortionists. The aerial show of four matching winged horses was exceptional. Then a group of wizards made a human tower, the top wizard doing a handstand on top of three other wizards who were standing on each other’s shoulders. One by one, starting at the top, the wizards took on an Animagus form until they were a tower of animals. Hermione was impressed. From the look on Draco’s face, he was pretty impressed with each act as well.

The finale of the show featured three Hippogriffs and three scantily clad witches. Their costumes put Hermione's to shame in terms of minimal use of fabric. They were spectacular. The witches leapt from animal to animal in flight. One witch was plucked off the back of her Hippogriff by another. He held her gently in his talons as he flew through the air, and then he threw the witch. She somersaulted in air and landed smoothly on the animal she had originally been riding. Hermione gasped when she was thrown and hadn’t realized she was holding her breath until she let out a sigh of relief when the witch landed safely, smiling widely to wild applause.

Hermione was thrilled. She couldn't have had a better time. She stood and applauded loudly as all the performers came out to bow. Draco had been right, though. She wouldn't have agreed to be in the opening act if she had been given time to think about it. And she would've missed out on a thrilling experience.

Hermione turned to Draco and embraced him. He held her close and she pressed her face into his chest.
"Have fun, Granger?"

Hermione smiled. She liked how he still called her Granger, as he had for years. It was comforting. While she may have changed, she was still the same witch in many ways. She felt like Draco understood that.

"So much fun." She smiled up at him. "Thank you for pushing me, Draco. I appreciate that."

Hermione really did appreciate it. She pushed herself academically, but was not often spontaneous and daring in her personal life. That was one reason she'd balked so much at dating four wizards, despite the fact that it felt so natural to her at this point in her life.

"Hungry?"

"Merlin, no," she replied, laughing. She had over indulged in chips and definitely in the fried dough. "I could use something non-alcoholic to drink though. All that champagne is making me feel fuzzy."

"All part of my plan, Granger." Draco laughed and began leading her out of the tent. "I was going to get you good and pissed, then let you take advantage of me."

Hermione giggled. The fresh night air outside of the tent felt good. Draco confidently led them down a street that eventually led to a little Parisian cafe. They sat at a small table in the window. From there, they were able to watch the busy night streets of wizarding Paris. Hermione had been to Paris twice before, but both trips were work related.

They ordered two cappuccinos and two bottles of sparkling water. Then they just talked. They talked for well over an hour. Hermione felt she and Draco had more to cover, more to talk about than she did with the other wizards. They had cleared the air that last year that they both returned to Hogwarts after the war, but they had never really sat down and had a conversation about their shared history. Hermione knew there was a spark between them. It led to a wonderful sexual chemistry, but also to some spectaculars rows in the past. It was also nice to see that they could laugh and talk together, peacefully. While Hermione loved a spark, she didn’t want that to be all there was.

Draco talked about his family and Hermione told Draco about hers. Draco was very close with his family, which wasn't surprising. The Malfoys were a very loving family, which was a little surprising. They would do anything for each other. Hermione loved her parents, but didn’t see them often since they were living happily in Australia. She'd sent them there to hide from Voldemort and they’d fallen in love with the sunny beach town where they stayed. Hermione went to visit them at least once a year for a week and they wrote letters monthly. In general though, they weren’t that close. Their very different lifestyles made it hard.

Draco wanted to know everything about her past relationships, even the brief flings, so Hermione told him. He didn't respond with girlish glee over her conquests as Pansy had. Instead, he grumbled that being a rock star or a cowboy wasn’t so difficult, that he could’ve easily been either if he’d wanted.

"You thought I only attracted wizards like Ron?" Hermione laughed.

"No," Draco defended, making a sour face. Then he broke out into a sly grin. "I knew you also attracted snarky old professors."

"Does it bother you that I was with Severus?"
"Not really," Draco admitted, speaking slowly. "He is my Godfather, but I never thought of him as a father figure. He was always more of an uncle."

"If you didn't want to hear about my past, you shouldn't have asked," Hermione teased. "I'm sure your history is much more sordid and prolific than mine."

"We don't need to get into all that," Draco waved, not denying the truth of her statement. "My longest relationship was seeing Pansy for fourth and fifth years at Hogwarts, but that wasn't serious. We were just kids. I dated the youngest Greengrass sister, Astoria, for a few months this past winter; but she wasn't particularly challenging. That is one witch whose goal in life is to be a trophy wife. While there are several people I used to...associate with regularly, I wouldn't call that dating. They don't matter, though. I won't be seeing anyone else but you."

"I don't think you should stop you regular behavior on my account," Hermione said, looking down at her almost empty cup. She hated the idea of Draco with another witch, but it wasn't really fair because she couldn't give up the other wizards.

"You want me to shag other witches?" Draco looked annoyed and a little hurt.

"No," Hermione snapped, a little too forcefully. She reigned in her jealousy. "I'm seeing other wizards, so it doesn't seem fair to ask any of you to restrict yourselves to just me."

"I don't want other witches, Granger," Draco said, pulling her chair closer to his so they were pressed together. He ran his nose up her neck. "I have a few weeks with you until you are bonded. I hope that I'll be one of your chosen. I know you can't really decide that, but I can't begin to express how much I want it. If I'm not picked...well, I don't like to think about that."

Hermione leaned into him, pulling his hand into her lap. She didn't like thinking about it either. She'd been assured that her magic would chose correctly for her, but she wasn't as confident as Adrian was on that subject. What if none of the four wizards she'd come to care for were chosen? And even if they were, who would be left out?

"I don't like to think about it either," she whispered.

"So let's not," Draco dictated, nibbling on her earlobe lightly. "Did I tell you that Adrian and I had lunch today at his office?"

"No, you didn't mention it," Hermione said, her voice a little breathy from Draco's attentions.

"He told me about the accidental magical discharge." Draco kept nuzzling her neck. Hermione blushed. "I was hoping to see it for myself."

"Draco!"

"Just for informational, scientific purposes of course."

"Yeah," Hermione scoffed. "Theo already used that line. How do you think he got my knickers?"

Draco chuckled.

"Did you learn anything new with Theo today, about the bursts of magic?"

Hermione’s blush deepened, but she nodded. Draco just looked at her expectantly.

“Apparently, it’s a… phenomena that I can produce on my own,” she finally shared. Draco gave a
soft groan.

“And Theo got to watch?” His voice was a little raspy and his arm went behind her back, holding her to him tightly. Hermione just nodded. Draco muttered what sounded like, ‘lucky bastard’ before asking, “Anything else?”

“The magic burst,” Hermione began. “Theo was several steps away. When it passed through him, it caused him to have his own climax.”

“What generous magic you have,” Draco purred. His fingers trailed over the bare skin on her back. Hermione shook her head.

“No, it’s destructive!” Hermione argued. Why was she the only one who seemed to see the danger in that situation? “It threw Marcus across the room, sunk Adrian’s raft, and split a desk at Hogwarts in two. It is too risky.”

“I see your point,” Draco nodded. He began, however, placing soft kisses on her shoulder. He wasn’t acting like he saw her point. “That means you probably shouldn’t climb into my lap here in the café, as much as we both want you to. Your lack of knickers would make it wonderfully easy. I can just unbutton my trousers and you can sink down on my-”

Hermione covered his mouth with her hand, blushing beet red. She looked around to see if people were listening. The café was not very crowded. It was late on a Thursday night.

“What? I was agreeing with you!” Draco grinned devilishly, removing her hand and kissing her palm. “The ecstasy that I would give you would surely endanger the other customers and probably everyone within three or four blocks.”

“Oh, it would, would it?” Hermione chuckled at Draco’s ego.

“You bet it would, Granger,” Draco purred. “Being with me will be like nothing you’ve ever experienced before.”

Hermione had to admire his confidence and smiled. His bravado did make her more than a little curious and just as turned on.

“Come on, Granger,” Draco stood. He dropped a pile of Galleons on the table and led her out of the café.

“Where are we going?”

“Somewhere less crowded, so I can give you a preview,” he smirked. Outside the café, Draco pulled out a shiny silver button. He held it in his open hand and placed Hermione’s hand on top of his. Draco leaned in and kissed her. She was entirely distracted when the hook of the Portkey pulled her away from Paris.

They fell onto a soft grassy area, Draco breaking Hermione’s fall. It felt like a grassy area. Hermione couldn’t be sure because it was dark. Draco whispered Lumos and she saw that they were in a small glade in the woods. Draco lay beneath her. She saw the lights of a house in the distance.

“That’s the Manor over there,” Draco said, making no move to get up. In fact, he wrapped his free hand around her waist and pressed her tightly against the length of his body. She could feel that the Portkey trip hadn’t taken the wind out of his sails, so to speak.
“We’re out in the woods, in the dark,” Hermione observed, whispering for some reason.

“Incendio,” Draco said softly, pointing his wand to his right. A small fire pit was set up in the glade. It was obviously well used.

“So is this the infamous play; Draco Malfoy’s closing move of the evening?” Hermione teased. She moved a bit so she was sitting on his stomach, her hands on his shoulders. He looked lovely lying underneath her, illuminated by the nearby flames. “At the end of a date, you bring witches into the woods to shag?”

“No,” Draco chuckled. “This is where I used to come when I was younger, to just read or think. The groundskeeper always has the hearth ready for me, even though I don’t think I’ve been to this spot in ages.

“I’ve never brought a witch here,” Draco continued, his voice turning serious. “I don’t want to do anything with you that I’ve done with other, meaningless witches. You’re important to me, Granger. That’s why I haven’t brought you here to shag. I’m not going to shag you on our first date. How would we be able to tell our children and grandchildren about our first date if it is full of shagging? As I said, you’re getting a preview.”

Draco’s fingers trailed down her arms and he sat up so his mouth could reach her neck. Now she was straddling his lap. Hermione groaned. His hands slowly caressed her back, moving up to unhook the halter-top of her dress.

“Why do I get the feeling your preview wouldn’t be appropriate for children either?” Hermione rasped. Her top fell to her waist and Draco’s hands immediately went to her breasts.

“We’ll edit this part out of the story,” Draco whispered before his lips covered hers. Hermione kissed him back like a witch possessed. His teeth nipped and pulled at her lips, and then his tongue soothed his little bites. Hermione gave as good as she got, exploring his mouth with her own.

Hermione pushed his robes off his shoulders and tugged on his black button down shirt, not wanting to take the time to undo each button. The shirt gave way and she was able to press her hands into his bare chest. Draco groaned and thrust upward slightly. Hermione adjusted herself slightly so that her bare center was positioned right over the hardness in his trousers. Draco was right, it would be so easy to free him and sink down on him, letting him fill and stretch her. She rocked in his lap thinking about it. Her movement made Draco gasp and lean back slightly.

Hermione stroked his torso, and then scraped her fingernails over his nipples. Draco hissed in approval. Hermione ran her tongue over his pebbled nipples before making her way up his chest. She nuzzled his neck, inhaling his unique scent. Draco gave her breasts a hard pinch and Hermione bit down on his neck, hard.

“Fuck, Granger,” he groaned. “I can’t wait to be inside you. I want you so badly.”

Draco ducked his head and his mouth closed around her breast. He flicked her hardened nipple with his tongue and pinched the other with his fingers. Hermione hissed and leaned back, pushing her chest into his mouth. She was so wet and surely ruining his trousers by grinding herself into him. He felt so large and hard. Hermione so much wanted to feel him inside her, to ride him properly as he feasted on her breasts. Draco had said no shagging, and he was probably right. She had no idea how her magic would respond to that situation.

Hermione panted and encouraged Draco. His hand abandoned her chest, however, and went to grip her hips. He took over the rhythm, rocking her over his cloth-covered cock at a quick, steady pace.
"Yes, Draco! Harder, faster," Hermione panted, riding him furiously. The way her full skirt spread out over them, it looked as if they were shagging.

Hermione tangled her hands in his distinctive blond hair. He bit down on her nipple and she pulled his hair.

"Gods, Granger, you're amazing," Draco moaned. He pressed his face into her neck as he kept talking. "I'm gonna come. Come with me, Granger. I want to see you come. I want to feel you coming all over me. Come on, Hermione."

Draco pushed and pulled her hips frantically as he spoke. Hermione was lost to the sensation. The pressure that had been building finally exploded. Her body went taut and she shouted.

"Yes, Draco, yes!"

Draco’s grip on her hips tightened and the white light shot out of her, as it had before. She looked at Draco, who shuddered and roared his own release. He seemed all right. Hermione heard loud cracking sounds above their heads and whipped her head around to look upward.

“Protego Totalum!” she yelled without thinking, her hand pointing up toward the noise. A bluish white watery dome appeared around them for a moment, and then disappeared. A half second later, branches of all sizes rained down on top of them. They stopped about a meter from hitting them, crashing into the invisible barrier, and then sliding down to the ground. It seemed to last forever, but finally stopped.

Hermione looked around, but couldn’t see much. Her magic had blown out the fire. At least it blew out instead of spreading and starting a forest fire. Draco found his wand and whispered a Lumos to give them some light. They were surrounded by branches, some the size of small trees. The once empty glade was covered in them, except for inside their little bubble.

“I’m sorry for ruining your forest,” Hermione murmured, her eyes welling up. She always seemed to be on the verge of tears after one of these episodes, as if all her feelings were right on the surface.

“That was well worth a thousand trees,” Draco grinned. “But you didn’t ruin them, just gave them a very thorough pruning.”

Hermione chuckled and buried her face in his neck.

“Now, how do we get out?” Draco asked.

They agreed that Draco should try first, since Hermione’s magic was so unpredictable. Hermione could stand inside their protective bubble, but just barely, so Draco had to stay seated. Draco worked to dismantle the barrier while she put her dress back on properly. After several minutes, Draco started physically pushing and hitting the shield.

“I’ve never encountered a barrier this strong,” Draco said, clearly frustrated.

Hermione put her hands up on the invisible wall and tried to dismantle it herself, but nothing happened. The only effect was that Hermione felt entirely drained. She collapsed down on the ground, exhausted. Draco sat cross-legged and pulled her into his lap, cradling her to him. He made soft, soothing noises that Hermione appreciated.
“I’m going to have to send a Patronus, my lovely sweet witch,” Draco murmured. “If we want to get out of here, we’re going to need some help.”

Hermione was so tired, she didn’t care. She just nodded and curled up in Draco’s lap. She registered a silvery, wispy winged dragon manifesting. It was cute and it nuzzled against her hand while Draco gave it instructions. Then she must have fallen asleep.

Next thing Hermione knew, she was being awoken by very bright lights. Blinking against the lights, Hermione tried to get her bearings.

“It’s okay, Granger,” Draco assured her, rubbing her arms. “They’ll get us out of here soon. And you can go sleep in a nice, comfortable bed.”

Hermione became accustomed to the light. She could see three figures, wands out, working to dismantle the barrier. She recognized one as Severus and the other two as Draco’s parents. Hermione stood, holding onto Draco’s shoulder for balance. Her dress looked presentable, but Draco’s shirt was irreparably torn. He also had a self-satisfied smile on his face, which didn’t help. Hermione wasn’t shy, exactly, but this was fairly mortifying. She and Draco were both adults. Nevertheless, how often do your date’s parents need to come and rescue you from an impenetrable bubble indirectly caused by your orgasm?

“Sit back down, Granger,” Draco admonished. “You are too tired.”

“This is so embarrassing,” she whispered. It turned out Draco was right, she was too tired. She sat back down and leaned into him, dozing lightly, until finally the barrier was cracked.

“That was the strongest shield I’ve ever encountered,” Lucius said, wiping sweat from his brow.

“Thank you Father,” Draco smiled, standing up to stretch. “You too Mother, Severus.”

As he stood, Hermione saw that Draco very much looked recently shagged. His shirt hung from his shoulders, as did his robe. His hair was ruffled and Hermione could see the mark on the base of his neck where she’d bit him. Frankly, she didn’t have the energy to be too embarrassed anymore.

“Yes, thank you,” Hermione said, trying to stay awake. “Mrs. Malfoy, it’s nice to see you again.”

“Please, call me Narcissa, Sorceress.”

“Then you must call me Hermione,” she said, sleepily.

“How exactly did this happen?” Severus asked, with an arched brow.

“Uncontrolled magical discharge,” Hermione replied, yawning. “It ripped branches off trees. They were falling on us. I cast a Protego Totalum so we wouldn’t be crushed. Can you take me home, Severus? I need to sleep.”

Draco pouted.

“You can stay here at the Manor, Granger,” he offered. “It’s close and I know just the place to put you.”

“Draco, let the Sorceress get some rest,” Lucius scolded.

“You’ll see Hermione tomorrow,” Narcissa smiled. “Now say goodnight.”

Now Hermione really felt like a fifth year that was caught out snogging past curfew. Draco came
up to Hermione and gave her a soft kiss.

“Goodnight, Granger.” He grinned. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Goodnight, Draco. Thank you for a lovely evening.”

Hermione stepped away and walked toward Severus. He scooped her up, bridal style, nodded to the Malfoys and Apparated them both back to Spinner’s End. Hermione answered all of his questions about her recent magical discharges as she shucked her dress and pulled on a nightgown. She tried to ignore his amusement and curiosity, definitely not having the energy for his teasing or his probing questions. She shooed him out, demanding to be left in peace to get some rest. Friday was the last day of planning and all the details would be finalized. Then she would have a date with Marcus. It was bound to be a busy day.

Chapter End Notes

Next - a new POV and planning for this ritual!
Chapter 13

Disclaimer - do I own Harry Potter? yes, the whole series in hardback! the intellectual property, of course not.

Now - Planning a ritual
Additional disclaimer - I know the Bronwyn OC is a bitch. I wrote her after all. :-) She also happens to be American, which is no bearing on her being a bitch. I'm American and I'm only a bitch sometimes. Bitches are everywhere. :-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bronwyn saw Percy Weasley waiting for her at the Ministry Apparition point. He gave her a pointed look after looking her up and down, which she happily ignored. She had dressed with the utmost care today. Bronwyn had seen the guest list, and knew some of the wizarding world's most influential people would be there. Marcus Flint would also be there, so Bronwyn was hoping to mix business with pleasure. She thought Brits dressed too conservatively and decided to show them some American style. She wore a short black skirt that showed off her long legs. Her emerald green sleeveless blouse dipped at the collar to show off her cleavage. She brought a fitted black jacket that highlighted her chest.

"Come on!" Percy said, grabbing her arm. "I don't want to be late."

Weasley Apparated both of them to a dreary looking grey townhouse. Bronwyn wrinkled her nose. This was where the famous Harry Potter lived? These Brits really didn't choose national heroes well. She'd seen Potter around the Ministry and in the papers. He seemed like a normal wizard, nothing special. In fact, he was kind of short. Bronwyn was certain she could've quickly defeated this Voldemort fellow if she'd been there.

Weasley knocked while Bronwyn inspected her gold lacquered nails. She hated this assignment. More to the point, she hated Hermione 'everyone-thinks-I'm-so-great' Granger. The witch seemed smart enough, but she was too short and that short hair was awful. The fates must have been drunk when they made her a Sorceress Potentiate.

Harry Potter opened the door and welcomed them in. He invited them to the kitchen, where they were just finishing breakfast. Potter's wife, Theo Nott, and Miss I-think-I'm-better-than-everyone were sitting around the table laughing.

"I can't believe it took three of them to free you." Mrs. Potter was laughing so hard she had to wipe away tears. "That's priceless!"

"It was embarrassing is what it was," Little Miss Perfect huffed. "It’s time to change the subject! You all know Percy, but have you met Miss Figgelowe? This is Harry and Pansy Potter."

Bronwyn gushed appropriately. Since everyone seemed to think these people were a big deal, she was supposed to kiss arse. Her boss had given her a lecture on propriety after Wednesday's meeting at Malfoy Manor. Pansy Potter scanned her critically and scoffed. Bronwyn thought she might feel a little threatened, since she was an attractive, single witch.
Potter told them to help themselves and Bronwyn poured herself a cup of tea. She listened to Percy confirm the attendees for that afternoon’s meeting. Bronwyn didn’t know how she had managed to get all these important people to jump and come at her command, but assumed that they wanted to come see the witch who may become a Sorceress. Regardless, Bronwyn could use the meeting to make her own connections. While she disliked this witch, she enjoyed her new access to exclusive places and influential people.

Bronwyn surveyed the would-be Sorceress in question. She wore grey cropped pants along with a white sleeveless collared shirt. The shirt was crisp and professional, but Bronwyn didn’t find it alluring; even with the white mesh fabric over the shoulders. Her cropped red swing coat did add a pop of color, but wasn’t fitted like her own jacket. Bronwyn did rather like her grey tweed ankle boots, but that tiny witch needed all the height she could get. Of course, they would look better on her than they did on that frail priss.

Bronwyn’s eyes widened when she saw her bracelet. It was a thick, primitive looking cuff with large red, opaque stones. Oh, this was rich. Miss Perfect was wearing fake jewelry. She wondered if she purposely wore a copy of a priceless piece to try to impress people; or if she’d just seen it somewhere and bought it, not knowing what it was supposed to be. Either way, Bronwyn found it hilarious. Miss Perfect was either a phony or ignorant. It was too good to pass up.

“What a charming bracelet,” Bronwyn said in a lull in conversation.

Miss Perfect looked down at her wrist and smiled. It was an annoying dreamy smile, as if she were remembering something touching.

“Thank you. I got it in Central Africa.”

“It looks like a Fulani Teddungal cuff,” Bronwyn pointed out archly.

“It is,” she smiled. “That is very observant of you. Most people just think it’s just pretty jewelry. It makes me feel confident, that’s why I wore it today.”

“But it can’t be a real one,” Bronwyn blurted. “It is a tremendous honor and sign of respect in the magical Fula tribe.”

“Yes, I know.” Miss Perfect nodded. “That’s why I was so touched when the tribe gave it to me. I’d been staying with them for a month, working with their Medicine Man to create a potion to cure a very strange illness. It was like dragon pox, but wasn’t quite the same. It targeted the children in the tribe. Several died while we were finding the cure, but we ended up saving the rest.”

“That’s so sad,” Mrs. Potter observed. Bronwyn held back her snort. Of course, Miss Perfect saved a bunch of kids.

“Is the bracelet supposed to do something?” Potter asked.

“Well, for me it’s a priceless reminder of the Fula people,” Miss Perfect said. Bronwyn wanted to gag. “It also reminds me that perseverance in a difficult task is worth the effort. The story of the cuff is that the Fulani elders place pieces of their spirit in the red stones. Not like a Horcrux, more like a manifestation of their good thoughts and wishes for the recipient of the bracelet. It is supposed to help the one it was made for, to bring them good luck. All I know is that when I wear it, I feel more confident and I seem to be able to see things more clearly.”

“That’s an important thing to have, Mi,” Nott said, reaching to hold Miss Perfect’s hand. Her nails weren’t even polished. “Do you think it could help in the rituals?”
Bronwyn rolled her eyes. Nott was such a kiss-up. He was always doing and saying things for her. He was her lapdog and clearly wanted to get into her pants. Bronwyn smirked. She wondered if Miss Perfect’s date from the other night, Adrian Pucey, knew that this wizard was lurking around. Maybe he did. Marcus Flint looked like he was practically guarding the little witch the other day. She knew Marcus was close with Pucey. He was probably trying to keep Nott away for his friend. Merlin knows why a wizard as unbelievably gorgeous as Adrian Pucey would be interested in this little slip of a witch. Bronwyn thought maybe he was trying to get some of that potent Sorcery power for himself. She mentally nodded; that made sense.

Draco Malfoy had been a real jerk the other day, threatening her not to say anything bad about his witch. Bronwyn took note of the possessive words and tone. She knew that Malfoys were a dangerous, but influential family. Pucey hadn’t seemed to mind Draco’s tone. Maybe the two wizards were sharing Miss Perfect. Bronwyn idly wondered if the press would be interested in such a salacious little tidbit. Of course, it could never be traced back to her.

The group moved to the Grimmauld Place library, home of all the Black family books. There sure were lots of books on dark magic, but there were also some on Sorcery. It was great. Bronwyn suspected though, that Nott kept the best books for himself and Miss Perfect. Bronwyn loved knowledge, no matter what kind or what source. With it, she could do anything – knowledge is power. She’d used it to seduce her married boss back in the States.

It was amazing what being the boss’ mistress could do for ones career and standard of living. She always got what she wanted because he wanted to keep having sex, and wanted her to keep quiet about it. It was a good situation for a while, until Bronwyn decided it would be better for her to be the wife, not the mistress. Unfortunately, her efforts to get the wife out of the way were not as successful as she’d hoped. Of course, no one could connect anything to her, but Bronwyn felt a change of scenery would be prudent.

Penrose, her boss at the ministry was not worth seducing. Therefore, Bronwyn put her efforts into predicting the identity of the next Sorcerer or Sorceress. Her previous research led her to believe the next one would be in Western Europe, most likely Scotland, England, Spain or France. It was one reason why she’d moved to London. She frowned as she flipped through a less than helpful text. She’d been sure the next one would be a male. It was her hope to discover the young man and guide him in the ways of Sorcery, because she was an expert. It would also position her to be the Ancillary and get some of that power for herself. Now, thanks to Miss Merlin's-gift-to-wizardry, that was never going to happen. Well, unless this horrid witch didn't make it through the rituals. The history was full of examples where the magic was too much for the person. That was a pleasing thought and made Bronwyn smile.

The morning did not go by as quickly as Bronwyn would have wished. Her leg was bouncing under the table. She was impatient for the afternoon meeting. It wouldn't start until one, but people would start arriving at twelve thirty for lunch and to socialize. Bronwyn hoped to make some of the people there notice her, like Lucius Malfoy. The elder Malfoy seemed to have his fingers in every pot. There was a wizard she wouldn’t mind seducing. Being his mistress must have some cache. Bronwyn was also looking to connect with Marcus Flint. He’d said he already had a witch, but Bronwyn knew first hand that kind of thing was easily changeable. She’d been interested in him since she saw him on the cover of a Quidditch magazine back in the States. She couldn’t have been more thrilled when he retired and began working at the Ministry. Unfortunately, she hadn't had much opportunity to interact with him until now. She just wanted him for herself; it was a bonus that he ran in impressive circles so being with him wouldn't hurt her career or future goals. She could date Marcus and still be Lucius Malfoy’s mistress if she wanted, she was sure. Marcus didn’t seem all too bright.
Bronwyn watched Nott and Miss Perfect flirt subtly. Maybe this was her ‘in’ with Marcus. She could express her concerns that the witch dating his good friend, Adrian, had a wandering eye. Marcus had seemed intent keeping her away from other wizards, putting his arm around her and escorting her places. He even showed her to the bathroom when they were at his home. He probably didn't want Nott to get her alone. Bronwyn smiled to herself. This would be a perfect thing to talk to Marcus about and it would paint her as a helpful, concerned person.

Finally, they stopped researching at noon to take a break, freshen up, set up for the presentation, and help the Potters set out lunch. Bronwyn thought they would've done well to bring in caterers and a professional wait staff for such a group, but these people never did anything properly, in her opinion. Not being one for manual labor, Bronwyn focused on freshening up while Percy set up a room for the presentation.

Bronwyn set off for the powder room, but had to go back to the library for her bag. She stopped in the doorway and broke into a wide grin. Apparently, Miss Perfect had more than a wandering eye; she had wandering hands and they were all over Nott. This was perfect. Now she could tell Marcus that the witch everyone thought was so wonderful, who was supposed to be dating his friend, was snogging another wizard. She snorted, but then turned the sound into a cough. The couple broke apart, the wandering witch blushing at being caught.

"Excuse me," Bronwyn said, unable to suppress her grin. "I forgot my bag."

Bronwyn held her laughter until she was back in the hall. She happily reapplied her make-up, straightened her hair, and studied her reflection. She was pale, tall, and very thin. She hummed as she appraised herself. She looked good. She would surely draw Marcus Flint and Lucius Malfoy's attention.

Downstairs, Bronwyn basically stayed out of the way as the Potters, Nott, and Miss Not-so-perfect bustled about. She did carry a bowl upstairs to the presentation room. Lunch was being set up as a buffet there. Finally, people started arriving.

The Minister and Director Penrose were exactly on time, as was Headmistress McGonagall. Bronwyn was the picture of grace as she flattered these important people. It bothered her to no end that Potter and Miss Perfect called the Minister ‘Kings.’ Bronwyn felt she should have a buddy-buddy nickname for the Minister.

Severus Snape arrived with Lucius Malfoy. Bronwyn batted her lashes coyly, knowing that she must play this smartly. It wouldn't do to give him too much attention. Moreover, his son seemed to have an irrational hatred for her, which may be a factor. Bronwyn sidled up to Lucius and made sure she expressed how happy she was to see him again. That earned her an arched eyebrow, which she took as a good sign.

Wanting to seem sweet and helpful, Bronwyn volunteered to go down to the kitchens and fetch more drinks. Keeping with her good luck that day, Marcus Flint stepped out of the Floo when she got to the kitchen. He must have come straight from work. His Ministry robes were hanging open and he looked delicious. Underneath his robes, he wore a simple t-shirt that stretched across his well-muscled chest. He had on faded denim trousers that hugged his thighs and the substantial bulge at his crotch. Bronwyn wanted to dive into those jeans and she licked her lips. Maybe a quick blowjob would show Marcus what she had to offer. First though, she'd spread her gossip.

"Marcus Flint," she purred in greeting. "You are just the wizard I want."

"And I'm one you're not going to get," he replied, still playing hard to get. Sometimes a wizard just needed to see how far a witch would go. Well, he had no idea what she was capable of. He started
"I saw something disturbing today that will just crush your friend, Adrian," she said, sadness dripping from her voice. She pouted as well to show Marcus how upset she was at having to be the bearer of such bad news. It was working. Marcus stopped walking and was looking at her now.

"Yeah?"

"Yes," she sighed dramatically. Bronwyn ran her hand over his chest. He was so firm under that shirt. "I know Adrian is dating Miss Granger, but I'm afraid her affections are easily given away to others as well."

"What are you talking about?" Marcus' brow furrowed. Bronwyn did love the idea of a simple wizard, all brawn and little brains. She had enough brains for the both of them.

"I walked in on her and Theo Nott this morning," she whispered, leaning close to him. "They were kissing."

Marcus looked impassive. She was hoping for more of a reaction, maybe outrage and shock. It was possible he didn't fully understand.

"That trollop is cheating on your friend," Bronwyn said sadly, shaking her head.

The Floo flared to life and Adrian Pucey stepped out, almost immediately followed by Draco Malfoy. This timing was perfect. Bronwyn was sure these two would be interested in her news. Apparently, Marcus agreed.

"Miss Figgelowe here just told me something about Hermione," Marcus stated. Bronwyn nodded sadly and tried to lean closer to Marcus, but he stepped away. She pouted. She should be rewarded for bringing this to their attention.

"Such as?" Draco asked, his brow arched just like his father's.

"It seems she saw Hermione snogging Theo earlier," Marcus relayed. "She'd heard that she was dating Adrian so she wanted to make sure we knew Hermione's 'affection was easily given away to others.' The other word she used was trollop."

Bronwyn was surprised that Marcus could remember her exact words. Quidditch players were just dumb jocks usually. Bronwyn concluded that he must've been paying very close attention to her.

"Did I not tell you once already what would happen if you spoke poorly about our witch?" Draco said, his tone menacing.

"You were fairly warned," Adrian said seriously.

"The question is, why are you spreading rumors about my witch?" Marcus said, grabbing her roughly by the arm.

Bronwyn was confused. This was not how this was supposed to go. Adrian was supposed to be hurt and Marcus angry on his friend’s behalf. They were supposed to be grateful to her for telling them the truth.

"But it's true!" Bronwyn blurted. "I saw them."

"We know she's dating Theo, just like she's dating the three of us," Adrian said sternly. "The
question is why are you trying to interfere?"

"Legilimens," Draco hissed. Bronwyn whipped her head around to see his wand in her face. She felt Draco lock eye contact so she couldn't break it. Then she felt him push into her mind.

"She wants Marcus," Draco reported. "She told him to get his favor. She doesn't like Hermione and is jealous. She feels like Hermione gets too much attention for no real reason."

Draco looked away and the pressure in Bronwyn's mind eased up. She sunk down into a chair and the three wizards left the room. Draco paused in the doorway.

"I told you not to make an enemy of me," he said simply. "I'll be watching you."

Bronwyn put her head down between her knees. She was overwhelmed. Then she got angry. Bronwyn wanted Marcus Flint and she was going to get him.

OoOoO

The next knock on the door revealed Healer Adams and her old Potions Master, Marc Bouchard. Hermione flew to Master Bouchard and hugged him. She hadn't seen him in over a year. He was very much a father figure to her and his presence was soothing. While she wouldn't have asked him to come because she didn't want to be a bother, she was so glad he was there. The two new guests gravitated toward Severus and began to talk shop.

Hermione couldn't stop smiling when Adrian, Draco, and Marcus came in. She hadn't had all four of them with her at once since Monday evening. It felt like forever ago. She greeted them all with a hug and a kiss on the lips. The four of them flanked around her almost automatically. It was strange how they made her feel protected but in the most unobtrusive way.

Bronwyn finally returned with those bottles of wine she'd gone for ages ago. She looked sullen and out of sorts, though she'd been in a good mood all morning. Right behind her was Blaise, who greeted Hermione with a kiss on the cheek.

"I bumped into some people down by the Floo who said they knew you," Blaise teased. Hermione looked behind him to see Luna and Neville. Hermione ran to her old friends, thrilled and surprised to see them. Harry must've invited them. It was nice, but also smart. Neville was a Herbology Master now and Luna had always been one of the most unconventionally brilliant people she knew. If anyone could see a bizarre angle that none of them had thought of, it would be Luna.

"You look so different, 'Mione," Neville said, squeezing her in a hug. "You look amazing, not that you weren't very pretty before."

Hermione smiled as Neville back-pedaled slightly. He was one of the sweetest wizards she knew, hands down. Harry and Pansy had not exaggerated when they said he'd become quite the heartbreaker. Neville had grown out of his awkward phase beautifully.

"I'm not the only one who's changed," Hermione teased, stepping back to look him up and down. "You look positively dashing."

"Okay," Draco intervened. "That's enough of that now. You have another, female friend over there to hug."

Hermione chuckled at Draco's mostly teasing tone. Four wizards was most definitely enough for her. She did turn her attention to Luna, who looked almost exactly the same. She was as lovely and dreamy looking as ever. She still dressed rather oddly, but in a charming way.
"I see you've freed yourself of those Wrackspurts." Luna smiled sincerely. "I'm so glad. Maybe they hid in your hair. You did have a lot of it. I'm not sure why people say you look different. You look more like yourself now than you ever did!"

"Thank you, Luna," Hermione replied, laughing. "I like to think I'm more myself now too. Maybe I've just made myself easier for others to see as well."

Luna nodded thoughtfully. Their conversation was cut short by a new arrival at the door.

Harry answered and her most recent Master, Selma, walked in. She was a relatively short witch, who was extremely voluptuous. That combined with her olive toned skin and long black hair always put Hermione in mind of that Hispanic Muggle actress who shared Selma's first name.

"You are always finding troubles aren't you, fistik," Selma teased. She pulled Hermione into her lush figure, hugging her tightly.

"Fistik?" Theo asked.

"Yes, she is my peanut," Selma said seriously with her thick, warm accent. Then she broke into a smile. "I love not being the shortest witch in a room. When my peanut lived in Turkey, it meant there was always someone smaller than me around."

"I've brought you two surprises," Selma continued, turning back to Hermione. "Whether or not you like them, I'm not so sure, but they were coming whether I liked it or not."

Hermione craned her neck to see two figures in the entryway, one small and one large. She gasped.

"Master Kobayashi!" Hermione approached the tiny old wizard reverently. He was at least ten years older than Dumbledore had been when he died. He was the Headmaster of Mahoutokoro, the prestigious Japanese school for witchcraft and wizardry. There were other similarities between this wizard and her old Headmaster too. They were frustratingly cryptic, fiercely powerful, brilliant, eccentric, and had wicked senses of humor. Needless to say, they'd been friends when Dumbledore lived.

"You know you are to call me Toshi," he reprimanded gently. "Did you think we wouldn't hear of your exploits, Hermione? That we wouldn't want to be here to help? Alexsandr and I were quite wounded."

Hermione blushed. She hadn't wanted to presume to bother the great wizard. Additionally, she felt okay with the work her team had done so far. However, having someone like Master Kobayashi check their work certainly couldn't hurt. Hermione didn't want to fall victim to her own hubris, thinking that she was so smart that she wouldn't miss something.

"Forgive me, Toshi," she said, bowed head. "I didn't wish to presume to bother you or your apprentice with my troubles."

"You are forgiven!" Toshi grinned, his old eyes twinkling with amusement. Hermione huffed and rolled her eyes. She should've known he was teasing, well mostly.

"I haven't forgiven you yet," Alexsandr scolded. "But I will let you make it up to me."

The tall, young wizard leered at her. His naturally white hair turned blue at the roots, becoming orange, and then fire red at the tips. If the leer hadn't been clear enough, Hermione knew from experience what that flame hair color indicated.
"Oh hush, Sasha," Hermione admonished the lanky Russian Metamorphmagus. He had been her most recent lover, so he wasn't being totally out of line. She decided to let him know they wouldn't be renewing that kind of relationship as soon as they had a quiet moment. 

Hermione ushered the two wizards the rest of the way inside, then made the introductions all around. Now that everyone had arrived, people helped themselves to lunch and mingled nicely. 

Surrounded by all her friends, Hermione felt like it was her birthday. In a way, it was a kind of was a birthday of sorts. If she made it through all the rituals, she would be a Sorceress. The nature of her magic would be different. She idly wondered what it might feel like, but then shut down that train of thought. There was no way of knowing until it happened, if it happened. 

Hermione made herself a plate. Pansy steered her over to a small nook, only big enough for four. She was nestled between Luna and Selma, with Pansy across from her. Adrian and Theo looked disgruntled while Draco and Marcus glared at Mrs. Potter. Pansy just blithely ignored her old friends, having had years of practice. 

"So a Metamorphmagus apprentice, huh?" Pansy smiled, nodding toward Sasha. The four witches tucked into their food. 

"Yes," Hermione replied honestly. She glanced over and saw Sasha sitting between Neville and Theo, talking. "But our fling was over three months ago." 

"But it was fiery and intense while it lasted," Selma laughed. Well, Hermione couldn't argue with that. 

"It seems like there are other suitors now, though," Luna observed dreamily. 

"You can say that again," Pansy snorted. She turned to Selma. "Those four gents, the pretty one, Adrian; the blond, Draco; the big one, Marcus; and the one with the glasses, Theo; they all wish to attach themselves permanently to our Hermione here." 

"They seemed friendly with each other." Selma studied the wizards. 

"They are close friends," Hermione confirmed. "They each know I am dating the others and generally approve, or seem to at least." 

“So you may be able to finally fulfill that fantasy of yours," Selma said slyly, chuckling. Hermione felt the blood rush to her cheeks and knew she was blushing. Her friend was never embarrassed, which was completely unfair. 

“Oooh, what fantasy?” Pansy whispered, leaning forward. 

“I just mentioned that once,” Hermione hissed, looking around to make sure no one was listening. 

“I bet I know,” Luna said, smiling. “Dating more than person, your partners knowing about each other and getting along with each other; that all leads to one obvious fantasy, having sex with more than one person at a time.” 

Hermione’s face was so hot she thought she’d burst into flames. Pansy’s grin grew until it filled her whole face. Selma looked happy as she ate her lunch. 

“It’s a lovely experience,” Luna continued passively. “My last lover and I often invited a third witch we knew and liked to bed.”
Hermione felt better knowing that detail about Luna, less exposed telling people about her own thoughts.

“Who wouldn’t want two gorgeous wizards at once?” Hermione said, smiling quietly.

“Or more,” Pansy chuckled. “Which two of your four would you leave out?”

“I can’t choose between them,” Hermione admitted. “I don’t want to have to.”

“It will all work out the way it is supposed to,” Luna shrugged simply. Hermione chuckled. She sounded like Adrian.

Once most people had finished their lunches, Hermione and Theo began presenting their findings. They laid out the steps of the rituals, starting at the beginning, and including all of the materials that they would be using. Severus described the potion he had made. The knowledgeable crowd asked questions and made suggestions as they went. Percy reported on two additional ritual sites he’d found besides Hogwarts. One was on a large private parkland in Northern England and the other was on Malfoy Manor grounds. Hermione preferred Hogwarts, she felt more comfortable there. She didn’t want to hurt Draco’s feelings, though. Thankfully, Lucius spoke up.

“I believe Hogwarts is the best choice,” Lucius stated. “Miss Granger has a positive history with that land. She engaged in battle there and won. She defended that land against a hostile force. As much as we would love to host the Sorceress, our land holds bad memories for her. The overall magic in the earth was tainted by Voldemort when he stayed there and it is still recovering.”

It was agreed, Hogwarts would be the location. Marcus brought up post-ritual security. If Hermione needed a place to rest, Spinner’s End may not be the best choice. Healer Adams reported that he could have a heavily warded room in a private section of St. Mungos available for her, if such a thing was necessary. It seemed that her four wizards had already conferred and felt that she should stay at Nott Castle. They explained that Nott Senior was generally reclusive and had never dismantled his wartime security measures. In fact, Theo reported that he’d added to them after reading about old ward building techniques that sounded fun to try. Hermione thought ward building sounded like an interesting hobby and agreed that it seemed to be the best location if she needed privacy, so she agreed to spend the weekend there.

The details of the ritual itself were agreed upon and finalized. It was beginning to feel very real to Hermione and she admitted to herself that it was overwhelming.

“What do the centaurs think?” Luna asked idly as they were wrapping up.

“The centaurs?” Theo asked, looking confused.

“Or the Merpeople,” Luna shrugged, “though the centaurs are easier to talk to. So few people speak decent Mermish these days. Of course, the Veela are easy to talk to as well, as long as you aren’t prone to getting mesmerized. Unless it was a Phoenix you’ve spoken to, which would be impressive. All of my conversations with those birds have led me to believe they are difficult and try to be cryptic on purpose.”

“Why would we talk to any of those things?” Bronwyn asked, her lip curled in a bit of a sneer.

Luna appraised the Ministry witch for a moment. Her look was curious, steady, and penetrating, but not at all judgmental. It was as if Luna had found a new creature to figure out. It clearly made Bronwyn uncomfortable. Eventually, Luna seemed to come to some conclusion and gave a little nod to herself before turning back to Hermione.
“You have powerful elemental magic coursing through your body, mind, and soul,” Luna said. “Wizards and witches can’t use elemental power. Humans who get that power are rare, obviously, and when it occurs, you have Sorcerers and Sorceresses. As we’ve established, elemental magic is dangerous. Humans aren’t designed to physically withstand that power. All the rituals we are planning will align your magic with you so that you can not only exist safely, but be whole and strong as you are supposed to as a Sorceress. Just because humans don’t have elemental power doesn’t mean there aren’t other sentient beings out there that do. Those beasts and beings may have insight into your magic, being practitioners of elemental magic themselves.”

“Oh course,” Hermione said, pressing her hand to her forehead. Why hadn’t she thought of that before. “Centaurs have earth magic. Merpeople have water magic. Pure Veelas access air magic and the Phoenix is born of fire magic.”

“But what could they tell you that would be helpful?” Harry asked.

“We don’t know, because we never asked,” Hermione replied, shaking her head. “Luna’s right, the centaurs are the most logical ones to talk to. Does anyone speak Mermish?”

“I do,” Toshi smiled. “Though I have not practiced in years, so I may be dusty.”

“I believe the word is ‘rusty,’ Master.” Sasha smiled.

“There’s a colony of pure Veela in France,” Lucius contributed. “It’s in the Pyrenees mountain range in the south of France, but relatively easy to get to.”

“Anyone know a Phoenix?” Percy asked.

“Fawkes comes by here every so often to say hello,” Harry reported. “I haven’t seen him in a few months, so he may come back anytime. I’ll try to explain that he needs to find Hermione. Sometimes it seems like he can understand me, but I don’t know if I’m just kidding myself.”

“Minnie, if you don’t mind me traipsing around Hogwarts’ grounds, I can go see the centaurs in the Forbidden Forest this afternoon,” Hermione said resolutely.

“Absolutely not,” Marcus interjected sternly. Not many of her wizards had contributed to the meeting other than to talk about post-ritual security. Theo helped present, but the other three had generally observed quietly, occasionally making a statement of asking a question. Now they looked serious, with Marcus leading the charge.

“What do you mean ‘absolutely not’, Marcus Flint?” Hermione asked, her eyes narrowing at the large wizard. He stood, walked toward her and crossed his massive arms over his broad chest. Hermione, of course, did not back down. In fact, she took a step closer to him and craned her neck to look up at him.

“It is not safe to go into the forbidden forest looking for centaurs,” Marcus reported, his stern expression not wavering. “Especially since you have no useable magic to speak of.”

“You do not dictate to me, Marcus,” Hermione said emphatically, poking the wizard on his firm, muscled chest. “If you have a concern, voice it. However, I will not be bossed around by anybody. I don’t care how big you are. You don’t intimidate me. If my magic was working properly, I could kick your giant arse.”

“But it’s not,” Marcus retorted, seemingly unperturbed by her lecture or her poking. “In fact, the last time you cast a spell you were trapped inside it for an hour. It took three seasoned, strong people to get you out.”
“Well, I didn’t say I was planning on going by myself,” Hermione hissed.

“I’d be happy to go with you,” Sasha volunteered, smiling at her.

“If anyone is going with her, it’s going to be me,” Marcus retorted, glaring at the Russian wizard. Hermione kept staring daggers at Marcus. She knew he was protective and she knew he was partly correct. She couldn’t be sure of her abilities to use her magic to protect herself, but he still didn’t need to take that tone with her.

“I’ll go too!” Blaise said happily, as if there were no tension in the room at all. Hermione looked over at Blaise. His easy, charming smile took her anger down a notch.

"I haven't seen you since Wednesday, Piccola," Blaise said with a fake pout. "I haven't had a chance to tell you about the silly witch I went out with, so you can pretend to be non-judgmental. I also haven't had a chance to tease you about this."

Blaise pulled a newspaper out of his robes and unfurled it. There on the front of the French daily paper was a photo of Hermione, dismounting from the red dragon and bowing before the crowd. Blaise had effectively distracted her from her argument.

The others crowded around to see the picture, happily commenting on her costume and asking questions. Sasha suggestively asked if she'd kept the dress, while Harry wanted to know what it was like to ride the dragon that wasn’t trying to escape from the bowels of a bank.

"No, I did not get to keep the costume. Riding that dragon was much easier than the one we rode out of Gringotts," Hermione said. "It was thrilling and the circus was wonderful. If you all want to tease someone, ask 'Miss Granger's partner' over there how he liked his costume."

Hermione pointed to Draco and the group burst out into laughter. Even thought he was never named during the show, Hermione thought it only fair that their friends should know. Harry, Blaise and Adrian's teasing was relentless, but Draco could hold his own. She took the opportunity to grab Marcus and drag the huge wizard from the room into the hall. She marched him up the stairs to the landing for more privacy. She stopped him so he was three steps below her, putting them eye to eye.

"I know that you care and I know you want to protect me," Hermione said calmly, "but I don't respond well to that kind of tone and approach. I don't like being told what to do."

"I imagine you don't," Marcus sighed. "I'm not used to caring about a witch. I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

"I know, princess," Marcus said. He began nuzzling her neck. "I'm used to caring about a witch. I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

Marcus leaned forward, resting his head on her chest.

"I worry about you, princess. I'm nervous for tomorrow, but I know we all are. I've missed you. It's been too long since Wednesday afternoon when I saw you last. That crazy Figgelowe witch keeps hitting on me, which is annoying. She even tried to tell me she caught you cheating on Adrian with Theo."

"That witch needs to mind her own business," Hermione retorted, eyes narrowing.

"I know, princess," Marcus said. He began nuzzling her neck. "And I don't like this Russian bloke, Sasha. Was there something between the two of you?"

"Months ago, yes," Hermione said. She cupped Marcus' face in her hands, making sure she could look into his eyes. "That's over though. I have all the wizards I want."
"I'm going to take such good care of you tonight, princess." Marcus smiled. Hermione was pleased to be rid of the tension between them and change the subject.

"What should I wear?"

"Nothing," Marcus replied, leaning his face into her palm.

"Seriously, Marcus," Hermione scolded. "Do I need to dress a certain way for our date?"

"Seriously," Marcus said. "Wear whatever you want, because it will be coming off."

Hermione studied his expression, trying to figure out what he had planned. Part of her wondered if Marcus was really just going to take her somewhere to shag, or if he had an actual activity set for the evening. Marcus halted her thinking by hefting her up into his arms. Hermione squealed and wrapped her legs around his waist so she wouldn't fall. She knew it may be a little odd, but she really liked it when he picked her up. He was just so big.

“Well, then I guess I’ll change into something more appropriate for hiking through the forest, looking for centaurs.” Hermione smiled.

“You do that,” Marcus agreed. He leaned forward and rested his forehead against hers. “I’ll be watching out for you. And then tonight, I’ll make you feel so good.”

“I have no doubt,” Hermione responded.

The sound of someone clearing their throat at the base of the stairs broke the pair apart. Hermione looked over Marcus’ shoulder, down the steps. Her other three wizards stood below. They all looked amused.

“All made up then?” Adrian asked, smiling.

“I believe so,” Hermione answered, pushing on Marcus a little to make him put her down.

“Good,” Draco said. “Come say goodbye to us then. We won’t see you until tomorrow.”

Hermione walked down the steps. Draco was the closest. He pulled her close and kissed her deeply.

“Thank you again for last night, Draco,” Hermione murmured. “I had fun. You’ll be there tomorrow?”

“Nothing could keep me away, Granger,” Draco replied seriously. He pressed a kiss into her temple.

Hermione felt another person behind her, pressing against her. From the scent, she could tell it was Adrian. It was his expensive cologne. It felt delicious being between the two wizards and for a moment, Hermione wondered if the ladies had spilled details of her threesome/group fantasy.

“I can hardly be in a room with you and not touch you, kitten,” Adrian purred in her ear. Draco chuckled and muttered something that sounded like ‘join the club,’ before releasing her from his grip. Hermione spun around so she was facing Adrian. He captured her lips in a sweet, steamy kiss that may have melted her knickers. “Have fun tonight. Let Marcus relax you. You’ve got a big day tomorrow. I’ll be right there with you. I promise.”

Hermione nodded. It made her feel much better knowing these four would be there. They had no
part in the ritual, no specific expertise, but they felt like important pieces. Adrian stepped away from her, letting Theo sweep her into his arms. She rested her cheek on his chest and let his heart beat soothe her.

“Don’t worry about tomorrow, Mi,” Theo said, rubbing small circles in her back. “Sleep as late as you can, have lunch with all the Weasleys and then come to Hogwarts whenever you’re ready. Severus and I will be supervising and making sure everything is properly set up, just the way we planned today. All you have to do is prepare yourself.”

“Thank you, Theo,” Hermione said seriously. “Really, your help has been invaluable.”

“You know I’d do anything for you, Mi,” Theo said, his voice becoming thick. She looked up at him and he bent down to kiss her. After she had been thoroughly kissed, Theo released her lips.

The group walked back into the meeting room, Marcus’ arm around her waist and Theo holding her hand. Adrian and Draco were close behind. The out of town guests had booked themselves into a hotel in Diagon Alley and were off to find dinner. Except, Sasha; he stayed behind. Luna and Neville were staying to catch up with the Potters. The Ministry group left to get some rest so they could prepare for the big day tomorrow. McGonagall and Healer Adams left, also planning to do some more preparations. Lucius said he was going to have a quiet dinner with his wife and practice the ritual yet again. Adrian, Draco, and Theo decided to meet up later for a pint and dinner at the pub. Blaise would meet them later.

Hermione Flooed with Severus and Marcus back to Spinner’s End to change clothes. She would meet Blaise and Sasha in Hogsmeade in fifteen minutes. She wondered what the centaurs would have to say, if anything. Regardless, it didn’t hurt to talk and afterwards she would spend a lovely evening with Marcus – naked apparently.

Chapter End Notes

Next - Marcus of course!
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer - JKR owns Harry Potter, not me.
Now - Centaurs & Marcus, oh my

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Blaise took the Russian wizard, Sasha, to Hogsmeade side-along. He seemed like an okay bloke, but if he were smart, he’d stop leering at Hermione. His friends were already feeling anxious and protective.

"So, an apprentice, huh?" Blaise asked, making conversation as they waited in Hogsmeade.

"Yes," the wizard replied, his Russian accent light. "I will be a Transfiguration Master in a few months. I am finishing my final project. It will be published in the European Journal of Transfiguration."

"Forgive my ignorance, but as a Metamorphmagus, can't you already transfigure yourself?"

"I can change my appearance easily," Sasha replied. As he spoke his white hair turned teal blue and his ice blue eyes became bright purple. He also grew at least six inches taller. "I also have an Animagus form. My area of study is changing inanimate objects into living things."

"Ah," Blaise nodded, idly wondering what animal form he could take. "So, you are interested in Hermione."

"She is a spectacular witch; brilliant, sweet, passionate, and powerful. She'll be a unique Sorceress. I can only imagine what being her Ancillary would be like," Sasha replied, looking a little wistful.

"Regardless," Blaise said seriously. "She is already dating my mates. They won't take kindly to you trying to step in."

"I'll keep that in mind, but it's not their choice," Sasha replied. Blaise nodded. He'd done what he intended and warned the wizard. "How many of your friends is she dating, exactly?"

"Four," Blaise grinned.

"See? Passionate," Sasha smiled, as if dating four wizards was the most normal thing in the world.

Blaise chuckled. He asked Sasha about Russia and Japan while they waited. Blaise had resigned himself to a long wait, especially if Marcus was intent on helping Hermione change her clothes. The wait, however, was short. Hermione must’ve made Marcus wait downstairs. She looked rugged in tight green trousers, flat grey leather boots that came up to just under her knees, a silvery gray top, and a grey leather jacket.

McGonagall had said she would extend temporary permission for the wizards to follow Hermione onto Hogwarts grounds. The four made their way through the gates and headed toward the forest. Hermione and Sasha chatted about mutual acquaintances while Marcus appeared as stoic as ever. Blaise wished there was something he could do to make his friends less anxious, but he figured it
was probably impossible.

Hermione ducked into Hagrid's hut. Blaise knew this hut was built in the past five years, the previous one having burned down, but nothing about it looked new. Blaise wrinkled his nose, comfortable with his own snobbery and happy that he got to wait outside.

Hermione emerged with assurances for the half-Giant that she would be back for tea soon. As the group ventured into the trees, Hermione explained that Hagrid was only recently getting back into good graces with the herd. Letting his half-brother Grawp loose in the forest had angered the centaurs. Moving Grawp to the Scottish highlands, where there was a small group of relatively civilized Giants had been the first step in making amends, but centaurs held grudges for years. Hagrid was able to give an approximate location for the herd though.

After twenty minutes of walking, Blaise was getting cranky. He wasn't an outdoorsy sort of wizard. The others didn't seem to mind, but the sun would be setting and he really didn't want to be roaming the forest in the dark.

"Can't we send them a signal or something?" Blaise huffed. "What if they're avoiding us? Maybe as we get closer, they are moving away on purpose. We don't even know if they'll talk to us."

"That's a good point," Hermione said thoughtfully. She stopped walking and Blaise sat on a fallen tree. His shoes weren't made for trekking through bushes. "Maybe we could send a Patronus. Sasha, yours would be good if you can manage one."

"Of course I can manage one," Sasha scoffed. The Russian produced his wand, said the spell, and a white gauzy horse appeared in front of them. Sasha addressed the horse. "The Sorceress Potentiate, Hermione Granger, wishes a brief audience with the centaurs of this forest should it be convenient."

After it had the message, the horse galloped away.

"Pandering to the ponies I see," Blaise smirked. His and Marcus' Patronuses were both large predators, a panther and a grizzly bear respectively. Of course, Hermione would choose the horse.

"You better not let them hear you call them that," Hermione scolded. She was right. Centaurs were sensitive and easily offended, but Blaise was cranky. He knew he should bite his tongue. His attitude wouldn't help them, so he just nodded.

They walked a little more aimlessly for a while, waiting to see if the centaurs would respond. Finally, they wandered into a clearing where five centaurs were obviously waiting for them. One male was in the center, flanked on each side by a male and a female. Blaise tried very hard not to look at the females’ bare breasts.

"Magorian, thank you for your time. I know you are a busy leader," Hermione nodded seriously to the central beast. "Bane, Ronan, you both look well."

Blaise wasn’t surprised that Hermione already seemed to know key members of the herd.

"There is change in you," the one she called Magorian stated. Hermione nodded her agreement. "It is a dangerous change."

"I'm unstable, the magic in me is dangerous," Hermione agreed. "I am worried that it will be too much and that it will consume me."

The middle male, Magorian apparently, nodded to one of the females. She stepped forward and
began to inspect Hermione. She held Hermione's hands up close to her face, inspecting them on both sides for several minutes. Then she peered into Hermione's eyes and pressed her hands into Hermione's forehead.

"You have magic of the earth, air, fire, and water," the female finally said. "It is stronger in you than I've ever seen in another. You must be strong to endure it."

"Will she endure?" Marcus asked directly and pointedly.

The female looked to her Leader, who regarded Marcus for a long moment. Then he stared at Hermione for longer.

"We have not always seen eye to eye, Hermione Granger," Magorian finally said. One of the males, possibly Ronan, cleared his throat. "But we have fought together in battle and others tell me you are intelligent, for a human."

Magorian nodded to the female that had inspected Hermione. Blaise guessed he was giving her permission to answer.

"There are several paths you may walk," the female said. "Even the stories told by the stars are subject to change. You are strong. You are strong enough for this magic, but that does not make success certain."

"What will make it certain?" Marcus asked testily.

"You must reign yourself," the female glared at him. "If you were not full of love, I would fell you like a tree. As I was saying, there are possible paths, not all of which lead to success. For the best outcome, trust yourself and your instincts. Be on guard for those that do not wish you well. Finally, and most important of all, you must mate."

"Mate?" Hermione asked, her brow furrowed. "The magic will choose a mate in the last ritual, on Midsummer."

"You must have your ideal mating; no more, no less, and no substitutions," the female said sternly. "With magic this strong, you need others for balance. You will not survive without your ideal mating."

"So I have to bind to the right wizard or wizards?"

The female nodded.

"Bane and I will observe your ritual," Ronan announced. Magorian huffed and gave him a bit of a sidelong glance, which made Blaise think there was some dissension in the herd. "Burn sage around your ritual space to clarify and purify the area before you begin."

"Thank you," Hermione responded.

"Good luck to you, Sorceress," Magorian nodded. "We wish you well."

Blaise mulled over what the ponies had said. The four humans stood in the empty clearing for a moment then Hermione turned and headed back the way they'd come. They walked in silence out of the forest.

"They talked at least," Blaise pointed out as they walked toward Hogsmeade. He noticed that Marcus was holding her hand tightly.
"They said you are strong enough to handle the magic," Sasha said. "That's good."

"Part of me thought I'd be out of danger after the second ritual," Hermione sighed. "But there was no basis for that thought. I was more concerned about my choice of partner, not safety. I need to be more vigilant and not make assumptions. Sloppiness in this situation can be fatal."

"So you must have as many Ancillary candidates as possible," Sasha reported. Blaise heard Marcus beginning to growl. "If we really care about Hermione, she needs all possible options. Would anyone rather see her dead than with another wizard? We need to trust in her magic to make the right choice."

"We can make sure as many wizards attend the third ritual as possible," Blaise finally sighed. He wanted one of his friends to end up with Hermione. The Russian was right, though. Blaise knew that they would ultimately step aside if it meant Hermione would be safe and happy.

"We can't control the future," Marcus finally said when they stopped just outside of Hogwarts grounds. He pulled Hermione close to him and enveloped him in his arms. "Tonight though, you are all mine, princess."

Blaise watched the couple disappear as Marcus Apparated them away. He sighed and patted the Russian on the shoulder.

"Come on, Sasha," Blaise said. "Let's go find the guys at the pub and get pissed."

OoOoOo

Hermione held tightly to Marcus until the dizziness of side-along passed. She looked around and saw that they were back in the woods. She snorted, thinking that she shouldn't be surprised. This forest, however, was unlike the forbidden forest. It was more mountainous and they were standing on a gravel drive that led to an impressive looking lodge.

"Come along, princess," Marcus smiled, leading her up the drive. It was so quiet that Hermione could hear the wind in the trees, birds chirping, and the crunch of the gravel under their feet.

The lodge was also quiet. No other people were coming or going. Hermione almost didn't notice the two people standing inside. Both were dressed in white robes.

"Welcome," the witch said softly, smiling. "Your evening is arranged as you specified, Mr. Flint."

"You may change through there," the wizard said, gesturing to a doorway.

Marcus, still holding her hand, led her into a very luxurious locker room.

"Is this a spa?" Hermione asked, feeling excited.

"Seemed like one of the best ways to relax you," Marcus replied, throwing his robe onto a bench. He pulled his shirt over his head and Hermione stared, her mouth feeling dry all of a sudden. He looked as strong and solid as he felt. Every muscle in his torso was clearly defined. Hermione imagined running her tongue along the ridges of his abdomen. "It was either this or shag you until you passed out from exhaustion."

Hermione watched his hands unbuttoning his trousers. Before she could see anything good, he paused.

"Of course, if you prefer the shagging, it's not too late to pick that," Marcus grinned. Hermione
snapped out of her half-naked Marcus induced daze.

"No, the spa will be lovely," Hermione blushed. She looked about and saw a thick white bathrobe that would fit her.

Hermione busied herself taking off her jacket and pulling off her heavy boots, trying not to notice Marcus out of the corner of her eye. A flash of skin told her he wore nothing under his trousers. She turned her back to him fully, knowing they would be unforgivably late if she got distracted. As she pulled off her top and tossed her bra over with her other clothes, she heard a groan. Hermione looked over her shoulder at Marcus. He was wrapped in his own bathrobe and he was staring at her through half-lidded, lust-filled eyes.

"I had the sense not to watch, since there are people waiting on us," Hermione smirked. She pushed her trousers down her legs slower than was necessary, bending over as she went. Hermione considered that it may not be nice to tease, but she didn't much care. She should've realized that teasing Marcus was not the same as when she teased Draco the night before changing into her costume.

As she was bent over, stepping out of her trousers, Hermione felt large hands grip her hips and Marcus pressing into her rear.

"To hell with those people," Marcus growled. His hands pulled her back toward him tightly. She could feel his arousal easily through her thin knickers and his robe. Marcus ran his large, rough hands slowly up her spine, feeling her bare skin. Hermione thought she heard a low rumble coming from him, like a cross between a growl and a purr. She sighed and enjoyed the feeling of his warm hands. They were so large they easily spanned the width of her back. He slid around and palmed her breasts, pulling her upright, but still pressed tight against his body. He leaned down and ran his tongue up the side of her neck.

"You shouldn't tease, princess," Marcus whispered in her ear. "You know I want you more than anything."

Hermione turned in his arms and caught his lips with hers before he had a chance to stand back up straight. She brought her hands up to his face and pressed herself as close to him as she could get. Hermione forgot that people were waiting on them and she almost forgot where they were. Marcus was squeezing her arse with one hand, the other cradling the back of her head. She doubted she could physically pull back from him if she tried, and she had no desire to try.

All of a sudden, Marcus broke their kiss. He turned to glare at the door and Hermione realized someone had been knocking. She hadn't heard it.

"Did you find everything?" a cheerful male voice asked.

"Yes," Marcus responded. "We'll be right there."

Heaving a sigh, Marcus reached for Hermione's bathrobe. She felt like objecting, but it wouldn't be prudent to get carried away. Therefore, she pouted while Marcus helped her into her robe, securing the belt.

The helpful wizard outside the door led the couple to a room that only had two walls. The room was open to the early evening air. A large fire kept any chill out of the spring air. A comfortable lounge area was set up and they sat on a cushioned bench that had no back or arms.

"Welcome to introduction to couples massage," the witch smiled. "This evening we will focus on
Hermione smiled. A massage would be wonderful, but one by Marcus would be even better. She would get to rub him down as well. Hermione wasn't sure if it would be very relaxing though, given the amount of tension that was generated whenever Marcus touched her. She figured that the presence of two strangers in the room with them may dampen her enthusiasm for her wizard.

They started simply enough with a hand massage. The teachers demonstrated on each other and provided oil that smelled like sandalwood and bergamot. Hermione took Marcus' huge hand and did as she was instructed. She worked all the small muscles in his hands, deciding to focus on her task rather than thinking about the delicious things those hands could do to her. Although she did make a mental note that limber, relaxed hands could be a benefit to her later.

Next, they were taught the principles of foot massage and the instructors demonstrated. Marcus took Hermione's small feet into his lap and began kneading the balls and arch of her foot, just like they were shown. Hermione couldn't suppress her groan of happiness. His touch was firm but gentle. Marcus did one foot then the other. Hermione didn't know when she'd ever had a better, more thorough foot rub.

Next Hermione practiced the scalp, neck, and shoulder massage that they learned. She focused on the muscle groups and pressure points they were shown. Marcus moaned contentedly and leaned into her hands. The next lesson was back massage. Hermione lay down on the bench with her robe pulled down to knickers. Marcus did such a good job rubbing her back; she was so relaxed, that Hermione felt like her bones were made of jelly.

The instructors brought over a towel and draped it over her bum so they could remove the robe entirely. They began explaining the concepts behind magical massage. Massage could stimulate the flow of magical energy or ground it. Since Hermione needed no extra stimulation, they primarily taught Marcus grounding techniques. Warm obsidian stones were pressed onto her muscles then placed in strategic spots. Marcus also learned a simple spell to visualize her magic. Hermione was still laying face down, so she didn't get to see what the others saw. Whatever it was, it made them all gasp.

"I've never seen magic like this before. It’s so… strong and convoluted," the masseuse breathed.

"We don't expect a massage to fix this," Marcus said, his tone bordering on snappish. "We are just hoping anything might help, temporarily."

Hermione suppressed her curiosity. She decided that she really didn't want to see her magic. If it looked anything like it felt, then she didn't need to see it. Marcus gently soothed her body, seeming to focus on certain areas. She guessed he was focusing on magical hot spots that he could see. Whatever the reason - the stones, the eucalyptus oil, or the soft chanting Marcus was doing; it felt good. Hermione didn’t think she would be able to lie quietly and relax, considering that the first ritual was the next day, but she felt her mind turn off.

“Come on, princess,” Marcus whispered in her ear. Hermione shook herself out of her relaxed haze. The others, the lodge masseuse and masseur, had left.

“Wow,” Hermione breathed. “It was like I was just floating in space. I wasn’t tense or even thinking about anything.”

“That was the goal,” Marcus chuckled. “Think you can walk?”

“I’ll manage,” Hermione said, smiling. Marcus stared at her nakedness as she stood, but helped her...
back into her robe like a gentleman.

“Then let’s go get dirty,” Marcus said, leading her out one of the open walls into the forest. Both of them were barefoot, but the path was smooth packed dirt and moss. The climbed uphill for a while and then came to a small ravine brightly lit with floating globes. Marcus pointed out steps worn into the rocks that took them down into the ravine.

“What in earth is that?” Hermione pointed to a pool filled with grey-brown sludge.

“That’s exactly what it is – earth.” Marcus laughed. “This lodge is famous for their mineral mud baths, so hop in, princess.”

Hermione stared at the ooze for a minute, wide-eyed. Marcus untied her robe and tossed it to the side.

“Feel free to leave your knickers on,” Marcus advised, throwing his robe after hers. Hermione was distracted by his nudity, her eyes traveling down his chest to his rippled abdomen, and then to the impressive package he had between his legs. He took her hands and the stepped into the pool of mud together.

“It’s kind of warm,” Hermione said, surprised.

“There are thermal pools here in the rocks that bring the mud up to body temperature.”

Hermione slowly descended into the pool, pausing when she was in waist deep. Marcus picked up a container of utensils that she hadn’t noticed on the edge of the rocks. He selected a wide brush and dipped it in the mud. Then he began painting the mud onto her chest, swirling the brush around her breasts and making her giggle. Hermione picked out a ladle and began spooning mud onto his shoulders, watching it drip down his chest. Hermione felt like a child, feeling the thick mud ooze and squelch through her fingers and toes. They were laughing and mud was dripping everywhere. Marcus eventually tipped a cup filled with mud over her head, wiping it away from her eyes. Hermione sputtered and lobed a handful of mud at him that landed right on his forehead. Soon, they were literally covered from head to toe.

They relaxed into the mud. Floating in such thickness felt strange, but interesting. Marcus pulled her close to him and they sat in mud, talking, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. He talked about Hogwarts, the war, playing Quidditch, his family, and his history with witches. Marcus was honest about his… adventurous and colorful past with Quidditch groupies.

“Didn’t you ever want something consistent, something lasting?” Hermione wondered aloud.

“I want that with you,” Marcus said simply. “I want what my parents have; mutual respect, understanding, and affection. Groupies aren’t looking for a partner, a life-mate. They are looking for a score, a thrill. To some witches, famous athletes are like the trading cards that come in chocolate frogs – they compete to see how many different ones they can get. They never wanted to get to know me, and I wasn’t about to share myself with them.”

“But you probably weren’t complaining about all the shagging you were doing,” Hermione snorted. It was sweet that Marcus wanted to make a life with her, but it wasn’t in her control. And it’s not as if he didn’t spend years shagging more than his fair share of witches, sometimes several at a time, and often not ever learning their names.

“Nope, I wasn’t complaining until more recently,” Marcus agreed, grinning. “I have a healthy sexual appetite and it has only been in the past few months that random sex has become distasteful...
to me. On the plus side, I’ve got it completely out of my system and I may have picked up some interesting ideas you’d like to try one day.”

“Like what?”

“Have you ever had multiple partners at once?”

“No,” Hermione blushed, but it was impossible to see that under all the mud. “I’ve never had multiple partners at all, until now.”

“Are you interested in trying it?”

“Like you, me, and another witch?”

“No, princess. You’re all the witch I want. I was talking about myself and one or more of your other wizards.”

"Oh," Hermione squeaked. Maybe Selma was right. Maybe she was in the perfect position to live out her fantasy. "I'm not going to say I've never thought of it. But I want to spend alone time with each of you, to really get to know you. You are so different."

"Most people assume we are similar," Marcus pointed out. "We were all in Slytherin, all come from money, and all found ourselves on the wrong side of a war. Theo is the only one who didn’t play Quidditch in school, but he's always ready for a pick-up game. We are all competitive, we like to win, and we do very well at our chosen professions. We can all be sneaky and devious when we want to be, so you'll have to watch out for that. We are also protective, probably excessively. I think it comes from the war and all the losses. We hold tightly, sometimes too tightly, to those we care about."

"You're right; you have a lot in common. It's no wonder you are all such good friends." Hermione thought about them each individually and as a group. "But I still think you really are different in a lot of ways."

"I'm glad you notice," Marcus said seriously. Then he shifted topics. "Ready to stop rolling around in the mud?"

Hermione nodded. She wondered if he was purposefully trying to keep her from over-analyzing, especially in light of what the centaurs said. It was a lot of pressure to know she had to find her perfect match or she would die. She couldn't begin to choose between these four wizards. She wanted them all. Hermione hoped her magic was somehow smarter or more decisive than she was.

Marcus helped her out of the slippery pool and Hermione looked about for some way to clean up. She found nothing.

"Time for a walk, princess," Marcus said, tucking her arm into his. They both looked like grey-brown mud people. She couldn't even see the definition on his beautiful muscles anymore.

Hermione decided to go along with whatever he had planned. They walked leisurely through the woods, staying on the smooth, mossy paths. Neither one of them was wearing a robe. Their mud paint covered all their bits and pieces. Hermione still had her knickers, but they were covered in the ooze and plastered to her skin. An observer wouldn't even know they were there.

After several minutes, Hermione noticed that the mud was hardening and making her skin feel tight. It was getting more and more difficult to bend her knees and elbows. The muddy clay was turning to brick.
"Marcus," Hermione said, hardly able to move her mouth. "It's drying."

"I know. It's not too much farther now."

They came upon another little valley in the hillside, lit up like the one before. This one had a clear pool at the center. The water was steaming slightly. It was hard to talk and Marcus guided her down the mossy steps.

Hermione and Marcus sunk into the hot water. She assumed this was one of those thermal pools he'd mentioned before. It felt wonderful. Marcus submerged himself and rubbed his face mostly clean. He pulled flannels from the edge of the pool and began gently wiping mud off Hermione. He slowly cleaned every inch of her, sometimes adding in the massage techniques they'd learned for whatever part of the body he was focused on. It felt amazing. Marcus also discarded her knickers. They were hopelessly muddy.

Almost too soon, Hermione was stark naked and mud free. Marcus was mostly clean due to the water and steam. Hermione took a flannel from him and made sure his back and face were clean. Then they were two people swimming together naked in steamy water. Hermione ran her hands over him. They'd spent this whole date touching in various states of undress and cleanliness, but she wasn't the least bit tired of touching him. Marcus seated himself on a ledge and pulled Hermione into his lap. She straddled his waist and faced him. Sitting that way, she was face to face with the large wizard.

"You are so lovely," Hermione sighed, skimming her fingertips down the side of his face. Marcus snorted.

"Ades is the lovely one," Marcus objected, leaning into her hand.

"Adrian is beautiful, romantic, and sensitive," Hermione corrected. "He is lovely, in his way. You, Marcus Flint, are lovely in your way - and don't you forget it."

Hermione thought she saw him blush, but couldn't be sure. That would be a feat, making Marcus blush. She really did think he was lovely. He wasn't pretty and sentimental, but he was sexy and practical. She didn't say it, but she thought the date he planned was romantic even if the activities were designed to get her naked and filthy.

Marcus slid a hand up her back to her neck and pulled her face to his. Hermione loved kissing Marcus. It was so raw and all-encompassing. She got wrapped up on his drugging kisses, his soft but firm lips, the nips with his teeth and flicks of his tongue. Hermione began rocking on his lap, her wet, slippery skin sliding against his substantial hardness.

"Unless you want to shag out here under the stars, we need to stop, princess," Marcus rasped, pulling away from their kiss.

"I want you inside me, Marcus, so much," Hermione lamented, sliding away from him. Part of her wanted to throw a temper tantrum. The past several days, all her dates, had been wonderful; but it was like having three days of foreplay. She'd always been satisfied, but at that moment it felt like it had been a delicious starter while waiting for the main course.

"But you aren't ready?" Marcus ventured.

"I am so very ready," she pouted. "I have four amazing wizards at my disposal, but I am too unstable. My magic is too unpredictable, too dangerous. I don't know if proper sex will have a different effect than what's happened so far, but I can't risk it. I'm a grown witch, not a randy
teenager. I can control myself."

"Being frustrated isn't healthy for you," Marcus pointed out.

"Maybe after this ritual is over, things might be different," Hermione said hopefully.

"In the mean time, come here," Marcus instructed. He pulled Hermione out of the pool over toward a mossy bank with towels and robes. She went to put on one of the robes, but Marcus put it back. He lay a towel down on the moss and lowered himself down, taking her with him.

"I only had a brief taste the other day," Marcus said, teasing her earlobe with his teeth and pulling gently on her breast.

Before she could formulate a response, Marcus had laid back and lifted her up so she was kneeling over his face. Hermione was open and exposed. She blushed. He'd gone down on her before, but now he was just looking at her. She moved a hand to cover herself, but Marcus knocked it away.

"You're beautiful," he scolded. "I'm trying to memorize you. Let me see you."

Hermione felt self-conscious, but let him stare. His adoring gaze made her feel a little more comfortable. After a while, he began lightly touching her - his fingers tracing every fold. Hermione moaned and closed her eyes. It was too soft, not enough for what she wanted but intensely arousing.

Hermione tried to find something to focus on. She saw Marcus' jutting erection over her shoulder and swiftly turned to face it. She could tell Marcus wanted to object to her moving, but she was repositioned over his face before he had a chance. Now though, she could reach out and touch him the same way he was touching her. She ran her fingers down his abdomen and circled around the base. He was massive, which was proportional to his overall size. Hermione brushed her hands lightly over the warm thickness. It was so hard, but his skin was so smooth and soft. Marcus groaned.

Without warning, she felt his tongue press into her center. He threw her off balance and Hermione leaned forward. She found herself in a wonderful position, just close enough to his beautiful cock. Hermione ran the tip of her tongue up the shaft, making Marcus rumble. The sound caused a wonderful vibration between her legs. It was utterly decadent. Marcus' tongue was exploring and licking every nook and cranny. Hermione was likewise exploring Marcus with her mouth. She took the head in her mouth and swirled her tongue around it. She couldn't fit his entire length in her mouth; he was just too big. That didn't stop her from tasting every inch of him.

Marcus kept distracting her with his wicked tongue. He teased her opening, his tongue going further into her opening than she thought possible. It was maddening the way he would bring her so close only to back away.

"Stop teasing and make me come, Marcus!" Hermione finally groaned. He chuckled against her skin.

"Patience, princess. I'll give you what you need."

Hermione took her frustration out on Marcus' cock, which was rock hard and weeping liquid at the tip. He must have been as ready as she was. She scraped her teeth along his sensitive skin. Marcus growled and nipped at her folds. He could be so gentle with her, which was surprising given his size. However, Hermione liked it best when he was rough. It felt primal and a little feral. Marcus also teased her clit with his teeth, gently pulling the sensitive bead. That was all Hermione needed.
She felt her orgasm slam into her, hard, screaming Marcus' name.

The now familiar white light burst forth. Marcus gripped her hips tightly, which Hermione hoped would keep both of them from being thrown. She felt a rumble underneath them, but was distracted by Marcus coming. What seemed like an unusually large amount of warm, thick liquid jet onto his stomach, splashing Hermione as well. Marcus was panting and moaning her name.

"Are you okay?" she asked, sliding off him so she could look around for damage. Last time she'd done this in a forest, she broke all the trees.

"Never better," Marcus managed to respond as he caught his breath. "That was amazing."

"Nothing's broken?"

Marcus sat up and looked around, assessing the situation. Hermione did the same, since Marcus looked fine.

"I think that little earthquake you caused was it, princess," Marcus said, grinning. Hermione scoffed and rolled her eyes. An earthquake wasn't a little thing. She hoped none of the pools were damaged or altered. Marcus started chuckling.

"What?"

"I was so good, the earth literally moved. I can't wait to tell the others," Marcus teased. Hermione gave his shoulder a shove and rolled her eyes again. She knew he was teasing, but she found that she didn't mind the idea of the four wizards she was dating talking about her to each other. "And I seem to have made a mess."

Marcus retrieved cloths to wipe themselves off and brought back new robes as well. Once they were clean and wrapped in the fluffy white robes, Marcus led them down another path.

Nestled along the mountain face were a series of caves. One of the caves was well lit with floating candles and a fire in a hearth. There was also a low table set for dinner and surrounded by cushions. Hermione and Marcus settled down on the pillows, sitting next to each other on one side of the table.

A wizard dressed in white robes that seemed standard for the spa brought them a lovely dinner. Steak, potatoes, and mushrooms followed an endive salad. A robust, earthy red wine flowed. Dessert was a simple pot of melted dark chocolate with pieces of fruit and cake for dipping.

Hermione relaxed over the leisurely dinner. She and Marcus talked and also ate in comfortable silence. Hermione felt like focusing on the future instead of thinking about the next day. She told Marcus that she wanted a house. They talked about what they each wanted in a home. That led to a conversation about family and children, about where they wanted to go in their careers. Marcus wasn’t particularly interested in getting ahead at work. He liked the job he had and liked to keep busy. He talked about spending more time at home if he ever had children, doing things with them and coaching children’s Quidditch teams. It was a side of Marcus that Hermione hadn’t ever considered. It felt so nice, so homey and comfortable, to relax in his arms and fantasize about the distant future.

Hermione had no idea what time it was, but she began yawning. Marcus summoned the waiter and instructed him to fetch their clothing from the lodge.

“But I don’t want to leave,” Hermione sighed sleepily, leaning into the large, warm wizard. “We are talking.”
“You need to get a good night’s sleep, princess,” Marcus soothed. “I won’t leave you.”

“Promise?” Hermione closed her eyes and nestled deeper into Marcus’ arms.

“I promise,” he replied seriously.

Hermione felt Marcus pull her into his arms and stand, cradling her easily in his strong arms. She vaguely registered him taking a bundle from the waiter and slinging it over his shoulder. Hermione was so tired; the side-along Apparition hardly bothered her at all. She saw they were back at Spinner’s End and Marcus carried her inside. The house was quiet and they went straight upstairs. Hermione pointed out her room and they quietly settled in. Marcus removed Hermione’s robe and laid her on the bed. He then tossed his robe onto a chair and joined her under the covers.

Hermione curled into Marcus, feeling comfortable and safe.

“Goodnight, Marcus,” she whispered happily.

“Goodnight, princess,” he whispered back. “Go to sleep, I’ve got you.”

“I know you do,” Hermione replied, entirely sure in that moment that he did have her.

Chapter End Notes

Next - Weasleys and a ritual
Hermione closed her eyes and tilted her chin to face the bright midday sunshine. It was shining down warmly in the open space of the Hogsmeade Apparition point.

"Thank you for the escort, Severus," Hermione said, smiling at the dark wizard.

Marcus had laughed when they stood side by side to Apparate to Hogsmeade. Severus was dressed in his usual black robes and frock coat. Hermione, however, was wearing a bright yellow sundress with bamboo heels and a denim jacket. He hadn't blamed Marcus for laughing; she and Severus did look like night and day.

For his part, Severus hadn't batted an eye when Marcus accompanied Hermione downstairs that morning. He simply Accioed a third cup for tea and asked how they'd slept. Hermione had slept long and well. Good sleep was elusive since she'd started feeling off. She felt sleep deprived and tired for a month with a few exceptions, even when she'd had plenty of rest. In the past week, Hermione had slept really well two nights and reasonably well another night. It felt good to start the day well rested, especially considering what was in store for her.

Hermione had a light tea, but saved her appetite for lunch with the Weasleys since it was near that time. Marcus helped her repack her trunk, which didn't take long, and then volunteered to take her things over to Theo's house. He'd promised to get to Hogwarts in plenty of time for the ritual.

Severus took Hermione to Hogsmeade at noon since she still didn't dare Apparate. They walked in companionable silence through the busy streets. People moved out of the way for them and stared. Her statement to the press earlier that week was just the first of many articles about her and about Sorcery in general. Hermione hadn't really been out in public, so she hadn't had to find out how people were going to treat her. She decided to ignore the gawking, while Severus scowled at the general populace.

They parted at Weasleys Wizarding Wheezes, Severus openly sneering at the brightly colored joke shop.

"I'll see you at the ritual site in a few hours," Severus said. Hermione gave him a kiss on the cheek and went into the shop.

Hermione watched the hustle and bustle of the joke shop. Students from Hogsmeade rushed around mischievously, laughing and whispering to each other. She was watching a pair of boys argue about which kind of Whiz-Bangs to buy to celebrate the end of the school year, when she was practically tackled from the side. Hermione shrieked as George Weasley lifted her up and twirled around.

"It's about time, 'Mione!"
"Hello, George," Hermione managed to say. He really was squeezing her tightly. "Can't breathe, George."

"My enthusiasm is your cross to bear, 'Mione," George retorted, though he did loosen his grip slightly. "If you'd come to visit me sooner, I wouldn't be so excited that I try to crush you."

"I've missed you too," Hermione chuckled, looking at the grinning redhead. He looked so much better, happier than when she'd seen him last. "You can put me down anytime now, you know."

"And risk you pulling a runner? I don't think so," George said, laughing. "I'm not letting you go."

George adjusted his grip so he was carrying Hermione bridal style toward the back of the store. Hermione groaned and closed her eyes. The customers were definitely watching George's display. A door in the back opened to a stairwell and George carried her up.

"I keep a small flat above the shop," George explained. "Lee and I go between this one and the one in Diagon Alley. Mum wanted to cook lunch and I thought it'd be more private here. You certainly do know how to attract attention these days."

"Sounds wonderful," Hermione smiled.

"Mum, Dad, guess who I found downstairs?" George called out as they entered the flat. He also set the small witch down on her own feet, finally.

Molly rushed into the room, a dishtowel in her hands, followed by Arthur. Hermione was pulled into a warm, motherly hug as Molly nearly squeezed the breath out of her, just as her son had.

"We’re so happy to see you, Hermione!” Molly gushed. “Aren’t we, Arthur? You look so beautiful!"

“You look well, very well,” Arthur said, clapping Hermione a bit awkwardly on the shoulders. Hermione smiled at her surrogate Wizarding parents. Arthur was never very comfortable with big displays of affection, but she could see his feelings in his face.

"We’ve missed you, Hermione!” Molly continued. “Come in, come in and sit.”

“I’ve missed you, too,” Hermione said honestly. She’d always been so fond of Ron’s family, but knew he would get them in the breakup. Also, part of her had been very worried that they would side with Ron and be cross with her.

“We’ve got time to catch up over lunch,” Arthur smiled.

Molly ushered Hermione into the dining room and called to George to set the table. Dishware floated to the table, followed by platters of steaming food. The roasted chicken led a bowl of root vegetables, a loaf of crusty bread, and a leafy salad.

"So tell us what you've been doing for the past four years," Molly ordered, beaming at Hermione with pride. The young witch was a bit surprised.

"Charlie's told us about your accomplishments," Arthur added. "Two Masters is quite impressive."

"But we weren't surprised," Molly smiled. "If anyone could do it, it would be our Hermione. You must've seen and done such interesting things!"

Hermione obliged their curiosity and talked about her years away while Molly filled her plate.
After a while, Hermione asked them for news from the past four years, so that she could stop talking and eat. Molly's food was as good as she remembered. The information was similar to what she'd already learned from Harry, but Hermione didn't mind the repetition. They were less critical of Ginny, of course. Molly did lament that her only daughter seemed nowhere close to settling down at this point. There was a lot of sighing over Ron's choices, and eye rolling from George.

"I just can't believe that he has two children," Hermione said honestly, as she took her last bite. "You know, I thought you all might be upset with me that things didn't work out with Ron."

"That was never a right match," George snorted. "You're brilliant and Ron's an idiot."

"He was quite the strategist at times," Hermione pointed out, finding herself in the strange position of defending Ron. She did have some good memories of him from when they were friends.

"We don't blame you, dear," Molly soothed. "Ron obviously made some bad choices. I didn't raise him to disrespect his mate, but they're his mistakes to atone for and learn from. Clearly, it wasn't meant for the two of you, as much as we wanted to have you as an official family member."

"You're still family, and always will be," George interjected. "And don't you forget it."

Hermione nodded and smiled. George was always like the older brother she'd never had.

"Do you mind telling us about these rituals you're going to do?" Arthur asked gently as Molly brought out a plate of chocolate brownies.

"Not at all," Hermione replied. She outlined the basic steps and purpose of the three rituals, ending with the warning given by the centaurs.

"So you'll need to find your exact soul match then," Molly concluded soberly.

"I guess so," Hermione nodded. "A good-enough match won't cut it. It sounds like I'll need to find an Ancillary or two that perfectly balance me and this magic I'm carrying around, or it won't really work."

"While I doubt I'd ever be so lucky, I'll definitely be there on Midsummer in case you need me," George stated. "And I'll bring every bloke I know."

"Thanks, George," Hermione smiled. "I appreciate it."

Hermione did appreciate his willingness to join the pool, even if she didn't want him as an Ancillary. George may be better than a total stranger, but Hermione already had four wizards she wanted to choose from. The idea that she wouldn't end up with Adrian, Draco, Marcus, or Theo made her stomach churn.

"I honestly don't want to talk about Ancillary candidates," Hermione admitted with a weak grin. "It's a bit overwhelming at this stage. Once I get past steps one and two, then I'll focus on number three."

The Weasleys nodded sympathetically and Molly put a second brownie on her plate. Hermione happily bit into the dessert, letting chocolate distract her, when a voice called from the hall.

"Oi, George! You in here? Hogsmeade is packed today for some reason. Shouldn't you be minding the store instead of leaving that clerk of yours on his own?"

The four diners turned to watch Ron Weasley walk into the room. He froze in the doorway, his
eyes going wide. Hermione grimaced inwardly. This was exactly what she'd hoped to avoid when seeing the Weasleys. Ron looked much the same. He was tall and lean, but well muscled. His shaggy red hair was cut shorter and was, consequently, neater.

"Well, this looks cozy," Ron finally observed, a little bit of a sneer on his face. Hermione imagined he was caught off guard to find her there.

"You look well, Ron," Hermione nodded.

"I am well," Ron replied a bit haughtily. "I'm leading the league on saves and I'm on the national team that's playing for the World Cup this summer."

"Congratulations," Hermione said genuinely. She didn't begrudge him the things that made him happy. She had bigger things in life to contend with that day.

"You are supposed to be at practice today," George said, somewhat accusingly.

"It let out early," Ron snapped. "So, how long have you all been so chummy?"

"We wanted to see Hermione since she moved back," Molly said briskly. "We've known her since she was a girl and we have a right to catch up."

"I actually better get going," Hermione sighed. She wanted to give the family members space to discuss what they needed. It was also half past two and she had some preparations to do before the ritual.

"Don't leave on my account," Ron said sarcastically.

"I'm not," Hermione said simply, shrugging. "I have things to do. Molly, lunch was lovely. I'd almost forgotten how good your cooking is."

"Don't be a stranger, dear," Molly said, standing to hug her. "You know where to find me if you need anything or just want to talk."

"Thank you, for everything," Hermione replied, squeezing the Weasley matriarch.

"That goes for me, too," Arthur said, giving her a stiff hug with lots or back patting. "I'm full of questions about these new Muggle iPods things, when you have time of course."

"Of course, Arthur," Hermione chuckled. The Weasley patriarch had never failed to pump her for information about Muggle gadgets.

"You better not disappear on me again, 'Mione," George chided, sweeping her up into a big hug and lifting her so they were closer to eye level.

"I'll do my best," Hermione smiled. "I've missed your letters too, you know. We have to keep in touch."

George nodded and gave her a good squeeze. He set her back down and she turned to leave. Ron stood in the doorway still, seeming to have a hard time processing the scene in front of him.

"Ron," Hermione nodded. "Good luck in the World Cup."

She breezed by her ex-fiancé and showed herself out of the flat, then out of the shop. Hermione felt a little proud that she'd been so mature seeing Ron for the first time in ages. She felt that she did have more important things to do that day than squabbling with Ron. It also helped that she had four
wonderful, sexy wizards waiting for her.

As she walked toward Hogwarts, Hermione shivered as she realized how awful it would have been for her if she'd stayed with Ron. Of course, there were the obvious issues of him cheating on her and her not respecting him as a partner in life. Then there was the issue of Sorcery. Marrying Ron wouldn’t have changed the fact that Hermione was an unknown Sorceress Potentiate. She could already have an irreversible marriage bond to Ron, though; which would likely interfere with then being bound to an Ancillary. Ron most certainly isn’t her ideal mate, so Hermione would have been screwed.

OoOoO

Adrian had been waiting at the Hogwarts’ gates for half an hour with Marcus, waiting for Hermione to arrive. He leaned against the gate while Marcus paced, much like a caged animal. Adrian had Marcus tell him all about his date the night before while they waited. He was glad his friend spent some quality time with their witch. Marcus had needed it. Adrian knew he was worried that Hermione and her magic might not like him, but that didn’t sound like the case. Most people didn’t realize how sensitive Marcus really was when it came to the people he cared about, but Adrian knew.

“It’s getting late,” Marcus growled.

“She has plenty of time,” Adrian soothed.

“How can you be so calm?”

“Faith, I guess,” Adrian said, shrugging. He knew Marcus was worrying that Hermione wouldn’t make it through the rituals. He also knew Marcus was even more irritated because there was so little they could do to affect the outcome. Marcus was a hands-on sort of wizard that hated sitting helpless on the sidelines.

“I’m worried too,” Adrian continued. “I can’t imagine a world without her in it and I don’t think any of us could take it if something bad happened to her. At this point though, we have to trust in the research team, trust in the magic, and trust in Hermione. I’ve never known a stronger witch, but she still has a certain fragility. This is overwhelming her and I know she’s worried too. It won’t help her if we are going mad with worry. She may need to lean on us, so we need to be strong.”

Marcus stopped pacing and closed his eyes. He took several deep breaths.

“I can be strong.”

“I know you can, mate. Here she comes now.”

Adrian smiled as their witch approached the gate. She looked like sunshine in her bright yellow dress. It seemed appropriate. Like the sun, she was the center of his universe.

“I get a personal escort today?” she asked, smiling broadly at the two wizards. “I sure am a lucky witch to have such fine wizards to walk me.”

Adrian laughed at her relaxed, playful attitude while Marcus swept her up into his arms. He watched his friend kiss and nuzzle their witch. He thought, not for the first time, how strange it was that it didn’t stir even the smallest feeling of jealousy or upset. Adrian just shrugged off the thought and went to claim his greeting from Hermione. As soon as Marcus set her down, Adrian pulled her small frame into his. He kissed her thoroughly, relishing in the taste of her and the warm softness of her lips. Everything about her felt right to him. Maybe that’s why he had such faith that
she would be okay and that her magic would choose him.

“Have a nice lunch, kitten?” Adrian asked, snaking his arm around her waist as she caught her breath.

“It was nice, yes,” she replied. Marcus took her hand and the trio began walking toward the ritual site. “Molly and Arthur were like parents to me when I came into the wizarding world. They supported me and guided me in ways that my own parents just couldn’t. I was able to talk to Molly, to ask her about witch things as I came of age. And George was like a brother to me. I was glad to see him again.”

“Still relaxed then?” Marcus asked. Adrian thought taking Hermione to that spa had been a perfect date because she needed to unwind.

“I think so. Ron showed up right before I left, which was a big surprise for everyone. He was supposed to be at practice all day.”

“Did he upset you?” Marcus growled. Adrian knew that tone. Merlin wouldn’t be able to shield Ron Weasley from Marcus if the moronic redhead had upset Hermione, on this day of all days.

“Not really, no,” Hermione said, lifting Marcus’ hand that was joined with hers and rubbing the back of his hand on her cheek. “I was expecting more feelings, more upset at seeing him again, but it wasn’t there.”

“What did you feel?” Adrian asked. He was curious. Hermione had a long, complicated history with the youngest male Weasley. They had been friends, and then were romantically involved. There must have been plenty of good times and happy memories. Part of him was worried that she would still have…charitable feelings for him.

“Hmmm, indifference I suppose,” Hermione finally answered after taking a moment to think. Adrian smiled widely and squeezed her closer to him as they walked. Indifference or apathy of any kind was the best feeling Hermione could have about an ex. “I just saw him and thought I’ve got more important things to do and to think about. What did you two do today?”

“I woke up with the sexiest witch in my arms this morning,” Marcus replied. “It was delightful.”

“Be serious,” Hermione instructed as she blushed and rolled her eyes.

“It was the highlight of my day,” Marcus defended, “so far at least.”

Hermione blushed a little more, stopped, and stood up on her tiptoes to give Marcus a kiss on the cheek. Adrian found it wonderfully refreshing that Hermione blushed at compliments from her wizards, even though she knew how much they admired her. It was as if she wasn’t used to such things, but then Adrian realized she probably wasn’t. Adrian had always chosen exquisitely beautiful witches for companionship, and they all knew how lovely they were on the outside. Compliments about their attractiveness were expected as a matter of course. Adrian had seen them smile coyly or bat their eyes, but not genuinely blush.

"I took your things to Theo's house and had a breakfast with the Notts," Marcus continued. "Then Theo and I came over here to begin preparations. I think I was getting in the way more than helping, because Snape sent me down here to wait for you."

Hermione chuckled.

"That sounds like Severus," she said.
"I got pretty pissed last night at the pub, so I slept late. Than I had breakfast with Mother this morning," Adrian reported. "She very much wanted to come with me today. I hope you don't mind."

"No, I don't mind Arabella being here," Hermione said. "I just didn't want reporters and a bunch of strangers here."

"Good, because my parents showed up as well," Marcus sighed. Adrian laughed. He knew how much his friend loved his parents, and how much they embarrassed him with their brash, extroversion.

"Your parents are lovely and charming," Hermione said, with a slightly scolding tone in her voice. "Tell me what you got up to at the pub last night, Adrian."

Hermione squeezed him slightly and Adrian thought she may need to take her mind off what was coming.

"Draco, Theo and I went to the pub yesterday after the meeting," Adrian smiled. "We had a few rounds of darts and a few rounds of pints before Blaise and your Russian friend, Sasha, joined us."

"Sasha went?" Hermione asked, sounding a bit surprised.

"They came by after your talk with the centaurs," Adrian grinned. "That metamorphmagus trait of his got pretty funny as the night went on and he got more pissed."

"Yes, I've seen it," Hermione chimed in. "Adrian's drunken memories were hazy toward the very end of the night, but he did remember Sasha changing his appearance drastically so that the bartender wouldn't realize how many pints he'd had."

"Of course, he still wants to get into your knickers and we were all horribly jealous that he'd been in them at all," Adrian reported. He heard Marcus grumble, but couldn't make out his words.

"No one told you to invite my ex-lover out to the pub," Hermione pointed out, narrowing her eyes at Marcus.

"Blaise invited him," Adrian shrugged. "He finds that kind of thing amusing. Draco and Marcus are the possessive ones, who are never going to like anyone you've been with. Theo and I are more laid back about it. I'm sure that between the four of us, we have loads more ex-lovers than you do."

"I'm sure of that as well," Hermione snorted. "In fact, I'd venture that you each have more ex-lovers than I do."

"But ours aren't turning up and trying to enter into a permanent bond with us," Marcus pointed out.

"I'm sure plenty would, if you were in my position," Hermione said dryly.

"Regardless," Adrian interjected, "Blaise and Sasha explained what the centaurs had said, that the third ritual is critical in your case. Blaise also told us about his intention to invite every eligible wizard across the globe. So, of course, Draco tackled him."

"No; really?" Hermione chided. Adrian laughed. She should know Draco and his fiery temper well enough by now.

"Really," Adrian said. "He threw Blaise down right next to the billiards table."
"But they're friends!" Hermione objected.

"Blokes do things differently sometimes," Adrian countered simply. "We can have a dust up and still be mates. It's all mended after a round of drinks and an Episkey spell."

"Draco especially," Marcus snorted. "You of all people should know how hot-headed he is. He has been since we were kids. I don’t blame him. None of us want a parade of eligible wizards traipsing in front of you, so you can pick one of them instead of one of us."

“But we understand what must be done, for your safety,” Adrian said sternly, glaring over at Marcus. They had all four discussed this issue at length a few hours ago. Draco and Marcus were quite peeved, while Adrian and Theo were unhappily resigned to fate. In the end, they all agreed that they’d rather Hermione be bound to someone else if it meant she was going to live a long, happy life. A big part of Adrian still firmly believed that she would find her ideal mating with him and his friends. Being with Hermione felt too right for her to then bind with another.

“You all know I don’t want any other wizards,” Hermione said sadly. “The four of you are entirely enough for me. I don’t like the idea of being with anyone else either, you know.”

“I know,” Marcus said apologetically.

They walked in sober silence for a moment. Adrian furrowed his brow. This wasn’t the lighthearted, relaxed mood he wanted for Hermione before the ritual.

“So changing his appearance isn’t the only thing your Sasha friend does when he’s in his cups,” Adrian teased lightly. “It turns out he’s quite chatty.”

“What did he tell you?” Hermione asked, eyes narrowed.

“Oh not much,” Adrian grinned. “I just never knew you could be so…kinky. Not that I mind in the least.”

“If Sasha said it was my idea to ride around on him in his Animagus form beforehand, that’s just not true!”

“Wow, that’s amazing. I was just bluffing,” Adrian laughed. “That is kinky! What is his Animagus form?”

“A horse,” Marcus intoned disapprovingly. “As in, hung like a…”

Adrian watched Hermione’s face go beet red as she fought to suppress laughter.

“Well, that’s not what a bloke likes to hear about his witch’s former lover,” Adrian cringed in mock horror. “Except for Marcus, of course. I’m sure he couldn’t care less, given what he’s carrying around in his pants.”

With that statement, Hermione was unable to hold back her laughter and it rang out beautifully, just as Adrian had planned. Marcus’ chest also puffed out a little with pride. Adrian rolled his eyes at his friend. They all knew Marcus had the biggest cock between the four of them. Most boys living in dormitories had the experience of pulling out the measuring tape on a dull night after too much alcohol.

The smiling trio crested the hill and looked down on the ritual site before them. Lucius and McGonagall had drawn the circle with bloodstone and salt, positioning it so the lake was to the north and the ceremonial hearth was to the south.
Two tents were set up a little distance away from the circle. One tent was white and the other was green. Adrian had helped set them up. Like all wizarding tents, they were bigger inside. Both contained a ritual bath and changing area. The green one was for McGonagall and Lucius, while the white one was for Hermione. Adrian shivered at the thought of the Headmistress and Lucius Malfoy naked together in their bath, but ritual was ritual. Of course, if anyone had a right to recoil in horror it would be Lucius. He was the one that had to see McGonagall’s bare backside. Nevertheless, they needed to be cleansed and wear only the approved garments, just like Hermione.

"There you are!" Draco exclaimed, coming up to them. Neither Adrian nor Marcus released Hermione, but that didn't stop Draco from cupping her face and giving her a long, lusty kiss. Adrian was becoming entirely too aroused listening to Hermione's throaty moans that Draco caused.

"Hey, I'm cross with you!" Hermione finally said, stepping back from Draco.

"What did I do?" Draco questioned, pouting slightly.

"You shouldn't fight with Blaise because he is trying to be helpful to me, even if you dislike what he needs to do," Hermione scolded.

"Which one of you snitched?" Draco sneered.

"Ades," Marcus piped up, earning him a little glare from their witch.

"Blaise is fine," Draco said dismissively. "He's around here somewhere, looking for gate crashers."

"You're here!" Theo exclaimed, pulling her slightly away from the other three wizards. He pressed Hermione tightly against him, wrapping her up in his arms.

"How did everything go?" Hermione asked, resting her head on Theo’s chest.

"Exactly as planned." Theo smiled, rubbing circles in her back. "The circle has been cast. Neville arranged the hearth so it's ready for the bonfire. Sasha and Master Kobayashi cleansed the area with sage as the centaurs recommended. Bouchard and Snape finished the tincture for your bath. Bouchard completed the potion for the ritual. Luna and Selma are ready to help you with your cleansing. Bronwyn volunteered to help Lucius, but Narcissa and Severus were already conscripted for that. So Bronwyn was assigned to McGonagall, along with Director Penrose. I think Penrose fancies McGonagall, which is pretty disturbing."

Adrian smiled as Theo dotted kisses along Hermione's head and face while he spoke.

"Why can't we help Hermione with her bath?" Draco asked, pouting again. Adrian actually felt like pouting himself, but refrained.

"That would be entirely too distracting," Hermione said, blushing again. "Would you all be able to sit with me after the bath though? Having you around makes me feel...I don't know, calmer I think."

"Of course, kitten," Adrian assured her.

"We are at your beck and call," Draco grinned.

"And here to support you," Marcus added. Adrian could almost hear him reminding himself to be strong for her.
"Come on, Mi," Theo said. "We can stay with you the whole time. Everything is under control. Percy is really on top of the schedule and is entirely comfortable bossing everyone around."

Adrian smiled, happy to be allowed to stay with Hermione. She took Theo's arm and Draco appropriated her free hand. Adrian slung his arm over Marcus' shoulder as the pair followed their witch and her other wizards.

The group entered the white tent where Luna and Selma were heating the bath. The water steamed and Adrian was hit with the earthy scent of the water. It smelled like the mountains after a heavy rain.

"Gentlemen, if you are staying then make yourselves comfortable over there," Luna instructed, pointing across to a seating area near the entrance. The Lovegood witch may be a flighty thing, but she looked serious and Adrian didn't dare argue with her. Neither did the others. The only rebellion in sight was that Marcus positioned himself a short distance away from the other three, so he could stand guard over the tent door.

Adrian sat himself on a chair. The bath was only about two meters away.

"Feeling good today, fistik?" Selma asked, kissing Hermione on each cheek. Adrian thought it was funny that the small Turkish witch called Hermione 'peanut.' It was such a childish nickname.

Hermione nodded and returned Selma's kisses, one on each cheek.

"Then let's get started," Luna smiled, coming up behind Hermione. The blonde slid Hermione's jacket off and Selma took her purse and sunglasses. Adrian's mouth went dry as Luna unzipped Hermione's bright yellow sundress. It was so incredibly hot to watch Hermione be undressed by two attractive witches.

The dress pooled at Hermione's feet and Adrian swallowed hard. His witch stood in a soft petal pink set of knickers and a strapless bra.

He looked at his friends and saw they had similar reactions. Theo's eyes glazed over and Draco crossed his legs. Marcus was adjusting his robe over himself as he stood in the doorway; hiding what Adrian was sure was a substantial bulge.

Selma helped her step out of the dress at her feet while Luna whisked the yellow fabric away. Luna unclasped her necklace and Hermione stepped out of her heels. The witches walked Hermione the two steps to the bath, so her back was turned to them. Luna blocked their view to unhook Hermione's bra. Selma pushed her knickers down and Hermione stepped out of those as well. Hermione's naked form was breathtaking, even from behind.

Luna and Selma held her hands as Hermione stepped into the steaming, fragrant water. Hermione knelt down and then lay back, submerging herself entirely. She rose back up and knelt in the bath, facing the wizards. Adrian licked his lips as droplets of water fell from Hermione’s sweet, pert breasts. He was brought back to the purpose of the water as Luna drew her wand and began a series of basic cleansing charms. Selma held a pitcher over Hermione’s head and a stream of gold, copper, and emerald green liquid flowed out. It looked thick like syrup and Selma made sure it evenly coated Hermione’s head and then shoulders, chest, and back. It was the tincture that the Potions Masters made and it was supposed to calm Hermione’s magic before the ceremony. Luna continued to cast spells and Hermione rubbed the tincture into her skin. It made her already tan skin glow a sort of metallic bronze.

When the pitcher was empty, Selma filled it with water from the bath and poured it over Hermione again. She repeated that procedure precisely seven times. Luna had run through all the common cleansing spells that Adrian knew. Now she was on to strange obscure spells. He was pretty sure she just used one for banishing dust sprites and another that dissolved sticky things like sap out of
fabric. Well, they certainly couldn’t hurt.

Selma lit a small fire near the bath and the two witches helped Hermione out. Towels were not allowed, as they may wipe off some of the magical properties of the bath water and tincture. Hermione had to air dry with the help of the fire, which was fueled with hawthorn, dried eucalyptus, and goldenseal roots. Adrian tried not to squirm as he watched his beautiful witch, standing naked in front of the fire. The droplets that clung to her skin shone in the soft light. She was simply perfect.

“We’ve cleansed her, so don’t get her messy,” Selma sternly ordered the four wizards in the tent.

“Don’t touch her until she’s completely dry, either,” Luna instructed. “Don’t use any magic on her of any kind. Just to be on the safe side, talk about positive things as well. We want to keep her aura uncluttered as well.”

“It’s half past four, so we have half an hour,” Theo informed the group. “Are you hungry or thirsty, Mi? We have fruit, vegetables, and water here. All of it has been purified for you.”

“I’m pretty full from lunch, but I could use a drink of water,” Hermione smiled, leaning toward the fire to let it dry her skin faster.

Draco popped up and went to the table. He poured a glass of water and walked over to Hermione. He held the glass to her lips, careful not to touch her yet. Adrian wouldn’t have been able to stop himself from just running the tip of his finger over her skin. He admired Draco’s restraint.

“So, what are you going to do tomorrow?” Luna asked Hermione as she sat next to Selma on a couch, tucking her legs up underneath her. Her simple, casual question made Hermione laugh aloud and Adrian decided he really liked the blonde Ravenclaw.

“Hang out at Theo’s house I suppose,” Hermione replied, grinning still. “I’m given to understand it is an old gothic castle on the cliffs in Devon, so that should be interesting.”

“I’m sure we’ll find a way to keep you entertained,” Theo said, giving Hermione a predatory smile.

“If you need a breather, come for tea with me and Father,” Luna said. “He would love to see you again and show you the house, now that he’s finally finished it.”

Hermione agreed and the witches chatted about Luna’s eccentric father for a while. Adrian had never formally met the wizard, but he’d certainly heard stories about Xenophilius Lovegood.

“I think I’m dry,” Hermione finally proclaimed. She ran her hands all over herself, to double check. Selma stood up and walked over to Hermione, peering closely at her but not touching. Nodding her agreement, Selma retrieved a simple, woven shift. Hermione slipped the white fabric over her head. It was simple, unembellished and unlined. Adrian could easily see the outline of Hermione’s body through it.

Hermione came to sit next to Adrian. He opened his arms to his witch and held her close. Draco slid over to press against her other side while Theo sat at her feet. Marcus walked behind the couch and began slowly rubbing circles in Hermione’s scalp, neck, and shoulders. Adrian made a mental note to get a lesson in massage, as Marcus had. Marcus had said the magical massage had really helped. That was very smart of his friend to learn. Adrian decided Marcus must be a genius when Hermione began moaning.
“Marcus, that feels so good,” she sighed.

“That’s it,” Draco said, “I’m taking a lesson in massage.”

“I was just thinking that as well,” Adrian chuckled.

“We all should,” Theo agreed. “There’s no reason Marcus should have all the fun.”

“I’m not going to object,” Hermione smiled serenely.

“No witch would,” Selma laughed.

Suddenly, Harry appeared in the tent’s entrance.

“’Mione, it’s time,” Harry announced.

Adrian could feel Hermione tense next to him.

“Relax, kitten,” Adrian whispered in her ear. “We are here for you. We will be with you the entire time and we will take care of you when it’s over.”

Hermione met his eyes and nodded. She rose up and everyone else stood with her. Hermione walked toward Harry, four wizards and two witches following closely behind. Harry offered her his arm and Hermione took it. They stood for a moment while she took a deep breath, then they all exited the safe, seclusion of the tent. The first ritual was about to begin.

Chapter End Notes

Next - Let's see how this ritual goes!
Hermione gripped Harry’s arm as they walked toward the ritual circle. The grass felt cool underneath her bare feet. Hermione surveyed the scene in front of her. The grassy path to the circle was clear. Minerva and Lucius Malfoy stood in the circle, also barefoot, but wearing long, emerald green robes. Their robes were embellished with copper, bronze, and gold.

People lined the outside of the ritual space. Narcissa Malfoy stood between Arabella Pucey and Inge Flint, making a trio of the most strikingly beautiful blonde witches Hermione had ever seen. Pius Flint was there too, next to Severus, Pansy, Neville, Master Bouchard, and Healer Adams. Bronwyn, Percy, and Director Penrose stood next to Kingsley, who looked impressive in his formal purple Minister robes. Hermione almost rolled her eyes at all his pomp, given that there was no press there. Next to him, Blaise looked exceptionally dashing. Blaise stood next to Bane and Ronan, the centaurs that promised to come, though he did give them plenty of room. Standing more comfortably next to the centaurs were Master Toshi and Sasha. Hermione, still holding Harry's arm, stopped at the circle's edge. Her little entourage stopped behind her as well. Luna and Selma both came up and gave her kisses on the cheek, smiling warmly. They went to stand next to the centaurs and Toshi. Harry whispered good luck, gave her a tight hug, and went to stand with his wife and Neville.

Hermione took a deep breath and tried to steady her nerves. She felt strong arms wrap around her from behind and she smelled Theo's distinctive scent of ink, parchment, and lemon verbena soap.

"You know what to do, Mi," Theo murmured in her ear. "We've researched this and you know all there is to know. You can do this! I know you can, my brilliant, sexy witch."

Hermione blushed at Theo's words and because he very surreptitiously gave her bum a squeeze through the white linen shift. He pressed a kiss into her temple and stepped aside. It meant so much to her that he had faith in her. Theo's confidence made her feel like she could do anything.

Marcus turned Hermione to him and leaned forward. She tilted her head back and Marcus rested his forehead against hers.

"I'll be right here, princess," Marcus whispered in his low, rumbling voice. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

"I know, Marcus," Hermione replied. She felt her heart swell. It warmed her inside to know that Marcus was there, ready to protect and support her. She tilted her face just a little more so she could brush her lips against his. Marcus groaned and stepped back.

Draco pulled Hermione into to him, pressing her small frame against the length of his. He was so self-confident. Draco was larger-than-life sometimes, as if nothing and no one could touch him. He
had no trouble being in the spotlight. Hermione rubbed against him, hoping some of that attitude would rub off on her.

“Best get on with it, Granger,” Draco grinned. “You’re the most stubborn witch I’ve ever met and I need you to put that to use for me now. Whatever happens in that circle, you aren’t going to give up. After all, who else is going to keep me in line? You haven’t even given me a lecture for hexing your friend Sasha last night at the pub!”

“Draco!” Hermione said, disapprovingly. Adrian and Marcus hadn’t mentioned that earlier, not that Hermione was surprised. She had already figured out that her four wizards would watch out for each other.

“See?” Draco chuckled. “You have to be fine, just so you can punish me later. I’ll even cast the Incarcerous charm on myself, so you can have your wicked way with me.”

Hermione couldn’t help but laugh. Draco was so bold. He made her feel like she could face all the scrutiny, all the attention with grace. He leaned down and gave her a firm kiss, nipping her lip with his teeth slightly.

“You are in so much trouble,” she chuckled as Draco stepped away.

“I’m counting on it,” Draco winked.

“Are you ready, kitten?” Adrian asked, stepping in front of her and rubbing her bare arms with his hands. He was giving her his gorgeous, cinema star smile, the one that made Hermione’s knickers melt away and her insides go mushy.

“I think so,” Hermione nodded. Adrian took her hands in his, lifting them up and kissing them each.

“Have I told you how proud I am of you?” Adrian said, beaming. Hermione felt herself blush and look down. Ironically, while she loved being right, she was uncomfortable with too much praise. Adrian, still holding her hands, nudged her chin up so she was looking in his eyes. “You amaze me and inspire me. I am lucky to have you in my life, any way I can have you. I know you are overwhelmed, but I wanted to let you know how proud I am of you.”

“Thank you,” Hermione said genuinely, her eyes tearing up a little. “That means a lot to me.”

“I’ll be right here for you, kitten,” Adrian murmured, leaning down to give her a sweet kiss. Then he was gone, standing with the other three wizards.

Hermione turned to face the circle and squared her shoulders. She stepped inside the circle and felt a shiver of magic go through her. Minerva and Lucius had their wands out and immediately began their part of the ritual, casting their spells in sync. One of the spells caused the hearth at the south end of the circle burst into flame. The shiver of magic she’d felt turned into a continuous pressure. Hermione knew this was just the beginning.

Hermione went to the center of the ring, where a bowl sat on the ground. She knelt before it and picked it up carefully. It was important that she drink every drop of the potion. She could smell the willow bark, which would increase her circulation and allow the potion to speed through her system. It was a complicated potion that worked as a kind of magical adhesive, bonding her elemental magic with her physical body. Regardless, it did not taste pleasant. Hermione suppressed her gag reflex and swallowed everything in the bowl, even the chunks.

A warmth spread through her body and it quickly became very uncomfortable, bordering on burning. Hermione gasped and tears streamed down her face. She wanted to curl up into the fetal
Hermione rose up to her knees and then slowly stood. Minerva handed her a basin filled with purified water. Hermione took a deep breath and hefted the basin over her head, her arms shaking with the effort. She quickly shouted the second part of the spell, directing her water magic, as did Minerva and Lucius. As soon as she was done, her arms gave way and the basin spilled over her head. It was a good thing she was meant to pour the water over herself. Either Minerva or Lucius redirected the basin before it hit her, but Hermione barely noticed because her legs swayed underneath her and she collapsed on the ground. Her whole body felt weak and her magic felt like it was lava beneath her skin.

Lucius approached her prone figure, levitating a shallow, smoking earthen pot. He laid it gently by her head and Hermione turned her head to see the smoldering embers from the ceremonial fire. She'd been dreading this part of the ritual, despite historical evidence that the Sorceress did not get burned. Now though, since it felt like her veins were on fire from the inside, Hermione wasn't worried about a few flames in her hands. She looked over to Minerva and Lucius to make sure they were ready for the third part of the spell. On the other hand, maybe she was trying to delay. Every part of the spell came with an almost unbearable pain.

Hermione propped herself up and scooped the burning embers out of the bowl. She held them up in her hands and said the third part of the spell, binding her with the fire magic. Her hands didn't feel any worse than the rest of her body and it didn't seem like her skin was burning. The aching, burning pressure of the magic was crushing all of a sudden though, and Hermione felt like all the breath was squeezed from her body. She fell back, hands tight around the embers, and her mouth open in a silent, airless scream. She was no longer concerned with holding back screams of pain; she was simply unable to produce the sounds.

After several drowning moments, the crushing pressure relented enough for her to take greedy, gasping breaths. Her eyes were filled with tears, but she didn't have it in her to wipe them away. Hermione lay on the ground feeling drained, but she wasn't done yet. She turned her head to the side and searched for her wizards. It was hard to make anything out, but she saw them on the very edge of the circle. They seemed to be holding each other back from entering the circle. That was a good thing because only the purified ritual leaders and the Potentiate could enter once the boundary had been set.

Hermione smiled at the sight of her four wizards and they seemed to calm down. She remembered what they said, that she had their faith, strength of will, and affection supporting her. Hermione let her feelings for them fill her, distracting her from the pain. She hardly noticed Minerva and Lucius approach her with sticks from the fire. They were no longer burning, but the ends were black with ash. They used the ash to draw the necessary runes onto her arms and legs. During the process, Hermione stared at her wizards and thought about how lucky she was.

Once the runes were written, the next part required additional concentration. Hermione submerged herself in her good feelings for her wizards and focused. She narrowed her concentration so she was only thinking about the next part of the spell. She began murmuring the initial words of the spell over and over until they were the sole focus of her mind. Her single-track mind vaguely registered that she was levitating a meter and a half above the ground. Once floating in the air, Hermione finished the rest of the fourth spell, binding her with the air magic. Minerva and Lucius were doing the same, both sounding quite fatigued at this point. Hermione fleetingly wondered if
they would be okay. They didn't have to endure the pain, but the magical energy all three were expending was tremendous.

As soon as the last word of the spell died on her lips, the breeze picked up substantially. Hermione was tossed around by a cyclone that came out of nowhere. Just floating, she had nothing to hold onto, nothing to brace against. The force of the wind was like a wall and she was thrown against it. Hermione heard a snap and felt an additional pain radiate through her left arm. She screamed, but the wind swallowed the sound. Hermione tried to hug her shattered arm to her body then tried to tuck herself into a protective ball but it was difficult. After being batted around for what felt like forever, everything just stopped.

Hermione dropped suddenly with a thud and let out a pained yell as her tormented body hit the ground. The wind was knocked out of her again, but only for a moment. Hermione lay limply on the grass, not moving, and trying to collect herself. Tears filled her eyes. She tried to find her wizards, but everything was too blurry. She saw large shapes that must’ve been the centaurs. They were sideways though, instead of facing the circle as they had been before, which seemed strange. Hermione forced herself to stop musing about the motives of centaurs and concentrate on not passing out. There was one more step to the ritual.

Squeezing her eyes shut and holding as still as possible, Hermione whispered the fifth and final spell. Now that the four elemental magics were bound to her body, the fifth spell was to bind the four elements together. It would all be for nothing if the four elements couldn’t coalesce. If water and fire always fought within her, for example, then Hermione would die a slow and painful death. She whispered that spell repeatedly, until she couldn’t enunciate any longer and the words just slurried together. Her head felt like it was stuffed with cotton and she couldn’t think anymore. Her whole body felt broken and wrecked. She was starting to feel numb and she couldn’t find it in herself to care. Then there was nothing.

OoOoO

Theo gripped his wand tightly in his hand, though he didn’t raise it. Draco and Marcus, however, had no such inhibition. Their wands were pointed, each taking one target. Adrian hadn’t lifted his yet, but it was ready. This entire ritual had been painful for Theo to watch. He had known, academically at least, that there would be some pain involved in the ritual. Theo had read about it, researched it. Seeing this, though – this was brutal. He had wanted to jump into the circle almost as soon as she drank the potion and was knocked forward. It was an almost irresistible urge after the water basin slipped from her fingers and her legs gave way. Theo knew how important it was though that no one breaks the barrier of the circle, so he held himself – and his friends back.

Hermione giving them that smile after the fire part, had helped them all restrain themselves. The windstorm, however, was a different story. Hermione, his witch, was clearly being thrown around with intense force. He couldn’t hear her over the wind, but he could see her screaming. It was too much for him to watch, and the others felt the same. All four of them surged forward, only to be blocked by the wide flanks of two centaurs. Marcus shouldered the beast roughly, but was pushed back.

“You must not interfere, or all is for naught,” one of the half-horse men said sternly. Draco and Marcus aimed their wands, each one trained on a centaur, ready to hex them back into the forest and go to their witch.

Master Kobayashi stepped in between them before anyone could act.

“They are correct,” Kobayashi said calmly, reminding Theo of Dumbledore not for the first time since they met. “All of Hermione’s pain and suffering will mean nothing if you break the ring.
ritual will not be finished and she will need to start again, which she is not likely to survive.”

Theo gritted his teeth. He understood, but he didn’t like it. He watched Hermione over the backs of the centaurs, still being thrown in the wind; although she did appear to have rolled into a ball to protect herself.

Draco knew the four of them could take down the centaurs, but the little Japanese Dumbledore was another matter. Draco sneered at the small old wizard, knowing full well that size did not equal power with someone like this. He didn’t think the old wizard wanted Hermione to die, but these rituals were dangerous and the tiny witch in the middle of the circle didn’t mean as much to him as she did to Draco. Over the past week, Hermione Granger had become his whole life. Draco would go in and get his witch before he let her die. They would just have to find another way to fix Hermione’s problem.

The Russian bloke stood next to his Master looking much more concerned than the soberly calm Kobayashi. Draco easily stared the Russian down and Sasha looked away. Behind the guard of ponies and wizards, Draco saw the tornado stop and Hermione drop to the ground. She cried out as she hit the ground hard. Adrian shouted Hermione’s name. Draco watched helplessly as his witch lay crumpled on the ground, not moving. It was too much to handle. It was too much like before, during the war, when he had to watch her being tortured and he was helpless to stop it. Draco wiped away hot angry tears. He didn’t want to go through this again.

Draco felt Theo’s hand on his shoulder and looked over at his friend. Theo looked just as worried, which was a small comfort. At least, this time, Draco wasn’t alone. Draco saw his father and McGonagall approach Hermione, though they looked careful not to touch her. Father! Draco knew that his father would do what needed to be done, he always had.

Adrian felt sick to his stomach as he watched Lucius and McGonagall stand on either side of Hermione, their wands pointed at her limp body. He felt small and ineffectual. He was a lover, not a fighter. He wasn't used to seeing people in pain and injured. Unlike most of his friends, conscripted to fight with Voldemort, Adrian only did battle in court. His father had moved them away before the big battle. He wondered if he was strong enough to watch this. He wanted to turn away, but he couldn't bring himself to abandon his witch. Instead, he clutched Marcus' shoulder to steady himself and made himself witness the scene.

Adrian focused on Lucius Malfoy. There was a wizard with the stomach and the strength to do whatever was necessary for his loved ones. He was a strong wizard, but now even his face looked ashen and drawn as he repeated the final spell. McGonagall, whose posture was always impeccable, was bending under the strain. Hermione still wasn't moving. Adrian could've sworn he saw her lips moving earlier, but now she was as still as death. Adrian felt like his heart stopped beating. He didn't know if he'd be able to bear losing her. He had a horrible flash of a future without Hermione. He'd shut himself up in the house with his mother. Maybe, after years had passed, he go back to taking a string of meaningless, beautiful lovers to parties for distraction; but he would never marry, never share anything real with someone. Neither would Theo. His bookish friend would become a depressed recluse alongside his father, surrounded by books and pining for his lost love. Draco's spirit would be crushed, but he would have to marry to carry on the Malfoy name. He wouldn't care for his wife, but would vacillate between indifference and outright disdain. Marcus would shut down entirely; Adrian was sure. He would be too angry at life and really become the surly thug most people thought he was. That was an entirely unacceptable future. Adrian needed to do anything in his power to keep that from happening.
Lucius and McGonagall's voices sounded hoarse and weak. Finally, just as they looked ready to collapse, Hermione's still body rose limply from the ground bathed in a golden glow. Her back arched and her limbs stretched out. Lucius and McGonagall did fall to the ground, both gasping for breath. Hermione's eyes remained closed, but her mouth opened. The strange golden, twinkling glow flowed all over her skin, and then slowly seeped into her open mouth. When all the gold was inside her, Hermione dropped back down to the ground - and not gently.

"It is done," the old Japanese wizard announced.

Marcus shoved his way past the horse-men and the tall Russian as soon as Kobayashi began speaking. He'd broken the line of the circle as soon as the old wizard said the last word. Marcus was a wizard of action and he was through waiting. He stopped next to her bruised body, afraid to touch her, and chastised himself. He'd promised to protect her and failed. She was broken, while he sat by and did nothing. For a moment, he feared the worst, but then Marcus noticed the shallow rise and fall of her chest. He may not have been able to prevent this trauma, but he was going to fix it.

"Healer!" Marcus bellowed, snapping his head around to where he last saw Healer Adams. The middle-aged wizard was gawking. Draco snatched his arm and yanked him toward Hermione. Adrian was kneeling by Hermione's head and murmuring encouraging things to the small witch. Theo was on the other side of her, trying to survey the damage. Draco's roughness had snapped the Healer out of his daze and he started walking on his own, though not as fast as Draco wanted. Marcus watched his friend pull the Healer along, anxious to get to Hermione.

"Find out what's wrong, now!" Marcus ordered.

Healer Adams nodded and pulled out his wand. Marcus watched him like a hawk. He'd been banged up enough to know the Healer was running diagnostic spells. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lucius and McGonagall being tended to as well. Narcissa and Severus hovered over Lucius while he drank a replenishing potion. Bouchard and Penrose did the same for the Headmistress. They still looked exhausted. Potions would give them enough strength to get home, but only sleep would truly restore them. The rest of the group stood around Hermione, keeping a short distance and giving the Healer room to work while also giving the four anxious wizards wide berth. Marcus knew his parents were right behind him, like Ades' mum was behind him, ready to be of use but keeping a distance.

"Well?" Draco snapped at the Healer impatiently.

"She's fine," Healer Adams finally pronounced, sounding relieved.

"Are you mad?" Ades asked incredulously. "Look at her!"

"I meant the ritual worked," Healer Adams explained. "The magic has bound to her physically. It hasn't overwhelmed any of her internal systems or caused any organ failure. Of course, the sheer violence of the ritual has caused some damage."

"What kind of damage?" Marcus growled. He didn't want his princess in pain for another second.

"Her left arm is shattered and dislocated," Healer Adams reported. "Several ribs are cracked and she has multiple contusions all over. None of it is life threatening and it's all relatively simple to fix."
"So fix it!" Marcus shouted.

"Marcus," a soft voice crooned. He felt a hand on his arm. He looked down to see that daffy Lovegood witch, who, incidentally, seemed to have no fear of his temper. "It would be best if we move her first. We will need to disrobe her and clean all the wounds."

Marcus nodded curtly. Luna cast an Immobulus charm on Hermione to keep her still.

"You can pick her up now," Luna said simply. Healer Adams nodded behind her.

Marcus lifted his witch as gently as he could, being mindful of her broken arm. The charm would keep it from moving, but he didn't want to cause her any additional suffering. He carried her back into the preparation tent where Theo transfigured one of the couches into a flat cushioned table. Marcus set her softly down on the table. He heard Draco ordering people about. Marcus was glad Draco was putting his bossiness to good use. Most people he made wait outside, which was good. Too many people gawking and watching set Marcus on edge and he didn't want to snap at anyone.

Pansy charmed away Hermione's ruined white shift and began a series of cleansing charms. Without all the dirt, ash, and sweat covering her, Hermione looked even worse. Snape unpacked a bag of potions that he'd brought with him. Healer Adams ended the Immobulus charm so he could relocate the shoulder. Pansy held her steady while Adams pushed it back into the socket. Hermione only whimpered.

Pansy and Adams each had their wands out and began spelling closed any gashes and cuts, now that they were cleaned. Snape poured several things down her throat.

"What is all that?" Adrian asked. Snape didn't even bother with a snarky comment, he just answered, which Marcus thought was smart.

"Blood Replenishing potion, Skele-Gro for the arm and ribs, and a Rehydrating potion."

"The bones should start mending in the next few minutes," Pansy reported. "Scans will tell us of the rehydration and blood replenishing is working as well. The blood loss and dehydration are minimal though, not life threatening."

"Once we see that everything is working as it should, we can revive her," added Healer Adams.

"Doesn't she need to rest?" Theo objected.

"We need to talk to her," Pansy said simply. "Her brain scans are fine, but we need to make sure she's lucid. She can also tell us if something feels off that we haven't addressed."

"After we talk to her, we can give her a pain potion and you can take her home," Healer Adams informed them. Marcus nodded. Even though she was going to Nott's house, it was understood that he, Ades, and Draco would be going as well.

Pansy and Adams did another series of scans, which were positive. Healer Adams cast the Renervate spell and Hermione's eyes fluttered open.

"You made it through the ritual," Healer Adams told her, smiling. "Don't try to move. You broke your arm and some ribs. How do you feel?"

"Like I got hit by a bus," she croaked.

"Besides your left arm and ribs on your left side, do you feel any other severe pain?" Pansy asked.
Hermione seemed to think for a moment.

"Not really," she finally said. "I ache all over and feel exhausted though."

"You'll need to rest, a lot," Pansy told her. "These blokes will take you to Theo's house. Try to drink two liters of water and eat something with a lot of iron and protein. Make sense?"

"Sure," Hermione nodded stiffly. "Eat, drink, and sleep."

"Apply this bruise paste anywhere you have a bruise, which looks to be all over, and they'll be gone by morning," Snape instructed.

"Thank you, Severus," Hermione said.

"The Skele-Gro we gave you should fully mend your bones in a little over twelve hours, maybe longer for that arm, because it is shattered into so many pieces," Healer Adams told her. "I'll come over tomorrow late morning to check you, but you can reach me by Floo anytime before then if you need anything. Master Snape has a supply of pain potion for you. I'd recommend taking one now so you can dress and travel. Then you can have a vial once every four hours."

"Pain potion sounds like a wonderful idea," Hermione said, her voice a bit tense sounding.

"Is the pain awful?" Draco asked.

"No, not compared to what happened during the ritual itself. I've never felt anything like that. It made a Crucio feel like a little bee sting."

"I'm so sorry you had to endure that, kitten," Ades said, shaking his head. He smoothed his hand over her hair.

"I didn't expect it to be so...violent," Theo added, lightly touching her cheek.

Snape put the vial of pain potion to her lips and tilted it back. Almost immediately, Marcus could see her relax. She reached out her good arm to him and Marcus slowly helped her sit up.

"I imagine you don't want to put on the clothes you wore earlier," Draco ventured to guess.

"Merlin, no," Hermione sighed.

Marcus shrugged off his t-shirt and lifted it gently over her head. It was soft and warm from his body heat. It took a moment to get her broken arm through the sleeve, but they managed. Theo transfigured a napkin into a sling for the arm. Ades gathered up Hermione's things from earlier, while Draco took the potions bag from Snape. Hermione did insist on putting her knickers back on, although Marcus' shirt easily came down to her knees. Ades happily helped her with that task.

When she was ready, Marcus picked her up. She said she may be able to walk, but Marcus wouldn't hear it. The other three agreed as well. She was not well and didn't need to try something unnecessary. The group exited the tent to find everyone waiting outside.

"Thank you all, for everything you did today," Hermione said, trying to speak up. "It means a lot to me that you were all here. Minnie and Lucius, are you all right?"

"Oh fine," the Headmistress said. She looked exhausted. "It's nothing a good, long sleep won't cure."

"I've had worse," Lucius grinned wryly.
The centaurs approached.

"We are glad you are well and will return next week for the second ritual," one of them said. Marcus thought it was Ronan.

"Thank you for coming," Hermione nodded to them. They all watched the centaurs go back toward the forest.

Marcus started walking toward the Apparition boundary. He felt compelled to get her somewhere quiet so she could rest. His friends fell in step, as did many others. Percy and Bronwyn seemed to stay behind to clean up. As they walked, people said their goodbyes to Hermione and made plans to see her later. By the time they reached the Apparition boundary, Hermione had talked to everyone.

Marcus just wanted to get her away and resting. As soon as he could Apparate, Marcus set off for Nott Castle with the three other wizards right behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Next - Recovery
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer - I don't own Harry Potter.
Now - Recovery, fun times, & a press conference
Note - This is your slash warning, although there is so little in this chapter. There is a bit more going forward! FYI

Hermione was barely affected by the side-along Apparition. Maybe it was the pain potion or maybe it was the warm, strength of Marcus' arms. She looked up to see a dark, foreboding-looking castle against a stormy grey sky.

"Wow, that's ominous," Hermione murmured, nestling into Marcus' arms.

"It is," Marcus chuckled. "It seems we’ve caught a rainy evening here at the cliffs."

Hermione took a deep breath with a twinge of pain, probably because of the broken ribs. It smelled salty and wet like the ocean.

"I bet this place is gorgeous on a sunny day," Hermione mused.

"It is unique," Theo chimed in, having Apparated right next to them along with Adrian and Draco. "Let's get inside before this storm breaks open on us."

Hermione watched Theo perform a series of very complicated wand movements to temporarily dismantle the wards. The group followed Theo inside the wards and he reinstated them with a much simpler wave of his wand.

The entrance and foyer was entirely in keeping with the exterior of the castle. It was dark due to the grey stone and polished mahogany floors and rafters. There was soft fire light coming from a fireplace and a few candle chandeliers. A tall, thin older wizard came into the front hall. Hermione could see some of Theo's body features in him, such as the reedy frame. Theo must've inherited his facial features from his mother though, because this wizard had very sharp, hawkish traits and was entirely bald.

"Dad, this is Hermione Granger," Theo announced, gesturing to her. Hermione felt a little awkward because Marcus was still cradling her like a child. "Mi, this is my dad, Theodore Nott, Senior."

"Thank you for your hospitality and please excuse me for not shaking your hand," Hermione said. "I'm afraid this arm is not working at the moment and I need my other arm to hold onto my escort here."

Nott Senior's lips twitched in a sort of grin for a moment.

"You are most welcome here, Miss Granger," Nott Sr. reported. "There is no need for apology. Practicality always trumps pomp and circumstance in this house. I have no wish to keep you. Your current condition and research into your ritual leads me to conclude that you have had a trying day. I merely wanted to introduce myself and let you know that I am at your disposal, though I doubt
that any service I can provide will be necessary given your current company. So I will bid you good evening."

"Thank you, Mr. Nott," Hermione smiled tiredly. She liked the strange way he expressed himself. He spoke like a book, but Hermione enjoyed it. "I hope you have a pleasant evening as well."

The wizards around her all chimed in with their goodnights and Theo led them out of the hall. They made their way upstairs to a large bedroom. An enormous bed made of dark wood dominated the room. There were two fireplaces, both of which blazed; one near the bed and the other centered in a seating area on the other side of the room. Heavy dark green velvet drapes covered the far wall, but the room was not as dark as the hall. More lights were set up here.

Marcus laid her gently down on the bed and Hermione yawned widely.

"I don't know how much longer I can stay awake," she reported to the four wizards surrounding her.

"So let's get to work then," Adrian smiled. "Theo, why don't you see about an iron and protein rich dinner for all of us? Draco, open up that bag of yours and get out the bruise paste. This witch is black and blue. Marcus, I'm sure stripping Hermione won't be problematic for you. I'll get started on those two liters of water you need to drink."

Hermione watched the wizards get to work. Theo left the room, Draco began to sort through the potion bag, and Adrian found a large pitcher of water and glasses on a sideboard. Marcus sighed as he sat down next to her on the bed.

"Not eager to remove my clothes, Marcus?" she smiled. "That's not like you."

"I'm sorry, princess," Marcus said heavily, refusing to meet her gaze. "I promised to protect you today and I failed."

Hermione reached up and cupped his face with her right hand. She tilted his face so he met her gaze.

"You have absolutely nothing to apologize for," she said sternly. "Some damage was inevitable, a necessary part of the ritual. If it had to be painful to work, then I'd rather take the pain. You were there for me today and that means a lot to me. I don't know that I would've made it through this without all of you."

"We don't like seeing you in pain," Adrian said softly, sitting on her other side. He gently helped her sit up, mindful of her left arm. He held a glass of water to her lips and Hermione drank down the whole glass. It felt wonderful on her scratchy throat.

"Not just don't like, hate," Draco added. "We hate seeing you in pain. It seems unfair to say it was unbearable for us given what you had to bear, but I'll say it anyway because I'm selfish - it was unbearable."

Theo quietly reentered the room.

"I, we, were helpless," Draco continued. "It was horrible. All I could do was see you back at the Manor with Bellatrix, suffering through her Crucio all over again."

"It was like reliving the war at times," Theo said, joining them. He used a spell to remove Marcus' shirt from Hermione and picked up one of the jars of bruise paste. Theo settled himself behind her on the bed and began gently rubbing the paste into areas on her back. "That's why I think you are
going to have an impromptu sleepover tonight. We need to be near you now."

"Logically, we know you'll be okay," Adrian said, picking up another jar of paste and attending to her left side. "I think we need to see it to be reassured though."

"I don't mind having all of you here. In fact, I enjoy it," Hermione said, wincing slightly as Adrian covered a particularly sensitive spot. "Of course, this bed isn't going to sleep five."

Draco chuckled and began applying paste to her legs.

"A simple extension charm will fix that," Draco smiled. "It will be nice and hedonistic to pile all five of us in bed together. Maybe we can get some good rumors started about our sexuality, well, some more rumors."

Draco grinned at Marcus and raised his eyebrows up and down.

"Ooooh, what rumors?" Hermione asked, her curiosity piqued. She looked back and forth between Marcus and Draco. Marcus rolled his eyes and caught the jar of paste Draco tossed him. "Come on, distract me from my discomfort and tell me."

"Haven't you heard?" Adrian asked. "The tabloids always talked about Marcus' sex life, his insatiable appetite for witches and wizards."

Hermione's eyes went wide and she looked over at Marcus, who was casually rubbing paste into her right side bruises. She imagined him with another wizard for a moment, those large rough hands gripping a wizard's short hair and two masculine mouths coming together in a hard kiss. Hermione sighed at the thought.

"Of course, if he did decide to have the best of both worlds, he wouldn't be the only one here that's done that, would he, Draco?" Theo teased from behind her.

Hermione's head snapped forward, albeit a little slowly because her body felt stiff all over. Draco just grinned and he continued to work.

"And yet the tabloids always paint me as quite the ladies man," Draco smiled devilishly. "Those blokes I'm seen with from time to time are labeled as my partners in crime as we hunt down witches to break their hearts."

"You didn't mention wizards when we talked the other night," Hermione accused. She was already picturing him with a lithe, beautiful wizard with high cheekbones.

"I said there were people I associated with, some on a regular basis," Draco corrected with an impish grin.

"Have all of you been with wizards?" Hermione asked, her voice a little breathy - but she blamed that on her sore throat. She had always found the image of two wizards kissing and touching each other incredibly hot. Regardless, the discussion was nicely distracting, which she imagined was exactly why Draco brought it up.

"Does that excite you?" Theo murmured in her ear. "Do you get hot thinking about two wizards together?"

Hermione felt a flicker of arousal, which would've been an inferno if she wasn't seriously injured.

"Yes," she whispered, closing her eyes.
"I've had a few male lovers over the years," Adrian shrugged casually, not stopping his ministrations. He seemed to be going over every bruise twice. "I admire beauty in all forms and never saw a reason to limit myself to one gender."

"I've been with wizards, but never one-on-one," Marcus finally spoke. "There were always witches around as well."

"And I've had both kinds of experiences," Draco said, "both one-on-one and group."

"It seems I'm the odd man out then, since I've never done anything with a bloke," Theo chuckled.

"Hey, Theo, over here," Adrian said, beckoning him closer. Hermione looked over, curious at what Adrian wanted to show him. When Theo got closer Adrian pulled him in by his shirt and gave him a full, long kiss on the lips that made Hermione whimper involuntarily. Adrian let go of his shirt, smiled, and pulled back from the stunned wizard. "There. Now you aren't left out."

Marcus and Draco chuckled and Theo just smiled and shook his head. Hermione thought she detected a little bit of a blush.

There was a knock at the door and Hermione looked around for something to cover herself. Marcus snagged a soft robe hanging by the bed while Draco got up to answer the door. Hermione recognized the robe as her own and realized someone must have unpacked her things. It was loosely draped over her shoulders and tied when Draco let in a pair of House-elves. They were levitating everything necessary for a large meal.

"I don't want to eat in bed," Hermione frowned. Breakfast in bed was one thing, but this dinner looked messy. "Marcus, I want to try to walk over there. Can you give me a hand?"

Marcus looked disapproving, but helped her slide off the bed. Hermione leaned on him with her good arm and made the few steps over to the sitting area by the other fire. There was nothing wrong with her legs, but they felt like jelly. It was as if she'd just run a marathon and her muscles were exhausted. She collapsed into a chair and decided that was enough walking for the evening.

The elves brought a heavy, full dinner of roast beef, spinach salad, scalloped potatoes, fried tomatoes, bread, and chocolate pudding. Adrian made her drink another glass of water while Draco filled her plate.

Hermione didn't talk much over dinner. She was so tired but oddly hungry as well, so she focused on eating. She enjoyed watching the others talk, laugh, and tease each other. These wizards had been friends since childhood and they were so easy and comfortable together. They told her stories about things they'd done as kids, games and silly things they used to do. They didn't ask her to talk, and she was grateful.

It was so homey and nice, sitting around with the four of them, a fire making it seem even cozier. She could hear the springtime storm outside the castle, winds howling and thunder clapping, which somehow made her feel safer with her wizards around the warm fire.

Hermione cleaned her plate and drank at least three more glasses of water. A trip to the loo, thanks to all the water, exhausted her. Coming back into the room, Hermione announced her intention to go to bed. She didn't have much left in her and her earlier pain potion was wearing off.

Marcus carried her back to bed, which Theo expanded to be ridiculously large. Draco brought her another dose of pain potion. Adrian found a book of poetry in her things and brought it over to the bed.

Hermione watched as all four of them began undressing. She barely knew where to look, there was so much to watch. Marcus had been shirtless since she'd borrowed it earlier, but now the trousers
were coming off. Marcus was muscled, masculine perfection. Adrian disrobed down to his pants, as did Draco. Neither was as defined as Marcus was, but both were very fit. She hadn't seen Theo undressed at all, so Hermione focused there for a moment. He was lean and trim, like a swimmer she thought.

Draco drew back the covers and helped Hermione get under the sheets before giving her the next dose of pain potion. Theo climbed in to her right and settled back against the pillows, leaning Hermione on his chest. Her broken ribs hurt less and breathing was easier when she was slightly inclined. Draco lay down to her left, careful not to touch her most damaged side. Marcus reclined next to Draco and Adrian climbed under the covers next to Theo.

"I thought you might want to read a little as you fall asleep," Adrian offered, nodding to the book he'd set on the nightstand.

"If you do the reading that would be lovely." Hermione sighed, closing her eyes and letting the pain potion work its way through her system.

Adrian opened the book and began reading aloud. His voice was soothing and even. Theo was warm and solid behind her. He very gently stroked her right arm. It was hypnotizing. Draco seemed restless and twitchy until he rested his hand on her thigh, which was not damaged. Hermione opened her eyes to look at Marcus because he was the only one she couldn't feel or hear. He was staring at her, lying very comfortably. Hermione gave him a smile and closed her eyes again. She let Adrian's voice wash over her and drifted off to sleep.

OoOoO

Hermione arched her back and stretched. She felt warm and as if she'd slept for a decade. The warmth was replaced by a cool breeze on her chest. She blinked and looked down to see Draco folding down the sheet and looking at her bare breasts. He smirked at her and ran his hand over her left breast, giving the barest of squeezes.

"No more bruises," Draco smiled.

"How do you feel?" Theo asked from her right side. He leaned in and rubbed his face on her right breast.

"So much better," Hermione smiled. She stretched her limbs out experimentally and felt some residual soreness in her left arm. "The left arm is still finishing healing, but it's only a little sore."

"Do you need another dose of pain potion?" Draco asked, concerned.

"No, no," Hermione assured him, running her left hand through his blond hair. "It just aches."

"Too much for this?" Theo asked with a mischievous look before swirling his tongue around her bare nipple.

Hermione groaned and arched her back, pressing herself into Theo's mouth. She heard a chuckle and looked over to see Marcus grinning at her from behind Draco. For his part, Draco increased the pressure with his hand and pinched her nipple. Hermione gasped at the sensation and sight of having two wizards lavishing attention on her breasts.

All of a sudden, Theo was gone. Hermione looked over to see him disappearing beneath the covers. It was amazing how deftly he positioned himself between her legs. Even more amazing was how skilled his tongue was as Theo dragged it up her center.
"Oh, yes," Hermione hissed, throwing her head back.

"Feel good, kitten?" Adrian asked, almost immediately taking the spot on her right side that Theo vacated.

"So good," she moaned. Theo added his fingers and was teasing her opening as he licked.

Adrian palmed her right breast and Draco lowered his head to suck on the left. Adrian's mouth found hers while his hand still caressed her. His kiss was sweet and soft, but filled with passion and promise. He broke the kiss to plant wet kisses along the length of her neck.

"Look how they adore you, princess," Marcus said, his morning voice husky with sleep and lust. "You want them too, don't you?"

"I want all of you, so much," she whimpered. Hermione was flooded with sensation.

"And we want you," Marcus said, his voice more labored. Hermione looked over to see him stroking himself. She watched, enraptured as he ran his large hand up and down his massive cock. With that visual, Hermione really was on sensory overload.

Hermione was panting now and trying to press her hips into Theo, to get more friction and pressure. He increased the speed with his fingers pumping in and out of her center, and then he latched onto her clit. She ran her right hand down Adrian's beautiful bare chest and dug her nails into Draco's back with the other. An echo of pain went through her left arm as she gripped, but she didn't care. She was so close, too close. She was just reaching her peak when she remembered that her magic would react, but it was entirely too late to turn back. A half second later, Hermione's muscles went taut and her orgasm crashed into her.

She threw her head back and screamed. It felt so intense, so powerful. Hermione saw the now familiar light radiate from her, but it looked slightly different. Instead of just a bright white light, there was a kind of sparkle in it as well. She watched the now twinkling light disappear into the walls and waited to see if Theo's ancestral home would be reduced the rubble. Nothing happened.

Well, one thing that happened was that all four wizards had their climax ripped from them as the magic went through them. They were all recovering from that post orgasm haze. Hermione was covered in thick, sticky fluid on both sides from Adrian and Draco.

"Everyone all right?" Hermione managed to ask.

"Spectacular," Draco grinned.

"Perfect," Adrian smiled dreamily.

"You taste wonderful," Theo said, hauling himself up to rest his head on her abdomen. "That was amazing."

"You okay, princess?" Marcus asked. "It wasn't too much stress on your body, was it?"

"I feel great," Hermione reported as they all looked to her. "I'm just waiting to figure out what I broke this time. I saw the discharge, but it just passed through the walls."

"No harm done then," Draco concluded. He picked up her left hand and gently rubbed her palm, wrist, and forearm.

All of them lay, limp and relaxed for almost half an hour. A soft knock on the door interrupted
their blissful laziness. Adrian was closest, so he dragged himself out of bed and found his trousers. Theo extricated himself from between her legs and sat up next to her. Hermione pulled the sheet up to cover herself.

Two very awed looking House-elves waited at the door. They didn't speak, but just stared at Hermione. It was strange.

"Yes?" Adrian finally asked them.

"Oh, we are being sorry, sir," one of the elves finally said. "There is being the Master Snape here with the Healer for to see the Sorceress."

The elves just remained, staring at Hermione after they delivered their message.

"Tell them she will be down shortly," Theo instructed. "Is that all?"

"We is wanting to be seeing and thanking the most wonderful, giving and generous Sorceress," the other elf finally spoke.

"Thank me?" Hermione asked, bewildered. "Thank me for what?"

"For your gift, your blessing," the elf beamed. "Thirty minutes past, you were giving our household a wonderful gift. Your magic was making all creatures here feel happy and was blessing our lands. All trees and flowers now blooming, some bearing fruit too even this early in season. Sorceress gives great gift and now we have harvest to last for spring, summer, and fall!"

Hermione's mouth dropped open. The elves bowed and finally left.

"I caused all the flowers to bloom? That's mad!"

"I wonder what that 'happy feeling' was for them," Draco mused.

"I better check on Dad," Theo said. "He's not used to any kind of happy feeling."

Hermione blushed deeply. She knew what kind of happiness she gave the four wizards in her bed. She would be eternally mortified if she compelled the same reaction from Theo's unsuspecting father.

Theo found his trousers and gave her a kiss, telling her he'd see her downstairs. The others began dressing as well. The elves must have laundered everything while they slept, because it was in neat piles close to where they'd been dropped. Hermione cast around the room, looking for a likely place for her luggage. It must be around somewhere since her robe had been next to the bed.

"I'm sure the castle elves unpacked for you," Draco said, buttoning his shirt.

Adrian checked the bureau and Marcus opened the wardrobe. All her things were neatly laid out and hung up. Hermione found a pair of comfortable dark purple yoga leggings and an old t-shirt. She hoped no one minded that she wasn't going to dress up. Although the pain really was mostly gone, Hermione wanted to be comfortable.

"Come on, princess," Marcus smiled. "Let's get you checked out."

Draco took her hand and Marcus rested his hand on the small of her back. Adrian led them downstairs where Severus and Healer Adams waited in the front hall.

"There's a sitting room over here we can probably use," Adrian pointed. They all followed him
inside. Hermione sat while Healer Adams ran diagnostic spells. She didn't get a chance to say much because Adrian, Draco, and Marcus narrated her entire evening for the two other wizards. They recounted how much she drank, ate, and slept. They described how much bruise paste they used and reported how much pain potion she'd taken. Theo slipped in at the end of the 'report' and added his two bits as well.

"Your broken bones are almost entirely healed," Healer Adams reported, "but your vital signs aren't back to normal. The elemental magic is settling into your body, but it's still fluctuating more than I'd like. You really need to rest. It would be best if you stayed here the rest of the day and tomorrow as well. Don't do anything strenuous or try to use your magic in any way yet."

"I did accidentally use some magic this morning not too long ago," Hermione blushed. "It wasn't intentional, but apparently, I put all the plants on the grounds into full bloom and fruit - even though the season is still a while away. Do you think that could be what's affecting my vitals and magic?"

"Most likely," Healer Adams frowned. "If you know what caused your unintentional magic, don't do it again. You must relax the remainder of the day and tomorrow as well. The ritual was violent and jarring, both physically and magically. You need to let your body calm down. I'm putting you on house arrest and trust your wizards here to make sure you stick to it. Do not let her lift a finger, understand that, gentlemen?"

All four wizards nodded and all looked abashed. Hermione groaned. She just knew they would be over-protective and not allow her to do anything. They probably also regretted their morning romp and would chastise themselves, even though none of them could’ve possibly known she was too unstable for such activities.

“So keep your hands to yourselves, gentlemen,” Severus sneered at his four former Slytherins. They all looked like teenagers again; being lectured by their head of house, and no one needed that. “Or perhaps she would be safer back at Spinner’s End.”

“Oh hush, Severus,” Hermione scolded. “I didn’t even think about the accidental magical discharge until it was too late. Now that we know, we won’t let it occur again. Let’s move on. I’m surprised my magic could do such a dramatic thing to the plant life around the castle.”

“Elemental magic is a powerful natural force,” Healer Adams reported. “I would like to see the results of this magic and possibly take some samples for study. The accelerated, instantaneous maturation may have altered the flower or fruit in some way.”

“The House-elves tend the grounds and would know exactly what was affected,” Theo told him. “One of them can easily guide you.”

Theo summoned an elf and Healer Adams excused himself, reminding Hermione that he was available whenever needed.

“Would you like to stay for lunch, Snape?” Theo asked the dour looking wizard. He nodded curtly.

Hermione went to Severus and took his arm as they followed Theo to the dining room.

“Don’t be so sour, Severus,” she smiled. “The ritual went well and I feel fine.”

“It was not a pleasant thing to watch yesterday,” Severus finally stated.

“Yes, I’ve been informed that it was quite traumatic for those watching,” Hermione said, squeezing his arm. “But, all’s well that ends well. Now we are one ritual through and there are
only two to go. Research would lead us to believe the next one is not so physically violent, since it is mind focused.”

“That reminds me, later this week when you are fully recovered I want to practice your Occlumency,” Severus told her. “Mental focus, control, and discipline will be necessary in the next ritual.”

Hermione nodded. That was a smart idea. She pulled Theo aside before they went into the dining room.

“I have to know,” Hermione grimaced. “Did you ask your father about the ‘happy feeling’ the elves mentioned? Was it…”

“Orgasmic?” Theo grinned. “No. Dad said he was struck by a feeling of euphoria, just a simple, pure happiness. It lasted for several moments and then dissipated slowly until he felt himself again. He quite liked it actually.”

Hermione was relieved. She would’ve never been able to face the elder Nott if it had been a sexual release.

Lunch was a casual, buffet, although Hermione was not allowed to get up and get anything for herself. There were delightful sandwiches, different kinds of salads, chips, and fruit. Hermione sat between Theo’s dad and Severus. Mr. Nott told her to call him Ted and she insisted he call her Hermione. She also apologized for her magical outburst, since it affected both him and his grounds.

"Oh, no apologies required," Ted said. "It's quite fascinating. I have little interest and no skill for Herbology, but I maintain correspondence with several Masters and intellectuals in the wizarding world. I've already owled a Herbology expert I know detailing the phenomenon. As for the more personal affects, that was also... fascinating. Do you know what causes those bursts of magic?"

Hermione nodded, blushed deeply, and pretended to find her plate fascinating.

"It's... well, it's caused by..." Theo tried to explain.

"It happens whenever she has an orgasm," Severus finally said bluntly. "It seems they are embarrassed to have engaged in sexual activity while on your home."

Hermione swatted Severus on the arm and rolled her eyes. Of course, he wasn't wrong, but his bluntness was sometimes jarring.

"Well, it's very interesting," Ted said thoughtfully. "If you do it more today will it create the same affect? The flowers are already in bloom, so they can't do it again. I wonder if anything different will happen. Why don't you go try after lunch and we can see what will happen?"

"Dad!" Theo scolded, his face turning a bit red. Ted looked unfazed and Hermione laughed. Theo's father really was a strange wizard. Hermione wondered if his spending so much time alone was a cause or an effect.

"While I appreciate your scholastic interest," Hermione chuckled, "Healer Adams forbade any additional magic use until my system fully recovers from yesterday's ritual."

"Well, maybe later in the week then." Ted shrugged.

Hermione asked Ted to talk about his wards and his academic interests. He was extremely
knowledgeable and widely read. He'd read every article Hermione had published in journals, but then he'd read almost every journal. Ted was fascinating to talk to and Hermione looked forward to looking at his ward research later.

The elves brought out several trays of sweets, biscuits and little tarts. They were still beaming at Hermione. Some of them waited near her chair to be at her beck and call.

Hermione was enjoying a never-ending cup of tea, because the elves would pour more before she could see the bottom of the cup. As they were nibbling on biscuits, Blaise arrived. He carried a bag and smiled at the group.

"Good afternoon all," Blaise grinned. "I've come to help Hermione prep for her press conference over at the Ministry in a half hour. I can see from your outfit that you could use some assistance."

"I'd forgotten about the press conference," Hermione admitted, looking down at her comfortable yoga bottoms and t-shirt.

"I've been by the Ministry. Some reporters have been waiting for hours to make sure they get a good seat," Blaise reported. "The Minister will introduce you, and then you can make a statement and choose to answer questions if you like. I brought you some clothing choices, but we can pick something from your own wardrobe if you prefer."

"Let's go take a look at what you've brought," Hermione sighed. She very much appreciated everything Blaise was doing, but she mostly wanted to take a nap.

Hermione walked with Blaise back up to her room. Adrian and Draco followed behind.

"The look I was thinking of going for was strong, pure and proper, but also young and modern," Blaise said, looping Hermione's hand through his arm.

In the room, Blaise looked through her closet and Hermione surveyed the three dresses he brought. Adrian and Draco both just lounged on the bed and watched. Hermione knew they were watching her to make sure that she didn’t exert herself.

"I like this cream colored, linen dress," Hermione said, picking up one that Blaise brought. The fit was slightly off, but Blaise seemed to know countless tailoring charms. He brought in the waist slightly and raised the hem to just below her knee. The dress was loose and light, which Hermione appreciated. Blaise chose a pair of tan leather Mary Jane heels and her gold wire cuff bracelet. Hermione applied a very scant amount of makeup and was ready to go.

"The Minister connected the Floo in his office to Nott Castle temporarily," Blaise reported, so we can go straight there. Adrian, Draco, Marcus, and Theo were all ready and clearly set on going with her, as was Severus.

"Before we go," Adrian said, "we got you a gift."

"A gift?" Hermione was surprised. "For what?"

"We got it to give you after the first ritual," Draco reported.

"Rather than overwhelm you with gifts from each of us, we thought you might be more comfortable with one thing from the four of us," Marcus smirked. Hermione nodded. She knew they were all wealthy wizards, but Hermione didn’t care too much for big displays of wealth.

"That was my idea," Theo smiled, handing her a small square velvet box.
Hermione opened the jewelry box. Inside was a beautiful necklace. A smooth oval rose quartz about the size of a large grape hung on a lovely gold chain.

“It’s gorgeous,” she breathed.

“We wanted to get you something meaningful,” Adrian said, lifting the necklace out of the box. He draped it around her neck and fastened the clasp.

“Rose quartz had meaning for us,” Marcus said. Hermione knew, of course, that this particular mineral represented unconditional love, both romantic and platonic. Crushed rose quartz was a necessary ingredient in any love potion. It also had exceptional healing properties and was used in healing potions, especially those for heart ailments.

“It holds our feelings for you,” Theo added.

“Literally,” Draco said. “We’ve charmed it to be linked to us. If you need any of us, you can use this to call us.”

“Just hold it and concentrate on one of us, or all of us, and we’ll be able to Apparate to you, wherever you are – or as close to you as possible,” Theo informed.

“Wow,” Hermione said, a little overwhelmed by the gift. “That means so much to me.” She gave them each a kiss thank you and they went to the Ministry.

The press conference would’ve been entirely too much if Hermione hadn’t already had one before. There were so many more people there this time. It looked like it wasn’t just reporters, but regular people as well. Kings had been waiting for them in his office and they all walked down to the main hall. A podium was set up on a high platform. Kings led Hermione up onto the platform and her four wizards accompanied her along with Severus and Blaise. Kings cast a Sonorous charm and addressed the crowd.

"I am pleased to announce that the first of three rituals for the Sorceress Potentiate was completed yesterday evening. If you haven't heard, let me be the first to tell you that Miss Granger did survive the ordeal - which should be obvious since she is standing right behind me. I for one could not be more pleased. Not only is a Sorceress a gift to any community, but Miss Granger is also a personal friend and wartime comrade. She will now make a statement."

Theo was closest to her so he cast the Sonorous charm for her. Hermione patted Kings on the shoulder as they traded places at the podium. Hermione squinted for a moment against the lights of flashbulbs going off.

"Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. Thank you all for your interest. As the Minister said, the first of three rituals has been completed. It was held at five o'clock yesterday on Hogwarts grounds. Examinations by Healers, and the fact that I'm not dead, indicate that the elemental magic has successfully bound with my physical body. I will complete the second ritual next Saturday and the third ritual will be held the Saturday after that, on Midsummer. I will now take three questions as before."

Hands shot into the air. Hermione sighed internally. She thought, again, how difficult it must be for Harry, whose celebrity was much longer standing and practically part of wizarding culture for decades. She never did understand why people sought fame.

Hermione chose a studious looking witch wearing muted colors.

"Several distinguished Masters have recently traveled to London and rumor indicates they
participated in the ritual. Is there any substance to those rumors?"

"Traditionally, one ritual leader participates with the Potentiate, so there are usually two people in the ritual circle. Because I was so delayed in completing this ritual, my elemental magic is more out of control, and our research led us to believe two ritual leaders would be helpful. Those two people were Hogwarts Headmistress Minerva McGonagall and Lucius Malfoy, who both did a wonderful job. This ritual required a great deal of power, control, and stamina. As to Masters who have travelled here, I have been fortunate to have the assistance and support from many friends. I appreciate that everyone respected my privacy for this first ritual. There were about twenty-five people and two centaurs present at the ritual. Some were there because of their expertise, but most were there for moral support. If anyone wishes to have a list of names of those present, I have no problem releasing that information. I will leave it to the discretion of the Ministry."

When Hermione stopped talking, hands immediately rose in the air. People waved and tried to get her attention. She called on a bespectacled wizard.

"What did the ritual feel like and was any recovery time necessary?"

Hermione thought for a moment and decided to be entirely honest. There was no point in sugar coating her experience. She took a breath and responded.

"It felt like all the blood in my veins turned to fire. The pressure of the magic made it feel like I was being crushed, which made it hard to breathe. My muscles felt like they were used beyond their capacity and I could no longer direct my limbs. I dislocated my left shoulder, shattered this arm, and broke several ribs. I passed out from pain at the end of the ritual, so I don't really know what happened after that. I've been recovering well, with help from these wizards behind me. I am still recovering and have been ordered by the Healer to refrain from using any magic or doing anything stressful. I am supposed to be home resting now, but I promised to hold a press conference today. I know people are concerned and interested, so I didn't want to break my promise."

Hermione picked a very young looking witch to ask the last question.

"You mentioned before that you were not choosing Ancillary candidates until it was closer to the third ritual. Have you made any decisions as to who those wizards will be?"

"I have a small group of wizards that I would like to stand as Ancillary candidates." Hermione sighed sadly. "I have been advised recently, however, that I must make an ideal match if I want to survive - not just a good-enough match. In the third ritual, my magic will chose my Ancillary from amongst those present. In order to increase the chances of achieving an ideal match, I am inviting any wizard not already bound to another to attend the third ritual."

The crowd burst into loud, raucous chatter in response to her last statement. Hermione knew she'd opened the flood gates to any wizard who wanted to be her Ancillary, but that was necessary - necessary, but too sad to think about. Hermione felt entirely depressed at the thought of losing any of her four wizards. She felt a hand on each shoulder. Hermione turned to see all four of her wizards right behind her, tears brimming in her eyes.

"I'd like to go rest now," Hermione said softly. She knew they would hear her. Draco wrapped his arm around her waist and Theo took her hand. Marcus walked ahead of her, clearing a path, and Adrian was behind, his hand on her back. They quickly found themselves back in Kingsley's office, ready to Floo away. She said goodbye to Kings, Blaise, and Severus. The last two promised to visit her soon.
Hermione spent most of the afternoon napping. Her wizards had been planning an impromptu two-on-two Quidditch game when she fell asleep. When she woke that evening though, they were all there. Marcus was snoring very softly next to her and Draco was doing the same on the other side. Theo was in the sitting area reading a book. Adrian was at the little table in the room writing something. Hermione smiled. She may not get to keep them, but she had them now and for the next two weeks. That was something.

Hermione tried not to wake the sleeping two as she climbed out of bed, but Draco had a strong grip on her right arm and Marcus was the lightest sleeper of all time. They had a nice quiet dinner with Theo's dad and then all retired to the Nott library, which Hermione fell in love with.

Ted showed her his ward research, which was extensive and fascinating. Being no slouch setting and dismantling wards herself, Hermione was drawn into Ted's theories. He had schematic drawings and even some interesting experiments in progress. He'd successfully managed to create a small ward that kept out sunlight entirely and another that wouldn't allow the flow of oxygen. Both were so complex and tightly knit that they were limited to about a meter in height and width. Hermione suggested a few Arithmancy equations to reduce speculation on some of his works in progress, which made Ted very excited. He and Theo didn't look much alike, but they both lit up when they were discussing and debating.

While Hermione was talking with Ted, the other four played a card game. They almost unobtrusively made sure she was drinking plenty of liquids and not becoming too over excited. Eventually, Adrian pointed out that it was midnight and she ought to rest. Like the night before, they all piled into one bed, but this time Adrian and Marcus were closest to her. Hermione closed her eyes and reminded herself to enjoy them while she could, because she had no idea how long she would be allowed to keep them.

Chapter End Notes

Next - Time with Theo and a party!
Monday morning Hermione woke feeling entirely herself, better than she had in months in fact. The sore muscles, morning headaches, and exhaustion no matter how much she slept were all gone. That first ritual really did fix all the physical problems her magic was causing.

None of the four wizards were awake and Hermione did her best to sneak out of bed for the loo. Marcus stirred, she froze, but when he went back to sleep, she darted towards the door.

Hermione realized it was obscenely early, but she had more than enough sleep since the ritual. It felt like that was all she'd really done. She took a nice shower then dressed in comfortable blue jeans and an old t-shirt. The shirt had been a gift from Harry on her first birthday after the war. She was back at school and he'd owled it to Hogwarts, writing in the card that he was compelled to buy it for her when he saw it in a Muggle shop. It was teal and had a Shakespeare quote from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* across the front. It read 'Though she be but little, she is fierce.' Hermione had appreciated it then and still did. She thought magical folk especially would've learned not to judge a person based on their physical appearance, since magical power was in no way bound to your size or looks; but she still found herself being diminished or condescended to at times because of her small stature. She skipped jewelry and makeup, except for the necklace she'd received yesterday from her wizards.

Hermione peeked out the closed, heavy curtains in her room for the first time. Her mouth dropped and she threw the drapes open, bathing the room in bright morning light and causing some grumbles from the bed. He couldn't bring herself to care. Almost the whole wall was made up of huge windows that looked straight down the cliff side and over the ocean. The sky was a bright blue, unblemished by clouds, and the ocean a deep, churning dark blue green. Waves crashed against the cliffs and the spray tossed in the air created rainbows. Hermione didn't know how the castle didn't fall off the cliff, perched as it was on the very brink. Of course it was probably magic that kept it from sliding into the ocean.

"It's early," she heard Draco protest.

"Have you seen this view?" Hermione was in awe. "This is gorgeous!"

"It'll still be gorgeous in an hour, kitten," Adrian yawned.

Marcus didn't bother protesting, but stumbled out of bed toward the loo. Theo was sitting up and rubbing sleep from his eyes.

"Theo has the same view in his room, princess," Marcus said sleepily. "It's right next door. Go enjoy it in there and let these two lazy blokes sleep."

Marcus disappeared and Hermione heard the shower turn on.
"Come on, Mi," Theo smiled. "You can look out my windows while I get dressed."

Hermione reluctantly closed the curtains, sorry to shut out such a sight, and followed Theo out. His bedroom was interesting and fit him perfectly. His curtains were already open, so she could easily see. He had a large desk area and piles of books. His bed was substantial and neatly made since he hadn't slept in it. Theo went to take a quick shower while Hermione looked around. She read the book titles on his shelves and smiled at his mementos. He had a Slytherin house scarf hung on the wall next to a Quidditch poster of England's national team from five years ago. There were some pictures from their school days, a young, skinny Theo waving next to young versions of Draco and Blaise. There were a few pictures of what must've been baby and toddler Theo with his mother. Hermione could instantly see where Theo got his eyes and facial features. She looked like a soft, pleasant witch. She had long brown hair and wore light colored, flowing clothes. It was as if she was airy lightness, and her dying removed it all from the heavy, dark castle.

"She was lovely, wasn't she?" Theo asked from behind her, startling her slightly.

"She was," Hermione agreed.

"Dad loved her so much; he's never recovered from the loss."

"I imagine that every death, every loss in our lives creates a rip in us," Hermione said, still watching Theo's mother smile and lift her toddler son up into her lap. "Generally, the rip isn’t big enough to kill us and it mends in time, which lets us keep living our lives. It closes eventually, but you can always see the tear when you look for it. Sometimes the loss is so great, the rip is too large to mend on its own, and a person has to walk around with this gaping hole going straight to their insides. That makes it hard to go on."

Hermione turned to Theo and put her arms around his waist. His brown hair was a little shaggy and damp from his shower.

"I'm sorry your father was so damaged," she continued. "That must've been hard for you."

"This was a dark, lonely place a lot of the time when I was growing up," Theo admitted. "Hogwarts was so busy and full of energy that it was almost too much for me. After school, I got my own flat, but I still come back here a lot. I don't like to leave Dad alone for too long. I have to admit, my feelings for you make it easier to understand a little of what he must've gone through."

Hermione pressed her check against his chest and tightened her grip. Losing any of these four wizards just might rip her apart and she didn't want to think about that.

Theo walked Hermione down to breakfast, where Marcus was already sitting with Ted. Theo made her a plate from the sideboard while Marcus poured her a cup of tea. Ted handed her the Daily Prophet and went back to his copy of what looked like a German paper. All this was done in silence and Hermione smiled. The food was lovely and Marcus knew exactly how she liked her tea, but Hermione was slightly put off by seeing herself on the cover of the paper.

The article wasn't horrible. It did list everyone who was at the ritual and speculated wildly as to why they were there. It also focused a great deal on the Ancillary part. Guesses were made about the identities of her chosen group. Draco and Adrian were clearly the writer’s preferred candidates, as she described their impressive attributes at length. The article did encourage any unattached wizard to attend the third ritual, so that he may find himself chosen and privy to all that elemental power.

"They're talking about you in Berlin's Die Magie Taglich and the St. Petersburg Gazeta," Ted
informed her casually as he read. "They are encouraging male citizens to attend the third ritual so that you may move to their countries, at least part time, and they could have a Sorceress. I’d wager it's similar in more papers, but I only greet weekend editions of the papers from Paris, New York, Tokyo, Prague, and Sidney."

"I'm so glad to be a factor in international news and politics," Hermione said dryly as she sipped her tea.

"I've got a few meetings today, princess, so I have to go into work," Marcus sighed.

"That's fine, Marcus," Hermione said honestly. "You all have things to do. While I love having everyone around, it isn't reasonable to expect you to be by my side constantly. I expect today will be a quiet, uneventful day."

Hermione was right; it was a delightfully quiet day. Like Marcus, Adrian had to attend to a few things in his office. Once he finally woke up, Draco received an owl from his father, requesting that he go to Brussels in Lucius’ place that day. Their company had an important meeting there and Lucius’ healer hadn’t cleared him for long-distance travel. The ritual had depleted almost all of Lucius’ magical energy and he wasn't quite back up to snuff yet. Theo did have some reports to look at, because his lab at Malfoy Industries was still running without him. His research assistants had specific things they were supposed to have done and written up the previous week.

After breakfast, Hermione and the Notts retired to the library. She went over their ritual research with Ted while Theo worked. Ted was good at analyzing data, thinking critically, and making new suggestions. They already had extensive information about the second and third rituals. Even though they focused on the first ritual when researching, they had collected everything. It couldn't be helped, since the rituals were so inter-related. Theo set up the large white board for Hermione, then she and Ted charted out the second ritual. It was an interesting and productive morning.

Hermione looked out the windows at the ocean and lamented being stuck inside. Theo asked the elves to pack a picnic lunch, only if Hermione promised to take it easy outside. The elves were thrilled beyond expression to do anything for Hermione. Theo carried lunch while they wandered through the gardens. It was amazing to see all the flowers in bloom and some of the trees heavy with fruit, as if it were at the height of the summer. The air wasn't very hot, but the sun was shining. Theo said they would have to wait to climb down to the beach another day because the path was much too steep. They ate their lunch on the windy top of the cliff, looking down on the ocean. It was gorgeous.

After they finished their sandwiches and fruit, Theo pulled her into his arms and they sat together quietly talking and relaxing. Theo told her about the castle’s history and what it was like growing up in this strange place.

“I truly and honestly don’t mind sharing you with Adrian, Draco, and Marcus,” Theo said, rubbing his cheek against the top of her head. “They make you happy and you make them happy, which is important to me. I’ve got to say though; it’s great to have you to myself for a little while.”

“I agree,” Hermione chuckled. “I love having you all around, but I think it’s important to spend time apart and just one-on-one.”

“The others have all taken you out on a date, but I haven’t,” Theo observed.

“I don’t need a date to know how much you care and how much you mean to me, Theo,” she told him.
“That’s good,” Theo smiled, squeezing her tighter, “because I’d hate for you to think that you weren’t as important to me as you are to the others. I can’t think of anything I want more than to be bound to you.”

“I can’t imagine losing any of you,” Hermione said honestly. “I don’t know what I’m going to do without you, Theo. I really, really don’t want it to come to that. Adrian keeps saying that everything will work out the way it is supposed to and to have faith, but that’s hard.”

“Well, at least we have now and almost two weeks,” Theo said before burying his face in the crook of her neck.

“That’s what I keep reminding myself,” Hermione smiled.

They walked back to the castle slowly, enjoying the beautiful day. When they walked around the front of the castle, they saw Percy waiting on the outside of the wards. It turned out that he had already done some research into real estate for Hermione and brought it for her to look at while she was resting.

Percy had put together an amazing amount of information in what Hermione considered a short time, especially considering all the work he’d done for the ritual Saturday. She hoped he wasn't working himself sick and told him so.

"I can't take too much credit for all this,” Percy smiled. "I delegated. I sent out word to about a dozen estate agents letting them know that 'the Sorceress' wished to purchase a home. I gave some basic specifications, but they sent me hundreds of different listings. Many of them were nowhere near what you wanted. There were city penthouses and townhouses, which aren't close to the cozy country cottage you wanted, so I took those out. I also removed any property that didn't have at least five possible bedrooms. I made a separate file for empty pieces of land, thinking that you could build your own cottage if there was nothing acceptable on the market. There are some very nice properties though, so I doubt that would be necessary."

Each property had a folder with photos, statistical information, and history. Excited, Hermione took the files and began looking through them with Theo and sorting them into yes, no, and maybe piles. Theo was clearly steering her toward the large houses that were more country manor than cottage.

"Unless you want to move again in five years, you have to think of practical issues for the future,” Theo explained. "You and two Ancillaries will be three bedrooms. If you have two children with each wizard, that's seven bedrooms total. If you want a room or two for out of town guests, you need to be looking at the eight to ten bedroom houses. Then there are the other rooms. You'll need a basement big enough for storage and a potions lab. You know you want a substantial library and you need a study for your work. Then there are your future partners to think of. If they are anything like you, they'll want their own work space. Ades, Draco and I would all want a home office. Marcus wouldn't, but he'd want a lot of land. All of that means that you need a big house."

"Well, I still want one that feels cozy," Hermione countered. Theo smiled and gave her a quick kiss.

"I don't want to presume too much, but I flagged any homes that were slightly isolated geographically and any near water," Percy spoke up. "The green stickers mean lots of open land around the house and the blue means water on the property. From what we've researched, prior Sorcerers and Sorceresses have wanted to be close to the four natural elements. Open air, lots of land, and water of some kind were found in the places they preferred. I was thinking you may feel more comfortable around those things."
"That's good thinking, Percy. Thanks." Hermione smiled. She liked to be able to retreat home to peace and quiet. Traveling was so easy, or had been for her before her magic was off. She didn't need to live near Diagon Alley or Muggle London to be able to frequent the shops and cafes everyday if she wanted; they were only an Apparition away.

Hermione could picture an old stone house surrounded by gardens. It would nice to have a large pond to swim in too. It was hard to imagine what life would be like after all the rituals were complete. Not knowing the identities of her future life partners would make it hard to anticipate their needs. Hermione decided to look for a place that she loved that would have the kind of space Theo was talking about. It would be larger than the little thatched roof cottage she’d pictured; but when she’d imagined that, she pictured herself living alone. She briefly considered that her Ancillaries might have an opinion about where they lived, but then she had a willful and stubborn thought. If she didn’t have a choice about her mates, then she was going to bloody well choose her own home. They would just have to move in with her and live with whatever choice she made. Hermione didn’t feel like she had any control over her life at the moment, so she was going to take control over this.

Hermione found a half dozen extremely promising properties. All were out in the countryside and had some kind of water on the property. They averaged about ten bedrooms and all had loads of space. Some of them had additional buildings on the property besides the main house. Hermione wanted to go and see them all the next day if possible, so Percy started sending owls to estate agents to arrange tours.

“You seem adamant to do this as soon as possible,” Theo observed, taking her hand.

“I want to do something to settle myself,” Hermione explained. “I feel so adrift. I need to drop anchor somewhere. I love your house, so I don't want you to think I don't want to be here. Spinner's End is very comfortable, even with the dodgy plumbing. I know I could stay at Grimmauld Place, Flint Lodge, Pucey Hall, or Malfoy Manor if I wanted. And those are all lovely homes with wonderful people, but I need my own place. I need to not be a guest. With everything happening around me that I can't control, I need something that I'm in charge of."

"Understood," Theo nodded, rubbing her hand on his cheek.

OoOoOoO

Draco could not get out of Brussels soon enough. He went there on business often enough and it was a charming place, but Draco wanted to get back to his witch.

"Don't you want to take me out to dinner?" Monique purred. Draco grinned at the flirtatious witch, but never stopped packing his files back into his bag. She was an employee at the company Malfoy Industries collaborated with for this endeavor. Draco had spent several pleasant evenings in her company when he happened to be in town. He searched himself for a moment and found no inkling of desire for the very busty witch. She was lovely and Draco knew first hand that she was a satisfactory partner, but there was not even a wisp of sexual attraction left. She may as well have been eighty years old or a family member.

"Thank you, but no," Draco smiled. He was pleased with himself. Given his very active history and not really having stayed with any one person for long, he'd wondered at times if he was cut out for a committed relationship. He knew he wouldn't be having any kind of sex that night and would be sharing his witch with three other wizards, but Draco still couldn't muster any wanting, needing feelings for anyone but Hermione Granger.

"But it's so much fun when you stay the night before returning to England," Monique pouted,
batting her eyelashes.

"I'm afraid my staying days are over," Draco said, still smiling. He shrunk his case and put it in his pocket. "Well, I hope they're over. There's a witch I want to be with, and if it works out then she'll be my only witch."

"Aw, that is so sweet," Monique gushed. "I just love love, and love stories! What are you going to do to win this witch, to make her your one and only?"

"Well, unfortunately, there's not too much I can do," Draco sighed. "I know that she likes me, cares for me, but it's not up to her. She's a Sorceress Potentiate."

Monique's eyes went wide.

"I read about her in the paper! Well, best of luck to you. I hope your love story is the happy ending kind."

"Thanks," Draco said soberly. He was desperately hoping for a happy ending himself. Rather than thinking about such a distressing thing, Draco said goodbye to Monique and rushed to catch his international Portkey in the building lobby, so he could spend as much time with Hermione as possible.

Draco stopped by the Manor to report to his father about the meeting, which had gone smoothly. He also wanted to get a change of clothes, because he fully intended on staying with or near Hermione that evening. Draco went to find his father and was surprised to find a little party in the drawing room. His parents seemed to have invited the Flints, Arabella Pucey, Nott Sr., Severus, Kobayashi, and Bouchard over for dinner. Theo's dad rarely went out, so his presence was the most surprising.

"You can update me tomorrow, Draco," Lucius told him. "I understand at least a dozen young people are descending upon Ted's house. I would hate for you to miss out on whatever is happening over there."

"Well, that doesn't sound like Hermione is resting," Draco observed, his brow raised.

"That's what Marcus said," Nott observed. "I believe her exact words were, 'if you insist on treating me like a fragile piece of glass, I'll cut you'. But I could be mistaken."

"No, that sounds about right," Draco chuckled. "Have a nice evening."

Draco Flooed directly over to Nott's place, glad to be one of the few with Floo privileges. It was just so much faster than Apparating over to the heavily warded castle, since no one but Theo and his father could Apparate within the wards.

Draco followed the sound of talking and laughing to a large sitting room. He stood in the doorway and surveyed the scene, smiling. His gaze sought out Hermione first and he found her backed into a wall by Adrian. He was standing so close to her that Draco couldn't see any light between them. Ades was whispering something in her ear as he kissed and nibbled on her neck. Whatever he was saying, it had Hermione blushing in a delightful way. Marcus and Theo were setting up tables while Harry and George Weasley put chairs around them. Percy Weasley was unpacking playing cards and poker chips from a case. Loony Lovegood and Master Turan were talking very seriously to a pair of House-elves.

"Between the four of you, I'm surprised Hermione has any energy left at all." Draco heard Pansy's dry tone next to him. He turned to his old friend and smiled.
"We try," Draco replied, putting his arm around her shoulders.

"She's lucky to have you," Pansy said, elbowing him in the ribs. "And you lot are lucky to have her."

"I hope we will be lucky on Midsummer," Draco sighed. "But who is going to be left out, Pans? What if two of us are picked? What happens to the other two?"

"You will make it through, no matter what happens," Pansy said confidently. "You are strong. You fought in a war when you were just a kid for Merlin's sake."

"So what's all this then?" Draco asked, changing the subject. He appreciated Pansy's faith in him, but had already told himself that he wasn't going to dwell on something he couldn't control.

"Poker night," Pansy grinned. Draco rolled his eyes. They had never let Pansy play, telling her it was gents only, no witches allowed. Of course, the rule arose because Pansy was a card shark and would take them for all they had. In addition, it made her cross, which Draco saw as a huge benefit. "Ades was going to cancel it, but Hermione said not to. She did suggest that it be expanded and then she invited more people over. Now I can win all your money!"

Pansy walked away cackling and Draco just shook his head. He went and sat in one of the chairs that Harry had just set up.

"Or you could help, Malfoy, instead of sitting on your spoiled arse," Harry commented.

"I'm sure you've got it well under control," Draco smiled innocently. "With your common, working class background, moving furniture must be second nature to you now."

Harry tossed a stack of folders at his head, which Draco caught neatly. He peaked inside and saw that each folder contained information about a house. He saw notes written on the pages in Hermione's neat, precise script.

"Oi, Granger! Tell Ades to stop pawing and come tell me what I'm looking at," Draco called.

Hermione grabbed Adrian's hand and pulled him toward Draco.

"These are homes that I want to look at tomorrow," Hermione said as they walked. When she got close, she leaned into Draco and gave him a sweet kiss on the lips. "Welcome back. How was Brussels?"

"Brussels was pretty uneventful," Draco reported, pulling Hermione onto his lap. "It's good to be back though."

Draco held his witch tightly in his lap, inhaling her scent. Ades was in the chair next to them, still holding her hand.

"So you want to see all of these houses?" Adrian asked. He began flipping through one of the folders while Draco looked through another.

"Just these top six gold folders," she replied. "The silver folders are maybes. Those plain black folders were the nos."

Lovegood and the voluptuous Turan witch came to sit at the table as well. They began leafing through her choices. Hermione described the things she was looking for. Draco admired her choices. All were impressive estates, maybe not Malfoy Manor impressive, but certainly close. It
seemed that Hermione steered away from anything too imposing or stately. Draco could imagine himself in any of her top six.

"Those are some pretty impressive piles of bricks there, 'Mione," the earless Weasley observed.

"Theo and Percy pointed out that it won't just be me," Hermione said. She explained her probable needs when it came to bedrooms and workspace.

"When are the appointments?" Draco asked. He was going to go with her, invited or not.

Hermione's Weasley assistant rattled off a list of times.

"I'll come along," Marcus announced.

"Me too," Ades chimed in.

"I think we're all going," Draco observed.

"Having never bought a house, I'd appreciate any advice," Hermione responded.

"Then you'll want to bring Arabella and Lucius," Pansy snorted. "Those two have made millions of Galleons on real estate."

"I wouldn't want to bother them," Hermione waved.

"Father loves real estate," Draco chuckled. "Mother says it borders on infidelity. I'll owl him and he will likely meet you here for breakfast to discuss strategy. He loves the haggling part of buying the best."

"I'm sure my mother would love to come too," Adrian added. "She is a very shrewd buyer and can always spot a problem if there is one. I'll owl her too."

"Maybe this is too blunt of a question," Draco began, "but these are expensive places. Do you have the money for this?"

Draco generally had no problem being blunt, but he'd also been taught that it wasn't proper to discuss money at social events. George and Turan both snorted at his question, but he didn't know why.

"'Mione's loaded," George said laughing.

"Don't exaggerate, George," Hermione scolded. "I'm not loaded, just comfortable."

"You have a vested interest in three of my best selling products that you helped develop when you were still in school," George argued. "I know how much I deposit into your vault every quarter. Even minus the percentages that you reinvest in the business and give to charity, it’s a healthy amount. And seeing as you are a large share holder, I also know the amount of yearly profits that you get. You, 'Mione, are loaded."

"She also holds the patents on six different potions," Turan added.

"I share one of those six with Severus and two with Bouchard," Hermione reported.

"So you split the rights to three of the six," Turan waved dismissively. "They still generate a tidy income."
"Regardless, I was going to use my Order of Merlin money for the house," Hermione said.

"The Ministry is willing to purchase any property you want," Percy added. "They want you to stay here and will do anything to make that happen."

Hermione rolled her eyes.

“And that’s why I’m going to buy it myself,” she said, jutting out her chin stubbornly. “The Ministry of Magic doesn’t own me.”

Draco smiled. Hermione Granger was an independent witch and that would never change. She would never be with someone for their money or their power; she would be with them because she wanted to. Draco appreciated that so much. He was raised in a circle of people who valued status and influence over matters of the heart. He’d always known his future wife might not marry him for any affection, but for his name and his money. Hermione would never do such a thing and Draco would never have to doubt her feelings for him.

Theo went to let more people in past the wards and Draco relished the feel of Hermione in his lap as everyone talked. Theo came back with Blaise, Longbottom, and that Russian bloke that Draco didn't quite like. It irritated him that this wizard had been with Hermione. Of course, the witch he lost his virginity to was sitting across the table, so Draco couldn't really complain.

Elves filled a sideboard in the makeshift game room with food. There were four different kinds of sandwiches, chicken and prawns on skewers, fish and chips, crisps, pretzels, fruit, and biscuits. They divided into three groups and set up three different games at three tables. Draco found himself unwillingly separated from his witch, as did Ades, Marcus, and Theo. Hermione had argued that she would see them all evening and they should all socialize outside of just each other. Draco sat between Marcus and Blaise. The Lovegood witch and Percy Weasley made five players. Ades and Theo were playing with Harry, Turan, and the Russian. Hermione had Pansy, the formerly twinned Weasley, and Longbottom at her table.

It was a fun evening, full of eating, drinking, talking, and laughing. They weren’t playing for as much money, but that didn’t matter. Butterbeer and Firewhiskey flowed freely and the group became pretty raucous. Draco ate too much and certainly drank too much.

Draco would definitely blame his crap playing on the drinks. When each table got down to only two players, they made a new table of six. Marcus was ahead at his table, which wasn't surprising. He didn't let on, but those that knew him like Draco did, knew that Marcus was incredibly sharp. He worked for the Department of Magical Games and Sports for Merlin's sake. All they did was play cards, Gobstones, Quidditch, and other games. More surprising was that the daffy blonde Lovegood witch was a close second to Marcus. Over at the other table, Adrian was a close second to Longbottom. At the center table, Pansy was well ahead and the only other one left with Galleons to play was George Weasley.

It turned out that Hermione wasn't much of a card player, but she was laughing and clearly having fun. She gave Marcus and Ades both kisses for good luck, but said she would be rooting for Pansy or Luna. Apparently, she disapproved of the 'no witches at poker night' rule on principle.

Theo, who Draco always thought was a fun drunk, pulled Hermione in to him as they sat on a nearby couch and watched the "winners" face off. Draco watched and chuckled as Theo subtly groped Hermione inappropriately. After Pansy ordered her husband away, saying that his hovering was bad luck, Harry and Percy had found a chessboard. The Russian alternated between watching chess and poker. Blaise was doing his damnedest to chat up Turan, but didn't seem to be getting anywhere.
Draco settled himself on the sofa next to Theo and Hermione. They were so close together she was practically sitting in his lap. Draco was pressed against Hermione's other side. His witch gave him a stunning, bright smile and leaned in to press her cheek against his.

"I've never seen Theo tipsy," Hermione laughed. "He's naughty when he's been drinking."

"I'm naughty all the time," Theo said, licking the side of her neck.

"The drink just makes him less inhibited and more himself," Draco added, running his hand up her thigh. Draco loved her soft denim jeans and t-shirt. Most witches he knew didn't wear such casual clothes.

Hermione threw her head back, laughing. Theo set about nibbling on her neck and ear while Draco answered her questions about his work. He was pleased that she was interested and recognized that he had a real and challenging job, not just some cushy title with no real work given to him by his father. The three of them talked about work and what they wanted to do with their careers going forward while they cuddled on the couch, sparing some attention to the others in the room and continuing to drink a healthy amount.

Draco commented on Blaise chatting up Hermione's former Master. It took both he and Theo a full five minutes to stop laughing when Hermione informed them that the luscious looking Selma Turan firmly preferred witches, no exceptions. Theo thought they should mention it to Blaise, but Draco threatened to hex him of he did. It was just too good to watch.

Longbottom was the first one out. He set up an exploding snap game with the Russian and Turan. Blaise joined in to continue his pursuit of the buxom Turkish witch. Draco and Theo laughed and told Hermione how much Blaise hated that game, ever since he singed off most of the hair on the left side of his head as a child.

Adrian was out next and he came to be consoled by Hermione, who petted him and praised him for playing so well. After replenishing their drinks, Ades nestled himself on the floor between Hermione's legs.

George Weasley was out next. He floated around the room, pouring more drinks and entertaining everyone. Draco did heartily appreciate his story about Hermione and a lab experiment gone awry. She was developing a time-release invisibility ink for him one weekend during her seventh year after the war and the cauldron burst, coating her with the stuff. She'd made it out of Weasley's lab and into the shop without noticing that large sections of her jeans and jumper had gone invisible, showing her bra and knickers to all. That was just the beginning of the embarrassing Hermione stories. Turan had several that were more recent and Harry was a font of knowledge. Draco was having a ball and he wasn't the only one.

Luna left the game finally, leaving just Marcus and Pansy. Theo nudged and whispered when Luna headed straight for Turan, asking Hermione if there was anything going on there. She just grinned and told them all to mind their own business.

About an hour later, Adrian announced that it was time to turn in. Hermione was still supposed to be resting, so Draco didn't grumble about putting an end to the fun. He was pretty well and truly pissed, as was Theo and most others. Pansy and Marcus both still had money, but Pansy did have slightly more, so she was declared the winner.

The happy and now richer witch took her inebriated husband home to Grimmauld Place. Pansy was perfectly fine to Apparate, having hardly drunk anything so she would be clear headed for cards. The Russian was sober enough as well, so he agreed to drop Blaise off at home on the way back to
his hotel. The Weasleys were able to carry Longbottom between them. That was one Gryffindor who couldn't hold his drink. The two witches, Lovegood and Turan, left together, holding hands.

Draco propped Theo up and the two headed upstairs. Well, to be fair, Draco had to admit they propped each other up. It wasn't the first time and certainly wouldn't be the last. In his drunken haze, Draco noticed that straight-laced Granger was having trouble staying upright, swaying dizzyingly between Adrian and Marcus. The longer they stayed in the game, the less time they had to drink. Draco realized that was why he, Theo, and Hermione were fully in their cups. Ades was nicely pissed, but Marcus was near sober.

Hermione swayed into Adrian and gripped his shirtfront.

"You are so beautiful, Adrian," she slurred. "I never thought I'd want a wizard prettier than I am, but I do!"

"You're gorgeous, kitten," Ades grinned sloppily. "I want to wrap myself around you and never let go."

Hermione made some grunt of approval and went to kiss Ades, but accidently swayed away from him. Draco and Theo cackled, finding most everything hilarious, especially the pout on Adrian’s face. Marcus caught their little witch neatly before she landed on her bum and swept her up in his arms.

"Mmmm, Marcus," she hummed, rubbing her face against his chest. "Have I ever told you that I want to climb you like a tree?"

"No, princess, you haven't," Marcus said grinning. "Anytime you want to give me a climb, you go ahead."

"You are just so big," Hermione sighed, closing her eyes as Marcus carried her up the steps. "I never thought I'd be the type of witch who wants a big strong wizard to sweep her off her feet, but I like it so much!"

Draco and Theo stumbled into Hermione's room behind the others. Ades was helping her out of her t-shirt and jeans while Marcus got her something to sleep in. Theo went and collapsed on the foot of the bed. Draco wanted to protest pajamas and keep his witch uncovered, but it would be entirely too tempting. As it was, he came up behind her and placed kisses along her shoulders. She moaned and leaned back into him. Draco unclasped her bra and his hands wound around her, cupping her bare breasts. Adrian was left to untangle the bra from her arms.

"Draco is such a troublemaker," she said in a breathy voice. "It's such a cliché to be attracted to the bad boy, isn't it Adrian? But I just can't help it."

"No one's asking you to help it," Ades grinned. He caught her lips in a deep kiss and Draco could feel Adrian's chest pressed against the back of his hands. Adrian was an incredibly attractive bloke, Draco had always thought so. In all the years they'd known each other, they'd had the occasional drunken snog, but nothing more. He wondered what would happen if he and Ades became Hermione's Ancillaries. Would she be interested in seeing them together? Ades leaned back from Hermione to let the witch breathe and Draco reached around to the back of his head, pulling his face closer. Draco kissed him hard and Ades responded. He heard Hermione groan, trapped between them.

"That is so hot," she whispered, mostly to herself. Draco let Ades go and smirked. Hermione's eyes were glazed over with lust. Yes, their witch would definitely like to see some displays of affection
Draco is absolutely a troublemaker," Marcus said sternly. He reached for Hermione and gently extracted her from between the two wizards. "And Ades isn't much better. They know you need rest and that isn't helping."

Marcus slid a nightshirt over her head and Hermione pouted as if Marcus had taken away her toys.

"You can watch the pretty wizards snog later, princess," Marcus chuckled, leading her over to bed. "Now, you need to sleep."

Adrian wrapped his arm around Draco's waist and Draco draped his arm over Adrian's shoulder as they watched Marcus take her away.

"I'm in love with her," Ades told Draco. His fuzzy brain did its best to process his friend's words. "I don't want to lose her."

"I think we all feel that way," Draco slurred. "And what better group of blokes could there be for her? We are fantastic. You are fantastic."

"So are you, Drake!" Ades exclaimed. "I love you too, not like I do her; but you're the best mate a bloke could have."

"Oi! Knock off the love fest, you poofs, and either come to bed or go someplace else to snog," Marcus called out. Draco could tell their friend was amused. He certainly had reason to be content, spooning with their now sleeping witch as he was. Hermione looked tiny in his large arms. Theo managed to crawl up the bed and pass out on top of the covers in front of Hermione.

"Oh, don't be jealous, Marcus," Ades teased, pulling Draco toward the bed. Draco stumbled along; glad Adrian still had his arm around him, because Draco was sure he'd fall over without it. “If you need some affection from the rest of us, just say so.”

Draco chuckled and climbed into the bed with Adrian. He was sandwiched between Adrian and Theo quite comfortably.

“Goodnight, you tossers,” Draco said through a yawn. He was sure that he was grinning like an idiot, but he was happy. He looked over at Theo to the sleeping witch in Marcus’ arms and felt warm and fuzzy inside. Everything needed to work out and they all needed to stay together, Draco was sure of that. If he did become Hermione’s Ancillary, he would never ask her to give up the others. As far as he was concerned, she could have them all. It felt right.

Chapter End Notes

Next - House hunting and so much more
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer - don't own Harry Potter
Now - Houses, girl time, and then boy time

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Theo was fairly certain something died inside his mouth, while another something was still alive and trying to claw its way out of his head. He blinked against the bright morning sun. The heavy curtains hadn’t been drawn the night before and the light was painful. Theo felt bodies next to him on both sides and tried to look around without pain jolting through his head. Draco was next to him and Hermione was on the other side. He spied Marcus and Adrian as well. All of them were still sleeping, but if his drunken memory was correct, he wasn’t the only one drinking last night. He decided that as host, he should find the Hangover Potion.

Theo whispered for a House-elf to retrieve several doses of the potion and only had to wait a few minutes for relief. The potion began working almost immediately. Theo left four more doses on the nightstand and went to his own room to shower and dress.

"Good morning, Theo," his father said from behind his newspaper as Theo came in for breakfast. He was only a little surprised to see Adrian’s mother and Draco’s father there as well. He figured that they wouldn’t turn down a day of house hunting.

"Morning Dad," Theo said. "Good morning, Mrs. Pucey, Mr. Malfoy."

Over breakfast, Theo relayed Hermione's wishes regarding properties and her thought process so far. He showed them the information on the six houses they were scheduled to see that day as well as the ‘maybe’ pile, so they knew what the other options were.

Draco came in, followed by Adrian and Marcus. They exchanged greetings and set about eating breakfast. Hermione had wanted to take a long shower and told the others to go on ahead, rather than accepting their offers of scrubbing and drying charms.

Hermione arrived not too much later, dressed in red trousers and a black sleeveless top. She carried a light jacket because spring could still be chilly.

"Hermione, those shoes are darling," Arabella Pucey observed. Theo and the other looked down at her black shoes that resembled ballet shoes and laced up her ankle.

"Thank you, Arabella. And thank you for coming along; you too, Lucius. I'm sure you had other things planned."

"Nothing that couldn't be moved for the Sorceress," Lucius replied, making Hermione roll her eyes. Theo was a little surprised by the teasing tone. He'd never heard the Malfoy patriarch be playful before.

"He's right," Arabella said, laughing. "I had a dreadful lunch on my calendar that I hadn't been looking forward to. However, no one can get too upset at a last minute cancellation, because a
Sorceress always takes precedence. And this will be so much more fun!"

Theo wasn't much for real estate, but he had to admit, it was fun. Percy met them at the first house and made sure they stayed on schedule. All of the estate agents fell over themselves to cater to Hermione. The Malfoys and Puceys didn't seem to mind the arse kissing. In fact, they seemed to expect it.

The first place had very small rooms and not many windows. There was a lot of open land around it though. Arabella pointed out that Hermione would need to do some significant renovating before the house would be ready.

The second home was large, but was laid out quite awkwardly. The land it sat on was small as well.

The third home was very nice, but Hermione said it was too stately and the grounds didn't "feel right" to her.

The fourth home was similar. It was a nice place, but it wasn't exciting Hermione. As soon as she expressed her lack of enthusiasm, Marcus and Ades said it was time to go. They all wanted her to find her dream house.

The group stopped for lunch at a little cafe in a small wizarding village near house number five. It was a bit smaller than Hogsmeade, having about a dozen shops and a handful of restaurants. Hermione and Arabella cooed over the place, calling it quaint and charming. Theo liked the quiet, easy manner of the people. His friends had always attracted attention; Quidditch groupies for Marcus, gold-diggers for Draco, and just about any witch for Adrian. With Hermione, Theo envisioned it being hard to go anywhere without unwanted attention. This village, however, left them in peace. People were friendly on the street, nodding and saying a nice ‘good afternoon’, but no one stared and no one interrupted them.

The fifth house was it. Hermione loved it. The house was enormous, but still managed to feel welcoming and simple. It was made of a light grey stone and had loads of windows. There was a nice unimposing but elegant entrance and plenty of space inside. Besides the main and second floors, there was a large cellar and attic space.

"It's a mess," Draco proclaimed as they stood in the front hall.

"An utter disaster," Adrian frowned.

Theo had to agree, but he just nodded instead of adding his comments.

There were expansive sitting rooms, a gigantic library, a dozen bedrooms, and big open spaces - all of which were in a shambles. Dust covered every surface and a layer of dirt filtered the light coming in through the large windows.

The estate agent reported that the home had belonged to a prominent Danish wizarding family, but they hadn't been there in years, maybe decades. The family finally decided to sell the property after neglecting it for ages.

"It's nothing a little love and care wouldn't fix," Hermione asserted.

"It certainly has wonderful potential," Arabella nodded. "There isn’t anything structurally wrong with it, it just needs cleaning. The house is laid out well, but you'll need to redecorate."

"You'll need House-elves," Lucius observed. Theo watched Hermione narrow her eyes at him.
Lucius continued undeterred. "It's too large to attend to on your own."

"You can always hire House-elves," Marcus said, before Hermione could respond. "Give them clothes, wages, and a day off every month if you want. Whatever you do, you'll need help."

"The gardens will need considerable work as well," the estate agent reported. "The orchard may not fruit for a few seasons, because the trees have been so neglected."

"That's not a problem," Draco laughed. Theo couldn't stop himself from joining in, neither could Marcus.

"We know how to... invigorate the land," Adrian grinned. "Hermione learned how the other day."

Hermione rolled her eyes, but Theo could see that she was holding back a laugh.

"Let's see the grounds," Hermione said.

There was a lot of land that they couldn't possibly see, but the estate agent did provide them with a very detailed map. They walked around close to the house. A stream was channeled into a brick lined canal near the house and would eventually lead to a small lake, or large pond depending on your point of view. There were several rundown buildings on the grounds, including a greenhouse, large shed, barn and old carriage house. Theo saw a mess, but Hermione saw potential. Hermione wasn't interested in having animals, but noted that the old barn could be a free-standing laboratory and the carriage house would make a lovely guest house. Seeing as they were in worse shape than the main house, Theo wouldn't have called it lovely. Arabella, Lucius, and Hermione all seemed to have the imagination necessary to see those buildings could become though.

There was one last house to see, although Theo could tell Hermione was already sold. Hermione assured the estate agent that she would be in touch before the group left. Sure enough, the sixth house didn't measure up, and Hermione made her decision to buy the fifth house.

Arabella invited everyone back to Pucey Hall for tea to discuss the purchase. Percy Weasley opted to return to his office and start finding House-elves for hire. Apparently, the Being Division at the Ministry had a program for displaced House-elves. Over tea, Lucius plotted out a bargaining plan, beginning with the opening offer and going through the negotiating until Hermione would end up purchasing the house for a fair price. Arabella recommended several decorators to assist Hermione and owled them on Hermione’s behalf, requesting a portfolio of their previous work and asking them to remain available for a possible interview in the near future. Hermione went ahead and owled the estate agent with her opening offer, just as she and Lucius had discussed.

As Hermione was finishing her tea, a House-elf showed Healer Adams into the room.

“I’ve tracked you down at last!” Healer Adams exclaimed. “I went to Nott Castle for your check-up, but you weren’t there. And I had a devil of a time finding a way into that place so that I could find out that you were gone.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Hermione said, looking aghast. “I didn’t realize we had an appointment.”

“We didn’t really, so don’t worry yourself,” Healer Adams chuckled. “I anticipated that you would be right as rain by now, but I wanted to check.”

“Adrian, why don’t you show them to the lavender sitting room, so they can have some privacy,” Arabella suggested.

Theo stood to go with them, as did Draco and Marcus, when Lucius spoke up.
“Oh, sit down,” the elder Malfoy ordered, rolling his eyes. “Let the witch alone for a moment; give her some space to talk to the Healer on her own for once.”

Hermione chuckled as they all sat back down, looking dejected. She followed Adrian out of the room while the others sulked. Shortly, though, Adrian returned looking just as left out as the rest of them.

“Maybe Hermione needs some witch time,” Arabella mused aloud, smiling over her teacup. “I’m heading to the salon to have my nails done after tea. I wonder if Hermione would like to come along.”

All the wizards grumbled while Lucius chuckled. Theo didn’t want to be away from Hermione, but maybe Arabella and Lucius were right. Maybe they needed to give her some space and let her relax.

"Everything is perfect!” Hermione said when she finally returned. "My magic seems to have fully settled. All is well."

Everyone smiled at her announcement and Arabella suggested that Hermione celebrate with a trip to the salon, followed by a late dinner with the girls. Theo sighed. That would be the whole evening, but if Hermione wanted to go, he'd try not to complain.

"Oh, I haven't been to a salon in ages!" Hermione sighed wistfully. That settled it. If their witch wanted an evening of beauty charms, then she would have it.

Arabella penned several quick notes to invite some other ladies out to dinner and the pair was off. Hermione left the four wizards with kisses and a nice thank you to Lucius for his help that day.

Theo looked around at the others and wondered what it was they did before Hermione came along. It wasn't that long ago, but for a moment, Theo couldn't recall how he spent his evenings. He finally decided to go home and do some planning for the second ritual with his dad. Odd as he may be, Theo knew his dad had a brilliant mind.

Draco went with his father on the suggestion that they have a nice family dinner. Lucius implied that Narcissa had been missing her son, not having spent much time with him lately. Adrian went with Marcus over to Flint Lodge to play some billiards and have a hearty steak dinner. Theo knew they were all counting the moments until they could see their witch again.

OoOoO

Hermione relaxed back in her chair next to Arabella Pucey. She'd had a manicure and now she was getting a pedicure. Hermione talked with Adrian's mother about decorating ideas and all the things that would need to be done to the house. Hermione wanted to incorporate international, eclectic items she'd seen during her travels the past four years. She also wanted her house to be simple, uncluttered, and elegant.

Once again, Hermione appreciated that Arabella didn't mention Sorcery, Ancillaries, or any of those things. It was nice to take a break from those subjects.

Nails freshly painted, Hermione left the salon with Arabella and the pair walked to a nearby restaurant. It was an extremely posh place, which Hermione was not used to. She balked for a moment at seeing some photographers outside.

“Oh, I should've thought to use their private Floo,” Arabella frowned. “I chose this place because it’s very private, at least once you get inside. None of the other patrons would approach you or
“It’s not a problem,” Hermione assured her. “What’s one more picture?”

Indeed flashbulbs went off as the witches entered the restaurant, but inside it was just as quiet and low key as Arabella had said it would be. The host showed them to a table where Pansy and Selma were seated with another brunette. She was a slightly older witch, probably Arabella’s age and incredibly striking. Hermione had seen many beautiful witches, including Adrian’s mother next to her, but this witch was exquisite. Her face was perfect, symmetrical with high cheekbones, flawless dark skin, and bright violet eyes. Her long black hair was smooth and looked entirely effortless.

“Ladies, I’m so glad you were all free for dinner!” Arabella smiled. “Hermione, have you met Blaise’s mother, Serafina?”

“No, it’s nice to meet you, Mrs…” Hermione felt a little awkward. She didn’t want to presume to call the older witch by her first name, but she had no idea what her last name was. She knew Blaise’s mother had been married and widowed seven times. At least half of the marriages would’ve occurred after she was married to Blaise’s father, so if she was a Mrs. Zabini once, she had other names since then.

"Rousseau, Serafina Rousseau," the lovely witch smiled, showing gleaming white teeth behind her perfectly shaped lips. "But please call me Serafina."

The five witches had a wonderful dinner. The food was very elegant and their wine selection was unmatched. They wanted to hear about the house Hermione was looking to buy and they all had decor opinions to share. They didn’t focus on Hermione, though, which she appreciated. Hermione never wanted to be the center of attention and found she didn’t entirely enjoy it the past week.

They talked about how much Pansy was enjoying being a newlywed, as well as the not so enjoyable parts. It turns out Pansy and Harry had very different opinions about everyday things, such as how often sheets should be changed and whether dinnertime should always be at the table versus occasionally standing over the sink. They chatted about Arabella’s many business endeavors. Hermione hadn’t realized that the sweet, lovely witch was quite the mogul. She invested heavily in real estate, which made sense given all that she knew about the subject. Arabella loved beautiful things and was developing a line of home design products for sale, everything from large pieces of furniture to vases and candlesticks. Selma got to know the other witches, telling them about herself, her life in Turkey, and her work.

It turned out that Serafina didn’t work in any capacity. She had mountains of Galleons from having married extremely wealthy wizards. Like her son, she led a very relaxed lifestyle in which she did as she pleased, and only what she pleased. Hermione learned that she had been seeing a wizard for several months. This was the first relationships she’d had in years, having sworn off getting serious with any wizard after her seventh husband died. Hermione thought it was sweet the way the older witch blushed sweetly when talking about her new relationship.

The witches were lingering over some remarkable desserts and coffee, laughing at a story Selma was telling about an overly persistent wizard that refused to believe that she was not only uninterested in him, but in any wizard full stop.

“So, is this the weekly meeting of witches who marry for money, then?” a sneering voice asked from behind Hermione. Across the table, Pansy rolled her eyes and huffed.

Hermione turned in her seat to see Ginny Weasley standing behind her. The youngest Weasley had changed since Hermione had seen her last, four years ago. She was always fit; but now she was
very athletic looking, which made sense given her profession. She was tall, lithe, and very grown up. Her long red hair seemed brighter, coppery. Ginny was also wearing a chic dinner dress, which flattered her enormously. Overall, she looked lovely.

“Ginny!” Hermione stood and smiled at the witch. They’d never been very close, but had been friendly enough. Being the only two young witches in the Weasley household ensured forced bonding at times. “You look so very… grown up! I can’t believe it. I mean, you were always so pretty when we were young, but you’ve become quite a stunning witch.”

“Hermione,” Ginny managed. Her blue eyes widened in surprise. The redhead clearly hadn’t realized that Hermione was among the party she’d come over to malign. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Didn’t your mum and dad tell you I was back? We had the nicest lunch this past weekend,” Hermione smiled. She decided to give the young Weasley a chance to behave herself. She saw Ginny narrowing her eyes at Pansy across the table. “Let me introduce you to my dining companions. This is Arabella Pucey, Serafina Rousseau, and Selma Turan. Pansy, you know of course from school.”

Ginny looked very confused and her mouth just opened and shut again. Hermione assumed she didn’t know how to react to the warm welcome or the implied expectation that she would be polite and civil. When Hermione said Pansy’s name, Ginny let out little snort.

“Oh, you can’t possibly bear Pansy a grudge,” Hermione chided in a teasing tone, waving her hand dismissively. “So she married your ex-boyfriend. You wouldn’t have wanted to be married to Harry anyway.”

“Hey,” Pansy objected.

“Let’s be honest ladies,” Hermione said shrugging. “Harry’s idea of a fun night on the town is going to the local pub. If you’re lucky, he may take you to the cinema. That’s fine for you guys, Pans; you want a quiet sort of life. But Ginny here is living a different life!”

Hermione turned back to Ginny and took both of her hands, holding them out slightly as she surveyed the younger witch.

“I hear you are living the dream, Ginny,” Hermione smiled. “You are at the top of your game and I understand the wizards are lining up to try and catch your attention. It’s clear why that is. Imagine how bored you would be if you’d stayed with Harry.”

“Hey!” Pansy objected again, but Hermione ignored her.

“You would have at least one child by now, probably more,” Hermione continued. “That would’ve changed your career path, since you can’t play Quidditch while you’re pregnant. You’d be home with Harry and the kids, exhausted from all that a working mother has to manage, unable to get the effort up to even go out for a quiet dinner if your mum was able to babysit. And you’d have Harry, only Harry, day in and day out. You’re young and full of life! You should be out sowing those wild oats now, flirting with different blokes and painting the town red. Do you dance, Ginny? I found that I love to go out dancing. We should go together!”

“Um…yes,” Ginny stumbled. “I do go out dancing.”

“You should owl me when you are going next,” Hermione encouraged her. “It’s been ages since I went out to a club. We can catch up and have some fun.”
“Oh…sure, yes, of course,” Ginny managed, ending on a confident note.

“Then I’ll let you get back to your dinner,” Hermione replied. “I’ve kept you long enough with my chatter I’m sure. If that eager looking fellow over there watching us is your date, I’d wager he’s anxious to have your company back. I’m sure we’ll be in touch. Tell your parents that I send my love.”

Hermione gave Ginny the slightest of pushes, sending the confused looking witch back to her table before she sat back down. She took another bite of her wonderful dark chocolate torte and let it melt in her mouth. The other four witches at the table just looked at her.

“What?” Hermione asked.

“That was fairly masterful,” Serafina appraised, smiling. “I never would’ve thought you could be so manipulative.”

“That wasn’t manipulation,” Hermione said, grinning. “That was just allowing someone to start over. I think that people can tire of their old feuds, but they don’t know how to get out of the pattern they’ve set. I was just forcing her out of what I hear is her usual behavior. She can always choose to go back to being nasty to people.”

“And I thought Narcissa was the best witch I’d seen at social manipulation to avoid a scene, but that was good,” Arabella said. “You can call it whatever you want, but you saved everyone from what could have been an unpleasant experience.”

“Being married to Harry isn’t that bad,” Pansy interjected, pouting slightly.

“Of course it isn’t,” Hermione agreed. “You two seem to be a good match. But can you honestly say he would’ve been happy with Ginny, or she happy with him?”

“Merlin no!”

“My point exactly.”

The other witches chuckled at her logic. They enthusiastically finished their dessert and polished off another bottle of wine. Hermione was tipsy, but nowhere near as drunk as she was the night before. It was late and Arabella insisted that Hermione return to Pucey Hall to spend the night. Hermione accepted. She really liked Nott Castle and Spinner’s End, but didn’t want to overstay her welcome at any one place; although she knew she would have to stay much longer to be in danger of that. Regardless, she wasn’t able to Floo into Nott Castle. Even if she could Apparate herself, which she couldn’t, she didn’t have use of her magic to dismantle Ted’s complicated wards. It was much easier to take Arabella up on her offer and owl Theo a quick note so he wouldn’t worry.

The witches all went their separate ways, with Arabella taking Hermione home with her. They Apparated directly into the front hallway of Pucey Hall and heard voices coming from the nearby sitting room. She and Arabella peaked through the doorway so see Adrian and Marcus playing wizarding chess and drinking.

“We’re home,” Arabella announced, walking into the room with Hermione. The wizards turned to them and their eyes lit up. They stood up from their seats as the witches approached. “It was late and I invited Hermione to spend the night here, rather than having her pop around Britain at this hour.”

“Wonderful,” Adrian said, smiling. A slow, predatory grin spread across Marcus’ face. He opened his arms and Hermione stepped into them. Marcus’ large arms closed around her and Hermione
inhaled his familiar scent.

“Did you have a nice time?” Marcus asked Arabella, looking over Hermione’s head.

“It was lovely, thank you for asking, Marcus,” Arabella replied, a knowing smile on her face.

“You know, Mother, if you are tired, I can make sure Hermione gets settled,” Adrian offered, stepping closer to Hermione and putting a hand on her back.

“That’s so sweet of you,” Arabella chuckled. Hermione laughed into Marcus’ chest at Adrian’s very obvious attempt to get rid of his mother. “I just might retire for the evening, unless Hermione needs anything from me.”

“Thank you Arabella, I’ll be fine,” Hermione smiled. She appreciated that Arabella checked with her, rather than just doing as Adrian said. Arabella had impeccable manners.

“Then you all have a good evening. I’ll see you in the morning,” Arabella said. The three younger people watched her leave the room.

As soon as she was gone, Adrian turned Hermione’s face away from Marcus’ chest and kissed her. Adrian’s kiss was all-encompassing. His lips were so soft and perfect. He always managed to kiss with such emotion and passion, as if he was pouring everything he felt into his kisses. Marcus still had his arms wrapped around her and his hand went down to grip her rear. Between Adrian’s kisses and Marcus’ hands, Hermione didn’t know which way was up. When Adrian released her lips, she took a moment to catch her breath.

“We’ve missed you, kitten,” Adrian told her, running his fingers along her cheek lightly.

“I’ve only been gone a few hours,” Hermione managed.

“Like that matters,” Marcus chuckled.

“The Healer did tell you that you were in perfect condition, right?” Adrian asked. Hermione nodded, furrowing her brow slightly. It seemed like an odd shift in the conversation.

“Good, because we are going to take you to bed now and not let you sleep for some time,” Marcus reported. He hefted her up and slung her over his shoulder, slapping her arse. Hermione squeaked a sound of protest at his caveman like behavior, but at the same time found herself incredibly turned on. Adrian’s kiss had sparked quite a fire, and now Marcus was fanning the flames.

Hermione couldn’t see where they were going, but she did have an amazing view of Marcus’ arse in his well-fitting denim trousers. She presumed they were following Adrian to his room upstairs. Sure enough, Hermione found herself being carried into Adrian’s room and then tossed onto his bed. She propped herself up on her elbows and looked at the two wizards standing at the foot of the bed, both staring back at her.

“Are you just going to stand there?” she finally asked.

“You’re gorgeous, princess,” Marcus replied. “We’re taking a moment to appreciate that. There’s no need to rush.”

Hermione disagreed. For the past two nights, she slept in a bed with four wizards that she wanted more than anything, but she hadn’t been able to take advantage of her wonderfully scandalous position – Healer’s orders. She also remembered what happened last night. Even when she got stumbling drunk, she never lost memory of the usually embarrassing events, which was especially
lucky in this case. Hermione had thought about Draco kissing Adrian more than once that day, and each time her knickers became damp.

Hermione was through waiting. She sat up and shrugged off the light jacket she’d worn that day, tossing it off to the side. She reached down and slipped off her shoes, throwing those after the jacket. Hermione looked up at the two wizards and began unbuttoning her shirt. Marcus’ was beginning to breathe faster. Adrian’s blue green eyes were dark and stormy with lust. Hermione tossed the shirt away. She reached down and unclasped her trousers, sliding them down her hips and legs. All she was wearing were the black lace knickers and matching bra. Hermione scooted up the bed to lean against the pillows. She ran her fingertips lightly down her chest and across her abdomen.

“I guess I’ll just have to do this myself then,” she said, watching the wizards. They still hadn’t moved, but were clearly aroused. Adrian moved to climb onto the bed, but Marcus put his hand on his shoulder. Hermione grinned. She slipped her hand underneath her knickers and let her fingers glide through her wet folds. Adrian’s mouth fell open and Marcus was panting. Hermione groaned at the feel of herself. She imagined that her own hand was replaced by Marcus’ large, strong one, or by Adrian’s sweet lips.

Finally, they moved, but not quite where Hermione wanted, which was on the bed with her. Marcus released Adrian’s shoulder so that he could pull his shirt off over his head. Adrian looked over and quickly began unbuttoning his own shirt. Hermione stopped imagining anything and just watched all that perfect, masculine flesh be uncovered. She continued to explore herself, spreading the increasing wetness around. Adrian kicked off his shoes and quickly lost his perfectly tailored trousers, leaving him in navy blue silk pants that did little to conceal his excitement. Marcus let his jeans drop to the floor, revealing that he hadn’t bothered wearing anything under them at all. Hermione felt visually over stimulated by the two wizards in front of her and threw her head back onto the pillows. They were so beautiful.

Hermione felt a hand on her wrist, pulling it out of her wet knickers. She opened her eyes to see Adrian next to her, taking her glistening hand and bringing it to his mouth. He sucked her fingers into his mouth and proceeded to lick them clean. Marcus was positioned between her legs, grinning dangerously. He took her knickers in his hands and ripped them right down the middle, tossing the ruined scrap of fabric aside. He ran his large hands up her thighs and pushed them apart a bit more before running a finger up her wet slit, just as she’d imagined. Hermione moaned and looked up at Adrian, who was sucking her fingers into his mouth one by one.

Adrian released her hand and whisked away her bra with startling speed. She didn’t have time to wonder how he managed it before his lips crashed into hers. His elegant fingers teased and pinched her taut nipples while Marcus’ was plunging his thick fingers into her channel. Hermione let her tongue lick and explore Adrian’s perfect mouth, tasting him. He was exquisite. She reached down to his pants and slid her hand inside, closing her hand around his warm hardness. Hermione remembered doing the same thing last week on their date. She also remembered that it was dark then and that she hadn’t been able to really see him the way she wanted to. She imagined that this part of him had to be just as gorgeous as the rest of him, but she wanted to see for herself.

Hermione broke the kiss and pulled away. She closed her legs, forcing Marcus to pull back as well. Hermione knelt on the bed, Marcus slightly behind her and Adrian still lying to her side.

“Problem, kitten?” Adrian looked concerned. “Is it too much with the both of us?”

“I’ve never really seen you naked,” Hermione commented, looking at Adrian. “You kept your pants on when I slept here last. I want to see you.”
Adrian smiled. He reached down and removed his pants, leaving him totally naked. He really was beautiful all over. His slightly tan skin shone golden in the soft light and every inch of his body was well toned and defined. Hermione’s eyes greedily took in his body and stopped between his legs. His cock matched the rest of him. It rose up proudly, almost elegantly. It was thick, long, and perfect.

“Move up a little,” she managed to order, her mouth watering at the sight of him. Adrian leaned up against the pillows and Hermione shifted to kneel between his legs. Marcus pulled her up onto her knees, pressing her back against his chest. One hand went to her breast, squeezing gently, while the other went back between her legs. He ran kisses along her neck as she looked at Adrian.

“Gorgeous, isn’t he?” Marcus murmured in her ear. Hermione nodded, arching back into him. His hand was working slowly between her legs, teasing and rubbing. “I think he needs you, princess. Touch him.”

Hermione leaned forward, her face just a breath away from Adrian’s toned abdomen. She ran her tongue up the trail of light brown hair to his bellybutton, and then placed open-mouthed kisses up his torso. Adrian groaned. She circled his tight nipples with her tongue and then bit down gently on one.

“Yes,” Adrian hissed. Hermione played with his nipples for a moment; all the while Marcus’ hands were still on her, in her. One hand caressed her bum and his other fingers pushed inside her. She was so wet.

As soon as Hermione released his nipples, Adrian pulled her head up higher and kissed her hard. He palmed her breasts and Hermione began the whimper at all of the sensation. It felt like there were hands everywhere, all over her, touching exactly where she needed. Hermione began to lose herself in the feelings. She was so close, but she wanted more of Adrian. She wanted to taste him.

Hermione pulled back from his kiss and slid back down Adrian’s body until her face was directly between his legs. She ran her fingers softly up his cock, feeling the velvety warm hardness. She rubbed the thick head against her cheek and Adrian groaned. Hermione didn’t give him any more time to prepare, she just took as much of him in her mouth as she could.

“Fuck, kitten,” Adrian gasped. One of his hands went to her head and the other fisted in the sheet next to him. Hermione began sucking hard as she rose up slightly, using her hand to work the base of him.

“Merlin, that’s so fucking hot,” she heard Marcus grunt from behind her. “She has the sweetest mouth, doesn’t she?”

“Yes, yes, yes,” Adrian panted with each stroke of her tongue. “So fucking good.”

Hermione loved the taste of him, the feel of him. She watched his face as she worked; loving that he was falling apart. She also loved Marcus’ hand. He was going at a fast pace now, plunging his fingers in and out quickly. All of a sudden, he was gone. She felt Marcus lifting up her hips so she was up on her knees, then she felt his tongue against her clitoris. Hermione moaned at the warmth of his mouth on her and the way his tongue caressed her swollen nub. Marcus’ fingers made their way back inside her, making her whimper around Adrian’s cock.

Her orgasm hit her suddenly, without much build up at all. Adrian was still hard in her mouth when Hermione screamed, taking him further down her throat than she thought possible and muffling the sound. Her eyes were squeezed shut and she felt Adrian come down the back of her throat, without warning. Adrian gripped her head while Marcus squeezed her arse so hard she was sure it would
leave a mark. Hermione heard both wizards yell her name and did her best to swallow everything Adrian was giving her, though some leaked out.

Adrian pulled away from her rather quickly when he finished. Hermione dropped down onto her stomach, feeling boneless and without energy to hold herself up.

“Oh, kitten, I’m so sorry,” he said raggedly, trying to catch his breath. “I didn’t mean to do that without any kind of warning, it just happened too fast.”

Hermione licked her lips and swallowed again before grinning.

“That was my fault,” she said, also breathing heavily. “My magic makes you come. You couldn’t have stopped it if you tried. It’s not a problem. I think I swallowed it all, but I may have made a bit of a mess of your sheets. Sorry for that.”

Marcus’ laughter rung out in the bed. He collapsed next to her on his back.

“I think Ades will overlook any mess you’ve made, princess,” Marcus said, still laughing. “He’ll probably get hard again at the sight of his come running down your chin. Besides, I’ve made a huge mess of his sheets anyway, so it’s too late to worry about such things.”

Adrian shook his head, smiling at Marcus’ crass language. He grabbed his wand from the nightstand and cast a quick Scourgify on the bed and its occupants. He pulled the sheet and blanket up over them all before pulling Hermione into him, spooning her tightly. Adrian kissed the back of her neck.

“Goodnight, kitten,” he whispered in her ear. “Thank you for tonight.”

“Goodnight Adrian.” Hermione looked over at Marcus. He was lying on his back right in front of her. She put her arm out across his chest and smiled. He leaned in and gave her a kiss before settling back on the pillow. “Goodnight Marcus. Thank you both for tonight.”

Hermione closed her eyes, settled comfortably between the two wizards. She felt sated, tired, and she fell asleep immediately.

Chapter End Notes

Next - Preparations, a mystery POV, and shopping
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer - Harry Potter? Don't own that!
Now - Hanging out, the mystery POV, and shopping

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Adrian woke up slowly, registering the small warm body pressed against him. He kept his eyes closed, but smiled and inhaled deeply. He could smell her. Adrian would have to tell the House-elves to leave the sheets on the bed for a while. He opened his eyes to look at his witch, sleeping soundly. Adrian looked over her to his friend, his oldest friend as far as he could recall. Adrian couldn't stop smiling if he wanted to, which he didn't. Sleeping, Marcus looked so carefree and content.

Adrian relaxed against his pillow, letting his mind wander. It was Wednesday and he had a case going before the Wizengamot that afternoon. Adrian had moved around his schedule a bit so that he could be there for Hermione. He knew, though, that his friends would take good care of her whenever he wasn't around. Adrian found he appreciated that. It was easy for him to accept the others as part of the package that was Hermione Granger. He wasn't sure why. Maybe it was because he loved her. Maybe it was because he loved those other three wizards in a way.

Adrian frowned. He'd told Hermione over and over to have faith in herself, that her magic will make the right choice for her. And how could Adrian not be the right choice? He loved her; there was no doubt in his mind. He'd never been in love before, infatuated and intrigued yes - but never in love. Would fate be so cruel as to show him love just to snatch her away? Adrian knew it happened to other people. History was full of tragic love stories. He was pretty sure Draco, Marcus, and Theo were in love with her too; even if none of them had specifically said it. Adrian didn't want this to be a tragic love story for any of them.

"What about this situation could possibly be making you frown?" Adrian heard Marcus whisper. Adrian turned his head to look at his friend, who was softly stroking Hermione's arm that she'd stretched over his chest.

"Nothing," Adrian smiled. "This moment is perfect. I was just getting ahead of myself and thinking about what will happen next Saturday. It's just a week and a few days away."

"I know," Marcus sighed. "None of us want to lose her."

"I was just thinking that. I don't think she wants to lose any of us either. If I’m chosen, I wouldn’t ask her to give you up, or Draco, or Theo. She wouldn't be as happy with one or two of us as she would be with all four of us. I'll leave it up to her of course, but if she wants to keep one or all of you, and you want that too, that would be nice."

Marcus looked thoughtful. After a moment, he nodded.

"That sounds like a good idea," Marcus said softly, watching Hermione to make sure they didn't wake her. "Let's run it by Theo to see if the rituals would allow it. From what we read, the Ancillaries are critical to maintain balance for her. The centaurs implied that this was even more
important for her than it has been for others. We have to make sure any non-Ancillary relationships
don't take time away from what needs to be done.

"You're right," Adrian replied, thinking about what he'd read and heard about his own family
history. The Sorceress in his family tree was reportedly never without her Ancillary, not for any
significant length of time. Adrian had thought it sweet and touching that the couple never spent a
night in different places. He hadn't considered the possibility that they couldn't physically be apart.
He wouldn't want to disrupt or somehow dilute the affects of the Ancillary by adding other wizards
to the situation.

"If none of us are chosen, it will be a moot point," Marcus half shrugged. Adrian agreed, but he
didn't want to dwell on such an upsetting thought.

"A ‘moot point,’ eh?" Adrian teased. "That's fancy talk coming from a dumb jock."

"I got it from you," Marcus smiled. "When I want to sound like an absolute wanker, I just listen to
you and say what you say."

"At least I know words that have more than one syllable," Adrian said, grinning at his friend.

"I've learned all sorts of good, long words. Tosser, wanker, bloody bastard - see all two syllables.
Oh, and massive, that's two syllables. I can even use it in a sentence. Suck my massive cock."

"I don't know that my jaw can take it," Adrian said, trying to muffle his laughter. He didn't want to
wake Hermione before she was ready. "Given her interest the other night, I think our witch might
want to see something like that though. Who knew that Hermione Granger would be interested in
watching two blokes snog?"

"She is a kinky little thing isn't she?" Marcus said, looking down at her with what Adrian could
only describe as adoration.

"My mother had an alarm clock that woke her up with the sound of birdsong," Hermione said
suddenly, startling the two wizards. Her eyes were still shut. "I'm not sure how waking up to talk of
massive cocks and kinky sex compares."

"I'd say it's clearly a better way to wake up," Marcus replied. "Good morning, princess."

Hermione smiled and opened her eyes.

"Good morning, Marcus," she said, looking up at him. Then she turned to Adrian. "Good morning,
Adrian."

"Sleep well, kitten?" Adrian asked, running his hand up her bare arm.

"So well," she said, stretching. "I feel like I've slept for ages. What time is it?"

Adrian rolled over to look at his clock.

"Ten," he replied, watching her stretch. The sheet slipped down a little, revealing the tops of her
breasts. Marcus pulled the sheet down slowly, just a little, exposing her chest entirely. It turned out
his efforts were unnecessary, because Hermione popped upright, the sheets pooling around her
waist.

"Ten?!" She looked alarmed. "The morning is half gone! I'm supposed to be going through the
research for the second ritual and meeting with Severus to work on my Occlumency!"
Hermione bounced over Adrian and hurried to the loo. She was only gone a few moments before she reemerged wearing Adrian's robe. He smiled, liking how she looked in his clothes. The small witch drowned in the large robe.

"Relax, kitten," Adrian chided, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed and stretching. "Marcus Floo-called Theo last night after you went to sleep and told him to come over in the morning. He said he would bring the research here, along with a change of clothes."

Adrian looked around. Their House-elves were very good, unobtrusive and efficient. He spied a small bundle on a chair.

"Look there," he pointed. "That's probably the outfit Theo picked out."

Hermione opened the basket and pulled out a very frilly pair of mint green knickers with actual ruffles across the bum. There was a matching bra as well. Hermione rolled her eyes and pulled them on, muttering that a wizard would pick the least practical underclothes she owned. Next, she stepped into a pair of extremely high heels.

"If that's all Theo sent over, remind me to get him a present," Marcus chuckled.

Hermione scoffed at the large wizard, still relaxing back in bed. Adrian laughed and headed for the loo. When he returned, Hermione was dressed in a sweet looking grey and pastel floral dress. She looked more ready for a garden party than a day in the library, but Adrian liked Theo's choice. Hermione looked young and fresh, ready to be corrupted. Apparently, Marcus thought so too.

"You just stay where you are, Marcus Flint," she was instructing. The other wizard was crawling down the bed toward her, a definitely predatory look on his face. "I've got things to do today."

"You can do me," Marcus offered. Adrian heard Hermione sigh and saw the corners of her mouth twitch with amusement, but otherwise she was doing a good job of appearing stern.

Adrian pulled on a pair of jeans and grabbed a t-shirt.

"Come on, kitten," he said, chuckling and pulling her arm through his. "Let's leave Marcus to his own devices and get you some breakfast."

Marcus growled lowly, but Adrian just laughed. Hermione snatched up a large mint green bag that coordinated well with her dress, but perfectly matched the now hidden knickers. Adrian was sure Theo had done that on purpose and chuckled.

Adrian brought Hermione to the breakfast room. It was his mother's favorite place. The large wall of windows let in all the morning light. Thin, gauzy curtains framed the windows and did very little to keep out the sunshine. The walls were painted in rich, buttery yellow and cream colored vertical stripes. A small sitting area held a lilac fainting couch and grass green armchairs. The white wooden table had matching chairs and everything always looked so fresh and clean. His mother kept fresh flowers all around that room as long as they were blooming on the property. That morning the room was bursting with floral arrangements.

"Good morning!" his mother chirped cheerfully from the table. She was adding white Peonies to an arrangement of blood orange Helenium and small yellow sunflowers.

"Good morning," Theo chimed as he stood from his seat on the other side of the table. Tea, scones, and the paper were spread out in front of him. Theo held out the chair next to him for Hermione and they kissed each other hello before she sat.
"Good morning," Hermione smiled. "I'm sorry I slept so late! Thank you for the clothes, Theo."

"Of course, Mi," Theo smiled, kissing her on the temple.

"Adrian, we dress for meals," his mother observed airily. Adrian smirked and put on the t-shirt he carried on his shoulder.

"I know, Mother." He grinned and went over to give his mother a kiss on the cheek. "In my defense, Hermione was ready and I was not. I chose to abide by another house rule instead - never keep a lady waiting. How has your morning been?"

"Delightfully odd," she responded. "I had the loveliest dreams last night and woke up early, feeling like I could take on the world. It was wonderful. The House-elves were very riled up when I woke. It seemed that, overnight, all of the plant life on the property sprang to totally maturity. All the flowers bloomed. The winged-horses also became... unusually affectionate. The elves are convinced that the mare is with foal now. The elves are saying we were blessed by the Sorceress."

Adrian's mother looked over at Hermione, an eyebrow raised in question.

"I'm sorry about the disruption," Hermione said, blushing. "It's not entirely intentional. While my magic is still ungrounded, I sometimes have discharges of uncontrolled magic. They're better since the ritual. Before that, my magic would break something."

"This has been such a nice disruption, so there is nothing to apologize for!" his mother said, waving her off. "It's not destructive. If anything, it's life giving! Who could complain about that? I've been having the best time with the flowers this morning. See these flowers? Peonies bloom in June, but the sunflowers don't really look good until late July and August. I've never been able to mix these flowers before! You must be famished. What would you like for breakfast?"

As soon as his mother asked the question, a House-elf appeared suddenly next to Hermione, startling her. The little creature gazed up at her expectantly and adoringly.

"Tea would be lovely," she told the elf. "I would also like some fruit, a little sausage, and pastry of some kind, whatever you have on hand is fine."

"Of course, Missy Sorceress, right away!"

Adrian opened his mouth to order his own breakfast, but the elf was gone too soon. Marcus strolled in soon after and sat down after dropping a kiss on the top of Hermione's head. The elf returned very quickly with Hermione's breakfast, which was everything she asked for but in excess. Adrian snagged one of her six scones and, for a moment, thought that the elf was going to slap his hand. He'd never seen one of the Pucey House-elves be even remotely hostile before. It was with a very disapproving glare that the elf took his and Marcus' orders for breakfast.

As they ate, Theo read aloud snippets from the various papers and they talked about their plans for the day. Theo snorted with laughter within a few moments of picking up the Daily Prophet.

“You’re on the cover again, Mi,” Theo said, holding up the front page. There was a photograph of Hermione and Adrian’s mother walking into the restaurant the night before. Adrian thought it odd that Theo found it so amusing though.

“She’s been on the front page every day for a week,” Adrian replied. “What’s so funny about that?”

“Oh, that’s not the funny part,” Theo said, staring at Adrian. Adrian just looked at his friend
expectantly, waiting to hear the joke. “What’s funny is that the article says you can’t land a witch on your own. They wrote that your mother has been courting Hermione on your behalf, to get you into the Ancillary candidate’s circle.”

“Hey!” Adrian protested. He’d been in the society pages before, but Adrian had never really had bad press. This was horrid and entirely emasculating, to say that he couldn’t romance his witch without help from his mother.

“Oh, it’s just speculative nonsense,” Hermione said, waving it off.

“That’s not the point!” Adrian said, admittedly sulking now. “It’s offensive! I do not need, nor have ever needed, other people to get witches for me.”

“Of course not, darling,” his mother soothed. Adrian could see the amusement in her eyes.

“I should sue them for libel,” Adrian grumbled.

“Or you could have your mummy do it,” Marcus teased. Adrian scowled and threw half a scone at him.

As Hermione was lingering over another cup of tea and last bits of scone, she and his mother talked about her hiring help to get her new house in order – once she got the house of course. Adrian’s mother showed Hermione portfolios done by different designers or renovation teams. They all had sample pictures of homes from before and after their work. Adrian appreciated art and wanted his surroundings to be as beautiful as possible, so he tried to put the offensive newspaper article out of mind and pay attention. Hermione observed that they were all clearly talented, professional people and Adrian agreed.

“You aren’t being asked to grade them, kitten,” Adrian told her. “They all do good work; otherwise Mother wouldn’t have suggested them. The real question is whom do you think could help you clean up, renovate, and decorate your house? Whose aesthetic and style would you feel most comfortable living in?”

Hermione looked thoughtful for a moment and studied the pictures again, seeming to take Adrian’s question to heart.

“I think one of these two,” she finally said, setting two apart from the others.

“I’ll owl these two and invite them over so you can meet them and see who you like better.” Arabella smiled, retrieving quill and parchment from a sideboard.

Hermione and Theo began talking about the second ritual. Apparently, Hermione had gone over a great deal of the plan with Theo’s dad the day before. Nott Sr. was a strange wizard, but he had a brilliant mind.

Snape’s large raven swooped into the room and perched on the back of Hermione’s chair. Adrian recoiled slightly. He hated that bird. It always bit or scratched him when it came around, which thankfully was not often. He saw Marcus and Theo lean away as well. Hermione, however, untied the note on his leg and cooed at the nasty thing. She gave it a bit of sausage and petted its sleek black head. Adrian worried she would lose a finger, but the raven appeared to like it and preened under her hand.

“Arabella, do you mind if Severus comes over here in an hour or so?”

“Of course not, Severus is welcome here any time.”
Hermione wrote out a quick note on the back of the one she just got and attached it to the evil bird. She gave him another piece of sausage and sent it on its way, thankfully.

Before Adrian could marvel at her fearlessness, an unknown owl arrived for Hermione. She gave it a bit of food and took the parchment from it.

“It’s the house,” Hermione said, her brow furrowing as she read it. “I don’t understand it. They accepted my initial offer. They weren’t supposed to do that. Lucius said they would counter once and I would go up to a more reasonable price. What I offered was much too low.”

Adrian’s mother looked over the letter as well.

“I imagine there is another factor then that is making them inclined to sell you the property,” his mother concluded.

“Percy mentioned that the Ministry is invested in my staying here in Britain,” Hermione said. “You don’t think they would’ve influenced these people to sell at an unfairly low price, do you?”

“The house belonged to some Danish family,” Marcus observed. “I doubt the Ministry could pressure people in another country to do what they wanted.”

“I’d guess the owners want to sell it to you because you’re the Sorceress,” Theo interjected, shrugging. “Maybe they want to brag about it.”

“Well, it doesn’t seem fair,” Hermione said, brow still deeply furrowed. Adrian didn’t quite know what to make of her objections. She was getting the good end of the deal. Wasn’t that what everyone wanted? Maybe it was a Gryffindor thing. He couldn’t see a Slytherin worrying over getting the better part of a deal, that’s the kind of thing they schemed to achieve. Although, a Slytherin would be skeptical of something that looked too good to be true; there was probably a hidden agenda yet to be seen.

“It’s their choice, kitten,” Adrian said. “If they want make sure you specifically have the house by selling it at a low price, then that’s up to them. It looks to be a straightforward real estate deal, no strings attached.”

Hermione sighed and wrote out a reply. She would meet the agent at Gringotts at two o’clock that afternoon to transfer the money from her vault in exchange for the deed.

Hermione and Theo set up their research material there in the breakfast room. Adrian, his mother, and Marcus followed along, asking questions as they went. Given all the exhaustive work they’d done the week before, they already had the information they needed, they just needed to organize it.

Hermione drew out some new Arithmancy equations for the new aspects of the second ritual. Adrian took the opportunity to go and dress for court. Jeans and a t-shirt weren’t exactly professional and intimidating. When he returned, he ran into Snape and Draco, who had just arrived via Floo. Adrian walked them to Hermione. Snape looked comically out of place, his all black ensemble clashing with the sunny, flowery brightness of the breakfast room. Hermione stood up to greet them.

Draco made a beeline for Hermione, giving her a kiss that clearly demonstrated he had missed her.

"I missed you, Granger," Draco purred when he released her.

"I missed you, too," she said, smiling. Snape rolled his eyes and gave a soft snort. Hermione kissed
the dark wizard on the cheek and he huffed a bit. "Good to see you too, Severus."

"Likewise," Snape said before nodding to the others and seating himself.

"I wish I could say that I came just for you, Granger," Draco sighed. "But I've come for Theo."

"Me? What for?" Theo asked, looking up from his book.

"It seems there's been an explosion at your lab, with a rather substantial amount of damage," Draco informed with an even, if not grave tone. "Two of your researchers were injured, but not seriously. They are getting treatment at St. Mungos for burns and abrasions. Your other three researchers are trying to determine the extent of the damage. Aurors are also on the scene, investigating the source of the explosion."

"I need to go and find out what happened." Theo looked concerned. So did Hermione. It was serious and Adrian was concerned as well.

"Do you need any help?" Hermione asked. Marcus nodded his agreement.

"No, no," Theo assured them. "I'll Apparate over there now and find out what is going on. Unless you need me here?"

"No, go!" Hermione insisted. "We've gone over all the information. I'm going to work on Occlumency with Severus, meet with interior designers, and go over to Gringotts. Your lab is certainly more important than any of that!"

Theo threw a few things together and said rushed goodbyes. Adrian smiled at the fact that Theo didn't rush his goodbye kiss to Hermione though.

"Do you need a separate room to work on the Occlumency?" Adrian's mother asked Snape.

"No," Snape responded. He took Theo's vacated seat and turned Hermione's chair to face him. "She won't have the luxury of quiet, solitude on Saturday, so she needs to practice with things happening around her. If anything, you could make more noise."

"I'm not sure I have anything particularly noisy to occupy myself with right now," his mother said, frowning. Adrian chuckled. His mother did enjoy being helpful.

"Why don't you tell me about your dinner last night?" Adrian suggested. "You can tell me loudly."

Sure enough, his mother smiled and began recounting every part of her evening, in excruciating detail. Marcus pulled out a deck of exploding snap cards and dealt Adrian a hand so they could play while his mother talked.

Out of the corner of his eye, Adrian tracked how Hermione was doing. She looked very resolved, as if nothing could shake her concentration. From the looks of it, she was probably managing to keep Snape out of at least parts of her mind, only allowing him to see what she wanted him to see. Adrian didn't doubt Snape's skill as a Legilimens for a moment. With Voldemort dead and gone, Adrian couldn't think of anyone else that would be able to work their way into her mind.

Adrian watched Draco slide his chair next to Hermione. He sat for a moment and observed, as Adrian had been doing from his noisy end of the table. Then Draco leaned in slightly and began talking to Hermione. Adrian couldn't hear what he was saying, but from the impish grin on Draco's face, he could imagine that it was naughty. Hermione twitched slightly after several minutes of Draco's doubtlessly dirty monologue, but she didn't crack. Then the platinum blond
wizard initiated physical contact. He lightly drew his fingers up and down her bare arm while he spoke. Then one of his hands found her thigh, just above the knee. He didn’t try to advance up her leg, but stroked her leg by the knee. All the while, Draco kept talking to her. Adrian saw that he was getting himself at least a little worked up, because he was starting to breathe heavily while he spoke. It wasn’t until Draco’s tongue darted out to tease her neck, just behind her earlobe, that Hermione broke.

“I’m in,” Snape announced. After a moment, he sat back in his chair, looking typically aloof and indifferent. Adrian could see a small amount of moisture beading on his brow though. He may have found a way into Hermione’s mind, but it hadn’t been easy on him.

“Bloody hell,” Hermione muttered, frowning.

“You did well,” Snape told her. “You lasted a very long time and it took a great deal to break you of your concentration.”

“I can do better,” Hermione insisted.

“We can try in a little while after you rest a moment,” Snape told her, pouring himself a cup of tea. “There’s no sense in exhausting yourself. Your mind is in excellent shape already.”

Hermione looked a little disgruntled and Adrian thought she might argue with their former professor, but she just sat back in her chair with a huff, arms crossed over her chest.

"Come on, Granger," Draco said, tugging gently on her arm. "Let's go for a walk outside. It's a beautiful spring day and you can let your mind rest."

Hermione conceded and walked with Draco out to the gardens. Adrian chuckled softly and shared a knowing glance with Marcus. He was sure Draco wanted some alone time with their witch.

Adrian’s mother offered Snape a more substantial tea and the two of them ate. Adrian and Marcus continued to play their card game, but it was more a way to pass time than a real competition. Adrian knew he should get to court eventually, but he was well prepared and would rather bide his time with his witch and friends than wandering the halls of the Wizengamot making small talk with acquaintances.

Blaise strolled in a little while later, looking for Hermione. He and his mother wanted to take her out to lunch and then do some shopping.

"I came over to see if she was free this afternoon," Blaise explained, seating himself with the others. "And maybe she can invite her friend Selma. I haven't seen a more attractive witch than her in a while and I think she likes me. If she comes out with us today, I can ask her to dinner."

Adrian’s mother burst out into tinkling laughter, which was met by confused stares from Adrian and Blaise. Marcus looked indifferent.

"That's not a joke?" she asked, looking at all of them.

"I found it intensely amusing," Snape said, a wry grin on his face. "But no, Arabella, I don't believe Mr. Zabini meant it as a joke."

"Ah," she nodded before looking at Blaise with pity. "Did you know Selma was at dinner with us last night? I got to know her a little better. She truly is smart and funny as well as beautiful. She's also a lesbian."
Adrian thought a moment and then nodded. He wasn't very surprised. Marcus was laughing aloud.

"She wouldn't have been free for dinner tonight regardless," Adrian's mother continued. "She mentioned something last night about dinner plans with Luna Lovegood."

At that, Adrian couldn't help but laugh along with Marcus. Blaise looked disappointed, but then had a very thoughtful look on his face. Adrian would bet a hundred Galleons that he was thinking of a way to join the two witches if possible.

"What's so funny?" Hermione asked as she and Draco walked back in the room.

"Blaise is chasing your lesbian friend," Marcus reported, grinning.

"Aw, who told?" Draco asked. "We could've had so much fun watching him try to get her!"

"You knew?" Blaise asked affronted.

"Not at first, but Granger clued me in after the poker game the other night." Draco grinned devilishly.

Adrian sighed. He was having fun watching all this, but he had to go.

"I better go to court," Adrian announced. He stood and kissed his mother goodbye. "Walk me to the Floo, kitten?"

Adrian waved goodbye at the wizards and pulled Hermione close as they walked down the hall.

"I'll miss you today, kitten," Adrian told her, leaning down to press his face to the top of her head. "But I think you'll be too busy to miss me. You have a full afternoon!"

"I always miss you when you're not around," Hermione scolded, smiling. "Of course, I know I'll see you again soon, so I manage to bear the deprivation. You are right though. I have a lot to do today. I hope I like one of the decorators your mother invited over. I've never hired someone to work for me personally before; it's always been for work. Then I have to go to Gringotts to purchase the house. Draco said he'd come along and owl his father to meet us there, just to be sure I'm not missing something."

"That's smart," Adrian observed. As a solicitor, Adrian had a working knowledge of contracts, but he was more of a litigator. Between the two Malfoys, Hermione would have more than enough support. "Are you going shopping with Serafina and Blaise?"

"It sounds fun," Hermione noted, sounding wistful. "But shouldn't I be researching or helping Theo or doing something productive?"

"Having fun is productive, kitten," Adrian said sternly. "Snape won't let you practice all day. You've gone over the research plenty of times and you'll go over it again plenty of times in the next two days. Go out and have fun! Buy furniture for your new house. If you want to stay there soon, you'll need a bed to sleep in."

"It would be nice to stay there this weekend," Hermione conceded. "Do you think I could really do that?"

"Absolutely, kitten," Adrian grinned. "I am sure of it."

The wheels in Adrian’s head were already turning. He would get together with Draco, Marcus, and
Theo after court. They'd been wondering what to get her as a gift for the second ritual and now Adrian knew. Between the four of them, Adrian was sure they could make her home at least basically habitable by the second ritual. The Nott and Pucey family House-elves were falling over themselves to assist the Sorceress. There would be no shortage of volunteers to go over and clean the house. Add in some elves from the Malfoys and Flints and they could muster a small army; which that old, dusty house would definitely need, given its current state. They would also have to find a pest control expert go through the house, since Adrian thought it was likely there would be Doxy and Boggart infestations. His mother would be able to recommend a reputable wizard to do any necessary repairs.

Hermione was smiling dreamily at the thought and Adrian was sure this would be what she wanted most.

“Kiss me goodbye, kitten,” Adrian directed, jarring Hermione from her daydream.

Hermione reached up and took his face in her hands, smiling at him and pulling him toward her. She brushed her lips softly against his, before deepening the kiss. Adrian loved the taste of her, the feel of her. He hated to let go, even temporarily, but Hermione was right when she said it was healthy that they all spent time apart and together. Adrian thought he and the others were unusually clingy because they knew they might have such little time with her.

“I’ll see you later,” Adrian told her as he pulled away. He stepped into the Floo and looked back at his witch. It would just have to work out. There was no other future that Adrian could tolerate.

OoOoO

She looked out the shop window and watched Hermione Granger stand on the steps of Gringotts talking with Draco Malfoy. They had just walked out of the Goblin bank together, her arm linked through his. The two talked for a moment, standing entirely too close to each other. That horrible witch wouldn't stop until she had all the wizards to herself. It wasn't fair! And this was one witch that wouldn't stand for it. Hermione Granger wasn't getting her wizard, no matter what; she was making sure of that.

Draco turned and went back into the bank, leaving the selfish whore by herself. It only lasted a few minutes though. Blaise Zabini and his murderess of a mother joined her. The awful witch was probably shagging Blaise as well. Everyone knew witches couldn't resist Blaise Zabini. She'd seen it firsthand.

She heard her name called, interrupting her thoughts. She closed her eyes and counted to three to try to calm down. When she turned around, she didn't want anyone to notice anything amiss.

"Was there anything else you wanted here?" the other witch asked. She shook her head no. "Then on to the next shop!"

She glanced back out the window at the evil witch. She had to take direct action. She wasn't going to sit back and let Hermione Granger steal her wizard. She knew what she had to do and she only had a few days to figure out how to do it.

OoOoO

It was three in the afternoon when Hermione finished at Gringotts. It was a very productive hour though. Lucius went over the sale agreement with a fine-tooth comb. She took possession of the property as soon as she signed the parchment. The house was all hers.
Before leaving Pucey Hall, Hermione had interviewed the two designers whose portfolios she liked. Surprisingly, the second candidate was Susan Bones from school. Hermione was pleased to see the witch and incredibly impressed by her ideas. It was a wonderful match and Hermione hired her right then. The other candidate had been nice enough, but they hadn't really clicked. Hermione wondered if Susan could meet her at the house tomorrow to start working and borrowed an owl from the Goblins to send her a note.

Draco and his father had some business of their own to conduct in the bank, so Draco walked her outside.

"Congratulations, Granger," Draco said, slipping his arm around her waist. "You are the proud owner of a dusty, messy pile of bricks."

"Thank you," Hermione said proudly. She knew that none of her wizards were impressed by the house as it was, but they would see how great it would be.

"Have fun today," Draco ordered, sounding very haughty. "Buy yourself some lacy, frilly knickers for me."

"You are such an arse," Hermione chuckled.

"And yet you adore me," Draco teased, placing a kiss on the tip of her nose. "What does that say about you?"

"Prat," she said laughing. "You better go back in. Your father and that surly looking Goblin are waiting on you."

"I'll see you later, Granger," Draco grinned, kissing the back of her hand.

Hermione watched him swagger away. Draco was so cocky. She chuckled to herself, enjoying a few minutes of solitude. She wanted him so much, she wanted all four of them and they were all so different.

Adrian connected with the romantic, sentimental side of her. He was the sweet, attentive wizard that would treat his witch like a queen. Draco was daring, dramatic, and confident. He pushed her and didn't let her fall back on old habits. He was the wizard that would challenge his witch and keep her on her toes. What witch wouldn't want a touch of drama in her life? Marcus was the opposite. Rather than being dramatic, he was down to earth and genuine. He never said things he didn't mean. He was also enormous and very protective. He was the kind of wizard that made a witch feel precious and safe. Theo meshed with the cerebral, inquisitive side of her. He was brilliant and curious. He was the kind of wizard that would stimulate his witch, in more ways than one she was realizing. Hermione suspected Theo enjoyed intellectual stimulation in the bedroom as well.

Hermione allowed herself to imagine what it would be like to shag them. Theo seemed to know the importance of the brain, how to stimulate without any physical contact. He would tease with his words and the situation, making her feel naughty and taboo sometimes. Like in the empty classroom at Hogwarts last week, she'd never done that in front of anyone before. The fact that it seemed so forbidden had turned her on so much.

Marcus, on the other hand, was raw and physical. Marcus would worship her body, the sight, smell, and taste of it. Hermione thought a night with Marcus would be athletic and, at the end of it, she would feel entirely spent. She was sure that he would be a thorough lover.
Draco, however, was the kind of wizard who would find a way to keep his witch wanting more. He would be intense and the passion would be overwhelming. Hermione could easily see impulsively shagging him up against a wall. She thought Draco would push and challenge her sexually, just as he did with everything. He would introduce her to new things, which Hermione found exciting.

And then there was Adrian. Adrian would be a dream lover straight out of a romance novel. It would be sweet and emotional, filled with candlelight, deep kisses, and caresses. Sex with Adrian would be about their connection, about how they would put aside being two people and come together.

“You must be thinking about something delightful with that look on your face, Piccola.” Blaise’s teasing voice broke through her reverie. Hermione smiled at her friend and his gorgeous mother standing nearby.

“That’s the look of a witch thinking about a wizard,” Serafina observed.

“Or wizards,” Blaise said, laughing.

“Come, dear,” Serafina said, slipping her arm through Hermione’s. “Let’s have a bite to eat and talk.”

They led her to a little café on the corner where the three of them sat outside and had an early tea. Given Hermione’s late breakfast, she skipped lunch, so they ending up ordering quite a bit of food. Blaise wanted to go shopping for clothes and Hermione wanted to look at furniture. Serafina didn’t have a preference, saying that she was happy as long as she was shopping.

“You need new clothes for your public image,” Blaise argued. “You are ‘The Sorceress’ and you want to present yourself a certain way.”

“I have nice clothes,” Hermione defended, taking another scone and small sandwich. “And I only want to present myself in one way, as myself.”

“You will be yourself,” Blaise insisted. “You will be strong, beautiful, intelligent, compassionate, and fair. You will be understanding and sympathetic, but also tough and decisive. People already have an image of you from the war. You are part of the Golden Trio, Harry Potter’s best friend and war heroine. Many people feel that without your assistance, your intelligence, Harry never would’ve won. Now you just need to show the other sides of you. You aren’t a sidekick, you are the hero. You aren’t the brains behind the sword, you are the sword. You aren’t the plucky friend, who watches the hero go off with the sexy witch into the sunset. You are the sexy witch. You are squarely in the spotlight now, Piccola, and you need to embrace it.”

Hermione sighed. It was so at odds with everything she ever wanted; the quiet, cozy life where she was treated like everyone else and left alone to just live as she wished. Here Blaise was, telling her she had to embrace the celebrity. She looked at Serafina for her opinion.

“All I know is that you will be watched and scrutinized whether you like it or not,” Serafina said, sipping her tea. “People will be interested in whom you are, what you do, and in the people with who you spend time. If you were a Muggle, you would be offered your own reality television program. How you choose to present yourself will give you some measure of control over public perception. In my case, for example, many people are certain that I am a serial killer and that I’ve managed to escape getting caught for decades. That public opinion means that I have to take care. If I am having a bad day and want to be rude and snappish, I have to hold it in. It might not be fair that I can’t have an off day without people coming to the conclusion that I’m dangerous, but it’s my reality. Most people come away from an interaction with me thinking, ‘what a sweet witch, I
can’t believe she killed all her husband’s.’ That is my goal, to show people that I’m not some evil, scheming black widow. For the most part, I’m just myself, as you will be as well, but you have to realize that there is always someone watching when you are in public.”

Hermione sighed again. Blaise and Serafina had a good point. She’d been raked through the tabloids more times than she wanted to count and it was never pleasant. In the past, Hermione had ignored it all. She had more important things to do, like a war to fight and an ex-fiancé to forget, so she relied on time to make it blow over. Now, though, she was going to be a Sorceress – for the rest of her life. That wouldn’t blow over and she would always be a public figure.

“I see your point,” she conceded. “But I still think my clothes are fine. I do like new things though, and it can’t hurt to get a few more wardrobe staples. I also want to pop into some furniture shops as well as we come across them.”

“Deal,” Blaise grinned.

“Hermione, hello!” Hermione turned to see Penelope Clearwater coming out of the café, a very large take away box in her hands. “I don’t mean to interrupt your tea, I just wanted to say hello.”

“Hello, Penny,” Hermione said, smiling. She really did like the sweet Ravenclaw. “You remember Blaise from school, and this is his mother, Serafina Rousseau.”

Penelope nodded and happily greeted the others.

“That’s a lot of food you have there,” Hermione teased as Penelope balanced the box. “You must be famished.”

“Oh, right, no,” Penelope laughed. “It’s not all for me. I spent the afternoon shopping for the store, new things for the café mostly. I’ve sent Lisa on ahead to start setting up and another employee is coming in this evening to help so we can open up for breakfast tomorrow. Since I’m being such a taskmaster, I thought I would bring dinner. Do come by the store when you’re in Hogsmeade next!”

Sitting outside at the corner café set on two very busy streets turned out to be distracting to Hermione’s tea, not that it was entirely negative. She got to see several people she hadn’t seen since she’d returned. After Penelope, Lee Jordan stopped to say hello, followed by Ernie Macmillan. Grey Goyle passed by with Hannah Abbott, so they stopped to chat for a while. The most interesting interaction had to be Molly Weasley and her two shopping companions.

“Oh, Hermione!” Molly said upon seeing her. “How delightful to see you, dear!”

Molly held a shopping bag and next to her Ginny balanced many purchases. On the other side of Ginny was a thin witch with dark blonde hair who was surprisingly buxom in the chest, given how slim she was otherwise.

“Molly!” Hermione smiled at her surrogate wizarding mother. “It’s always good to see you. Do you know Blaise Zabini and his mother, Serafina Rousseau?”

“I can’t say as I’ve had the chance for formal introductions, but it’s very good to meet you,” Molly greeted. “You know my daughter Ginny of course. And this is Ginger, Ronald’s girlfriend.”

“Oh, I’ve heard so much about you!” Hermione said, making Ginger’s eyes go wide slightly. Hermione had no idea what the other witch thought about her, if she thought about her at all, but it was always awkward to meet your boyfriend’s ex-girlfriend for the first time. At least Ron wasn’t there, which would’ve certainly made it worse. “It’s nice to finally meet you, to have a face to go
with a name. And Ginny, two days in a row we’ve run into each other. We really have to get together on purpose when your schedule allows.”

“You should come by the Burrow soon,” Molly interjected while Ginny nodded. “Maybe for Sunday dinner if you can manage it. I know these rituals you have to do take a lot out of you.”

“That would be lovely,” Hermione agreed. “Oh! I’ve bought a house of my own just today. You and Arthur must come to see it, maybe in a week or so, after I’ve cleaned it up a bit.”

“You know we’d love to, whenever you’re ready for us,” Molly smiled. Molly and Ginny said goodbye, but Ginger just waved, and the three witches went back on their way.

After they left the café, Blaise led them to a series of upscale boutiques. Serafina and he had wonderful taste and their recommendations were impeccable. In one shop, Hermione found a half dozen dresses that she couldn’t pass up. Another shop had the most elegant looking trousers and shirts that still managed to be comfortable. She did find those lacy, frilly knickers that Draco had requested in yet another shop. Blaise and Serafina did their fair share of purchasing as well. All of the places Blaise took them sold menswear, even the shop with the knickers.

They did find several places that sold furniture and other home décor. Hermione found a headboard she loved. It was silvery blue tufted satin and timeless looking. She made a note of it and asked the shop to hold it for her, since the house was much too dirty. A pretty thing like that bed would need a clean space. Hermione also found other pieces she liked and made a note of those as well.

Between all the stores, it became much later than any of them realized. While trying on shoes, Hermione noticed that they were the only ones in the shop. The clerk reluctantly informed her that they’d closed half an hour ago, but she insisted that they stay and continue shopping. After all, they’d only browsed shoes and accessories. There was an entire clothing section they hadn’t even seen. It seemed so important to the shop staff that they stay, Hermione didn’t have the heart to leave. They all ended up purchasing more than they needed to make it up to the clerks for staying late.

Hermione was exhausted and surprised she hadn’t noticed the time. They had been shopping for over five hours! She was never one for long shopping sprees. Usually, she got tired of carrying around her purchases. Serafina and Blaise, however, always requested that the shop staff box up their purchases and deliver them to Blaise’s townhouse where one of his House-elves would receive it. Hermione had never thought to ask such a thing, but no one seemed to mind. In fact, shopkeepers and clerks tended to fall over themselves to cater to Blaise and his mother. It was clear that the extremely wealthy pair was widely known for their uninhibited spending habits. Serafina also explained that she and Blaise were frequently photographed for tabloids and the society or gossip sections of newspapers, so some shops got free advertising that way. When the shop staff recognized Hermione, the deference and arse kissing intensified. Hermione didn’t hate it, necessarily, but she didn’t like it either.

The three collected their purchases from that last shop themselves and Apparated back to Blaise’s townhouse, Serafina taking Hermione side-along. It was after ten o’clock, but they hadn’t eaten since three. They had a late dinner and Hermione decided to take Blaise up on his offer to stay in his guest room. Serafina had her own room in the townhouse, which she used with regularity. She had a house on the Southern coast of England, but liked staying with Blaise sometimes. Hermione knew that Theo must have had a hard day, dealing with the explosion at his lab, and she didn’t want to have to wake him to get through the Nott Castle wards. Blaise was authorized to Floo directly into the castle, but Hermione wasn’t yet.
Blaise showed her to an elegant, but masculine, guest room and gave her a quick tour of the room and attached bath. Between Blaise, Hermione, and his two House-elves, they managed to get all of her shopping bags and boxes to her room as well. Blaise brought her a set of his pajamas to wear to bed, altering them with his wand so the top and bottom should fit.

“I’ve hardly slept by myself in the past week,” Hermione commented. “It’s almost strange now.”

“I would offer to keep you company, purely platonically of course,” Blaise grinned, “but I think such a thing would get me hexed by one or more wizards.”

“I’m sure I can manage on my own,” Hermione chuckled.

Blaise gave her a kiss on the cheek and they said goodnight. Hermione changed into the emerald green silk pajamas and got comfortable in the large bed. It did really feel strange to sleep entirely alone. She chided herself just a little. While she promised herself to make the most of her time with her wizards while she could, she couldn’t become reliant on them. She wouldn’t always have them and she had to remember that. Hermione reminded herself that she was a strong, independent witch, who was used to being on her own. Still, she sighed wistfully and thought about how much nicer it would be to have at least one of them with her as she fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Next - Nesting & elves
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer - don't own Harry Potter
Now - Houses & elves

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Marcus flew his broom over Hermione’s property in the watery dawn light. He’d woken up slightly before the sun rose, which wasn’t entirely unusual for him. Marcus liked to run in the mornings and this morning he felt particularly restless. Rather than running, he dressed in warm flying gear. Marcus’ father came into the kitchen while he was drinking a quick cup of tea and eating a light breakfast. He explained where he was going so early and his father offered to join him.

Hermione had bought herself a large piece of land, but Marcus and his father covered all of it. There were basic wards set up around the house, but they weren’t complicated, and there was nothing preventing people from crossing into her property. Marcus and his father landed in the back gardens, which were in disrepair like the rest of the place.

“How do you propose Hermione to use this land?”

“Hermione has a lot of good land here,” his father observed, setting down his broom. “The stream is blocked in several places and will need to be cleared. The small lake front could use some attention too, especially if she wants to use the beach.”

“I’m sure these gardens are infested with gnomes,” Marcus said, looking around. “I saw some substantial Augurey nests too, which isn’t really bad, but will be annoying when the rains come and those blasted birds cry. There are probably Bowtruckles, Fairies, and Dugbogs all over as well.”

“There’s a lot of potential here,” his father noted. “It’s good land with plenty of space.”

Marcus pulled a small bag of scones out of his pocket and offered some to his father. They ate and Marcus told him about Adrian’s idea. The four wizards had met up at Malfoy Manor the night before. Theo had gone there, exhausted and quite messy from trying to sort through the explosion, to talk to Draco about the impact of the disaster on their work. Adrian found Marcus and took him over there as well, so they could talk. They all agreed that fixing up the house so Hermione could at least stay there the coming weekend would be the best gift they could get her. Adrian and Draco arranged for pest control and repair wizards to come out to the house. A veritable army of House-elves was also supposed to descend upon the area as well. Just as Marcus was telling his father about the elf invasion, one of the Flint family elves popped into the garden next to them.

“How did you get past the wards?” Marcus’ father wondered.

“The elves are not worrying about such things. It was only taking a few seconds to go through. The
impressive Mister Nott, his house is taking minutes to get into.”

Marcus wondered if Theo’s dad had ever talked to their House-elves about wards. The little creatures didn’t seem to find them at all daunting.

“How is it going inside?” Marcus wondered. “Will it take long to clean?”

“We will be finished cleaning today, Master. Elves is not lazy. The first floor is being done in the next two hours, upstairs by tea time, and then attics and cellar by dark.”

Mipsy looked a little offended at the idea that it may take them some time to get the old house spic and span. Marcus just chuckled and shook his head. He always thought House-elves were a queer lot.

Marcus gave his broom to his father to take home and Apparated directly to Blaise’s house. Blaise had sent Theo an owl late last night, letting him know Hermione wouldn't be returning to the castle, so he didn’t worry.

Marcus strode into Blaise's dining room, his eyes automatically searching out his witch. She was just sitting down and Marcus glimpsed the tight black leather trousers she wore.

"Good morning, princess," he grinned. "Did you wear leather for me today?"

He bent down and kissed her sweet, plump lips. She always tasted good to him, like no one else. He sat in the chair next to her, resting his arm over the back of her chair. His fingers toyed absently with the soft fabric of the sleeve on her loose pink sweater. It was soft, like a baby rabbit.

"Good morning to you, too," Blaise called out from the other side of the table, pretending to be annoyed. Marcus gave him a nod. If Blaise's mother was there, she hadn't come down yet. It was early still.

"I don't really have any clothes here," Hermione explained, leaning into Marcus with a contented sigh. "I just have the things I bought last night. I'm meeting Susan at the house this afternoon and leather pants seemed the most practical option I had. I mostly bought dresses and accessories."

"And lingerie," Blaise smirked. "Don't forget all the lacy knickers you bought."

"I didn't buy that many knickers," she defended. "Serafina was quite opinionated about what lingerie is necessary for a witch, which is a lot apparently. I still didn't buy a third of her must-have pieces."

"I'll take you back for those 'must-have pieces' another day," Marcus said simply. Hermione chuckled and rolled her eyes.

The House-elf brought breakfast for everyone. They'd seen Marcus, even if he hadn't seen them. They talked and Hermione read the paper. As before, she was on the cover. There was a photograph of Hermione, Serafina, and Blaise having lunch and another of them talking to Mrs. Weasley. Marcus recognized the two witches with her as the slaggy daughter and Ron's girlfriend, who he sometimes took to Quidditch events. In the photo, Hermione looked animated and genuinely happy to see them. No one could accuse her of being bitter about losing that waste of a Weasley ex-fiancé she had.

"Had you met Weasley's... girlfriend before?” Marcus wondered aloud.

"I believe her title would be his 'Baby Mama,' as the Yanks say it,” Blaise interjected.
"No, I hadn't ever met Ginger before," Hermione said, giving Blaise a disapproving look. "I heard about her a little bit from Harry and Pansy; and then again from Molly, Arthur, and George. She actually didn't even say anything when we met."

"I'm pretty sure I slept with her once, maybe twice," Marcus said. He didn't want Hermione thinking of witches he'd been with before, but if she was going to socialize with this Ginger witch it may be pertinent information. "She was a Quidditch groupie for years. I don't really remember her to be honest. I shagged a lot of groupies and I wasn't concerned with getting to know them. I do vaguely remember that she was a bit unhinged."

"Unhinged?" Hermione asked, brow furrowed.

"She worshiped Quidditch players, especially the famous ones," Marcus shrugged.

"Loads of kids and adults worship Quidditch players," Hermione argued. "They put posters up, buy jerseys, and bother them for autographs. When Viktor and I went out, someone always wanted to say hello to him even after he retired."

"All I know is that I recall her as being particularly mental about it," Marcus explained. "She would've done anything I asked of her, no matter what it was or whether she wanted to do it or not. A groupie can get hurt with an attitude like that. Not everyone is as... wholesome and honorable as I am."

Blaise snorted, but Marcus was being serious. Sure, he loved to shag and he'd done a lot of it, in private and in semi-public, with one partner and more than one. He knew of some wizards that were into some dangerous things. One fairly prominent Chaser for a well respected team liked to choke witches until they passed out and then have sex with them. There were wizards who could accidentally or purposefully hurt a groupie who was too naive or eager to please. He couldn't really recall Ginger specifically, but he bet she was the latter.

"Well, if she wasn't equipped to handle it, then I'm glad she got out of that lifestyle before anything bad happened," Hermione said firmly.

"She ended up having Weasel spawn," Blaise said, a sour look on his face. "I'd say something bad did happen."

"Hey, I was with Ron for over a year!" Hermione pointed out. "He isn't all bad."

"The youngest Mr. Weasley is a true dunderhead," Snape said from the doorway, alerting them all to his presence. "I've always chalked up your poor judgment to posttraumatic stress from the war."

Hermione rolled her eyes at Snape's comment, but Marcus thought he was right on track. Snape and Hermione exchanged a brief kiss on the cheek and their former professor sat down. Soon, Serafina glided into the room and bid everyone good morning.

An owl came in for Hermione that Marcus recognized as a Malfoy family owl. It turned out Draco and Theo would be meeting with Aurors all morning. The explosion looked like deliberate arson, not an accident, which was disturbing. Draco also invited Hermione over to the Manor for dinner that night, so he and Theo could spend some time with her.

"But who did it?" Hermione wondered as she wrote a note back, accepting the dinner invitation.

"The Malfoys are a powerful family," Serafina reported.

"Some people still think they didn't really reform and help end the war," Snape supplied.
"Or it could be a disgruntled employee or business contact," Marcus asserted. "They don't make millions of Galleons for winning popularity contests. If they get a good deal, somebody else may have got a bad deal."

Hermione looked upset.

"They're used to it, princess," Marcus soothed. "Lucius, Narcissa, and Draco can handle themselves better than most."

"Their association with you is good public relations for them," Snape noted casually, sipping his tea. "If the Sorceress approves of them that will be enough for everyone."

Hermione still looked upset, but there wasn't much to be done about it. The Malfoys were who they were, which had definite bonuses for them, but also some serious negatives. If Draco and his family were going to be part of her life, then Hermione had to learn what that meant. Just like it meant that she would learn to deal with Nott Sr.'s eccentric behavior, with Arabella Pucey's well-intentioned and usually helpful assistance, and with his own parents, who were more gregarious than Marcus would choose to be himself.

The rest of the morning was sufficiently distracting though. Before Marcus had arrived, Hermione owled members of her research team and invited them to Blaise's house for discussion of the second ritual. The old Japanese fellow showed up with his Russian student, who Marcus could only just tolerate. Selma and Bouchard came over as well as Percy and that annoying Figgelowe witch. Marcus had gone through the ritual with her the day before, so he only paid partial attention.

Bouchard and Snape were discussing the finer points of the potion Hermione would have to drink. Selma was working through Arithmancy equations for the different variables. Figgelowe was supposed to be helping her, but from what Marcus could hear Selma was frustrated at having to correct the other witch's work. Marcus didn't care as long as Figgelowe stayed away from him.

Hermione, Kobayashi, and the Russian were discussing all the aspects of the ritual and thinking philosophically about the end goal, which was to meld Hermione's magic with her mind. Blaise and his mother were talking about publicity and crowd control. Marcus was interested in the latter and in anything having to do with his princess' safety. Percy was going from group to group, planning and making sure everyone had what they needed.

When lunchtime arrived, Percy and Figgelowe left. Percy would meet Hermione at her house later that afternoon, but they wouldn't have to see Figgelowe until the next day. She would spend her afternoon tracking down supplies.

Figgelowe had been watching Marcus like a hawk. He was sure if he'd gone to use the loo, she would've followed him. As far as Marcus was concerned, they had nothing to say to each other and never had. Blaise provided lunch to the rest of them and they had a nice, companionable meal.

Snape suggested Hermione have another Occlumency exercise when she was done eating. The noise and chatter from the others eating would be a good distraction. Snape also suggested that someone randomly deliver a stinging hex or something else uncomfortable to Hermione, since she may have to deal with physical discomfort during the ritual. Marcus scowled and the other wizards in the room looked extremely reluctant to volunteer for that job. No one wanted to hurt Hermione.

“Oh, you all are such babies,” Selma huffed, rolling her eyes. “She’s not fragile.”

Marcus frowned while Hermione practiced her Occlumency. She seemed to do well, even with Selma and, later, Serafina, sending uncomfortable hexes her way. He recognized spells for stinging
and itching hexes. They also blew strong wind around her, made her hot, and made her cold. The two witches were much more creative and devilish than Marcus could’ve been. Apparently, it was just what Hermione needed though. She worked hard and kept Snape out for longer than she had the day before.

Snape declared her mind in excellent shape and told her to get out and do something else totally unrelated to the ritual for a while. That was their cue to Apparate over to Hermione’s new house. Marcus took her side-along while everyone else went about his or her business. Hermione didn’t want to show the house to too many people until it was cleaned up. She had no idea that the house was already substantially cleaner than it had been just that morning. Hermione was meeting her designer, Susan Bones, but she didn’t know that Adrian would be there as well. She thought he was in court all day, but it had just been the early morning.

From the outside, Hermione's new house didn't look different, but the gardens and yards would come later. Hermione held onto Marcus' hand and led him through her front door. The change inside was impressive and Marcus had a new appreciation for the house right away. The stone floors gleamed and the walls were dust-free. Now Marcus was able to notice the silvery blue of the stone and the detailed molding on the walls. The large crystal chandelier was much brighter without the cobwebs and dust as well.

"What happened?" Hermione whispered, looking around wide-eyed.

"We had it cleaned for you," Adrian said from a doorway. Hermione whirled around to look at him, still holding Marcus' hand.

"Do you like it?" Marcus asked. Some witches could be funny about doing things themselves, but he thought she would appreciate this. "We wanted you to be able to see underneath all the grime when you plan the house."

"I love it," Hermione beamed. She threw her arms around Marcus and gave him an enthusiastic kiss.

"Hey, it was my idea," Adrian teased, coming to stand next to them. With Marcus still gripping her waist, she turned and gave Adrian an equally intense kiss.

"Oh! I'm so sorry! I'll just... um, wait outside."

Marcus turned to see the witch Hermione hired to help her fix up the house. Susan Bones was supposed to coordinate and implement everything Hermione wanted.

"No, stay, Susan!" Hermione called to the retreating witch, halting her progress. Hermione gave Marcus a little shove so that he would release her, so he did, reluctantly. Hermione stepped away from the two wizards and waved for Susan to return.

"Please come in," Hermione continued. "You’re right on time. Do you remember Adrian Pucey and Marcus Flint from school? You may have seen Marcus lurking about yesterday, but I didn't have a chance to introduce you to everyone. This is Susan Bones."

"Yes, I do remember." Susan smiled. "It’s nice to see you again, Mr. Flint and Mr. Pucey."

"Call us Marcus and Adrian," Ades volunteered.

Marcus surveyed the witch. She was average height and had a nice body. Her dark red hair was braided and bundled up on her head. In the past, she may have been someone he looked at twice. Now though, he was concerned with whether this witch would make his princess happy. Marcus
vaguely recognized her from school, but her last name was very familiar. She was probably related to the Bones person who worked in the Ministry all those years ago who Voldemort had killed. Nearly everyone had been personally touched by the war in some way.

"This looks to be in much better shape than I thought it would be, given what you said yesterday," Susan noted, looking around the front hall.

"It was horrid," Adrian reported. "We are having it cleaned for Hermione. The first and second floors are clean. They are now working in the cellar and attics."

"Who is working?" Hermione asked.

"House-elves," Marcus reported. She began to look a little disapproving. "Before we get a lecture, it was strictly voluntary. The Nott and Pucey homes are almost entirely deserted. They jumped at the chance to help 'the wonderful, most giving Sorceress.' There are a few volunteers from Malfoy Manor and Flint Lodge that wanted to come bask in your glory as well."

"As long as it was voluntary," Hermione said, digging her elbow into Marcus' ribs.

"I had a pest control wizard out a few hours ago as well," Adrian reported. "There was quite a Doxy infestation in the attic, but that was it for the house. Your gardens are teeming with gnomes, but most of the outer buildings were okay; just some minor issues."

Hermione led Susan through the house. Marcus knew elves excelled at housework, but the change was amazing. Every nook and cranny was immaculate. There weren't any cobwebs or specks of dust. There was some furniture, but not much, and it was also clean. They came upon the elves in the cellar and attic. They were thrilled to see Hermione and then became almost delirious from her praise.

After walking through the house, they settled at a small table with mismatched chairs in one of the drawing rooms. Hermione pulled out a small scroll from her bag and Adrian enlarged it for her. The parchments were a map of the house, all four floors, and the entire grounds. Susan used a duplicating spell to make a copy, then she and Hermione began planning. Hermione informed the designer what function she wanted the rooms to serve. She, Ades, and Susan talked about wall colors, flooring, drapes, furniture, and other such things that were entirely boring to Marcus. Instead, he only half listened and studied the maps of the surrounding lands. Hermione had a very big place.

Percy Weasley arrived and interrupted, but it seemed to Marcus that they had already discussed everything to death. He probably didn't have the highest tolerance for interior design. As long as he was comfortable, it wasn't something he took much notice of.

Percy had used the influence of the Ministry to get Hermione’s house connected to the Floo network without having to wait. All she had to do was choose whom she wanted to grant access to. Hermione made a list and passed it to Percy so he could configure the Floo in her front hallway. Marcus saw that he, Ades, Draco, and Theo made the list, along with Harry and Pansy, Luna, McGonagall, Selma, and Snape.

"I've brought eight applicants from the displaced House-elf assistance program," Percy reported. Susan left to take measurements while Hermione selected House-elves.

"That's so many," Hermione observed. "Blaise only has two."

"Blaise only has a townhouse," Marcus argued. "You have this massive place. While it's just you
now, it won't be after the third ritual. You'll need at least four elves, depending on how much work on the grounds you want done. If you are going to have orchards or a large kitchen garden, then the outdoors could be the dedicated work of one elf by itself."

Hermione nodded, looking thoughtful. Marcus didn't really understand her reluctance at having House-elves. He heard that Muggles sometimes have people to clean their houses and take care of their children. Hermione would pay her elves as Muggles did with their servants, so what was the problem? Being Muggle-born, maybe she didn't know that the little creatures actually liked serving others. It made them proud and not letting them do things for you could be very insulting.

"I wouldn't want to overburden the elves," she acknowledged. "This is a big place to take care of."

"I was thinking you may hire between four or six elves," Percy offered. Adrian nodded his agreement. "Shall I bring them in?"

"One at a time," Hermione instructed.

What followed was a parade of elves the likes of which Marcus had never seen. The first was the smallest adult elf he’d ever encountered. She was dressed entirely in pink, from tiny tights on her legs to a little pink dress and a small pink beret. Her name was Nipsy and she had spent several decades attending to a single witch with no family. The witch had been editor of the European Journal of Arithmancy, so Nipsy could read, sort correspondence, as well as be a lady’s maid. She seemed like a sweet, knowledgeable little thing, but Marcus thought it would be hard for her to find a place. Not a lot of wizards wanted an elf who could read and may know more than they did about any subject.

The second elf was a gnarled old creature named Bobo. He wore a suit made out of what looked like burlap. It turned out Bobo only spoke German, but so did Ades and Marcus. Adrian's father took the family to Austria often. Marcus' parents enjoyed the Bavarian Alps in the winters, so they generally went skiing over Christmas. Bobo worked outside, primarily growing fruit and vegetables. The family he worked for sold the farmland for residential development, so they had no place for Bobo. He wasn't particularly civilized and he didn’t fit in well inside the home, but he knew a lot about agriculture.

The next was a pair of elves, Fancy and Dancy. Dancy was a juvenile elf and Fancy was his mother. The tiny baby elf was standing behind his mother, peeping out from behind her crisp checkered pinafore. The people that owned Fancy didn't want any more elves and were displeased when Fancy had a baby. House-elf children were freakishly self-sufficient, but they couldn’t work independently for several years. While Marcus always thought baby House-elves were a good investment, some wizards didn’t want to pay to feed and house an elf that wasn’t going to pull its own weight for some time. They gave Fancy clothes for herself and the baby, then put her out. Fancy still looked despondent over losing her place, which made Hermione clearly upset. Marcus was certain she would take in the pair; and if she ever found out who abandoned them, she would give them a piece of her mind.

Nobby came in next and he was the most put together elf Marcus had ever seen. He wore tiny trousers with a waistcoat and shoes with spats. Nobby held his head up high and looked entirely like a little gentleman. He was also quite tall and Marcus knew exactly why he didn't have a place to belong. He was probably part goblin, maybe a quarter, and not as naturally servile as a regular House-elf. Most wizards wouldn’t want an elf like that and it was probable that he’d been abandoned at birth. Hermione asked him questions and he spoke well, better than elves usually did. Nobby hadn't ever worked for a family or household before, but he had worked in housekeeping at the Ministry. Nobby could also read, write, and made sure all the supplies were ordered for his
floor at the Ministry. Hermione asked why he wanted to leave what sounded like a good job and Marcus could’ve sworn the big elf blushed. Nobby always wanted to work for a house, it was a big part of his elf nature, and he felt a longing to be part of family. Marcus knew that elves were intensely social, so it must’ve been hard for this one to have been on his own so much.

The next elf was a painfully shy looking female named Poppy. She was dressed in a bright floral smock and trembled just being in the room with the four people. Hermione knelt down in front of her and had Poppy turn her back to the others. His princess spoke in low, soothing tones and the elf’s responses were even quieter. From what Marcus caught, it seemed the shy little thing was given away by the wizards that owned her because they’d wanted a servant and Poppy was too shy to be around people. She inevitably spilled or did something wrong because she was so nervous. Poppy was quite ashamed. Hermione asked about her floral smock and Poppy admitted her love of flowers. Talking about flowers was the only time Poppy didn’t look entirely petrified.

A wildly colorful elf named Kiki came in next. This female was wearing every color of the rainbow. A red ribbon was tied around her head. Her sweater was yellow with orange stars, while her trousers were green and blue striped. Bright purple slippers were on her feet. Kiki cooked and kept the kitchens for a large family, most of whom perished in the war. She was placed at Hogwarts after that, but it was hard for Kiki to be one of many when she used to be in charge of the whole kitchen. Marcus thought this one would be very helpful to Hermione.

The last elf was a very young adult male named Frissy. He couldn’t have been considered an adult for more than a year. He was dressed in a kilt and vest. He looked embarrassed and had a hard time making any sort of eye contact. It turned out that Frissy had been abandoned in Scotland as a baby. Marcus would’ve guessed that he was in a similar position as Fancy and Dancy, but his mother either chose not to keep him or was not allowed to. He spent several years on his own, wild, before he was found and taken to the Ministry. Since then, Frissy was learning how to live with others. He seemed embarrassed because he had no skills. He didn’t grow up in a house or even with other elves to observe, so he didn’t know how to cook or clean. Marcus thought this elf would have a hard time being hired on anywhere. Who wants an elf that can’t do anything? Apparently, Hermione did.

“I can’t choose between them!” Hermione lamented after Frissy left the room. “They all need a place and I have a place that needs elves. How can I turn any one of them away?”

“Well, some of them clearly have issues,” Marcus pointed out. Hermione glared at him. “I’m not saying there is something wrong with them, just that there are obvious reasons why they have no place. Many wizards would consider Nipsy too smart for her own good. People don’t like smart elves.”

“Well, I do!” Hermione frowned.

“Bobo almost can’t be considered a House-elf,” Adrian pointed out. “He’s an outdoor elf.”

“I have loads of land for him,” Hermione countered.

“Nobby is clearly not purely elf,” Percy reported. “He’s most likely part Goblin. That makes many wizards uncomfortable. He won’t serve without question; he’ll have his own opinions and ideas.”

“As well he should,” Hermione huffed, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Poppy will be too shy to be of use around people and Frissy doesn’t know how to do anything at all,” Marcus pointed out. Again, Hermione glared at him. “I’m just pointing out the obvious, princess. I’m not saying you shouldn’t take them.”
“Well, I’m going to take them all,” Hermione said defiantly. Marcus chuckled. He knew she would. “Percy, can you call them all back in now.”

Percy nodded and went to get the elves. They all filed in behind him.

“Thank you all for coming today,” Hermione said. “I would like to hire all of you, if you are willing to come and work here. Let me tell you about the terms before you decide. Every Friday, you will be given a Galleon for the work you do here. You will be given a free day once a week, although we will have to coordinate a schedule so everyone is not off on the same day. There will be bedrooms for each of you in the attic. These are negotiable terms, as are your suggested duties. I’ll tell you each your duties and in return, you tell me if you accept, have any changes to these terms, and when you can start. Kiki, I’d like to start with you. I would like to hire you to cook and manage the kitchens.”

“That is being perfect, Missy Sorceress! I can be starting tonight,” Kiki beamed, but then she looked a little concerned. Hermione nodded to her encouragingly. “I is just… I can be sleeping in the cupboards. I is not needing a room upstairs.”

“I’m afraid I insist that all elves here have a proper room. You are all free elves and are entitled to your own space, at least a small place sleep and to store your clothes,” Hermione said. “But, if I recall, the kitchen has several attached pantries and storage rooms. May I convert one of the storage rooms to a bedroom for you so you can still be in the kitchen?”

Kiki nodded enthusiastically.

“Nobby, I’m afraid I have a lot to ask of you,” Hermione said seriously. “I’d like to put you in charge of the entire main floor, except the kitchen since that will be Kiki’s domain. That means you would keep the first floor clean and greet guests. I would also like you to be in charge of ordering household supplies, everything from cleaning products to food for the kitchen. You will need to coordinate with Kiki and the others on a regular basis to make sure everyone has what they need. In a way, you will have the most responsibility. As we get to know each other, and if you agree, I hope that you will be in charge of managing the household and making sure it runs smoothly.”

“It would be my honor, Madam,” Nobby bowed. “I appreciate your faith in my abilities. The wages and time off is acceptable, as are the accommodations. I need to gather my things and can begin tomorrow.”

“Bobo and Poppy, I would like the two of you to manage the grounds,” Hermione reported. Marcus translated what she said into German for Bobo. "Specifically, I'd want Bobo to be in charge of the orchards and kitchen gardens, while Poppy focuses on the flowers and decorative gardens. Since Poppy doesn't have a lot of experience working outdoors, I want Bobo to provide her with guidance. Is that acceptable?"

Poppy nodded quickly, a small smile on her face. She quietly murmured that she could move in that night and get started at dawn. Bobo was able to move in right away, but he was not comfortable sleeping in the house. Hermione reluctantly agreed to let him sleep in one of the old sheds, but she insisted on cleaning and renovating it in the near future.

"Fancy, I would like you and Dancy to work primarily on the second floor," Hermione told the pair. "It's a big job because there are a lot of rooms, but most of the twelve bedrooms will be unoccupied. You will also be in charge of the linens and laundry though."

"Yes, Missy Sorceress. Thank you, Missy Sorceress," Fancy said, managing a half smile. "I would
like to share a room with Dancy. He is young still."

"Of course." Hermione nodded before turning to the tiny elf in pink. "Nipsy, I would like you to be my personal assistant. You would help me on a daily basis, except on your day off, of course. You would help me organize the post, manage my library, and assist with my calendar. Is this agreeable to you?"

"Of course, Missy Sorceress." Nipsy smiled. "I have a few things to be packing and I can be coming first thing tomorrow."

"Lastly, Frissy," Hermione smiled, "I would like you to live here and assist the others. I understand you haven't had an opportunity to be around other elves and learn various skills. You will help Kiki with at least one meal a day and help Nobby clean a room on the first floor once day. That way you will learn to cook and clean. Once a week, you will help Fancy with laundry, Poppy with the flower gardens, and Bobo with the grounds, so you can learn those skills as well. Once a week, I want you to meet with Nipsy or Nobby to learn how to read. In fact, I encourage any of you interested in reading to learn how. I know it's a lot to do, Frissy, but it would be the best way to learn. After you become proficient in these things, we can discuss changing your duties as needed."

"Thank you, Missy," Frissy smiled. "I will be learning everything and making Missy proud. I will be starting tonight!"

"Wonderful!" Hermione smiled at the elves. "Thank you all so much for coming. I look forward to working with you. I don’t have a place to sleep here, so I won’t be staying the night, but I will see you all tomorrow."

Percy and the elves filed out and Marcus pulled Hermione onto his lap. He buried his face in the crook of her neck, inhaling her scent. She would have to leave soon if she was going to be on time for dinner at Malfoy Manor. He and Adrian got to play with their witch the night before last. It was wonderful to spend time with his princess. Marcus knew how cranky he got when he didn’t have a chance to be around her for a while, so he knew how Draco and Theo must feel. Having had to deal with an explosion and Aurors for two days now, his friends needed the balm that was their witch.

Adrian sat close to them and brought Hermione’s hand up to his face. She smiled at the other wizard and he pressed her palm into his cheek.

“Happy, kitten?” Ades asked.

“Very much so.” She smiled.

“Oh, sorry - again,” Susan said from the doorway. “I’ll come back later.”

“Come in, Susan,” Hermione called, chuckling.

“If you are going to spend time here, you’re going to have to get used to Hermione being surrounded,” Adrian said, flashing his winning smile at the other witch. Marcus watched her instantly smile back and almost involuntarily swoon. Ades had that affect on witches.

“If it makes you uncomfortable, it’s okay to say it,” Hermione kindly pointed out. “Not everyone likes public displays of affection.”

“No, it doesn’t bother me. I just don’t want to intrude on something private,” Susan explained.

“When it gets private, we’ll let you know, and you can leave,” Marcus informed her. Hermione smacked him lightly on the arm. Maybe it sounded a bit rude, but he was serious. They had
precious little time with their witch and he wasn’t going to waste any of it.

“I’d really like to stay here tomorrow night if at all possible, Susan,” Hermione said.

“I think it should be possible, pending anything unforeseen occurring,” Susan nodded, pulling out her notebook. “The house is clean and ready. There are some things to fix, but nothing too big. I can get the crew in here tomorrow to update the kitchen and your bathroom as we talked about. I can also get you room painted at least and have that bed you found delivered.”

“I also want one of the storage rooms in the kitchen converted to a bedroom for a House-elf,” Hermione instructed. “And I’ll need five more elf rooms in the attic. I know most elves aren’t used to having a room, but I insist that they be real bedrooms. They each need at least a cupboard for their clothes, a bed, some shelving, and a chair. Two of the elves can read and write, so they may want desks as well. One of the five bedrooms is for two elves, a mother, and her young son, so they will need furniture for both. Some of them will be here tonight, but they can find places to sleep. I would like their rooms to be done soon though.”

Susan nodded and began writing notes.

“You have to get going, kitten, or you’ll be late,” Adrian pointed out, somewhat reluctantly. “We can stay here with Susan and answer any questions about the elves.”

“Thank you,” Hermione smiled. She leaned over and gave Adrian a sweet kiss goodbye before turning in Marcus’ lap to do the same. Marcus didn’t release her when she first tried to pull back. He wasn’t one for quick, perfunctory goodbye kisses. There was nothing wrong with giving his witch something to think about when they were apart. When he did let her go, his princess looked breathless and dizzy, so he felt he’d done the job correctly.

Marcus walked her to the front hall and watched her Floo away to Malfoy Manor.

“She is most definitely going to be staying here tomorrow night,” Adrian was telling Susan when Marcus returned. “Draco, Marcus, Theo, and I want to give her that. We want her to be able to move in here tomorrow night and be perfectly comfortable, not just with the bare minimum. That means her bedroom will be entirely finished, as will the attached bath.”

“The kitchen needs to be functional as well,” Marcus added as he sat back in his seat. “To move in tomorrow, she will need one of the sitting rooms finished as well as the dining room and one of the main floor bathrooms.”

“That’s a lot of work to be done in a day,” Susan said, her brow furrowing. The witch was obviously figuring and planning in her head. “The plumbing needs some fixing, the flooring needs to be replaced upstairs, and all the rooms you are talking about need paint, furniture, drapes, and a number of other things.”

“At my request, Selma Turan has arranged for her things to be shipped from Turkey. She left most everything there in storage when she came,” Adrian reported. “It will be here tomorrow morning first thing. Two of the Nott family elves are bringing over her belongs from the Castle tonight. Two of the Pucey family elves are fetching the things she left at Spinner’s End tonight as well. Hire extra workers to get everything done tomorrow and send us the bill. Money is not a concern. If you need to pay the plumbers extra to get more on the job and work overtime, then do it.”

“Also, the elves she’s hired will all be here by tomorrow,” Marcus said. “Put them to work. If you need more help, we can get you more elves as well. Most of the rooms don’t need to be touched yet, but she will need those rooms I listed. When we say we want this place ready, we mean ready
down to the last detail. Her room will be set up and the bed will be made. There will be towels for the bathroom, food in the kitchen, and all the supplies she will need.”

“Got it,” Susan said, sitting up a bit straighter. “I’ll get it done.”

Adrian smile and Marcus nodded. He appreciated competence and Susan seemed ready to rise to the challenge.

Chapter End Notes

Next - Draco & Theo
Draco caught Hermione as she stumbled out of the Floo.

"I love it when you fall into my arms, Granger," Draco grinned. His witch looked lovely in a thin, pink sweater that draped her small frame. She also looked a bit wicked in those leather trousers. He leaned in and gave her a proper hello kiss. Draco had missed her. "I'm so glad you could make it over."

"I'm glad you invited me," she smiled. "I know you and Theo have been busy with the accident at work."

"It was no accident," Theo said, walking into the room. He spun Hermione out of Draco's arms and pulled her close. "I am so happy to see you, Mi. You being here already makes me less cross and frustrated."

"I'm sorry about your lab," Hermione said, her brow furrowed.

"Kiss me, Mi, and make me forget all about it," Theo ordered in a tone that Draco found a little surprising. His friend sounded very stern and brusque.

Out of the four of them, Theo was the most soft-spoken and easy going. Hermione quickly did as he said though. She pressed herself tighter against him and pulled his face to hers. Draco watched her kiss him hard and passionately. One of Theo's hands gripped her arse hard and she groaned. Draco moaned softly to himself. It was so arousing to watch. He hoped Hermione was planning to stay the night. If she did, Theo would too and the three of them could have some fun.

Draco didn't want to interrupt, but he felt his restraint slipping. He desperately wanted to join them and now wasn't the time.

"We better go to the dining room before Mother or Father comes looking for us," Draco sighed. The couple broke apart and Hermione stepped back. She smoothed her clothing for a moment and caught her breath. Theo wrapped an arm around her waist and Draco took her hand.

The dining room was formally arranged. Despite his telling his mother that formalities were not necessary, Narcissa refused to have 'the Sorceress' over for dinner for the first time using everyday dishware and pedestrian decor. As a result, the silk tablecloth and fine china were laid out. The tablecloth was a soft jade green and the dishes were bone white with a sterling silver edge all around. An inlay of bright green malachite depicted a snake biting its own tail at the center of each dish. The crystal stemware and silverware gleamed. Fresh flowers in shades of ivory and green along with ivory candles in silver sticks also dressed the table. Draco's parents were standing at the far end of the room, talking and enjoying their before dinner drinks.
"This looks so fancy," Hermione whispered to Draco. "Am I underdressed?"

"Mother just wanted an excuse to use the good china," Draco assured her. "You look wonderful. Besides, leather is right for any occasion, Granger."

Hermione rolled her eyes at his teasing tone. His parents saw them arrive and graciously greeted Hermione. They all had a drink and talked for a moment. Hermione was rightly curious about their day, but Draco and Theo had already talked the subject out - with staff at Malfoy Industries, with Aurors, and with the press. The whole thing made Draco bloody angry. He loved being a Malfoy, but not everyone liked them and he knew it.

"It appears as if someone brought in an unstable potion of some kind and left it in my work space," Theo reported. "It was probably left there because I wasn't in the office all week. That way, the bomber had less chance of being detected going in and out, and the potion wouldn't have been noticed until it exploded and it was too late."

Hermione nodded. It all made sense.

"Was there any residue or fumes to identify the original potion?" she asked. Draco smirked at his witch. Granger would always be a problem solver.

"I wore Bubble-Head and Impervius Charms into the lab, so I don't know if there was a smell," Theo explained. Although he knew Theo was smart, Draco was sometimes extra impressed by his friend's intelligence. The lab had been closed off as soon as the Aurors arrived and the injured personnel were taken to St. Mungos. The Aurors were still waiting for the explosives team when Theo arrived and no one had even been inside the lab. Harry was there as part of the Auror team and he told Draco how Theo scoffed at the Aurors, cast charms to protect himself, and shouldered his way into his lab to survey the damage.

"It was hard to determine the presence of residue because it was a mess, but I took a sample from what appeared to be the epicenter," Theo continued. "I managed to identify wine, Belladonna, and Ashwinder egg fragments. I don't keep any of those things in my lab, although one of my assistants is working with Belladonna and another with Ashwinder skin, but not eggs."

"Those are each ingredients that factor in a lot of different potions, but one thing they are all used for together is love potions," Hermione observed, clearly thinking it over.

"Love potions aren't supposed to explode," Lucius observed, brow arched.

"No, that would defeat the purpose of course," Hermione said, shaking her head. "What's the point of making someone love you just to blow them to bits? Nevertheless, some poorly made love potions can explode. Amortentia without the water, for example, will catch on fire."

"Plenty of people have been known to dabble in love potions when they have no skill for it," Narcissa nodded. "Of course, they don't achieve their goals. They usually just cause a mess."

"Why would someone leave a love potion in an empty lab? There's no one there to take it," Draco argued. "Those kinds of potions usually have a short shelf-life. They become ineffective if they aren't ingested almost right away."

"I'm not saying that was the intent," Hermione huffed. "It's more logical to assume that the bomber just combined volatile ingredients. I just think it's strange that the combination they used also contained key love potion ingredients."

They talked briefly about the two research assistants that were injured. Both would be fine and
would likely be back to work Monday.

Dinner was announced and the five of them sat down to eat. Draco's parents sat at each end of the table and they put Hermione on one side, making Draco and Theo both sit across from her.

Draco knew his parents would show their best at this dinner and he was right. The starter was roast scallops with cucumber ketchup and roasted cucumber. That was followed by a chilled sweet pea velouté with trout roe. Of course, Draco thought it was all a little overly fancy, as evidenced by his mother calling the soup a velouté.

They asked Hermione all about her new house and she gushed about it. She thanked Theo and Draco profusely for arranging to have the whole house cleaned. Draco told her she could thank them properly later and his mother sent him a mild stinging hex, telling him to mind his manners at the table. Both Hermione and Theo laughed. Even his father unsuccessfully tried to hide a wry grin.

The soup was followed by a trio of lamb with roasted hazelnuts and wilted spring greens. Hermione engaged Draco’s parents in discussion as they ate, asking about them and their lives. Draco’s parents enjoyed speaking about themselves, their businesses and charities, so it wasn’t hard to keep them talking. After the lamb, they had a light salad to cleanse the palate and then one of Draco’s favorites, chocolate soufflé with cherry ice cream.

They all lingered over dessert with coffee before they retired to the lounge for after dinner drinks. Theo and Draco each sat so close to Hermione on the couch that she wouldn’t have been able to move if she wanted to. After exactly half an hour and two drinks, Narcissa invited Hermione to stay the night, as a good hostess in her social circle would do. Hermione accepted, causing Draco's imagination to take flight. He'd been thinking of what he wanted to do to his witch ever since she accepted his invitation for dinner that morning. Now, he could think of nothing else. His draped his arm over her shoulders and let his fingers dance up and down her arm. Theo had a hand on her knee and was tracing shapes with his index finger. When Draco started paying attention, he saw that Theo was spelling out some very explicit things on her leg. Hermione obviously caught on as well, since she was blushing and her breathing was speeding up slightly.

After a socially appropriate quarter of an hour more, Narcissa dramatically hid a yawn behind her hand.

"Oh, excuse me," Narcissa smiled. "It may be time for us older people to retire. I hope you don't mind, Hermione. Draco can make sure you have everything you need. I'm sure Draco and Theo can keep you entertained until you are ready to sleep."

"Of course they will," Lucius chuckled, offering Narcissa his arm and leading her out of the room.

"Sleep well," Narcissa said.

"You too," Hermione called after her.

As soon as his parents were out of sight, Draco pounced on his witch and captured her lips with his. He groaned at the taste of her. Theo hauled her into his lap and Draco slid over as well, his lips still attached to hers. Theo's hands roamed over her torso and Hermione arched into his hands.

"We missed you, Mi," Theo whispered huskily in her ear, nipping at her ear.

Draco wanted more and pressed himself against her. Theo's hand snuck between them and palmed her breast. Draco ran his hand up and down the soft leather covering her thigh, occasionally teasing
the juncture between her legs. Hermione had one hand behind her, grasping at Theo's shirt. Her other hand went right to Draco's groin and he absolutely appreciated her enthusiasm. Only the fabric of his trousers stood between him and her hot little hand. Whenever he was around her, all Draco wanted to do was tear off their clothes and shag - no matter where they were. Everything was just so hot. He felt like he was on fire and he didn’t want to wait.

"Hold up," Theo ordered firmly, grasping Hermione's wrist and removing it from Draco's cloth covered cock. Then he pulled Hermione more firmly into his lap, breaking her kiss with Draco.

"Hey!" Draco protested, reaching for his witch.

"No," Theo said sternly. Draco recognized the commanding, in charge tone from when Theo ordered Hermione to kiss him earlier. Again, he wondered where this was coming from. Draco looked at his friend with confusion while Hermione leaned into him, clearly deferring to him. "Hermione has a bone to pick with you, Draco."

Draco wondered what the bloody hell Theo was talking about. Even Hermione looked puzzled.

"I believe punishment is still in order for Draco hexing Sasha at the pub last week," Theo said seriously. "Draco was naughty, Mi, and you must correct him."

Draco sat back a bit, his eyes going wide. Was his shy, bookish friend suggesting that their witch punish him? Draco felt himself get even harder at the thought. He knew Theo had hidden depths, but his friend was never one to go into detail about his sex life. Draco should've figured it out though. He always thought sex games required thinking and a certain intelligence to really work. When he'd shagged stupid witches, they never got the subtle parts right, were never able to push and pull him to that exquisite place he wanted to find.

"I don't know how to..." Hermione trailed off, blushing.

"You do know," Theo scolded. "Draco is a handful and he always will be. You know how to handle him, Mi. What does Draco need?"

"He needs to be punished," Hermione whispered, rubbing against Theo, but staring at Draco.

"How, Mi?" Theo asked sternly. He pinched and tugged slightly on her nipple through her shirt and Hermione whimpered, closing her eyes and pressing herself backwards into Theo even more. “Be a good girl and answer my question, Mi.”

"He needs deprivation," Hermione finally groaned. “He needs to be worked up, but then have to wait until he has permission to find his release.”

“Draco, does that sound fair?" Theo asked, looking to him. His friend was still fondling their witch roughly. Draco could see a twinkle of mischief and amusement in Theo’s eyes.

“Yes,” Draco hissed. He couldn’t wait.

“This is no place for punishment,” Theo stated, standing up and pulling Hermione up with him. “Come, Mi.”

Hermione followed Theo and Draco followed his witch, impressed with his friend for the millionth time that day. Theo was leading them to Draco’s bedroom. He was so hard it was a little uncomfortable to walk and he could hardly contain his anticipation. He was giddy. He was loving that Theo could be so dominant and that Hermione seemed open to taking both roles. Theo was clearly in control of her and she was willing to punish Draco.
Draco liked a little punishment, which his friends knew. It wasn’t a secret. He could give as good as he got, though. If Hermione also found the intense satisfaction from both giving and taking sexual control, then Draco couldn’t possibly ask for anything else in life.

Theo strode into Draco’s room, with Hermione in tow. He stopped a moment and surveyed the room. Draco knew his bedroom was a little stereotypical. The walls were Slytherin green and the floor was a dark hardwood. The large, masculine furniture was also dark wood. There was a sitting area near Draco’s fireplace, but the rest of the room was dominated by the huge four-poster bed.

“Accio handcuffs,” Theo said, smirking when several pairs came out of the chest near Draco’s bed. “I figured as much. Mi, where do you want him?”

“Lay on the bed, Draco,” Hermione told him. Draco quickly did as he was told and found himself comfortably shackled to his headboard, unable to use his arms to reach out and touch his witch like he wanted. She was hovering over him, running her hands over him. She popped the buttons on his shirt and dragged her nails over his naked chest.

Theo lounged comfortably at the foot of the large bed, leaning up against one of the bedposts. He had already removed his shoes and socks. Now he casually unbuttoned his shirt and let it hang open on his shoulders. He looked entirely at ease, while Draco never felt tenser.

“Mi, show him what he can’t have,” Theo ordered.

Hermione slid away from Draco and off the bed. She pulled the light, loose pink sweater over her head and tossed it aside. Underneath, she wore a silky, blush pink camisole that Draco desperately wanted to touch. She stepped out of her incredibly high boots and began to slowly inch the black leather trousers down her legs. She turned around to bend over and remove the trousers, showing them the skimpiest pair of purple thong knickers Draco had ever seen. The knickers framed her perfect, heart-shaped arse. Draco wanted to pull the knickers off with his teeth and bite the smooth, tan flesh of her arse. He actually forgot himself for a moment and tried to get up to do just that, but was jerked back down by his bindings.

“Come here, Mi,” Theo commanded, holding out a hand to their witch. She climbed back on the bed and straddled Theo at the foot of the bed.

Theo smoothed his hands over that arse, just as Draco wanted to do. He rubbed his face against the silk camisole and Draco could see him close his mouth over the fabric to suck Hermione’s nipple into his mouth. She gasped and threw her head back, arching her back and pushing her chest into Theo’s mouth. Theo suddenly pulled back and slapped her arse, leaving a pink mark on her skin. Hermione whimpered and ground herself against Theo.

“You love teasing Draco, don’t you?” Theo asked. Hermione groaned something that sounded affirmative.

“Answer me,” Theo said sternly, giving her another swat. This time Draco moaned along with her. He needed someone to touch him.

“Yes!” Hermione said. “I love teasing Draco. It makes me feel powerful and sexy.”

“Because you are, Mi,” Theo purred. He turned Hermione’s face away from his, so she was looking right at Draco. Draco was panting and still pulling at his chains, almost involuntarily. “Look at him. He wants you so much right now; he would give anything to have you. Is that enough?”
“No,” Hermione replied, boring a hole in Draco. Her whiskey colored eyes were so intense and completely focused on him. “I don’t want him to want me. I want him to need me.”

“That’s my good girl,” Theo praised, pulling her face to his for a deep, wet kiss. When Theo released her, her chest was heaving beautifully underneath that thin camisole. Theo slid the silk off her and let it fall to the floor. Hermione’s beautiful breasts were exposed and Draco needed to touch them, to taste them. Her nipples were hard and begging for attention. Theo brought his hands to her chest and teased them, plucked them. “Now, I would love to make you come for being such a good witch and doing what needs to be done with Draco, but I’m afraid I can’t do that. Of course, when you come, Draco and I will come as well. Draco hasn’t earned that yet. However, you can do something for me, Mi. Would you like to do something for me, to give me something that I want?”

“Oh, my good girl,” Theo answered instantly, her voice breathy as she rubbed herself against him like a Kneazle in heat. “Anything Theo, tell me.”

“I want your hot little mouth on my cock,” Theo answered calmly. Draco admired his ability to maintain control. He didn’t think he would be able to if the situations were reversed, no he knew he wouldn’t be able to. Then again, Theo had always been so steady that it shouldn’t be surprising. “I want you to suck me until I come, my sweet witch. I want to come in your mouth and I want you to swallow it all. Do you want that?”

“So much,” Hermione moaned. One of her hands dipped inside those tiny knickers as Theo was talking. Draco wished he could do the same, or at least free himself from the trousers he still wore. His straining erection was pressing uncomfortably on the fabric.

“None of that,” Theo reprimanded, catching her wrist and stopping her from touching herself. “Remember, you can’t come yet because Draco hasn’t finished his punishment. Don’t be naughty or I’ll have to punish you as well.”

“Yes, sir,” Hermione nodded. Draco moaned at her display of subservience.

Hermione opened Theo’s trousers and pulled them down his legs. Theo shrugged off his shirt and tossed away with the other clothes. Now he was naked and he was the only one, which Draco pouted about. Hermione still wore her knickers, although they hardly counted for much. She leaned up and kissed Theo, nipping and licking at his lips, while her hands stroked his cock and fondled his bollocks. Draco imagined her hands on him and moaned.

Hermione released Theo’s lips. She began sucking and licking down his neck, across his sternum, and down his chest. She bit and teased his nipples, making him hiss. All the while, her hands were still working him. Theo was gently, almost absently, caressing her back as she went. She worked her way down his stomach until she was finally kneeling in front of his cock. Draco watched her swallow him down. Theo moaned and tipped his head back, but he couldn’t look away for long. She worked her mouth up and down his shaft, licking and sucking, while her hands stayed busy with his bollocks and massaging the base of him that she couldn’t quite reach with her mouth.

Draco was sweating and panting. This was getting to be too much. Theo was right earlier when he said Draco would give anything to have her. Watching her sucking Theo, her beautiful arse raised slightly because she was bent over him. Draco couldn’t imagine ever wanting anyone more. He would give anything to be free and able to plunge into her from behind; fucking her as she went down on Theo. He imagined how wet and ready she must be. He could see her skin glistening between her thighs. Those tiny knickers did nothing to contain her arousal. Draco could practically taste her. He needed to taste her.

“Yes, Mi, that’s it,” Theo rasped, “just like that.”
One of Theo’s hands rested on her head while the other was raised over his head, gripping the bedpost he leaned up against. Draco couldn’t string together a coherent thought, he just watched. His friend was breathing heavily now, encouraging their witch as she worked diligently between his legs.

“Oh fuck, Mi, I’m going to come,” Theo gasped. He dropped his hand from her head and gripped the sheets tightly, shouting as he came. Hermione kept her luscious lips wrapped tightly around his cock, making sure she got everything he had.

Theo, who was leaning heavily on the bedpost, collapsed, as Hermione licked him clean. He cooed to their witch as he caught his breath.

“That was magnificent, my good girl,” he praised. Hermione released his now softening cock and Theo reached down into her knickers. She moaned and rocked against his hand. “You’ve been so patient, my sweet witch. Treat yourself and have Draco make you come.”

Draco perked up at the sound of his name. His lust filled mind tried to focus. Make her come? Merlin bloody fucking yes, he could make her come. That way he would get to touch her, to taste her – finally.

Hermione crawled up the bed to him like a cat, looking predatory and feral. Theo slid the nothing knickers off her as she went. She rubbed her naked body against Draco, finally bringing her face to his. The friction of her and the feel of her against him had him on the verge of coming already. She kissed him roughly, all need and desire. Draco could taste Theo in her mouth and found he enjoyed it. Theo whispered a barely audible Divesto from the end of the bed and Draco’s trousers were gone. His cock was lined up perfectly against Hermione’s center and she began rubbing her clit with the head of his cock.

“Fuck yes, Granger,” Draco gasped. She was so slick and the wetness was starting to drip down his cock. He wanted her to slam down on him so badly, but he was sure he would come that instant. He was so close, too close. “Come sit on my face, Granger. Please.”

Draco ignored his own pleading tone. He didn’t have time to dwell on how ready he was to beg because Hermione did as he said. She straddled his face, bracing herself on his headboard. Draco ran his tongue up her slit and found that he was right; she was soaked. He tried to lick it all up. Hermione was moaning and gasping. Draco vaguely registered that Theo had moved up the bed next to them and was using his own mouth on her breasts.

“Make me come, Draco,” she half ordered, half pleaded. “Now!”

Draco obeyed and found her clit. He wished he had his hands free to go inside her, but they were still chained to the bed. He flicked her clit with his tongue then sucked it in between his teeth. Apparently, she was close too and she came with a shriek. Her whole body tensed as she came and that glittering white magic shot out of her body. Draco came instantly and nothing had ever been more welcome.

Hermione went limp and Theo caught her, pulling her gently off Draco. He settled her on the bed next to Draco and then released him from his chains. Draco stretched his tight muscles and flexed his shoulders. He couldn’t keep the satisfied grin off his face. Theo pulled the covers up over the three of them, Hermione tucked securely in the middle. Draco wrapped his arm around her and Theo dropped soft kisses across her cheekbones.

“That was amazing,” she finally said.
“You were amazing,” Theo replied, smiling.

“I have to agree with Theo, Granger,” Draco said. “You were perfect.”

Draco watched her drift off to sleep, a sated smile playing on her lips. He looked over at his friend and grinned.

“I never knew you were so kinky,” he whispered.

“I don’t tell you all everything about my life,” Theo defended, smiling.

“I think we’ll have to compare toys in the near future,” Draco said, closing his eyes and settling back into his pillow. He heard Theo snort softly. “I would love to chain up our witch, to show her more, and I think we would make a good team.”

“Go to sleep, Draco,” Theo said, laughing softly.

“Yes Master,” Draco teased.

OoOoO

Friday morning, Hermione walked down the Malfoy Manor grand staircase feeling only a little bit like a harlot. This was why she needed her own place. It was obscenely obvious when she had any kind of sex and all her wizards lived with parents! Theo and Marcus both had flats somewhere that they said they used part time, but Hermione had never seen them. She tried not to scowl. After all, she woke up nestled between two wonderful wizards after a night of very interesting and fulfilling sexual activity. What was there to be cranky about?

Well, the half dozen elves trailing behind her was a little annoying, for one thing. They all watched her expectantly, waiting to be of use to "the most benevolent, generous, and giving Sorceress, who has honored them with her magical blessing." Despite grammar and syntax problems, elves sure did know loads of synonyms. Hermione really didn't understand why House-elves got so excited about her magic bringing all the plants into maturity, but they made it seem like she gave them the moon.

Hermione didn't regret anything she did the night before; she just wished it wasn't so... public. She figured it was particularly irritating to her that morning because it was the Malfoys. Hermione spent much of her childhood being intimidated by Lucius Malfoy and now, finally, she felt like they were finding an equal footing. In Hermione's opinion, their new working relationship did not include his knowing anything about her sex life, especially as it relates to his only son and heir to the Malfoy dynasty.

Hermione nervously smoothed her dress. At least Theo had brought a change of clothes from his house, so she didn't have to come downstairs in the same thing she was wearing the day before. Hermione smirked a little. Theo seemed to choose the primmest and most proper looking things she owned, paired with the least practical or raciest underclothes. She imagined it was a reflection of his desire for her to act sweet, but really be quite naughty inside. This particular dress was a knee-length, sleeveless navy blue that had a high folded collar. There was a whimsical graphic of grey birds along the bottom third of the skirt to keep the dress from being overly serious. Theo had also brought her a proper looking grey cardigan and almost scandalously high heels. Underneath it all, Hermione was wearing gauzy, lacy scraps of silver fabric that she'd purchased on a whim with no thoughts of practicality.

Hermione tried to shake off her crankiness. She was more out of sorts than usual because she had to
haul herself out of bed, out from between her wizards, at an obscenely early hour. She was meeting her ritual planning team for breakfast at Hogwarts to finalize the ritual set for Saturday morning. Hermione had to wake up earlier than Draco and Theo because she was washing up and getting ready without magic, which was undeniably more time consuming. Draco and Theo were ready in a fraction of the time and were already downstairs, waiting to go to Hogsmeade.

Hermione followed the voices to one of the sitting rooms off the front hall. Theo and Draco were sitting with Severus, but neither Lucius nor Narcissa were there. The three wizards stood when she walked in.

"Good morning, Severus," Hermione said to her friend, reaching up to kiss him on the cheek.

"Good morning," Severus intoned in his bored fashion. Hermione chuckled. He certainly was reserved, but Hermione was one of the privileged few that had ever seen him out of control.

Her relationship with Severus had been pivotal in her recovering from Ron. Making Severus Snape lose himself was a bigger accomplishment than with just any wizard. It had made Hermione feel like the most desirable witch on the planet. Severus was also a creative lover and showed her how exciting and liberating games could be. Playing stern professor and naughty student was a foregone conclusion, almost expected with Severus. Hermione had been surprised that sweet, quiet Theo had similar proclivities.

"Are you well?" she asked her ex-lover, going to sit next to him on the couch. Draco pouted quite obviously, while Theo was more subtle about it. Hermione felt like she'd been neglecting her old friend lately because she was trying to get in time with her new wizards and other old friends.

"As well as I usually am," Severus replied, a very small, wry smile on his lips. "And given the state of the Malfoy gardens I saw when I arrived, I'm not doing as well as you are."

"When do you think that will stop?" Hermione asked wrinkling her nose. She didn't mind that Severus knew about her sex life. They'd had many frank sexual conversations since they'd broken up years ago. Hermione could live without everyone else knowing her business, though. "I may as well hold a press release every time I have an orgasm! Or just take photos for the Daily Prophet!"

"Don't overreact," Severus sighed, rolling his eyes. "Only a few people even know what causes this. Everyone else chalks it up to the mystery that is Sorcery. As to when it will stop, I imagine it won't. You will always have this ability. However, I do expect you will be able to consciously control it after tomorrow's ritual. In the mean time, if you wish to photograph your activities I would recommend not distributing them to the press. You may gift me with a set for my birthday if you wish, but do try to keep them out of the frame."

Severus waved dismissively at Draco and Theo, their eyes going wide. Hermione laughed. Certainly, his former students would know when he was joking. It was also funny to her how defensive Draco could be around Sasha just because she slept with him, while he wasn't trying to hex Severus in any way. What she had with Severus, though long ago, had been a real relationship. Hermione assumed they didn't see the older wizard as competition. She wondered if they realized that, as far as she was concerned, they had no competition.

"You're right," Hermione said, still smiling. "I'm just being dramatic."

Severus smirked and squeezed her hand.

"Speaking of dramatic, where is your father, Draco?" Severus drawled. "Must he be fashionably late and make an entrance. There are a few things I want to do in Hogsmeade before we go to the
castle."

"I have no idea where he is," Draco reported. "He and mother are usually up before I am."

As if on cue, the couple rushed uncharacteristically into the room. Lucius was arranging his outer robes while Narcissa was putting in her earrings. Draco was looking at them as if they were half clothed, which they may as well have been. Hermione had not seen either Malfoy mildly disheveled, even during the war. They may have looked gaunt and damaged, but never ill prepared.

"My apologies to everyone," Narcissa said, looking genuinely stricken by their tardiness. "We had an... unusual night."

"Unusual?" Severus queried, staring at them. They both looked away, unwilling to expand. "I ask because Nott and Arabella experienced unusual things when Hermione stayed at their homes. Her magic can flare uncontrollably at times. It would be of interest to know how your experience compared to theirs."

"Well, sometime after we settled in to sleep, we were woken up by this intense feeling of euphoria," Narcissa hesitantly offered.

"And then?" Severus prompted.

"We both felt energized, as if we were decades younger," Lucius supplied, "insatiably energized. We only went to sleep about two hours ago."

"I really did not need to hear that," Draco muttered, pulling a sour face. Hermione was blushing furiously. Lucius looked serene, above embarrassment, while a tinge of pink crept to Narcissa's cheeks.

"Now that we're all here, let's just get going," Draco said, standing up.

They all started following him out, except for Narcissa because she wasn't coming to the planning meeting. Hermione had tucked her arm through Severus' and had to pause when he stopped very close to the other witch. Hermione looked at him and was surprised to see that he looked anxious, as if he didn't know what to do.

"Cissa, I'm not sure how to say this," Severus began quietly. Narcissa clearly had no idea what he was wrestling with saying any more than Hermione did. "Hermione's magic affected Arabella's horses. They also became... insatiably energized, as your husband put it. The female is now with foal, even though she was never able to reproduce before."

Narcissa's eyes went wide and Hermione was shocked by what Severus was implying.

"I'm not saying that will be the same for you," Severus continued quickly, "so please don't get your hopes up. I just thought you should know so you take care, just in case. I would make an appointment to see a Healer soon. It may be too soon to tell today, but you could know tomorrow morning."

"That would be... most welcome," Narcissa managed to say, her eyes welling with tears. "But I understand the chances are slim and I will not expect such good fortune. Please don't mention it to Lucius."

Severus reached out and squeezed her hand, nodding. Then he escorted Hermione out of the room and out of the Manor past the anti-Apparition wards. Hermione’s mind was whirling. Surely, her magic hadn’t spontaneously made a person fertile when they hadn’t been before. From what
Severus said and the way he said it, it was easy for Hermione to infer that the Malfoys had had problems conceiving in the past. Narcissa seemed quite moved at the prospect of having another child, so Hermione assumed that they had wanted to give Draco siblings. Hermione was lost in thought and was startled when Severus Apparated them to Hogsmeade. Draco, Theo, and Lucius were all waiting at the Apparition point.

“I need to make a few stops before we go up to the castle,” Severus reminded them.

“I’d like to pop into Bronzed Eagle Books and say hello to Penny,” Hermione added. “I ran into her in Diagon Alley the other day and she said she was making some changes to the store, so I wanted to take a look.”

“I’ll head up to Hogwarts now,” Lucius reported. “There are a few items I’d like to go over with the Headmistress.”

Lucius and Severus went their separate ways while Draco and Theo accompanied Hermione to the bookstore. She did so love a bookstore. It was early and the streets were full of people heading out for their day. Hermione and her two escorts were stared at, but generally, people left them in peace as they made their way through the streets.

Hermione made her way slowly through the store, trying to see the titles on the shelves, because she didn't have time to browse. Draco and Theo helped urge her along. Theo assured her they could come back anytime she wanted, while Draco said he would fill up her own library at her new house. Both were things to look forward to.

The cafe area toward the back of the store looked lovely, more put together than when Hermione had been there before. Now it was very much like a little French bakery and cafe. The only thing missing was a window looking out on a quaint Parisian side street. Hermione spotted Penny bustling around a little frantically.

"This looks fantastic, Penny!" Hermione gushed. Penelope and her staff must have put in a lot of work.

"Oh, Hermione! Good morning!" Penelope looked incredibly frazzled. "I'm glad you like it. It really did come together didn't it? Please, come and sit. Let me get you breakfast, on the house."

"We actually have a breakfast meeting up at Hogwarts shortly, but some tea would be nice if you have some on hand," Hermione smiled.

"Of course, sit, sit!" Penelope beckoned Draco and Theo closer and pointed them to a table. The three sat and watched her run around arranging things. Soon, a pot of tea and three cups were at the table.

"Penny, do you have a moment to join us?" Hermione asked. "I don't want to take you away from your work if you are too busy. You seem a bit overwhelmed. Where is your staff?"

"That's what I'd like to know," Penelope sighed, dropping heavily into the fourth chair at the table. Theo Accioed a fourth teacup and Draco began to pour. "Remember when we ran into each other in Diagon Alley this past Wednesday?"

"Yes, you had been getting all of these things for the cafe, which really does look great," Hermione said, nodding.

"And when I got back here with dinner for the staff, no one was here. Lisa had brought everything back and stacked it in the middle of the cafe then she left!" Penelope huffed. "I found a note when I
arrived. She wrote that she quit, effective immediately. She didn't even lock up behind herself! I swear if I see that witch she is in for a serious hex."

"I'm so sorry," Hermione sympathized.

"You're probably better off," Theo observed, sipping his tea. "I don't know how she was an employee, but after I broke up with her months ago, she had a hard time letting go. At least you're not stuck with having to sack her and her refusing to accept it, as she did with me."

"Oh yeah," Draco chimed in. "That was one persistent witch. I remember she used to show up at work looking for you, even though you never agreed to see her and she didn't get past security."

"I hadn't realized she was so..." Penelope trailed off.

"Nutters?" Draco supplied.

Penelope nodded.

"That does make me feel better about her quitting," the Ravenclaw grinned wryly. "Now I just need to replace her. If you know anyone who needs a job, send them my way. Of course, it would help if they are smart and hardworking."

"I don't know anyone looking, but I'll keep my eye out," Hermione promised. "I don’t know if it would work for you, but I recently found plenty of help for my new house through the displaced House-elves program in the Beings Division at the Ministry."

“I’d never considered that,” Penelope said thoughtfully.

Theo and Draco asked Penelope about her business and they all chatted for a while until it was time to go to Hogwarts.

"The only thing I might change is adding a magical window on that blank wall over there," Hermione said as they got up to leave. "This place feels so much like a French cafe, the only thing missing is a Parisian view."

"What a good idea," Penelope said, laughing. "Thank you all for stopping by. It made my day. I better start preparing for tomorrow. People are expected to flock to Hogsmeade tomorrow morning because you'll be right up the hill doing your second ritual. Even though no one is allowed on Hogwarts’ grounds yet, they still come to be close by while history is being made."

“Well, I’m glad it’s good for business," Hermione chuckled. "You better hire someone before next Saturday. I imagine the crowds will be bigger next week since the third ritual will be open to the public."

“Right, thanks for the reminder,” Penelope said, shaking her head. “I just don’t know how you do it, Hermione. I would be going mad if I had to deal with what you do. How do you manage?”

Hermione was about to answer, but stopped at the sound of familiar voices.

“I told you she’d be here," Marcus said to Adrian as the two walked past bookshelves to the café.

“And I didn’t argue," Adrian said, chuckling. “It’s a bookstore. Where else would she be? Good morning, kitten.”

Adrian gave her a hello kiss that left her flustered, quickly followed by another intense kiss from
“Good morning, princess,” Marcus murmured, wrapping his arm around her waist. Hermione smiled up at him and then at the other three wizards with her. She was certain that without them, she wouldn’t be holding up under the stress as well as she was.

“I have a lot of help managing,” Hermione told Penelope, smiling. Penelope just laughed and shook her head. “Thank you for the tea, Penny. I’ll see you later.”

Hermione and her four wizards left the store to walk up to Hogwarts and she was happy to have them all around her, supporting her.

OoOoO

She stood in the shadows where no one would see her, yet. From there she could see that evil witch who was intent on stealing her wizard. He was with her, walking with her, but he wasn’t really happy she could tell. Everyone thought she was so perfect, but she was clearly a slag and was shagging every wizard around. Other witches may not have the guts to stop her, but this witch wasn’t going to sit idly by. Her plan was in place; all she had to do was wait for the right moment to strike.

Chapter End Notes

Next - Hogwarts and unexpected visitors
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer - Don't own Harry Potter!
Now - Hogwarts & the unexpected visitors

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bronwyn leaned against the wall and checked her list. She was extremely irritated that she'd been put on supply duty. Percy Weasley was supposed to be the lackey, not her. Bronwyn was a researcher with the Department of Mysteries for Merlin's sake!

Almost everything on the list was ticked off. Bronwyn only had a few more things to procure. She fantasized for a moment about 'accidentally' getting something wrong for tomorrow's ritual. It was such a happy daydream, but nothing she could actually do of course. It would be too obvious that she had done it if one of the supplies she'd brought caused a problem.

That first ritual had been brutal. It had surprised Bronwyn that Hermione made it through, but of course, Miss Perfect wouldn't fail. She had been ready to console Marcus, but the bitch pulled through.

Bronwyn had been shocked that Marcus was also involved with Miss Perfect. She wouldn't have expected Miss Perfect to be shagging four different wizards, that she knew of. Blaise Zabini and that Russian fellow were probably also in the mix. Bronwyn toyed with the idea of going to the press, but thought it might backfire. Too many people thought Miss Perfect could do no wrong. They'd probably find something noble about her spreading her legs for every wizard she came across.

Marcus was just caught up in doing what his friends were doing - her. He couldn't possibly be satisfied sharing her with so many others. That's how Bronwyn would get him. When it was someone else's turn with her, Marcus would be alone. He'd be jealous and want an outlet for his frustrations. Bronwyn would be there for him and once she had him, he'd never get away.

"Lurking in the shadows?" a deep voice drawled close to her. Bronwyn jumped, almost dropping her list. She turned to see Severus Snape, a wizard with whom she was not entirely comfortable. He was so intimidating.

"Lurking? Me? No," Bronwyn managed to replied, flustered. "There was a glare on my parchment and it was easier to read out of the direct sunlight."

"Come, Miss Figgelowe," he commanded. "We mustn't be late."

Master Snape stared at her until she began to move. He didn't offer her his arm or anything else, just walked behind her as if he had to corral her. It was silent and awkward. Thankfully, they ran into others on their way up to Hogwarts. That very odd blonde Lovegood witch was walking with the Herbology Master, Longbottom, and that Turkish Arithmancy Master, Selma Turan. Bronwyn greeted the trio aloofly. She really didn’t like the Turan witch. Bronwyn was sure her Arithmancy was good enough, but yesterday morning, that witch was nothing but nitpicky and critical.
They all made their way up to the castle. It was still closed to the public because that day was the last day for students. Most students were taking the train back to London the next morning. The train left at nine o'clock in the morning, an hour before the ritual would start. Miss Perfect and the Headmistress agreed that sixth and seventh year students would be allowed to stay and watch the ritual, if they wished. If they weren’t of age, they also had to have consent from a guardian. They said it could be a valuable learning experience, as the students probably wouldn’t see another Sorcerer or Sorceress in their lifetime. Bronwyn thought it was silly to have children observe. They could just read about it like everyone else. It somehow made Bronwyn's role less special. What was the point of being in the exclusive inner-circle if anyone could come?

At the castle, they came upon the little Japanese wizard and his tall, Russian student. Master Snape led them all through the castle to a meeting room off the Great Hall. Headmistress McGonagall, Penrose, Percy, Healer Adams, Master Bouchard, and Lucius Malfoy were already there, talking about something. Miss Perfect probably wanted to make a dramatic entrance with her entourage.

The way he acted last week, Bronwyn was fairly certain Penrose fancied McGonagall, which was just gross. Bronwyn had to assist in cleansing the old bag before the last ceremony, an activity she had no desire to repeat. She'd only volunteered to cleanse so she could assist Lucius. That was one seriously attractive wizard, and one she hadn't given up hope of snagging for herself. Seeing his wife up close the week before had dampened her spirits some.

Narcissa Malfoy was a gorgeous witch in person, just as she was in photographs. Bronwyn had been hoping the pictures of her in the society pages were Glamoured slightly. She'd heard a lot of influential, rich witches demanded that. Nevertheless, Bronwyn was still younger and always would be, so she had that going for her. She subtly adjusted the plunging neckline of her sleeveless blouse for maximum cleavage exposure and surveyed her trousers to ensure they were still dust free after having to run around Hogsmeade like a House-elf.

"Oh, do be careful," the Lovegood witch said to her, sounding concerned. "Blibbering Humdingers are attracted to flat expanses of open skin and they do lurk here on this level of the castle in spring. That's why it's important to keep your back fully covered, or in this case your front."

Bronwyn had no idea how to respond to this crazy witch, but she felt offended. The indelicate snort from Turan didn't help either. While she was formulating what to say, the doors opened to admit Miss Perfect and the rest. Bronwyn knew she would want to make an entrance, that selfish witch. Witches like her always get what's coming to them, Bronwyn was sure.

OoOoO

Hermione and her four wizards walked slowly up to the castle, chatting and laughing. Marcus has his arm around her waist while Adrian held her hand. Hermione felt happy. After Saturday, she had at least a full week with them. A growing part of her was starting to have faith, just as Adrian told her. It seemed cruel to give her these wizards, only to take them away. Didn't she deserve happiness after everything she'd gone through in life? Hopefulness aside, as they walked Hermione promised herself that she would spend individual, one-on-one time with each of them in the next week - just in case.

They spied Harry and Pansy a little ways ahead and Draco called out to the couple.

"Thank you both for coming," Hermione told them. "I hope it wasn't an inconvenience."

"Are you kidding?" Pansy snorted. "St. Mungos gave me the day off to do this and another day off next week to 'make up for working Saturday.' I'm coming out ahead here."
Hermione laughed at Pansy's air quotes.

"They are telling people that you are working closely with a handpicked team of Healers," Pansy continued. "It makes them look good and involved."

Hermione shrugged. She didn't care if St. Mungos wanted to make themselves look like an indispensable part of the rituals.

Blaise caught up with the group just as they were going inside the castle. They had the possibly unfortunate timing of entering just as students began streaming down the stairs for breakfast. Most everyone stopped and stared at them, but the group just kept on. Hermione recognized a few of the older students and greeted them as they passed. She'd actually tutored a number of the younger students during her last year at Hogwarts.

Finally, they made it to the room off the Great Hall where Minnie told her it would be. It seemed everyone else was already there. A large breakfast was set out on a sideboard and people talked and ate for a little while before they got started.

The meeting went just as it had the week before. Hermione and Theo presented a detailed run through of the ritual. Some things were the same, but a lot was different. The ritual would be held at ten o'clock in the morning because that was the peak time of day for mental clarity and alertness. The ritual leaders would wear airy blue robes for insight and mindfulness rather than the earthy green ones of last week that were more in tune with the physical and the body. Crushed bloodstone was changed to crushed moonstone for clear thinking. Lavender, an important ingredient when working with the mind, was use in the potion she would drink as well as be dried and burned in the ritual fire. Everyone seemed to be hoping that this ritual would be less violent because it focused on the mind rather than the body.

As with last week, people asked questions and made suggestions. The ritual itself was relatively short, but the details were dissected and discussed for hours.

All on the same page and feeling pretty confident, they wrapped up the meeting right at lunch time. The Ministry group, Penrose, Percy, and Bronwyn, left to make a few last minute arrangements. Bouchard and Severus left to finish the potions for the next day. The rest of them stayed and had lunch in the Great Hall. Hermione sat between Luna and Selma, taking the opportunity to talk to her friends and relax.

After lunch, Hermione and her four wizards walked slowly back towards Hogsmeade. Hermione wanted to go to her new house. Susan would've been there all morning and she wanted to check on the progress. Susan had also promised to bring loads of catalogs so Hermione could look at different furniture and finishing options. It seemed, though, that Adrian, Draco, Marcus, and Theo kept trying to delay her.

Draco suggested they go shopping for furniture, but Hermione explained about the catalogs. Adrian suggested they all go to a little dessert place he knew, but Hermione was too full. Theo suggested they stop by Bronzed Eagle Books again to do that browsing she'd wanted to do earlier. Hermione almost agreed, but she really wanted to get her home library in a good condition so she would have a place for new books. When Marcus suggested checking back in with the centaurs before they left Hogwarts grounds, she got suspicious. He hated the centaurs.

"Why aren't I allowed to go home?" She asked the four, narrowing her eyes at them.

"What are you talking about?" Adrian asked, looking confused.
"Don't be daft," Marcus waved. "Of course you're allowed to go home."

"Then why are you all suggesting we go do other things?"

"Because we like spending time with you," Theo said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"And maybe we want to take you someplace nice because you deserve it, Granger," Draco pointed out. "A dusty old house isn't particularly romantic."

"It's not dusty anymore," she defended. "You haven't seen it recently. Besides, Marcus' trip to the Forbidden Forest isn't particularly romantic."

Marcus shrugged.

"I like the outdoors," he said simply. "I think being outside is romantic."

Hermione chuckled and rolled her eyes.

"I have outdoors at my house," she reminded him.

"What a good idea, princess!" Marcus smiled broadly. Hermione wondered what idea she had and looked up at Marcus with confusion. "Did I tell you that I took a quick fly over your grounds yesterday morning? I didn't get to cover it all, but we can all go together now. We'll just need to grab a few brooms."

"Brooms?" Hermione gulped. It was a little embarrassing how much she hated broom travel. She'd done it, of course, when necessary. She much preferred other means of travel.

"Are you still afraid of flying?" Theo asked gently.

"No," Hermione said too quickly. "I don't mind riding flying animals. I just am not too keen on flying inanimate objects."

"Do you trust me, Princess?" Marcus asked seriously.

"Of course I do," she responded. She did. Hermione trusted that none of these four wizards would ever let anything happen to her.

"Then you can ride with me," Marcus said, wrapping his arms around her waist.

"I'm not dressed for it," she protested feebly. "I'm in a dress and Theo chose the knickers, which means they aren't practical at all."

Theo grinned proudly.

"You look fine," Draco assured her. "No one is there to see you flashing your knickers if you do happen to show them. Ades can come with me to the Manor and we'll pick up four brooms. We'll meet you at your place by that old barn."

Draco pulled her into a quick kiss and gave her a smack on her arse before he winked, grabbed Adrian, and Apparated away. Hermione stood for a moment, feeling like she was being 'handled' by the four of them but unsure exactly how or why. She looked over at Marcus and Theo for more information.

"Theo really does pick the best knickers for you," Marcus said smiling. Theo nodded in agreement.
and Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Come on, Mi," Theo said, putting his arm around her shoulders.

Theo took her side-along to her property and Marcus followed. They stood in front of the old barn. They carefully walked through the messy old building while they waited for Adrian and Draco. She imagined how she could create a laboratory in the creaky barn. It would be wonderful to have her very own spacious lab.

"One quick fly around," Hermione told the wizards when they were all present, each with a broom in hand. Marcus hauled her into his lap and she held onto him tightly as they took to the air.

Hermione had to admit, it was pretty amazing to fly over her new land. It was expansive. Logically, she knew the square kilometers and had seen the maps, but to see it in person was different. They followed the stream to the small lake, and then swooped in and out of the forested area. The wizards made a game of startling the Augurey from their nests, which Hermione didn't approve of. It was funny, however, when a large Augurey chased Draco away from its tree.

Hermione was proud of her land. There were orchards and plenty of space for gardens. The lake would be wonderful for swimming in the summer. There were open meadows that would be lovely for picnicking. Several open spaces were big enough for a home Quidditch pitch, as Marcus pointed out.

Hermione was looking around when she saw four figures standing in one of the fields.

"There are people there," Hermione said to Marcus, pointing.

Marcus brought a hand to his mouth and produced a loud, shrill whistle. The other three flew near and Hermione pointed out the strangers on her property.


"Or Ancillary want-to-bes," Adrian scowled.

"Well, let's go see," Hermione said.

"They could be dangerous," Theo pointed out. "You stay here with Marcus and the rest of us will get closer."

Adrian, Draco, and Theo circled down toward the four people. As they got closer, all three wizards were abruptly pulled toward the strangers.

"Go, Marcus! Go!" Hermione insisted, pushing the large wizard. He hesitated for a moment, looking between her and the others, now on the ground. It only took him a moment to race down to the others.

The strangers, one male and three females, seemed to have Adrian, Draco, and Theo frozen somehow. The male, a very tall dark figure with long jet-black hair, was standing back from the females. The three females, all with long white blonde hair, were advancing toward her three wizards with an odd swaying grace, almost as if they were dancing.

As Hermione and Marcus got closer, she saw that none of them had whites in their eyes. The male's eyes were all black and the female's eyes were entirely blue. She began to have an idea of who these strangers were, but not why they were there.
"This one has hair like a female," said one of the females, stepping close to Draco. She reached out and caressed his platinum blond hair. Draco tried to get away from her touch, struggling against whatever force was keeping the three wizards mostly still. The female cooed at him. "It's so pretty. Why does he struggle?"

"This one is pretty too," another female said, petting Adrian's face. Then she frowned. "He too struggles. Why do they struggle?"

"Because their mine," Hermione hissed angrily. These females needed to get away from her wizards, especially if they were what she thought they were. In her hurry to get to them, Hermione had launched herself off Marcus' broom before they fully landed. Instead of falling the meter to the ground, Hermione levitated over toward her wizards and was able to have a height advantage over the three females blocking her way.

The females hissed back in response, their hands curling to talons and their facial features becoming sharp. The male stepped in front of Hermione.

"I've come to meet you, Sorceress," he said, his voice deep, rich, and heavily accented. "You must forgive my guards. They aren't used to males of your kind resisting their charms."

"I don't think I must do anything," Hermione countered. She was still floating, so she was about six inches taller than the dark male. She felt angry and her magic was crackling dangerously along her skin. A breeze began to blow around her, billowing her dress slightly. Hermione felt dangerous, but the male just looked pleased and happily inhaled the new breeze that blew.

"You are enchanting, my little warrior," the male smiled broadly. "Have you a mate?"

The male's question elicited loud hisses from the females and growls from her four wizards.

"If you want answers, you better let my wizards free," Hermione responded sternly, staring down the male. Her flashing brown eyes bored into his black ones.

"Of course, my little bird," the male purred, puffing out his chest. "Your request is my command. Moineau, Brise, Ciel, come. They can only assert their influence for short periods. Usually, wizards quickly become compliant and do not require restraint."

Hermione watched the three females retreat to flank the male. As he said it would, the freezing didn't last long. Her wizards, who all had their wands drawn and ready now, quickly surrounded Hermione. She floated down the ground now that he felt calmer.

"Who the fuck are you?" Marcus shouted.

The females formed a wall before the male, their wings appearing and spreading out to make a shield between them and the male.

"Veela," Draco said, his eyes narrowing.

"I've never seen a male Veela before," Adrian observed.

"Males are rare," Hermione reported, shouldering her way out of her wizard cage so she was standing next to Marcus instead of behind him. "Only about one in fifty Veela births are male. The males live longer though, with a life span at least double that of a female. Male Veela rarely leave the enclaves, whereas females can go out as they please for the most part. They are encouraged to mate with wizards on the off chance of having male offspring. When mating with humans, male births are slightly more common. Then those part-Veela males are kept in the enclaves. Of course,
males mate strictly with female Veela since there are so few of them to go around and they are most valuable to their society."

"You know my species well," the male praised, also stepping out from behind his guard. The females did not look pleased.

"She knows everything," Draco told him in a scathing voice, the tone implying this male Veela was an idiot.

"Not well," Hermione shrugged. "I was invited to visit a Veela enclave in the mountains of Nepal about a year ago. Spending a few hours with a whole other species does not let anyone know them well. I know a little. From your accent, I would guess you are from the enclave in the Pyrenees I heard about recently, but I don't know why you are here."

“My name is Avian. I am an emissary from my people, Sorceress,” the male replied. “We heard that you survived the first ritual, so you must be strong. We wanted to come and see for ourselves. Wizarding people such as you, who have elemental power, are interesting to my people. You are a bridge between us.”

Avian stepped closer to Hermione and the four wizards all took a step forward, wands pointed.

“Your males are very protective of you,” Avian chuckled. “If I had such a prize as you, I would treasure you as well. Imagine how great our offspring would be.”

The three females hissed softly, clearly upset by Avian’s flirtatious remarks but unable to do anything about it. Hermione’s encounter with an enclave of Veela taught her that the females were territorial regarding the males. They protected them and cared for them because there were so few. They desperately needed the full Veela males to keep making more full Veela offspring. The males, on the other hand, were in charge of the flock, so they had the power and authority. They were generally wiser and better leaders than the females, who were more impulsive and rash. Hermione attributed it to living twice as long as the females because young male Veela were just as impulsive, they just had a chance to outgrow it whereas the females did not. Hermione thought it was wildly unfair and it made the feminist in her bristle. The male Veela did acknowledge that their females were more adept at other things. For example, females were much more skilled in battle and were considered much tougher, physically.

“Do you have a purpose here?” Theo asked sternly, getting to the point.

“To offer myself,” Avian grinned, staring greedily at Hermione. “My assistance, my services; the Sorceress may avail herself of me. I am one hundred and seventy years old. I have studied elemental magic for longer than any of you have been alive. I did not meet the last Sorceress, but my father did and I was alive during her rule.”

“Rule?” Hermione thought that was a strange choice of words.

“Of course, my lovely nightingale,” Avian smiled. He really was attractive, for a human-looking bird man, and he looked nowhere near one hundred and seventy years old. “With your power, you may rule your kind if you wish. None would be able to stop you.”

“It is not my wish or my intention to rule,” Hermione reported testily. “All I want to do is live through these last two rituals and learn to live with this magic.”

“Give me your hand,” Avian instructed, reaching out to her. Hermione hesitated but then put her small hand in his larger one, as she had the week before with the centaur. Avian closed his eyes
and appeared to concentrate hard. Suddenly, she felt a shiver run through her, like her magic buzzed for a moment. Avian dropped her hand quickly, as if it were hot. For a moment Hermione worried that she had burned him as she did Severus, but he looked fine. In fact, his broad grin was back.

“You may rule them all,” Avian said smiling. “You have a great power in you and, therefore, have the potential to be great. All the elements run through your veins. They want to be there, to be part of you. They want to become one with you and look forward to the rituals to achieve that. It would take great effort to separate them from you. I don’t blame them of course.”

Hermione ignored his flirtatious comment and leer, thinking about what he said.

“You talk about my magic like it’s another person with thoughts and feelings,” she pointed out.

“It is,” Avian explained. “I forget you are a fledgling because you have the strength of someone much older. Magic is an entity and we are its vessels. It does not have conscious thought, it is not sentient, but it is feeling. Magic can become petulant and upset so your spells do not work. Magic can love you and want to fill you, making spells easy for you. Magic can become petulant and upset so your spells do not work. For your people, magic is born with you and grows with you, so your feelings are so closely tied no one would ever think of it as separate. Before, when you were angry because my guards were touching your males, your magic was even angrier – too angry to control itself and it began showing all over your skin. Elemental magic is more difficult, more mercurial and demanding. You must give it what it wants.”

“What’s that?” Hermione wondered.

“It wants to be with you and to attach to you, but who wouldn’t?” Avian smiled. “It also seeks its balance and will require you to take on mates. Without the mates of your magic’s choosing, it will not be whole and satisfied. You will not be able to live with broken, wistful magic.”

“The centaurs said something similar,” Hermione nodded. “They said I would require an ideal mating, nothing less would sustain me.”

“The horses are right,” Avian simply agreed. “I will attend your ritual tomorrow to observe with my guard. I will not interfere. In fact, I have a gift that will be of use.”

Avian reached into his cloak and withdrew an orb about the size of a Remembrall. Holding it up for her, Hermione could see swirls of white mist and what seemed like small flashes of lightening. She gasped, realizing what he held.

“As your male said, you do know everything,” Avian chuckled. “It is sky, as you appear have realized.”

“Sky?” Marcus asked. Theo gasped, as Hermione had.

“It’s literally a piece of the sky,” Hermione said, awed. “The Veela are said to have the ability to manipulate and contain the elemental magic of the air and sky. It’s pure elemental air magic and it’s everything in the atmosphere in this one little ball - air and wind, thunder and lighting, even rain. People have been known to pay millions of Galleons for a piece of sky the size of a marble. It is a powerful and unique magical tool.”

“I’m glad you appreciate the gift,” Avian said, tucking it back into his cloak.

“I thought it was a gift for Hermione,” Draco pointed out.

“Oh, no,” Hermione said reverently, shaking her head. “It takes intense magical control to even
hold a piece of sky and my magic is much too unstable right now. If a piece of sky that size were exposed to a burst of uncontrolled magic, it could cause an explosion big enough to level my new house, the nearby village, and most of this county.”

“How can you use something like that tomorrow?” Adrian asked frowning. “It sounds too dangerous.”

“The power in this piece of sky will make the ritual stronger, more successful,” Avian reported. “I will place the piece of sky above the ritual circle and it will empower the Sorceress and the ritual leader. Their magic will be unstoppable, unfailing, and unerring.”

“So nothing can go wrong,” Theo said, looking very pleased. “This piece of sky will keep them alert, refreshed, and powerful. They will not get tired and their magic will not be drained, no matter how trying the ritual is and how much power they need to use to complete it. This piece of sky is raw magical power. It will provide them with unflagging magical energy outside of what they have inside them. When the ritual is over, they will walk away able to take on anything, instead of having to take days to recover like last time.”

“Your male is intelligent,” Avian nodded. He surveyed the four wizards for the first time, looking at each one critically. The wizards each met his gaze with a challenging one of their own. After he was through, he smiled. “It seems they each have something to contribute. You have a good flock of males, Sorceress. We will attend your ritual tomorrow morning. We know the time and place.”

Then they were gone. All four Veela disappeared. Hermione shook her head. They had their own form of Apparition that was much smoother than the kind wizards used. It was as if they blended seamlessly into the air and blew away.

“I think we better go to the house,” Hermione said to the wizards. “I have some owls to send. Having the sky is a big development. I need to tell people.”

All four wizards nodded their agreement. Marcus again swept her up easily, settling her in his lap, and they took to the sky. Hermione felt so much better about the ritual tomorrow. With this gift from the Veela, she couldn’t fail.

Chapter End Notes

The Veela females have French names. Here are the meanings!
- Moineau – sparrow
- Brise – breeze
- Ciel – sky

Next - What did the wizards do to her house? And let's have a party!
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer - don't own the Harry Potter or his friends
Now - House and a party!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Theo extended his hands and helped his witch off the broom she shared with Marcus. It was hard for her to dismount smoothly in a dress and very high heels. Theo knew he didn't choose practical clothes for her, especially the shoes and the knickers. He liked to picture her wearing what he picked. Now, Theo couldn't repress his grin. This gift from that horrible Veela male was extraordinary. They couldn't lose. It was like the time Theo charmed the snitch to be attracted to him in a game with his friends.

"Oh, I don't have an owl," Hermione said, seeming to just realize that fact. Theo chuckled. "I'll have to Floo-call Severus about the sky."

Hermione started walking toward the house, clearly lost in thought and not really paying attention. If she were, she would’ve noticed that the front door was painted a fresh ivory color and a new light fixture was placed in the outdoor entry. The light was clearly Turkish, or at least Turkish inspired. It was a pewter-looking metal cage with hundreds of tiny little pieces cut out. When it got dark, light would shine through the lace-like metal.

Theo spun her around and twirled her into his arms.

"Calm down, Mi," Theo smiled. "We’ll spread the word about your gift from the Veela."

Hermione nodded and wrapped her arms around his waist.

"You're right," she murmured into his chest. "I can tell everyone about the piece of sky soon enough. It won't change what people have to do to prepare for the ritual. I'll slow down and enjoy working on my house."

Theo leaned down and captured her lips with his. He loved kissing her. Theo licked and nibbled, experiencing her. He wanted to have her and claim her after that male Veela so clearly coveted her. It was easy to get lost in her, which Theo didn’t mind at all. It was not, however, the time or place for him to lose himself in Hermione. The other wizards wanted to show her their gift. Of course, Theo did as well, but not necessarily at the expense of tasting her.

Hermione reluctantly pulled away from him at the sound of throat clearing next to them. She was blushing that light, delightful pink she had sometimes when she felt like she was caught doing something naughty. Theo loved that pink and it was his goal to coax it into appearing as often as possible.

“We’re all for kissing, Granger,” Draco pointed out. “That will have to wait though, because we have a surprise.”

Adrian and Marcus were both grinning. A smile crept onto Theo’s face to match theirs. He really
hoped she would like what they did.

“A surprise?” Hermione asked, hopping a bit in place.

“We wanted to do something for you,” Adrian explained, still smiling.

“We wanted to get you a gift,” Draco smiled.

“It’s no sky,” Marcus said wryly, “but it is something we thought you would like. We hope you like it.”

Hermione looked at them expectantly. Theo took the opportunity to point to the doorway she had overlooked.

“Oh!” she gasped. “What a beautiful lamp. I have one just like it back in storage in Turkey.”

“Not anymore you don’t,” Theo chuckled.

“We had your things sent over,” Adrian smiled. “We figured you would want them in your new house. Come inside and see.”

Adrian took Hermione’s hand and led her in through the newly done door. The other three wizards followed quickly, as they too wanted to see what had been done. Theo was told that the house was cleaned, but he hadn’t seen it yet. The front hallway was immaculate. The blue grey stone floors shone and the walls were now a contrasting cream color that brightened the room. The crystal chandelier sparkled brightly. A small seating area upholstered in grey lavender was nicely arranged near the Floo. Two console tables flanked the hall, each with large bouquets of fresh flowers.

“It’s beautiful,” Hermione breathed.

“We know you wanted to stay here after the ritual and we felt you should have more than the bare necessities,” Adrian explained.

“We wanted you to have a finished sitting room, dining room, working kitchen, and, of course, a beautiful bedroom,” Marcus reported.

“That’s so much,” Hermione said, her eyes shining with wetness. She was looking at them all with such gratitude and happiness. Theo melted inside. He wanted to make her look like that all the time. Deep down to his very core, Theo knew he could make her happy; he and the others.

“Well, let’s go see it,” Theo said. “We’re just standing in this one room, but there is more to see.”

As if on cue, Susan Bones strode into the front hallway.

“I’m so glad you’re here!” she smiled, looking very tired. Theo wondered how much sleep the witch got, or didn’t get, in order to get everything done in a day. “May I show you what we’ve done?”

“Please,” Hermione responded eagerly.

“I was able to get a team together to complete all the specified rooms,” Susan explained, leading them down the hall. “Of course, we couldn’t do all the rooms in the house, so I chose this sitting room here.”

Susan opened the double doors to the sitting room. It was a bright, airy room and very different from anything Theo saw when he’d toured the house before Hermione bought it. There was
metallic looking gold wallpaper accenting the walls and a bright grass green couch. It was perfect for spending time together, reading, talking, or playing games.

“This is amazing,” Hermione said, smiling. “It’s better than I pictured. I love the way you incorporated my old things as well.”

Hermione gestured to clear glass stars hanging from the ceiling near the window so they would catch the light. There was a painting of a landscape full of colorful wildflowers. Built-in shelves displayed interesting objects and pictures that Theo imagined Hermione had collected over the years. There were vases, bowls, sculptures, and other things Theo didn’t immediately recognize.

Theo spied a few photos. There were some still Muggle pictures of people that he assumed were Hermione’s family. He saw another of her and Harry during their Hogwarts years, smiling and waving to the camera. It looked to be around their fourth year. There was even one of the whole Weasley family with Harry and Hermione, all dressed up and crowded together. It looked like they were going to a wedding. Hermione was sandwiched tightly between the twins.

"I can't thank you enough for this," Hermione said happily to all of them.

"There's more," Draco grinned, taking her hand. He looked to Susan to lead them on. The witch led them down a clean, but plain hallway that clearly hadn't been done yet.

They came to the smaller, everyday dining room. It too was drastically changed from when Theo saw it last. The walls were entirely covered in cream-colored wallpaper that had large red and gold damask printing on it. A large rectangular oak table dominated the room. On one side of the table, against the wall, a matching oak bench ran the length of the table. It had a bright red seat cushion and smaller ivory pillows to lean against, although Theo noticed red and gold patterns in those pillows as well. The bench was long enough to seat all five of them. There were six single chairs surrounding the rest of the table, four opposite the bench and one on each end. The chairs were fabric and slightly mismatched, but coordinating. All of them were cream but two had a gold pattern, two had a red pattern, and the last two had a pattern in a slightly darker cream color.

There was a matching oak sideboard on another wall, next to the door to the kitchens, and a fireplace filled the third wall. There was a fancy flower arrangement on the sideboard and an interesting painting of Hogwarts above the mantle. Colorful mosaic plates and platters hung on the wall above the sideboard.

"This is perfect," Hermione said, clearly pleased. "It's beautiful, but still comfortable looking. I can't believe you managed to do all this!"

"Your wizards provided more than enough resources to make it possible," Susan responded humbly.

“And despite our resources, you made a Gryffindor themed dining room,” Draco commented with mock disgust, a teasing tone in his voice.

“I think the red and gold are the best part,” Hermione said, grinning.

"You had a lot of great things in storage in Turkey too, which made my job easier,” Susan noted. “Why don’t you all follow me through here?"

The group followed Susan through the other door in the dining room, not the way they'd come. They went through a hall lined with white cupboards, the top half of which had glass fronts. Theo assumed it was meant to house dishes, flatware, glasses, and serving vessels. There wasn't much in
there and he figured Hermione didn’t have a lot of that sort of thing.

On the other side of the cupboard room, was an archway that led into the kitchen. Theo’s eyes went wide. The kitchen looked drastically different than when he’d seen it last. When he first set eyes on it, there was no way he would eat anything that came from there. The floors were the same blue grey stone as the front hall, but cleaning them had made an enormous difference. The cabinets were white and the countertops looked like an ivory and light grey marble. The counters were strangely situated. Some of them were a regular height, but the rest were only half the height of the others.

“Why are the counters different?” Adrian wondered.

“For the elves,” Hermione said, as if it were obvious. “I never understood why they didn’t put kitchen counters lower for them since they were the ones doing most of the work.”

“This is so much better looking than before,” Theo observed.

“Yeah, it’s clean,” Marcus observed. “I can actually eat things from here now.”

“It’s amazing,” Hermione said. “Thank you, Susan, for putting a table and chairs in here too. I appreciate that.”

Theo took note of the smallish white wooden table surrounded by six wooden chairs. Most wizarding families with money didn’t eat or spend time in the kitchen. The elves did all the work and that room was traditionally their domain. This kitchen was different from any Theo had ever seen. It was exceptionally large with loads of space, fancy counters, stained glass pantry doors, and tons of windows. It was clearly a rich person’s kitchen. Then, on one end of the kitchen was the table and chairs. Next to the table were shelves, mostly filled with what looked like cookbooks. People with elves didn’t own cookbooks. It was a strange mix of Muggle and wizard that was so wonderfully Hermione.

A pantry door tucked away near the kitchen table opened and the most colorful elf Theo had ever seen emerged.

“Missy Sorceress!” she exclaimed. “Kiki is being so happy to see you! And so happy with the room provided by the most generous Missus.”

“Oh, is your bedroom finished?” Hermione asked. “May I see it?”

“Of course, Missus!” Kiki gushed. The small creature pushed the cupboard door back open to reveal it was not really a pantry at all, but a small room that was probably used as a large storage room before.

Theo peaked in behind Hermione. The room certainly wouldn’t hold all of them. The walls were plain white and the furniture was basic chestnut colored wood. There was a little bed, a chest of drawers, a small set of shelves, a table and two chairs. The room was bursting with color though. The little window had blue curtains with green and purple polka dots. The bedspread was bright stripes of red, orange, and yellow.

“All the elves have the same basic furniture,” Susan explained. “Kiki expressed an interest in color and chose these fabrics from our samples. She declined a carpet, mirror, or any art to hang on the walls.”

“As long as you are happy with it, Kiki, then I am pleased,” Hermione told the elf, who preened noticeably. Hermione stepped back into the kitchen.
“Kiki is very happy,” the elf responded. “I is happy to be in a house again and to be having a kitchen. I must be getting to work for making the dinner!”

“Oh, I wasn’t really expecting much this evening,” Hermione told her.

“Missy Sorceress is having her welcome dinner and I is making it perfect,” Kiki objected, looking slightly affronted.

“Wellcome dinner?” Hermione asked, sounding confused.

“It’s an old wizarding tradition, but it’s not a very big deal at all,” Adrian explained. “When you move into a new home, you host a small dinner, usually just for family. Since your parents live in Australia, we were very presumptuous and invited our families, Severus, Harry, and Pansy. I hope you don’t mind.”

Theo also hoped she didn’t mind. They hadn’t asked her how she wanted to spend the night before the second ritual, but they hoped this would be a nice distraction. It was mainly Adrian and Draco’s idea. Theo and Marcus would have been perfectly happy just having her to themselves for the evening. They all agreed, though, that they wanted Hermione to think of their families as hers.

“No, I don’t mind at all,” Hermione said. “I would love to show people what you all have done for me.”

As she was talking, a small troupe of elves gathered in the kitchen. It was strange for Theo to see a group of elves, all uniquely dressed rather than wearing the same linens. Adrian and Marcus had generally filled Draco and him in on the new additions to Hermione’s home. He was immediately able to place them based on what he’d been told.

“I apologize for the interruption, Madam,” the tall part-goblin elf said, clearly the leader of the group. “We wanted to give you a status update regarding the household.”

“We wanted to give you a status update regarding the household.”

“Please do,” Hermione nodded.

“Everyone arrived last night except for Nipsy and myself. We came this morning shortly after daybreak,” Nobby reported. “Bobo has chosen a shed for his quarters. He and Poppy have started on weeding, clearing, and removing pests from the gardens. They are starting closest to the house and working their way out. The rest of us have been assisting Miss Bones to ready the house, unpack your things, and lay in provisions. I am afraid I neglected to ask you about your preferences yesterday, so we obtained a small supply of basic items. We have food, beverages, soap and other cleaning supplies, but of course do not yet know your favorite things.”

“That all sounds wonderful, Nobby,” Hermione assured him. “It will take time to get to know each other. Thank you for all the work you’ve done today.”

“It is, of course, our pleasure, Madam,” Nobby said, bowing. The large elf appeared to hesitate before he spoke again. “There is only the matter of the rooting yet to be done.”

“Rooting?” Hermione asked, looking confused. That made the elves uncomfortable. Elves don’t typically ask to be rooted; the wizards that own them do it automatically. These, however, were paid elves and new to the house.

“Elves put down magical roots,” Theo explained to his witch. “Like when people talk about settling down somewhere, they say they are putting down roots in a place because they intend to stay there. Elf magic works better and elves are healthier if they root their magic in the property where they serve. It connects them to the place and the people that live there. From what I
understand, the connection makes them feel content and happier as well, as if they belong. It’s sort of like having an anchor to keep you safe. That’s why displaced elves can be so unhappy. Since you own this property, they need instruction from you to be allowed to do it.”

“What do I say? Does it have to be specific?” Hermione wondered.

“Anything along the lines of, ‘you are my elves and you serve this house, this land, and those that dwell within,’ should work,” Draco shrugged.

“That’s so… possessive sounding,” Hermione objected. “They aren’t my elves. I don’t own them. They are free.”

“They are your employees,” Marcus pointed out. “Just call them that.”

Hermione appeared thoughtful, and then faced the eight elves.

“I would like to welcome you all to this house and this land,” she began. “You all belong here and are my employees. Your job is to serve this house, this land, and those that dwell within to the best of your ability, until you no longer wish to do so. Does that work?”

Nobby closed his eyes and held very still for a moment.

“Yes, Madam,” the big elf finally said. “That was sufficient.”

The elves all gave some kind of version of a bow and went back about their business. Kiki got to work and set Frissy to a task in the kitchen. Susan Bones excused herself and said that she would be back with her crew on Monday morning, bright and early to complete more rooms. Hermione wanted her library high on the list of rooms to finish next.

Marcus wrapped an arm around Hermione’s waist and Draco took her hand. They all walked back to the sitting room.

“Do you think that the Nott, Pucey, and Malfoy elves were so grateful toward me for ‘blessing’ the land because they are magically connected and tapped into that land?” Hermione asked as they sat down. “That it affected them as well?”

“Sounds probable,” Draco replied, shrugging. Theo smirked. Draco was never one to care that much about what elves experienced or thought about anything.

Hermione sat on her new green couch, Marcus and Draco close to each side. Adrian sat up next to Draco, his arm draped behind Draco, so his hand was resting on the back of Hermione’s neck. Theo smiled at them all. They all looked so comfortable and happy. He spied a small bar on a side table.

“Drinks?” Theo asked the others, walking to the bar. Hermione nodded while his friends called out drink orders.

Theo mixed drinks and listened to them talk. Hermione thanked them again for making it possible for Susan to get all these rooms done. Theo grinned. She hadn’t been upstairs yet and they all wanted to save her bedroom as a final surprise. They had given Susan more direction and been a little more hands-on in there.

Theo passed out drinks and sat on a nearby chair, feeling very happy. That morning, Adrian had briefly mentioned the idea he’d had about all four of them continuing to share Hermione, even if only one or two of them were chosen in the third ritual. It was a beautiful idea and Theo
appreciated it, especially at times like this when they were all together. He would look into Adrian's idea, hoping it was viable, but the concerns Marcus pointed out to Ades did sound valid as well.

They drank and talked more. Hermione described her ideas for turning the barn into a lab and the carriage house into a guesthouse. She anticipated getting at least three bedrooms and a sitting room there. Adrian told them about the case he had before the Wizengamot that week. Marcus talked about the planning for the Quidditch World Cup, which would be later that summer. Fortunately, they planned for this event for ages and the last weeks just entailed making sure everything was implemented as planned and fixing problems that arose. Draco and Theo were tired of talking about the explosion, but they rehashed the main points for the other wizards.

After talking about themselves, the wizards unanimously agreed that they intensely disliked that Veela, Avian.

"And I don't have hair like a female," Draco grumbled. Hermione chuckled and pet his head as the other wizards laughed at his whinging.

"You have beautifully masculine, sexy hair," Hermione soothed, smiling. "They only said it because European Veela males typically have dark features. Almost all European females have what is very similar to Malfoy blond."

"He's an Ego-centric tosser, who thinks he's Merlin's gift to the world," Marcus scowled.

"Marcus, Draco is sitting right there," Adrian mock whispered, reaching around to cover Draco's ears. Draco huffed and knocked away Adrian's hands.

"Very funny," Draco said wryly while Hermione laughed. They all knew Marcus was talking about the Veela.

"While some people here may be so spoiled and catered to that they think they are Merlin's gift to the world," Theo teased, "imagine how it's been for Avian. He's been surrounded by females that treat him like a king since he was born."

"I imagine it's hardly occurred to him that there are females in the world who don't want him," Hermione observed. "I bet he hasn't been rejected since he came of age one hundred and fifty years ago. In fact, I bet he has been actively pursued."

"That's a lot of Veela that he's shagged in one hundred and fifty years," Draco observed, clearly imagining a Veela orgy for a moment.

"All the more reason for him to leave our witch alone," Marcus huffed.

"Madam," Nobby said from the doorway. "Master Snape has arrived via Floo, as have Mr. and Mrs. Potter."

"Thank you, Nobby." Hermione smiled. Theo smirked. He knew Hermione would work to make the goblin-elf less formal over time.

Snape, Harry, and Pansy stood behind the elf, looking amused. Nobby gestured them ahead and they walked in. Nobby seamlessly faded away, as good servants do.

"How very fancy," Harry teased. Hermione rolled her eyes and got up to greet her friends with hugs and kisses. "That was one big elf."
"He wouldn't be entirely elf, Potter. He's obviously a mixed breed, probably elf with a little bit of goblin," Snape observed, his tone implying that Harry was a 'dunderhead.'

Harry just shook his head and smiled, which Theo admired. He and his friends retained a healthy amount of fear for their former head of house, despite the years that had passed. Harry was mostly unfazed by Snape's snarky attitude and Hermione completely brushed it aside, which Theo found fascinating.

"This place looks wonderful," Pansy told Hermione as she looked around the room.

"It does, doesn't it?" Hermione agreed. "Susan Bones did a wonderful job, and was able to do it quickly thanks to these four. Please, sit. Can we offer you a drink?"

Theo automatically rose to get the drinks. He liked being useful. While he was up, he freshened Hermione's drink as well.

"As we were waiting to be announced, I heard something about a person who won't leave Hermione alone?" Snape half stated, half questioned when Theo handed him Firewhiskey in the rocks. "Is someone harassing you?"

“Oh, no, not really,” Hermione said. “We just had an unexpected visit.”

Hermione went on to describe the encounter with the Veela, with Adrian, Draco, Marcus, and Theo liberally adding their comments. Harry and Pansy were excited about the prospect of seeing one of the elusive male Veela. Snape looked more pensive.

“A true piece of sky is a remarkable gift,” he observed. “I wonder what they want in return.”

“Must they want anything?” Hermione asked. “The Veela I’ve met are very self sufficient. They don’t interact with the wizarding world much, especially the males. They consider themselves above our petty issues.”

“Snape’s concern is even more valid then,” Draco argued. “I’m well versed in doing things to further my own agenda. If this Avian bloke never comes down off his mountain, why is he doing it now? He said he wants to establish a relationship with the Sorceress for his people, as they have before. But what is it exactly that the Veela get out of that relationship?”

Theo thought about that for a moment. What would they get out of the association with the Sorceress? The group had their own powerful magic, which they certainly displayed earlier. The centaurs hadn’t wanted anything from Hermione, at least so far.

“Fertility?” Hermione finally ventured, looking thoughtful. “There has been some evidence that my magic creates fertility out of season or where it wasn’t before. Plants come to maturity and fruit. The horses at Pucey Hall are now expecting a foal. The Veela have certain fertility issues that result in having only a few males. Maybe they are hoping Sorcery can influence that.”

“That’s a reasonable hypothesis. We’ll find out when they make their request,” Snape shrugged. “At this point, we can only speculate. Regardless, the sky is a potent gift, much better than the other’s you’ll receive tonight.”

“Others?” Hermione asked. Theo realized they’d forgotten to mention that part.

“The people invited to a welcome dinner bring gifts,” Adrian reported.

“Like a Muggle house-warming,” Harry said. Theo hoped that would clarify it for Hermione and
Harry continued explaining. “It’s a traditional wizarding thing. And Pansy and I got you one of the traditional gifts.”

Harry stood and got something from the hall. He came back with a distinctively shaped package.

“Harry Potter, that is not what I think it is,” Hermione objected sternly. Harry just smirked at his friend and handed it over.

“It’s traditional,” Harry reported, smiling. “It’s even a traditional Muggle housewarming gift, so your house may be clean and free from evil spirits. So it’s a wizarding gift with a nod to your Muggle heritage.”

“Muggles are odd,” Marcus observed, leaning in to see what model Harry and Pansy had given her.

Hermione reluctantly unwrapped her newest model Nimbus broom, looking a little uncomfortable.

“Harry said you don’t like flying on brooms, but now you have to at least try to ride it because it was a gift from us and we’ll be offended if you don’t,” Pansy ordered, smirking.

“Well, that’s just not fair,” Hermione pouted. Her eyes sparkled with amusement though. “I do have all this land and I should have a way to check on it.”

“Exactly,” Harry said, laughing.

“That’s a good broom,” Marcus noted. “It’s safe and easy to ride.”

“I, on the other hand, brought you a gift you’ll actually use,” Snape drawled. He reached into his voluminous robes that had somehow managed to conceal a very large bird.

“You need a bird for correspondence, so I’ve obtained one for you.”

“Severus, it’s beautiful,” Hermione said, her eyes widening. Theo had to agree. It was a large, dark bird of prey, likely an eagle and definitely not a traditional owl.

“She is a juvenile Golden Eagle,” Snape reported, standing and bringing it over to Hermione. Theo realized that the large bird would get even larger. He didn’t know much about Golden Eagles, but they grew to be enormous and fierce. He’d heard that some people trained these birds to bring down rogue werewolves and other large predators. “She’s two years old, and won’t be considered an adult for at least another two years. She is, however, developed enough to carry your post now. She will get another eight inches taller and her wingspan may end up being between six and eight feet.”

“And Merlin help anyone who tries to take something that bird doesn’t want to give,” Harry said, shaking his head.

“Oh, don’t be silly, Harry,” Hermione admonished, petting the young but still fierce bird as if it were a sparrow. “She is just a sweetheart. Look at how sweet she is.”

Theo had to agree that, at the moment, the scary bird with the incredibly sharp beak and claws did look very docile. She made a soft, happy sound trilling while Hermione stroked her head and face.

“Yeah, your pets have always been sweethearts,” Harry scoffed. “That cat of yours was insane. It never liked anyone but you. You know, I think the same could be said for your… boyfriends. Maybe it is your special power, to make horrible, dangerous things sweet – at least to you.”

“Firstly, don’t speak ill of the dead,” Hermione instructed. The eagle rubbed her face against
Hermione’s cheek. “Crookshanks was a wonderful familiar. Secondly, Adrian, Draco, Marcus, and Theo are not at all horrible and dangerous. They are sweet, amazing wizards.”

“Let’s leave the ‘sweet’ descriptions to your kitty and your birdie, okay Granger?” Draco said, squirming a little in his seat. Theo thought Harry did have a good point. Not one of the four Slytherins was accustomed to being called sweet by anyone, except maybe Adrian; or Marcus, but only by his mother.

“I think I’ll call her Emilia,” Hermione said, smiling at her bird. “That was the name of one of the ladies in waiting to Queen Hermione in Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale.”

“Then it’s fitting,” Marcus said, leaning into Hermione slightly to press a kiss into her temple. The bird squawked and tried to nip Marcus, making Snape and Harry chuckle. Hermione encouraged her new bird to explore the grounds, but told her to stay close, and the eagle sailed out the open window.

Nobby, the large elf, came in to announced Draco’s parents. Lucius and Narcissa looked elegant and sophisticated as ever. Narcissa seemed especially lovely, smiling and glowing. They were informed of Hermione’s Veela visit and the gift of sky. The new magic power source would directly affect Lucius and he did admit to being grateful for the help. The first ritual had left him very weak for several days.

The Malfoys presented Hermione with their gift of wine, another traditional wizarding gift and a symbol of prosperity. Of course, being Malfoys, they did not bring a bottle or two. They gave Hermione a half dozen cases of some of the best wizarding wine in the world. Nobby arranged for it to be placed in safely in the cellar, but did remove several bottles for dinner at Hermione’s request.

Arabella arrived next. Her gift was a wooden desk that she’d designed for Hermione’s study. She brought a picture and the actual desk would be delivered on Monday. It looked very impressive from the picture. Theo thought it was strong and sturdy, yet feminine and graceful. Hermione loved it, which was the most important thing.

Nobby and a strange young elf in a kilt brought in some light food, which Theo thought was smart because the drinks were flowing well. Without food to balance the drink, they’d all be pissed by the first course.

Marcus’ parents arrived shortly after Adrian's mother. They were such a chatty, happy couple that they fit right into any social situation, at least post-war. They brought Hermione some rare plants from their own land. She was very happy with the gift. Although she confessed to having absolutely no talent at all in Herbology, she hoped these did well because they were valuable potion ingredients. She asked Nobby to fetch another elf called Bobo. Theo thought he saw Nobby hesitate, but the elf eventually did as he was asked.

Seeing Bobo, Theo understood the other elf’s hesitation at bringing him into a room of such sophisticated company. Bobo immediately recognized the plants and he handled them with a gentle nurturing that was at odds with his rough, gnarled appearance. He explained, in German, that he knew these plants and would care for them well.

Theo was beginning to wonder where his own father was. All the others had arrived within several minutes of each other and they would want to sit down for dinner soon. Theo knew his dad didn't like other people much, but he'd adored Hermione and he knew everyone here. Finally, as Theo was about to discreetly suggest starting without him, Nobby announced his dad.
"Ted! I'm so glad you could make it," Hermione greeted him with enthusiasm. "I was starting to worry."

"No need for worry," Ted said, not looking entirely comfortable. "I'm meant to give you a gift."

"You don't need to worry about that," Hermione waved. Theo could see that his dad didn't carry anything, so any gift he brought must be in his pocket.

"I made this for you," Ted responded, handing Hermione a roll of parchment from his robe. Hermione untied it and began looking over them. Over her shoulder, Theo saw complicated ward designs and a map of her property.

"Ted, this looks... I don't know," Hermione finally said. "I'm speechless. This must've taken you ages to design."

"Just four days," Ted replied simply. Theo couldn't believe his father worked on this all week. He obviously started as soon as he heard that Hermione was looking for a house. "I've been here for about an hour setting it up. I wanted to wait until all your guests had arrived before finishing it."

"You mean these wards in your design are up now?" Hermione said, eyebrows raised.

"Yes," Ted said, not noticing Hermione's surprise. Putting up wards, especially ones this complicated, was difficult and time consuming. Theo was used to his dad surprising people, though. He was never one to do what was expected.

"The ward surrounding the perimeter of your land is simple," his dad continued. "It will basically repel Muggles and keep out most dangerous creatures, like Manticores, Basilisks and whatnot. I set the Apparition boundary a ways from the house so no one can get too close. I managed to get your barn, carriage house, and sheds within the boundary as well so people can't Apparate into those either. An additional ward surrounds the actual house that does not allow uninvited guests. It also stops dangerous items from entering. Of course, my list of dangerous items is not comprehensive but does include possibly harmful potions, cursed items, and explosives. Anyone or anything carrying these items would be stopped at the boundary and not allowed to proceed without express permission. Of course, I tied your magical signature into the wards so you can Apparate within your own house, when you can Apparate again that is. You can obviously tie in other people to the wards as you wish as well."

"Ted, you are one amazing wizard," Hermione smiled. She reached up and gave him a kiss on the cheek, flustering Theo's usually staid father. Theo couldn't help but chuckle.

Snape and Lucius looked over the parchments detailing the ward designs and placements. They were suitably impressed, noting that even with the schematics it would take considerable time to breach these wards.

"I feel better knowing the Veela won't be able to come in without permission," Adrian said.

"Veela?" Ted asked. Arabella and the Flints hadn't heard about the recent visitors either, so they retold the story. It turned out his dad knew a lot about Veela, but Theo knew by now that his dad knew at least a little about everything.

Nobby announced that dinner was served and the discussion of Veela continued in the dining room. The wine the Malfoys brought was opened and the drinking continued as well. The Malfoys were abstaining though, Lucius reporting that alcohol made him sluggish despite hangover potions. He couldn't afford to be slow the next day, even with a piece of sky making him extra powerful.
Narcissa said she was abstaining in solidarity with her husband, so he wouldn't be the only one stone cold sober.

Hermione's new elf was definitely a good cook. Kiki incorporated the traditional welcome dinner items. The starter was roasted figs and scallops with honey. The honey symbolized a sweet start in a new place. The second course was supposed to be new vegetables to symbolize a new beginning. Most people made a simple salad, but they had an asparagus soup with crab. Kiki incorporated the salt, meant to symbolize a life with flavor, in a salt and herb crusted pork roast. Marcus ended up having three servings of that. The meal ended with a caramel bread pudding. Bread represented the hope that none in this house would ever go hungry.

The dinner was a success and all the guests spoke highly of both the food and Hermione's new house. No one really lingered after dessert. The ritual the next day was relatively early. Everyone used the Floo to get home and then the four wizards had their witch to themselves.

"Tired, kitten?" Adrian asked, pulling her close.

"Nervous," Hermione replied, nestling into his arms.

"The Veela gift will make this a piece of cake," Draco asserted confidently, rubbing the small of her back. Draco was always confident, which Theo thought was helpful. She had Draco for confidence, based in reality or not. Hermione also had Adrian for optimism, Marcus for pragmatism, and Theo to think of the dozens of things that could go wrong.

"I know," Hermione sighed. "I can't help but be nervous though. If this goes well, I should be able to use my magic again. I won't have those uncontrolled bursts anymore, I don't think. My body, mind, and magic will be in harmony. It's the last really dangerous ritual."

"You're prepared," Marcus told her. "You've done all you can until tomorrow morning. So, come upstairs and let us distract you."

"Marcus!" Hermione scolded, blushing. Theo chuckled.

Despite the things they'd already done together, she was still shy sometimes when it came to talking about sex. The time they had all five been together wasn't really planned. The four of them had insisted on staying with her after the first ritual because they were all so worried. They felt too close to losing her to be away. When they woke up and saw her looking healthy, it seemed natural to express their happiness physically. Well, that's how Theo thought about it. It was hard to be around her and not touch her. Hermione hadn't really had a chance to think about it, or over think it as the case may be.

"You haven't seen your new bedroom," Adrian said, laughing. "We would take you upstairs to show you that, not to distract you with sex."

"No, I meant distract her with sex," Marcus reported. "But there really is the bedroom to see, so not just sex."

"Marcus' cock is distracting," Draco observed wryly, looking at the big wizard. "Sometimes I'm surprised you can walk, having to carry that thing around."

Hermione had to laugh at Draco and Marcus. Their teasing and lightness made Hermione more comfortable, which Theo knew they all appreciated.

"Don't be jealous, Draco," Theo teased. "Your cock is perfectly satisfactory."
"Satisfactory!?!?" Draco said a little shrilly, whirling around to face Theo, who couldn't stop laughing. "My cock is more than satisfactory. It's...it's... epic!"

Hermione was laughing so hard, tears were forming in her eyes.

"Epic?" Hermione said, trying to wipe the wetness from her eyes. "You are so very humble, Draco."

"Screw being bloody humble," Draco scoffed. "Come on, Granger, take off those knickers and I'll show you epic."

"Don't put me in the middle," Hermione laughingly admonished Draco. "Theo started it, so take it up with him."

"Theo doesn't do blokes," Draco said with a huff. "If he did, I'd show him exactly how much more than satisfactory I am."

Theo chuckled and saw Hermione's eyes glaze over a moment. She was probably picturing it. He knew his friends' sexuality could be...flexible. The kiss Adrian gave him earlier in the week had been his first experience with a bloke. Theo wasn't opposed to it; he'd just never really considered it. He wouldn't deny being curious, and Theo knew he would have ample opportunity to satiate his curiosity if the five of them stayed together.

"Theo was naughty to tease Draco," Hermione said, leaning back into Adrian. Ades ran his hands along her torso and grinned. Hermione had a mischievous look, which was contagious. "Maybe Theo needs a spanking."

Adrian and Marcus raised their eyebrows and Draco chuckled. Theo sauntered over to Hermione and caught her chin in his fingers.

"Not gonna happen, Mi," Theo smiled. He pressed a firm kiss into her lips. While Theo could see himself experimenting with these particular wizards one day, he just couldn't imagine trying to be a submissive. He was laid back in life and people erroneously thought him a pushover, but he wasn't. And when it came to the bedroom, it just didn't feel natural to be in a submissive role.

"I only go the one way," Theo continued sternly. "You and Draco are switches, but I don't do submissive."

"Good to know," Marcus said, grinning. Draco had seemed surprised by Theo's inclinations last night and he wondered if Adrian and Marcus were as well. "It sounds like the three of you got up to some interesting things last night. Let's go see the new bedroom and one of you can tell us what you did last night as a bedtime story."

"Come on, kitten," Adrian purred in Hermione's ear. "Let us take you upstairs and show you what we have for you."

"If that's not a proposition, I don't know what is," Hermione said, giggling. "Lead the way."

Chapter End Notes

Next - Some smut and ritual number two!
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

WARNING - Cliffhanger ahead! If you do not care for cliffhangers, don't read - give it some time and come back when more chapters are posted. If you are particularly anxious and sensitive, wait until chapter 28 is posted. Just saying...

Disclaimer - I don't own Harry Potter. Really.
Now - Fun fun smut! And then ritual number two. And, as mentioned, maybe (definitely) a cliffhanger.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Adrian took Hermione by the hand and led her upstairs to the bedroom. Draco had an arm wrapped around her waist, while Marcus and Theo followed behind them.

"So, you're a task master in the bedroom, huh?" Hermione heard Marcus comment to Theo.

"I like what I like, the way I like it," Theo replied. Hermione could picture the grin on his face. Marcus' laughter rang out in the hallway and Hermione turned to see Marcus slap Theo on the back.

Adrian stopped in front of her door at the end of the hall and turned to Hermione.

"We know a bedroom is a personal space, but we hope you like it," Theo prefaced.

Hermione pushed the door open and stepped inside. What she saw took her breath away. It was the most luxuriously comfortable looking bedroom she'd ever seen. The walls were covered in a floral wallpaper of climbing cream and golden rose bushes on an ice blue background. The blue satin bed she'd found the other day coordinated perfectly. The bed was enormous, which she assumed was her wizards' doing. The thickest white rug Hermione had ever seen warmed up the walnut floors. The fireplace across the room from the bed was painted a bright white. Seating was grouped around the fireplace. She could easily imagine herself sinking into one of the blue wingback chairs to read.

"This is gorgeous," Hermione breathed. "I can't believe you all did this."

"Well, Susan helped a little," Adrian admitted.

"Open some doors, princess," Marcus instructed, gesturing to the three doors in the room.

Hermione went to the glass-fronted door near her fireplace and sitting area. The light coming in already told her that it lead outside. Opening the door, she saw that the strange, dirty narrow terrace that had looked entirely unsound was now a small oasis. Somehow, they'd managed to construct a new, larger terrace area. An area close to the door was covered with a canopy so she could sit there if it were raining or if she just wanted shade. A table and chairs were set under half of the canopied space while a very large hammock took up the rest. In front of the canopy was new space that housed a few lounge chairs for lying in the sun. Large planters were placed around the terrace, though they appeared mostly empty.
"There are things planted in those," Marcus explained as she peered into the dirt. "They just haven't
grown yet."

"This is perfect," Hermione grinned. "I can absolutely see myself spending time out here as often
as possible."

"Not a bad place for morning tea," Marcus said, smiling and draping his arm over her shoulder.

Hermione and her wizards went back into her room and she opened another door. It was a huge
dressing room lined with cupboards and chests. There was plenty of space for all her clothes. There
was a whole shelving unit for her shoes, another for bags, and small compartments for jewelry and
other accessories. All of her things had been unpacked and they filled about half of the space.

"I have loads of things!" Hermione exclaimed. "I mean, I knew I had accumulated a lot of clothes
and shoes, but I've never seen it all out in one place before. I never had this much storage, so I kept
nearly half my things shrunken in small boxes."

"Now you can see it all," Draco said. "These drawers here; they're just for knickers and only half of
them are being used. You know what that means don't you?"

"More room for socks?" Hermione said innocently, teasing Draco.

"If by socks you mean nylons with garters, then go ahead and fill them with those," Draco said,
leering.

Leaving her dressing room, Hermione knew what would be behind the third door, but had no idea
what it would look like. She opened the door to a large, window-filled bathroom. It had the same
walnut floors that went through the bedroom and dressing room. An enormous bath sat near the
windows, surrounded by marble steps. It wasn't quite as large as the prefects' bath at Hogwarts, but
it was close. There was a large glass walled shower in a corner, two sinks, and all the other things
you'd expect to find in a bathroom.

"I could swim in that tub," she said, still amazed by the space.

"If you want it, you'll have plenty of volunteers for company," Adrian said chuckling. "I myself
love a nice soak in the bath. It's relaxing and a good place to think."

“I couldn’t agree more,” Hermione said, smiling.

“Come on, princess,” Marcus said. “Let’s get comfortable. You, Draco, and Theo have a bedtime
story to tell us and I have a feeling it’s a good one.”

Hermione blushed slightly, but chuckled. Back in the bedroom, she excused herself and retreated to
the dressing room. She had slept with all four of them in the bed after the first ritual, but she was so
exhausted then that it was difficult to sexualize it. Of course, waking up with all those hands on her
and Theo under the covers between her legs had been absolutely amazing. She hadn’t had time to
think about it, the feeling of it all was overwhelming. After that, she wasn’t allowed to do anything
with any of her wizards. By the time she was medically cleared, Hermione wasn’t sharing the big
bed with all four wizards. It made her nervous to do so now; nervous but excited. Of course, she
wouldn’t change a thing. Who would she ever send away? No one.

Instead, Hermione focused on changing her clothes. She stepped out of the sky-high heels Theo
chose and set them on the shoe shelves with the others. Hermione spied a hamper and dropped her
clothes in there. Standing in her knickers, Hermione searched out the drawer that contained her
nightclothes. She found a thin silk nightgown that went down to mid-thigh. It was pewter grey and
matched the knickers she still wore. Taking a deep breath, Hermione went out to face her wizards.

Draco and Marcus were both lounging in the bed, Draco lying down fully and Marcus sitting up against the headboard. Theo was standing near Marcus, putting his clothes down on a chair. Adrian walked over to her and took her hand. None of them were clothed any longer, but Adrian and Theo wore pants. She couldn’t tell what Draco and Marcus had on, since both were under the covers.

“You look nervous, kitten,” Adrian said, his brow furrowed. “It’s just us. We aren’t expecting anything from you. We just want to be near you tonight.”

“We aren’t going to jump you, shag you, and toss you back and forth between us, Granger,” Draco said, patting the space on the bed between him and Marcus.

“Right,” Marcus affirmed. “Not yet anyway.”

Hermione laughed as Adrian led her to the bed.

“Just get comfortable, Mi,” Theo advised, sliding into bed next to Marcus.

“I was thinking earlier,” Hermione began as she crawled up the middle of the bed.

“You? Thinking? That’s shocking!” Draco teased.

“Prat,” Hermione scolded, swatting his thigh as she made her way up to the pillows. “As I was saying, I was thinking earlier about next week.”

All four looked at her expectantly. She slid under the sheets between Draco and Marcus before she continued.

“I know the issue of Ancillaries is the big elephant in the room. I want you all to know that I don’t like it anymore than you do. You four are the only wizards I want. Unfortunately, we don’t know what’s going to happen. Therefore, in the next week, I want to spend time with each of you individually. Not that I don’t love being together, but I think one-on-one time is important, especially since we don’t know how long we’ll have.”

“I think that’s a wonderful idea,” Adrian said, smiling. He got into bed on the other side of Draco and leaned against the headboard. Draco adjusted himself so his head was resting on Adrian’s chest. Adrian draped his arm over Draco’s bare chest. They looked so comfortable with each other. Hermione sometimes forgot how long these wizards had known each other.

“Me too,” Draco chimed in. “We could all use alone time with you.”

“How about alphabetical order?” Hermione suggested.

“Flint, Malfoy, Nott, Pucey?” Marcus asked, grinning.

“I was thinking Adrian, Draco, Marcus, Theo,” Hermione responded laughing. “But your way is good too. Why don’t you four work it out amongst yourselves.”

“Either way, I’m second, so I don’t care,” Draco smirked.

“We’ll talk about it and get back to you,” Adrian said.

“In the meantime, tell me my bedtime story, princess,” Marcus directed, pulling her to him so she was leaning against his chest. “What happened last night?”
“Well, I had dinner at Malfoy Manor with the Malfoys and Theo,” Hermione started, blushing. Marcus snorted and Draco chuckled. “When Lucius and Narcissa went to sleep, I had Draco and Theo to myself. I tend to get... carried away with Draco, but Theo stepped in and reminded me that Draco hadn’t been punished for hexing Sasha at the pub last week. Of course, I don’t condone that kind of behavior.”

Hermione felt Marcus’ chest rumble with laughter.

“So you punished him then, kitten?” Adrian asked, running his fingers idly along Draco’s chest. “Or did Theo do it?”

“I punished him,” Hermione answered, “but Theo helped me figure out what needed to be done.”

“And what was that, princess?” Marcus asked, his voice low and rumbling. Marcus also began running a hand along her torso, his fingers splayed across her rib cage.

“Deprivation,” Hermione sighed, pressing herself back into Marcus. “Draco was restrained. He could watch, but not participate and not touch himself.”

“Mmmm,” Marcus hummed and palmed one of her breasts. “I do love watching. What did Draco get to watch, princess?”

“Me with Theo,” Hermione replied. Her voice was becoming breathy and she arched into Marcus’ hand. She was so easily distracted by her wizards and Marcus had wonderfully talented hands. She looked over to Adrian and Draco; both were watching her with lust in her eyes.

“She was magnificent,” Theo reported, sliding over closer to Marcus, so he could reach her as well. Theo’s hand covered her other breast and Hermione moaned. Marcus gripped her face and turned it to his. His lips crashed against hers. Hermione groaned and pushed against him harder. She wanted to devour Marcus. Theo caressed her and Hermione lost herself in the sensation of the two wizards. Marcus and Theo together was a dangerous combination. They were both so strong and forceful, but careful with her. They could both push her comfort zone, but she had faith they wouldn’t push her too far.

Marcus pulled back and Hermione took a moment to catch her breath. Theo pushed her nightgown up and over her head, tossing it aside. He slid over so that he was positioned between her legs. Marcus was still behind her. Theo closed his lips over one of her nipples and licked. Marcus’ hand found its way down between her legs to her center.

"Look, princess," Marcus said, his eyes focused on the other side of her.

Hermione turned to see Adrian and Draco kissing each other just as passionately as she had been kissing Marcus a moment ago.

"Merlin, that's hot," Hermione moaned, not taking her eyes off the two beautiful wizards. Theo was licking and nibbling at her nipples, going back and forth. Marcus' hand delved underneath her nothing knickers and was leisurely exploring her folds. She was getting wetter and wetter by the second.

"They like it when you watch them," Marcus rumbled in her ear, grasping her earlobe gently in his teeth.

"They are so lovely," Hermione groaned. Marcus pushed two fingers inside her.
"Last night, when you punished Draco by deprivation, did you ever touch him?" Marcus asked. "Did you stroke his cock?"

"No," Hermione whispered. "He came when I came. My magic made him come."

Theo bit down a little harder and Hermione gasped. She threw her head back and arched, pressing her breasts into his mouth even more. The pain laced into her pleasure was intoxicating.

"Poor Draco," Marcus commented, his fingers still plunging in and out of her at a steady, but slow, pace. He began licking and sucking on her neck. "That was a punishment. All I think about is how wonderful it is when you touch me, your hands, and mouth on me and on my cock. I wouldn't be able to bear the deprivation of having you so close and not touching me. Look how much he wants you, how much they both want you."

Hermione returned her gaze to the other two in the bed. Adrian and Draco weren't kissing anymore, but they were watching her. Draco's eyes were locked on her. Adrian was behind him trailing kisses along Draco's shoulder, but his eyes were also fixed on her.

"You are so beautiful," Draco sighed.

"Gorgeous," Adrian agreed. Adrian pushed the sheets down, exposing Draco. "Look at what you do to him, to all of us."

Hermione's hand immediately extended out to wrap around Draco's cock. Her fingers gently caressed him and he bucked upwards into her hand, groaning. She began to work her hand up and down his shaft, slowly at first. Then Hermione noticed that Marcus was mirroring her speed with his own hand. The faster she went with Draco, the faster he would go with her. Therefore, Hermione picked up the speed.

Theo grabbed her hand and Draco whined. Theo licked her palm and left a pool of saliva on her hand, and then he put it back on Draco where it had been. Draco whimpered at the new slick sensation and rocked his hips into her.

Hermione was panting and trying to concentrate. She was so close. Marcus was pushing in and out of her, his thumb brushing over her swollen clit each time. Marcus was also rubbing his substantial erection against her backside. Theo was sucking hard on one nipple while he pinched and pulled the other. Draco more than filled her hand and he was grunting encouraging words to her as he leaned back against Adrian. Adrian's hands were around Draco's torso, caressing him and rubbing his nipples, all while he watched Hermione.

"Come, kitten," Adrian purred. "I love watching you come. You look perfect in that moment, uninhibited and beautiful."

Finally all the pressure that had been building and building up inside her snapped. Hermione's muscles when taut and she clutched down hard around Marcus' fingers. She inadvertently squeezed Draco tighter.

"Yes!" she screamed. "Oh, Merlin yes!"

Hermione's magic shot out from her and disappeared into the walls. Her wizards each had his own release. Adrian squeezed Draco's torso harder and Draco roared. Marcus' hand on her hip gripped tightly and he swore. Theo threw his head back and shouted her name.

Hermione collapsed back against Marcus' heaving chest. Theo did the same against her chest. Draco and Adrian were panting and leaning heavily against each other.
"I'm sticky," Hermione finally observed when her breathing got back to normal. She was covered with come from Marcus, Theo, and Draco.

Marcus laughed loudly while Theo chuckled. Draco rolled his eyes and Adrian grinned at her, shaking his head.

"You're not the only one," Draco reported. "That magic of yours really wrings a bloke dry, and I have Ades' come all over me to prove it."

Hermione laughed.

"Don't pretend like you don't love it," Adrian teased, giving Draco's nipple a sharp pinch.

"He'd have loved it more if you were actually buggering him while Hermione played with his cock," Marcus told Adrian. Adrian laughed aloud and Theo chuckled. Hermione took a moment to imagine the two wizards actually having sex. She loved watching them kiss and touch. Her image of Draco inside her while Adrian was inside him was just as good, if not better.

"I do like attention," Draco smiled happily and lazily. "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing at all," Hermione replied staunchly. She reached over and petted his face.

"No one here is surprised that you are a high maintenance wizard, who likes attention," Theo added, turning to face Draco, his head still resting on her chest between her breasts.

"I know we're all joking and teasing about buggering Draco," Adrian said, looking at Hermione seriously, "but, how do you feel about that sort of thing, kitten? Given what happened with the Weasel all those years ago, I want you to be comfortable. I hate to think my snogging Draco would make you uncomfortable or have you doubting my commitment to you in any way. I've already told you that you're the only witch I want."

"I know, Adrian," she replied seriously. "As I said before, we don't know what's going to happen next week. I don't feel entirely comfortable saying any of you must be faithful to me."

"We don't want anyone else," Theo said sternly. "All four of us are ready for, would welcome, a lifelong commitment to you."

"I'm just nervous," Hermione sighed. "I don't want to lose any of you."

"That doesn't answer Adrian's question about fidelity," Draco pointed out. "If it helps, just think about the next week. We can revisit the subject next weekend if we're lucky enough to be here with you."

"I would be honored to accept your fidelity for the next week and will promise mine as well," Hermione told them. She really wanted to keep all four of them to herself forever, but that wasn't entirely within her control. If she was bound to another wizard, she couldn't expect them to be alone forever.

"I've thought about my relationship with each of you, and I realized you all have long standing relationships with each other," Hermione continued. "I don't want to disrupt the relationships you all have. I feel like the relationship we all have together is... I don't know- it's hard to describe. You've all told me that none of you mind that I'm with the others when we've talked about it individually. Some of you even enjoy watching."

"I think we all enjoy watching," Theo smirked, rubbing his cheek against her chest.
"My point is that it's the same for me imagining any of you together," Hermione explained, running her fingers through Theo's hair. "I guess I don't think of you as mine, but that we all belong to each other - at least for the coming week. You all should spend time together without me, as you always have. If you want your relationship to have a physical component, anything from snogging to shagging, then I'm happy if you're happy. It's also incredibly hot to watch, not that I need to be there to watch for it to happen. But I don't want any of you to feel compelled to be together or do things together for my sake."

"We don’t," Marcus confirmed. Theo nodded as well.

"Draco is a good looking bloke," Adrian said, grinning at his friend. "So are Marcus and Theo. Having them as well as you, kitten, is the icing on the cake."

"Don’t get ahead of yourself, Ades. I haven’t invited you to ice my cake, just yet." Theo teased. The other wizards laughed.

"I’ve got a hundred Galleons that says Theo gets curious about being with a wizard and goes beyond snogging within the month," Marcus said.

"You’ve got a bet," Draco responded, grinning devilishly. "It’ll be much sooner than a month."

"We really are getting ahead of ourselves, but I read something to consider even though it may only apply to Hermione in the end," Theo interjected. Hermione looked at him curiously. "When a Sorcerer or Sorceress has had more than one Ancillary, the two Ancillaries were always described as very close. The literature theorized that the best way to support the Sorceress was to make a solid trio. There was never any indication of jealousy or preferential treatment among them. The magic picked the right people to bring balance and everyone was happy."

“That is nice to think about,” Hermione nodded. She really hoped that her magic would pick well. "In this moment, though, I am still sticky and it’s only getting worse."

“I think that shower in there is big enough to let everyone have a turn,” Adrian smiled. “Granger and I get to go first,” Draco announced, dragging himself upward. “We’re the worst off.”

Hermione was so relaxed with Marcus under her and Theo on top, but eventually she pulled herself out from between them. She and Draco went into the shower first, but they weren’t alone long. At one point, all four wizards were in there with her, jostling around, getting soaped up, and rinsed off. It was chaotic, but happy.

All cleaned up, Hermione returned to her dressing room and found a new pair of knickers – a real, practical pair. She put on an old comfortable t-shirt and climbed back into the middle of her bed, between four wizards. She kissed them each goodnight and settled down into the pillows. She was thinking that there was nowhere else in the world she’d rather be as she fell asleep.

OoOoO

Hermione woke up early Saturday morning. She had a little while before she had to get to Hogwarts, but not much time. She dressed in a loose top and cotton trousers. She wanted easy clothing in case she was injured again and it was hard to move around.

It was a beautiful morning and Nipsy brought her some breakfast out on her terrace. Hermione had tea and tried to eat, but her nerves banished most of her appetite. All of the stone planters on the terrace were brimming with plants and flowers that hadn’t been there the night before. She made a point to apologize to Bobo and Poppy, or at least give them a nice gift since elves didn't take
apologies well. The grounds were already a chaotic, neglected mess and her magic probably made it worse by encouraging everything to multiply and grow, even the weeds.

Hermione’s new eagle, Emilia, alit on the arm of her chair and gave her a happy trill. Hermione stroked her head and gave her food from her breakfast plate. She decided to test Emilia out and Nipsy brought her a parchment and quill. Hermione penned a quick note to Molly and Arthur Weasley asking if they would like to have lunch or dinner sometime in the next few days.

"Ready, princess?" Marcus asked from the doorway. She turned to him, nodded, and tried to smile.

Marcus took her hand and led her back inside. All the wizards were awake and casually dressed. They walked out of the house mostly in silence and Apparated to Hogsmeade.

The little town next to Hogwarts was packed. The streets were crowded, but people made way for them. The crowds parted and everyone stared as Hermione made her way from the Hogsmeade Apparition point toward the castle. Marcus walked a pace ahead of her, glaring and looking menacing. Adrian and Draco were at her sides, while Theo brought up the rear. A few people shouted words of encouragement as she passed and more than a few took pictures. No one could follow them on the path to Hogwarts though.

Hermione noticed that the set up for the second ritual looked almost identical to the first. The ritual circle was in the middle and there was a tent on each side, as before. This time though, there was arena seating arranged off to the side for the students.

Severus had already been there for a while. He and Percy let her know everything was set up and in place. Hermione retreated to her tent for the cleansing ritual as before, again accompanied by her four wizards. Luna and Selma were ready for her inside. They disrobed her and cleansed her while her wizards waited and watched. It was similar, but slightly different. The tincture they used smelled strongly of lavender with notes of peppermint. Instead of leaving her skin a metallic bronze, this made her silvery all over.

Hermione stood naked by the fire to dry and listened to the others chatter and banter. Her four wizards, Luna, and Selma talked, laughed, and teased each other. Hermione was well aware that the six of them were making an effort to keep her distracted and entertained. It made her feel warm and fuzzy inside to know they all cared so much. Once the cleansing tincture had dried into her skin, Hermione put on a simple white shift identical to the one she wore last week. Dressed, she curled up between Adrian and Theo. Adrian continuously and unobtrusively fed her small bits of fruit and glasses of water to keep her strength up.

Finally, Harry came to the tent to let her know they had five minutes. He also told Hermione what to expect. The same people were there as were present the previous week. Healer Adams and Pansy were ready for anything. Minnie and Lucius had completed their cleansing rituals as well and had gone into the ritual circle already. They were using sage to purify the area again, as the centaurs had recommended.

The two centaurs had returned and the four Veela were there as they said they would be. The male Veela, Avian, created a bit of a stir since most people there had never seen a male before. Really, the only thing different was the presence of the students sitting in the tiered seating. There were about sixty students there, all on their best behavior and being quiet as mice.

All the professors were also present and closely monitoring the students. It was supposed to be a teaching experience. Hermione knew that all the students present had learned the ritual ahead of time, so they would be able to follow what happened. Lucius had promised to owl Minnie about the sky gift the night before, so everyone at Hogwarts should know about it.
"It's time, 'Mione," Harry finally told her. She took his arm and they left the tent. At the edge of the circle, Harry hugged her and whispered good luck wishes before he went to stand by his wife. Luna and Selma kissed her cheeks and found a place next to the Veela. Hermione idly wondered if lesbians found female Veela as enthralling as wizards did.

Each of her wizards stepped forward to kiss her, but no one really spoke. Hermione knew they were as nervous as she was, maybe more. They all were hoping for less violence this time around, but completion of this ritual brought them closer to the third one. That was when they could be separated.

"We're here the whole time and afterwards, no matter what happens," Theo promised, speaking for all of them. "Remember that we are proud of you and have faith in you. You are strong and we know you can do this."

Hermione smiled and nodded at them. She was a fighter, which was important for her to remember. Hermione Granger didn't quit and didn't slack off - she won. She took a deep breath, pushed her shoulders back, stiffened her spine, and stepped inside the circle with her head held high.

Hermione felt the shiver of magic go through her as soon as she entered. Minnie and Lucius stood opposite her in their elaborate blue robes with silver stitching and moonstone. The three of them formed a triangle within the circle. They looked over to Avian.

Hermione watched the male Veela step away from his three guards. His long black hair was restrained in an intricate braid down his back. He fluidly dropped his robes to the ground, leaving him in nothing but a pair of black trousers. Hermione heard awed gasps, mostly from the students, but not entirely. Avian was an impressive figure, tall, fit, and well toned. He turned to Hermione and bowed, holding the piece of sky in his hands. While he was slightly bent, a pair of enormous black feathered wings emerged from his shoulder blades. As soon as his wings unfurled, they moved powerfully to lift him from the ground. His bare feet were much more talon-like than they had been just seconds before. Avian ascended and then swooped down above the circle. He hovered at the very center, several meters up, and gently placed the ball of sky. He whispered something and the ball hovered on its own while Avian returned to his place outside the circle. Never having actually breeched the perimeter, the circle was well intact.

Hermione could feel the impact of the sky immediately. It wasn't overwhelming, but as soon as Avian left it, she felt a sort of hum inside her. She felt energized and ready for anything.

As before, Minnie and Lucius used their wands to ignite the ceremonial fire and begin the ritual. Hermione approached the potion sitting in the bowl on the ground. She was prepared for the taste and the lumps this time, but the physical effect was different. She was again knocked off her feet, but it wasn't due to physical pain. Instead, there was an overwhelming pressure pressing into her head. It was as if everyone in the world was performing Legilimency on her at the same time. She squeezed her eyes shut, grit her teeth and focused on regaining control. She needed to block and redirect the pressure in her mind. Hermione had no idea how much time passed, seconds or minutes or longer, but she finally felt like she had a tenuous grasp on herself.

Hermione dug her fingers into the ground to steady herself and said the first part of the spell, the part that would merge the earth magic with her mind. She stood up, a little shaky, and took the large pitcher of purified water from Minnie. This time Hermione sat down before pouring the water over herself and saying the spell to bind her mind to the elemental water magic, having learned that lesson last week.

Other than being cold and making her shift dress inappropriately see-through, there was no effect.
Hermione smiled with relief. She still felt the pressure pushing on her mind, trying to get in, but she was able to keep her control. Her Occlumency skills allowed her to channel the pressure where she wanted, instead of being flooded. It took enormous effort on her part. She knew that she wouldn't have had the energy to do that and say the binding spells for the elements at the same time if it weren't for the piece of sky continually renewing and recharging her.

Hermione picked up the fire Lucius brought her and said the spell, again with no real ill affect. She could feel the pressure in her head increase, but it only took her a moment to adjust and regain control. Minnie and Lucius drew the necessary runes on her with ash. They had been saying their parts all along, also appearing to benefit from the Veela gift. By the third element last week, the two ritual leaders were hunched and exhausted.

Lucius made the entire process look effortless and didn't have a hair out of place. He was immaculately groomed as usual. Minnie looked chipper and ready to full of energy, as if she were ready to take on back-to-back classes of Transfiguration with first years. Logically though, Hermione knew differently. Both were expending vast amounts of magical energy, which was being replenished by the sky.

Hermione began the spell to merge her mind with the air. She lifted off the ground about a meter, but wasn't being tossed around by hurricane force winds as before. Unfortunately, she was being battered mentally. The pressure in her mind was becoming unbearable. If felt as if her thoughts were going to be swept away; she was barely holding on. She had to concentrate on channeling the pressure rushing around in her head, so much so that it took her forever to divide her attention enough to be able to complete the spell.

Finally, though, Hermione finished her part. The chaos was still raging around in her head and she was still hovering in the air, but it all felt manageable somehow. She knew that she could get down and rein in her mind when she needed to. Hermione watched a silver glow emanate from her skin. Last week, she hadn't been conscious to see the golden glow that signified the end of the ritual, but it was described to her. This silvery light glittered and danced on her skin. It was beautiful.

This was the end of the ritual. Hermione's eyes eagerly searched out her wizards. They were all beaming proudly at her. All she had to do now was the final spell to bind all four elements together in her mind.

Out of nowhere, Hermione heard a shout.

"Sectumsempra!" a shrill voice shrieked, breaking the reverent hush of the ritual site.

Hermione looked around for the source of the disruption. In that split second, she saw figures running toward the forest, but more disturbing were the looks on the faces of the people surrounding the circle, staring at her. They looked ashen and aghast.

Hermione felt something warm and wet, followed immediately by recognition of a searing pain through her torso. She looked down to see bright red blooming across the stark white of her shift dress. The red was everywhere. It was as if everything was in slow motion. She stared for a moment before she realized it was blood, her blood, and it was coming out of her at an alarming rate.

The same time the first few drops splashed onto the ground, Hermione dropped from the air and hit the grass hard. The chaos in her mind that she had worked so hard to contain spilled out everywhere, overwhelming her. This wasn't right, it couldn't happen. She had the final part of the spell to do. It was short, but critical. It would solidify the connection between the four elements and her mind. Without it, she would go mad, be a babbling idiot, or go into a vegetative state. Her
last coherent thought was one of panic.

Chapter End Notes

Next - What happened? Who did it? I know!
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer – I don’t own Harry Potter, not even a little bit.
Now – Let’s see some other POVs and figure out what happened!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As soon as Hermione hit the ground, complete chaos erupted all around. Some of the students started screaming. Adrian rushed forward. Hermione needed help. He didn't get more than two steps before he was shoved to the ground with such force all the wind was knocked out of him. He felt something heavy on his back, holding him down. He twisted his head to see one of the centaurs standing on him with its forelegs. Before Adrian knew it, Theo was down next to him in a similar position, held by the other centaur.

Adrian tried to yell, protest, and make them understand. Hermione was bleeding to death before them all. He couldn't produce any sounds though, since his rib cage was right on the verge of being crushed.

"You cannot break the circle," the centaur admonished him.

Adrian cast around desperately, looking for someone to break the fucking circle and go save his witch. Theo was in the same position as he was. Draco was being restrained by one of the Veela guards. The other two female Veela were wrestling Marcus, keeping him from helping as well.

Avian had taken to the air again. Adrian hoped he would land next to Hermione and save her, even if he couldn't stand to be indebted to that creature. The bloody Veela wasn't doing it though. He swooped around the perimeter of the circle, his wings beating back anyone that got too close. A third centaur that Adrian recognized as being one of the Hogwarts' staff was galloping around the perimeter, also keeping people from going to Hermione's aid.

It was unbearable. Adrian could not lay pinned to the ground and watch her die. He stared at her still, limp form. The silver glow still clung to her, but it looked as if it were starting to fade. Adrian heard authoritative shouting and turned his head to see Snape, perched at the very edge of the circle but not breaking the line.

"Minerva!" he was yelling, definite panic lacing his usually measured tones. "Finish it! Finish the ritual now! Lucius, do the Valera Sanentur, now! Fucking move!"

Adrian forgot about Lucius and McGonagall! They were in the circle with her and they could help her.

The two battle tested war veterans had been in shock. It was probably only a few seconds, but it felt like years to Adrian. As soon as they registered Snape yelling at them, they sprang into action. They were at Hermione's side, their wands pointed and working furiously before Snape even finished his rant. Strong, bright light flowed from their wands. McGonagall repeatedly cast that short, final part of the spell. She didn't stop, she didn't rest, and she barely seemed to breathe. The aging Headmistress looked tough, fierce, and determined.
Lucius was doing the healing incantation. Adrian had heard of the Valera Sanentur, it was an intense healing spell for serious injuries that required a lot of magic to produce, but he'd never seen it done before. Lucius was intent and made the incantation more than the usual three times. Adrian didn't know if it wasn't working or of he was just being safe. Lucius must have felt finished at some point, because he stopped chanting the healing spell and joined McGonagall in finishing the ritual.

Adrian never turned away as they worked. They were concentrating harder than Adrian had ever seen anyone concentrate before. He prayed and hoped that the piece of sky floating directly above them was giving them enough energy to complete it. But could it be done without Hermione? Finally, the silver glow was gone. It hadn't slid over her body and been inhaled as the gold had the previous week, it was just gone. Adrian didn't know what to make of that.

When the glow was clearly gone, people sprang to action. Healer Adams, Pansy, and Snape were on Hermione faster that Adrian could've imagined. At the same time, the Centaurs released him and Theo. The Veela stopped their restraints as well, freeing Draco and Marcus.

"Where the bloody fuck is she!?!" Draco screamed. Adrian whipped around. He'd only looked away for a second, but Hermione was gone.

"The Healers and Master Snape Apparated her directly to the waiting emergency suite at St. Mungos," Kobayashi reported calmly. "That was the emergency plan and why only those three were given permission to Apparate on Hogwarts grounds today for that reason."

The little Japanese wizard was telling them what they already knew. That was the plan. They'd all discussed it in the pre-ritual meetings. In the moment though, Adrian had forgotten and it seemed the others had as well.

"Let's go then," Marcus said, already turning and running toward the Hogwarts Apparition boundary.

"Stop!" Kobayashi called after him. When Marcus didn't slow, the old wizard pulled out his wand and stopped him in his tracks.

Adrian started to protest, but Blaise cut him off.

"None of you are in a state to Apparate yourselves," Blaise said seriously. "You'll be Splinched and Hermione will be so very cross with us for letting you go. And that's one witch whose bad side I never wish to be on."

Blaise beckoned to others and Adrian saw that the Flints, the Malfoys, and his own mother were already rushing toward them. When they arrived, Blaise started giving orders.

"Marcus, let your parents take you to St. Mungos," Blaise directed. "You can see Hermione and get your own wounds healed."

Adrian took stock of the others and himself for the first time. Marcus' shirt was torn and blood was visible through the holes in several places. Ragged, bloody wounds on his chest and on the side of his face were clearly made by very large talons. Draco was similarly wounded, but he didn't have many, just one on his shoulder and another on his thigh. Theo had some obvious bruising on his right cheek and he was cradling his left arm, which was clearly injured in some way. Adrian took stock of himself. He probably had bruises from being knocked to the ground and he was almost certain several of his ribs did break because taking a deep breath was painful.
"Draco, let your parents take you," Blaise continued. "Adrian, go with your mother and I'll take Theo."

"Who the fuck was that?" Selma yelled, coming up to them. Adrian didn’t register her question for a moment. All he had been thinking of was Hermione, but someone did this to Hermione. She was attacked.

"Harry and Kings caught her before she could make it to the Forbidden Forest," Luna reported, pointing.

Adrian saw them only a few meters away. A relatively small figure was trussed up and levitating between the Minister and Harry. It was an unremarkable looking witch, who seemed vaguely familiar to Adrian. The four wizards stared, as they got closer. They were headed off the grounds so they could Apparate, forcing them to pass by the group.

"Oh, bollocks," Draco muttered before turning to Theo. Adrian had no idea what was going on, but Theo obviously did. His eyes went wide with recognition and then his face turned to granite. Adrian had seen Theo snap a few times when he was pushed too far, but this was different. This wasn't Hurricane Theo; he was stone cold and it was scary.

The bound witch saw Theo and her stormy expression changed immediately.

"Theo! There you are! Now we can be together! I killed that bitch and you are free from her. She should’ve known better than to try and take my wizard," the witch said happily. She looked so joyful and proud; Adrian wanted to punch her in the face. He did realize who she was though. It was Lisa Turpin, that witch Theo dated for a few months who hadn’t taken it well when he’d ended things with her.

Theo's expression remained dangerously still. Adrian was starting to get scared. It was too much like the calm before the storm, as if Theo were summoning something disastrous. Sure enough, Theo lifted his wand and aimed it right for the witch.

"Avada-" Theo began. As soon as he uttered the last syllable of the first word, he was thrown to the ground onto his back. Except this time it wasn't a centaur, but a small blonde witch that had taken him down. Everyone else had just stared, mouths agape, but Luna acted. Now she was straddling him, Theo was pinned to the ground with Luna's hands over his mouth. The quirky blonde just looked into his eyes sympathetically and shook her head, not moving her hands.

"She wouldn't want you to do that," Luna told him softly.

The coldness in Theo's eyes broke. His face softened and his expression was one of pain and horror. His eyes filled with tears and a few began to roll down his face. Seeing the shift in him, Luna moved her hands away from his mouth.

"It's my fault," Theo choked out. Luna just stroked his face, letting him talk. "If it weren't for me, Hermione would be fine. I did this."

"All you did was help her and love her," Luna said. "What other people do is up to them. You aren't responsible."

Theo drew in a long, ragged breath.

"Minister, Mr. Potter, please get this psychotic witch away from here and into a cell," Lucius directed sternly.
"And just so we're all clear," Draco interjected, his tone matching his father’s, "Theo didn't say anything."

“I didn’t hear anything at all,” Harry said, narrowing his eyes at the witch he had in custody.

“But Theo, I love you,” Lisa wailed. “You are mine and only mine!”

The Minister raised his wand and murmured a spell to seal her mouth shut. Adrian wondered if it was a standard part of Auror training.

“Nope, nobody heard anything at all,” the Minister agreed grimly. The two wizards began to walk away with their charge, but Harry paused and looked back.

“Go to her,” Harry implored them. “She needs you. I’ll be there as soon as I can, but if I get hung up, please get me word.”

Blaise nodded. Adrian reached down and helped Theo up. His friend looked entirely broken and Adrian pulled him in, holding him tightly. Adrian knew exactly how Theo felt. They couldn’t lose her. It would break them.

Draco looked over at his friends, wanting to join them in their embrace. In the next second, however, his mother wrapped her arms around him and Draco suppressed the urge to sob into her as if he were a child. He had to stay strong, so he only lingered for a moment before stepping away from his mother’s comfort. He needed to get to his witch and find out what was happening before he deserved any soothing.

“Let’s go,” Draco ordered. They all followed and the group Apparated as soon as physically possible.

Draco was sure they made quite a sight as they descended upon the St. Mungos Apparition point. People stared and Draco didn’t care in the least. He generally enjoyed the spotlight, but now it barely registered. He had to attend to more important things. They rushed into the lobby and headed straight for the lifts, ignoring the loud protests from reception and security. The ritual planning team had been briefed about the location of Hermione’s secure emergency hospital room in case any of them needed to take her there.

“Where do you all think you are going?” a security guard demanded. “You all need to check in.”

The foolish guard tried to step in front of them and Marcus literally growled. The guard paled.

“You all go on,” Lucius instructed. “I will explain the circumstances to this… fellow here. They will need to increase security and put certain measures in place, the sooner the better.”

“I’ll help you,” Pius Flint said, stepping very close to the security guard and looking down at him. Pius, just as large as his son, towered over the regular sized guard. “We will be up shortly.”

As they all crowded into one lift, Draco remembered that Healer Adams had arranged for emergency Apparition privileges from Hogwarts grounds directly to the predetermined room at St. Mungos. Neither place allowed Apparition from within and Draco had never seen an exception before, but who would tell the Sorceress no? Because it was unheard of, no one knew Hermione was Apparated right in and was already there. It was good for privacy though. They had time to themselves before the press descended upon them.

The lift finally opened and the group flooded out into the hallway, Draco leading them down the hall. He hesitated at the door though. Part of Draco wanted to break the door down and get to his
witch, but the another part of him was reluctant. What if she hadn’t made it? What if she were already dead? Draco wouldn’t be able to bear it. At least on this side of the door, Draco was able to remain ignorant. On the other hand, maybe Hermione was sitting up in her hospital bed waiting for them.

Selma reached around and knocked, breaking Draco’s moment of paralyzed indecision. Pansy opened the door and the sober look on her face did nothing to provide Draco any solace. They all filed into the eerily quiet room. Draco immediately went to the bed, where Hermione lay. Adrian was quickly at his side. Marcus and Theo rushed to the other side of the bed, so all four of them were crowded around her.

Draco studied her intensely, as the other three wizards did. She certainly wasn’t dead. He could see the gentle, unlabored raise and fall of her chest. She was wearing one of St. Mungos white patient robes and was covered by a thin white hospital blanket. Her skin glowed tan, pink, and healthy against the white fabric.

“What’s going on?” Marcus finally asked, looking to Healer Adams and Severus. “Are you waiting to Rennervate her?”

“No,” Healer Adams responded seriously. “The spell that Mr. Malfoy performed in the field closed her wounds, but she had bled out a great deal. When we arrived here, we immediately administered Blood Replenishing potions. It took several doses, but we managed to get enough into Miss Granger quickly enough to keep her from going into organ failure. Body scans show that her organs are functioning, as they should. We applied dittany to the wound to prevent scarring, but there may be a mark there because of the delay.”

“So why isn’t she awake?” Adrian asked. “Does her body need more time to recover before you Rennervate her?”

“No, Mr. Pucey,” Severus spoke up. Draco looked to his godfather for answers and really did not like what he saw. He’d never seen Severus look so… helpless. It was disconcerting. “We tried that already and it didn’t work.”

“What do you mean it didn’t work?” Draco demanded.

“It didn’t work, Drake,” Pansy said sadly, touching his arm. “Her body is fine, but she won’t wake up. We scanned her head, but we can’t see anything.”

“Can’t see anything wrong?” Draco clarified.

“No, we can’t see anything,” Pansy repeated. “We have different scanning spells that illuminate certain areas or processes in the body. We can see her heart beating, all the veins in her body distributing blood, the flow of oxygen; things like that. When we scan her brain, we want to be able to see the blood going to every part. We also want to see her brain working. We have a scan that lights up areas of the brain that are using the energy. Dark spots would mean that part of the brain isn’t working. When we try to look at Hermione, we only get a bright silver light over the whole brain. We just don’t know what that means.”

“But her brain is working,” Marcus pointed out. “Obviously, it is sending signals to her body because she is breathing and her heart is beating.”

“And her body responds to the environment,” Healer Adams pointed out. “She can feel a stinging hex and exposure to temperatures. As Mr. Flint pointed out, her brain is working.”
“What’s the problem, then?” Adrian asked.

“We don’t know,” Severus sighed. “We can only hypothesize.”

Silence filled the room, everyone lost in their thoughts. Of course, Draco was glad Hermione’s body was okay, but he didn’t know what was going to happen next or how to help her.

“So what are the hypotheses?” Selma finally asked Severus.

“There are several unknown factors,” Severus explained, rubbing his face. “We all know there was one last part of the spell to do when Hermione was attacked. What we don’t know is exactly when she lost consciousness. Did she have a chance to whisper the spell or at least try to complete the spell nonverbally? On the other hand, her mind may have been overwhelmed entirely by the elemental magic, so she couldn’t do any of that.

“Research on that subject is split,” Severus continued, sitting in a chair. “There have been cases where the Potentiate could not complete the ritual, most often the first ritual because of its overall brutality. Half the time the Potentiate didn’t make it, but the other half of the time the ritual leader was able to complete it with no ill effect on the Potentiate.”

“In summary, we don’t know what Hermione was able to do before she became unconscious and if what Lucius and the Headmistress were able to do was enough?” Narcissa surmised. Severus nodded.

“Could her condition now be a sign that the ritual was not adequately completed?” Selma asked, frowning.

“Not really,” Severus responded with a sigh. “It certainly isn’t a good sign, but it may not mean the other thing either. The second ritual, as you all know, binds the elemental magic to her mind. The result is Hermione being able to control the magic, to channel it and direct it to her will. Research tells us that Sorceresses become very intuitive after the second ritual, so we know it’s not just about her getting control, but about the magic being able to exert its influence as well. Hermione has to share her mind with this magic and we honestly can’t say how long something like that may take. Maybe the ritual was done, but Hermione’s mind is taking longer to fully assimilate this new part.”

“She is stubborn,” Draco smiled wryly, touching her face. “I can’t imagine she would want to share her brain.”

“You’re right,” Marcus said, also smiling sadly down at their witch. “She’s probably in her head working out an agreement with her magic.”

“Hermione does love setting down ground rules,” Adrian smiled.

“You noticed that did you?” Severus smirked. “My hope is that Hermione is in there, setting rules and putting things in order. When she’s done, she’ll wake up.”

Draco fervently hoped that what Severus was saying was true. It was a lot to manage, having a new magic inhabit your mind. Maybe it just took time to straighten it all out.

"I hope you're right, Severus," Luna said, echoing Draco’s thoughts but also looking at Hermione with her brow furrowed. "My concern would be that she's lost in there. The mind is a busy, messy place and Hermione's mind is more complicated than most. She may be in there, looking for a way back to herself."
"That's also entirely possible," Severus agreed soberly. "Hermione is stubborn enough to keep fighting too, which gives me hope."

"I've never seen her back down," Selma grinned. "And I don't imagine she'll start now."

Draco felt restless and helpless, which he hated. He hadn't felt so at a loss since he was trapped under Voldemort's thumb. Adrian put his arm around his shoulder and they all stood in silence. No one had any ideas; there was nothing left to do but wait.

The four injured wizards all refused to leave the room, so Healer Adams and Pansy tended to them there. Marcus and Draco’s talon gashes were closed and salve was applied to prevent scaring. Theo’s left arm was dislocated, but reset and he was given bruise paste. Adrian was given a dose of Skele-Gro for his broken ribs and also needed a fair amount of bruise paste.

Healer Adams went to his office to do some research, hoping to find some additional information. Arabella, Inge, and Narcissa settled down on the couch next to Severus' chair. Selma sat in the other chair and Luna sat on her lap. Blaise and Pansy perched on the windowsill. Draco stood by Hermione’s bed, he and Adrian propping each other up. Across her bed, Marcus and Theo were doing the same.

"Pansy, Harry and Kingsley have taken the attacker into custody," Blaise said, breaking the silence, "but he'd like information about Hermione's condition."

Pansy nodded and got up to send her husband a message. As soon as she left, Lucius and Pius came in. Severus brought them up to speed. The two older wizards didn't have much to add. They went and stood by their wives.

Draco watched his father reach his hand out to his mother. She looked at him with such love, even after all the years and all the mistakes. That's all Draco wanted, years with his witch filled with fun and sadness, sex and fighting - all the things of life. He looked down at Hermione. She looked like she was sleeping. Draco tried to think of something, anything, he could do to wake her up.

Marcus watched her as well. She was the picture of health, tanned skin with pink cheeks. She was there, but only her body. Her mind was elsewhere, but she had to find her way back. Marcus didn't doubt for a second that she was a fighter. He hated waiting though. Marcus was a wizard of action, so this was killing him.

Marcus slung his arm around Theo. His friend hadn't said a word since they left Hogwarts grounds. Marcus could only imagine how he felt. He didn't blame Theo for this in any way, and he didn't think the others would either. Theo loved Hermione more than anything or anyone. His psycho ex-girlfriend was to blame. Marcus understood what he was feeling though. If he were in Theo's position, he would undoubtedly blame himself too, rational or not.

"There has to be something to do," Marcus huffed in frustration. "I hate waiting."

"If she's lost in her own mind, talking to her might be helpful," Luna suggested. "There's nothing wrong with her ears. She can still hear things, even if it doesn't register. Maybe she'll hear a little bit and that will give her a direction."

"It certainly couldn't hurt," Selma pointed out. "Why don't we all say something about her? Maybe that will help, hearing the sounds of our voices and talking about her."

"I'll start," Blaise volunteered. "We went shopping the other day and I was surprised at how long that witch can go. I never saw Hermione Granger as the shop-'til–you-drop sort when we were
back in school. Now, even a seasoned shopper can't keep up with Mother and me, but she did quite well."

They all chuckled. Luna told them all about a time when they started their last year of Hogwarts when none of the House-elves would go into her room or assist her in any way. They were all afraid Hermione would try to give them clothes and free them. The Headmistress had to gather them all and made Hermione promise not to free them in any way.

Selma related a time in Turkey when Hermione took Muggle cooking classes for British expats in Turkey, who wanted to learn the local cuisine. She turned out to be quite good, as cooking and potion making weren't too different. In the beginning though, Selma and Hermione's friends were subjected to burned, barely edible mush.

Snape chuckled and told them about a birthday cake she'd made and sent him via owl. It was the first thing she'd ever baked and it was barely a step above Hagrid's rock cakes, according to Snape. Her later endeavors were much better. Severus also mentioned that she hated hospitals.

"If she hates hospitals, then let’s take her home," Marcus said a bit crossly. If they weren't going to do anything for her, why were they still there? "She'd be happier in her own bed, with her own things."

"She is already very attached to that house," Adrian pointed out, "even if she only just moved in."

"That house is where she sees her future," Draco nodded. "Maybe she would be more comfortable there than here. It could also help give her that direction Luna was talking about."

"It certainly is more secure than the hospital, thanks to Ted," Lucius pointed out.

"Is the hospital doing anything for her?" Narcissa asked.

"Since she is in a coma, for lack of a better word, the hospital would help take care of her basic body functions," Severus noted. "If she stays unconscious for longer, she will need hydrating and nutritive potions to keep her body healthy. The waste her body produces will also have to spelled out of her since she can't get up to use the loo."

"That sounds simple enough," Marcus noted. He really wanted to get Hermione out of this depressing place. "Snape, you can get the potions she needs. The ones you make would be better than standard hospital issued potions anyway. The bodily waste spells aren't that complicated. I broke my legs and had to use them while the Skele-Gro took effect."

"I'll go get Healer Adams," Marcus' father volunteered. "He can check her out to us."

"Wait, will he check her out to us?" Inge asked. "As... close as the boys are to her, none of us are family."

"Hermione appointed Harry and myself substituted decision makers a few days before the first ritual," Snape reported, "in case it didn't go well. I can sign her out."

Pius left in search of Healer Adams and Marcus felt better, as if he was doing something productive to help his princess. Marcus would do anything for her. He had to help her any way he could.

Pius brought Healer Adams back. Pansy and Harry happened to arrive as well. Healer Adams was reluctant, but admitted that there was nothing they were doing at St. Mungos that technically couldn't be done at her home.
Harry reiterated what Snape had said, that Hermione hated hospitals. They had all spent too much time in hospitals and infirmaries during their childhood. That sealed it for Marcus. He tucked the blanket around his princess and scooped her up into his arms.

Pansy soothed Healer Adams, telling him that she and Harry would stay at Hermione's house. Healer Adams could still check on her several times a day and Pansy would be there all the time.

"There's a private Floo on this floor," Healer Adams told them, sighing. "It's only for emergency Healer use, but I think it's best not to go down to the public Floo. I understand word has started to spread that Hermione is here. Press and well-wishers have started to gather in the lobby."

"All the more reason to go," Draco said, shaking his head. Marcus nodded his agreement and held Hermione close to his chest. What happened earlier with that crazy, homicidal witch had proven to Marcus that his princess wasn't safe. He needed to do more to protect her.

They marched to the Floo. Marcus took Hermione through first and those that could follow did.

None of their parents or Blaise had Floo privileges into Hermione's home, so they left the others to get her settled. They would go to their own homes, but promised to come by later. Marcus could clearly see that his own parents were concerned, not just for Hermione but for him as well. They had realized what Marcus already knew, that he couldn’t stand to lose her. It would destroy him. It was clear to Marcus that he loved her more than he thought possible.

Marcus stepped into Hermione's from hallway and was immediately met by Nobby. The large elf's big eyes got even wider.

"The Madam... she is..." Nobby managed.

"She is unconscious and we don't know when she will recover," Adrian supplied, stepping through the Floo. "I trust her room is clean and ready?"

"Yes, sir," Nobby reported, still looking concerned. Draco stepped through, followed by Theo. The elf looked at the four wizards and drew himself up, as if preparing for battle. "What are my orders, sirs?"

"Marcus and Theo are going to take Hermione upstairs, change her into her own clothes, and settle her into bed," Draco reported. Harry and Pansy stepped through the Floo next, followed by Luna and Selma. "Adrian and I will make a list of authorized visitors. It is to be strictly adhered to. Only people on the list can be admitted to the house. Alert the outdoor elves to be on the lookout for trespassers on the grounds. Alert one of us immediately if any are found."

Nobby nodded and Draco continued.

"The Potters will be spending the night, so have one of the elves ready a guest room," Draco ordered. "If there isn't a useable bed in this place, let us know."

Severus came through the Floo last.

"Severus, are you staying here as well?" Draco asked. Their former professor nodded. Draco turned back to Nobby. "Master Snape will need accommodations as well. You should alert the kitchen elves that seven of us will be staying here."

"Immediately, sir," Nobby bowed slightly and was gone.

Marcus proceeded upstairs with Hermione, followed by Theo, who was still silent. Marcus knew
that Theo would talk when he was ready. Not only did the other wizard have to deal with Hermione's condition, as the rest of them did, but Theo had tried to kill someone that day. Marcus was sure that was a first for his friend. While they all fought in a war, it was as unwilling participants and none of them had wanted to kill. Marcus didn't judge Theo though. If he needed to kill to protect his princess, Marcus would do it in a heartbeat. A lifetime in Azkaban would be nothing compared to a lifetime of anguish that would come from knowing he could have saved her but didn't.

"Find her something soft to wear," Marcus told Theo gently as they entered her room. Theo disappeared into her dressing room and Marcus laid her on the bed. He unwrapped the hospital blanket from her small form. She looked so fragile sometimes. Theo handed him a thin, worn shirt that was clearly very old.

"She's just so small," Marcus told Theo, sighing. "I know she's tough and strong, but sometimes she doesn't look it. Hold her up while I take this thing off her."

Theo seemed hesitant, but then gently lifted Hermione into a sitting position. Marcus pulled the hospital robe up over her head, trying to be gentle and ease it over her arms. He could do this, he realized. He could, and would, stay with his princess no matter how long it took her to come back to him. Marcus would never leave her, no matter what.

It wasn't that Theo didn't want to touch Hermione when Marcus told him to, he just felt that he didn't deserve to. Theo couldn't shake the idea that everything he touched turned to shite. He was the one who exposed Hermione to that insane bitch. It would've been better for Hermione if she'd never met him.

When Marcus removed her hospital robe, Theo almost threw up. A long, jagged gash ran along her torso. It started on the inside of her left breast, right over her heart, and angled down across her abdomen. It ended at her right hip. The wound looked several days old already because of the dittany, which had left its distinctive brownish tint. Just a little deeper and the wound would've instantly punctured her heart.

"I can't," Theo managed to mutter as he tried to pass Hermione's unconscious form to Marcus.

"Stop," Marcus said sternly, gripping his shoulder so Theo couldn't move. "You aren't leaving."

"Can't you see what I caused?" Theo demanded, gritting his teeth.

"No, I can't," Marcus told him, his eyes narrowing. He slid Hermione's nightshirt over her, covering the scar. "I see what that psycho bitch did, not what you did."

"If Hermione wasn't with me, then this would've never happened," Theo seethed. "Lisa never would've targeted her."

Theo laid Hermione down and Marcus covered her with her own warm, fluffy blanket. Theo stepped away from the bed and walked toward the door.

Marcus grabbed him by the arm. Theo whirled around and swung out at his friend. He needed to go and if Marcus tried to stand in his way, then Theo needed to move him. Although Theo's fist made contact with Marcus' jaw, the large wizard didn't flinch.

"I'm not going to let you abandon her," Marcus told him simply. "She needs us all right now, including you. She loves you. I know she does, just as she loves Ades, Draco, and me. You may not feel worthy of her at this exact moment, but that's not the point. If she is going to pull through,
she's going to need all of us and we are going to need each other. You can't abandon her or the rest of us. We've been a unit and we are going to stay a unit; that's still the plan."

Theo collapsed into himself, defeated. He didn't want to leave Hermione, he loved her. He just felt so guilty. It was because he loved her so much that he couldn't stand himself, and he didn't understand how everyone else tolerated him either. Marcus propped him up, holding Theo close while he broke down.

"How can you even look at me?" Theo sobbed. "You know that if it wasn't for me, this wouldn't have happened."

Marcus just held him while he cried.

"Don't be an idiot," Marcus said in a very soothing tone, despite the content of his words. "It isn't your fault and you'll realize that soon enough. Hermione may just wake up to tell you to stop being such a bloody tosser. She's not the only one that loves you, you know."

Marcus said the last part softly, but Theo heard him loud and clear.

"I know it's been an emotional day, but the grief shagging can wait until later," Draco said from the doorway.

"Marcus was just stopping me from doing a runner," Theo admitted, wiping his face.

"Why would you leave?" Adrian asked, clearly confused. Theo still didn't quite understand how they didn't all blame him, didn't want him gone. Maybe it was just him then. Theo blushed.

"He feels like this is his fault, that it wouldn't have happened if he wasn't part of Hermione's life," Marcus explained.

"Probably," Draco shrugged. "But it's bullocks to think like that. If you weren't in Hermione's life, she wouldn't have had your help in doing all the research and maybe she wouldn't have lived through the first ritual at all. She wouldn't have been able to recover from the first ritual at Nott Castle nor had the wards around her that she has now. So maybe some nutter would've swooped in while she was vulnerable to grab himself his very own Sorceress. Who knows what bizarre strange thing would've or could've happened to the present if you change a detail of the past?

"I used to think about that kind of thing all the time," Draco continued. He began undressing and pulled on a pair of pajama bottoms. Draco seemed to have stashed a bag of clothes in Hermione's room. "I used to think about every little thing that happened leading up to the war, every day and every conversation at school. What if I'd been friends with Harry back then? What if I could've done something to save Dumbledore? It's a waste of time. That kind of thinking only leads to pain and it isn't productive. We are where we are in life and that's what we have to deal with. Examining every crack and pebble in the road that brought you to the present only distracts from the now."

Draco crawled into bed next to Hermione. He waved for Theo to join him.

"When did you get so deep?" Marcus teased him.

Theo took off his robes and slid into the bed on the other side of Hermione in his shirt and trousers. Despite Marcus' teasing, Theo knew they all appreciated Draco's perspective. In the years following the war they rarely talked about what they'd done, the things they'd had to do. They all had ways of coping with it.

"I'm secretly a philosophical genius, you ignorant prats," Draco retorted. "Hold her and keep her
warm, Theo."

Theo pulled Hermione's warm body to his and spooned her. Draco entwined his fingers with hers.

"Adrian, get that book of poetry Granger likes so much and get to reading," Draco ordered. "Marcus, come on in too, you giant poofter."

Theo inhaled against Hermione. Marcus lounged on the bed behind him and Draco was on the other side of Hermione. Adrian actually laid across the foot of the bed, propped up on an elbow, the book of poetry open on the bed in front of him. Adrian began reading aloud. Hermione was home and they were with her. There was nothing to do now but wait.

Chapter End Notes

Next – Keeping watch
Also, for those of you that guessed Lisa Turpin – good job! Ginger was also a good guess, as was Ron! Love the guesses. :-}
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer - I don't own the Harry Potter.
Now - How everyone is managing...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry tried to smooth down his unruly black hair, but it always seemed pointless.

“You look fine,” his wife soothed. Pansy smoothed her hands over his black robes.

“I just hate speaking in public sometimes,” Harry sighed. “It’s one thing to promote law enforcement, but this is personal, this is Hermione. How am I supposed to talk about her?”

“Honestly, and with all the love and affection you have for your friend,” Pansy said simply. Harry nodded. “Blaise is meeting you at the Ministry, but do you want me to come as well?”

“No,” Harry sighed. He did want Pansy by his side, but she had more important things to do. “You have to stay here and tend to your patient. Hermione’s wizards wouldn’t let you leave if you wanted.”

“I suppose they wouldn’t, but I can handle them,” Pansy smiled wryly.

“Even though it would make me feel better to have you with me, I’ll also feel better knowing you are here if anything happens,” Harry told her.

It was mid-morning on Sunday and nothing had changed since they’d brought Hermione home. Adrian, Draco, Marcus, and Theo were not the most pleasant people to be around, but Harry understood. He was worried about Hermione too.

They’d all settled in on Saturday. Harry went to see Hermione and found her nestled in between the four of them. They had been talking for hours. First Adrian had read aloud, and then Marcus took over. They told stories and recalled events that happened, just so Hermione could hear that they were there. Harry joined them for a while, talking and trying not to worry. Luna and Selma sat in the room and talked as well. Severus gave her potions to keep her hydrated and fed that evening. Pansy applied the dittany again. By Saturday night, the wound looked weeks old. After a few days, any scar would be incredibly faint. It may fade away altogether in time. Healer Adams checked in late Saturday. He and Pansy agreed that there was no change.

Outside the house, Kingsley had sent a half dozen Aurors to patrol the grounds at all times. They reported to Harry every six hours, although there wasn’t much to say. Since they hadn’t seen the initial attack coming, Harry felt it was better safe than sorry.

Harry sent a note to the Burrow and to George Weasley, letting them all know about Hermione’s condition. Harry and Pansy managed to convince the four wizards to leave her room for dinner, but two of them were always with her at any given time. When it got late, the four of them slept in there with Hermione.

Sunday morning came with more potions from Severus. Pansy did several spells to take care of
Hermione’s bodily needs. Healer Adams came over again, but still there was no change. Harry dropped by and told the four wizards about some music Hermione used to like to listen to back in school. Adrian arranged for music to play while Marcus massaged her sleeping body. Pansy said it was good to keep her muscles stimulated so she wouldn’t get too weak.

It was coming up on twenty-four hours and everyone was resigned to waiting, to living with the anxiety. Hermione had promised to make a statement to the press after each ritual, even stating that it would be done in her stead if she were unable. Harry found himself with that unpleasant task now.

Pansy walked him downstairs to the Floo and gave him a kiss for good luck. Harry thought, not for the first time, about how distraught he were be if Pansy were the one in the coma. It helped him have sympathy for Adrian, Draco, Marcus, and Theo when they became snappish and hard to deal with. They were vigilant and never left her side, which is just what Harry would do in their position. He realized on Saturday night how much those four really loved his friend. He knew they cared, were attracted to her, but it was clear to him now that this was love.

Harry had permission to Floo directly to the Kingsley’s office, where he would meet Blaise and the three of them would go downstairs together. It would be nice having Blaise and Kings there, but Harry was the one appointed to do all the talking.

“The update we got an hour ago said still no change,” Kings said soberly when Harry stepped through the Floo. “I don’t suppose you have anything new?”

“Still no change,” Harry sighed. Blaise shook his head sadly. Both of the other wizards were dressed in dark colors as he was. No one smiled, joked, or laughed. It just didn’t feel right.

“Shall we?” Blaise asked, going to the door.

“We may as well get it over with,” Harry responded, taking a deep breath.

The trio took the lift down to the main atrium where the platform and podium waited. The crowd was huge and loud, but they quieted down when the three wizards stepped up onto the stage. Harry walked up to the podium and murmurs started to go through the crowd. There was so little that was publicly known at that point. The morning papers could only say that the ritual took place and that Hermione was taken to St. Mungos, but then also that she was released to go home after a few hours. Her absence spoke volumes though and was clearly a sign that something was wrong.

Harry cast a Sonorous charm and stood up straight.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Harry began. The murmurs stopped and he could’ve heard a quill drop in the echoing silence. “I am here today to report on the events that took place yesterday during the second ritual of Sorceress Potentiate Hermione Granger. As you can see, Hermione is not here to do this herself. This is because the ritual did not go as planned.”

Gasps went through the audience and people started yelling out questions.

“Silence,” Kings shouted over the din before nodding for Harry to continue.

“The second ritual began very well,” Harry reported, “better than expected, in fact. The Veela colony in the Pyrenees Mountains gifted Hermione with a rather sizeable piece of sky, which made the ritual easier for all involved. As you may know, there are five sections of the spell used in this ritual. The first four were completed without incident. As the fifth section was beginning, however, Hermione was attacked, was seriously wounded, and lost consciousness. Headmistress
McGonagall and Lucius Malfoy, the ritual leaders, completed the fifth part of the spell and Hermione was taken directly to St. Mungos for treatment and evaluation. While the wound was healed and her body appears to be in fine working order, scans of her mind were, and continue to be, unsuccessful. At this point, it is unclear if the second ritual was successful or not. Hermione has not regained consciousness in the past twenty-four hours nor has anything about her condition changed. I will now take questions.”

“Where is Hermione Granger now?” a wizard shouted. “We heard she left St. Mungos.”

“Yes, she is at the home she recently purchased,” Harry stated. “Hermione always knew these rituals were dangerous so she appointed Severus Snape and myself to act on her behalf if she were to become incapacitated. We agreed with the suggestion of others that she would be more comfortable at home, among her own things. Hermione hasn’t been too keen on hospitals since we spent so much time in them as kids. Her home is secure and comfortable. My wife and I are staying with her, as are several others. Pansy is seeing to her medical needs and Healer Adams has been coming to check on her as well. As I said, there is no change in her condition.”

“Who attacked her? What did they do and why? How did they get to her? Was the culprit apprehended?” a witch yelled out.

Harry sighed. He knew it would be a question, but it made him so very angry. He put his Auror cap on and decided to answer the question as he would if it were about any other case.

“Hermione was attacked with a powerful cutting spell. The Minister and I apprehended the witch who cast the spell as she was fleeing the ritual site for the Forbidden Forest on Hogwarts’ grounds,” Harry explained. “The witch has been identified as Lisa Turpin and is now in Auror custody. She has been charged with attempted murder at this point. She will be tried before the Wizengamot next week. Should Hermione… not make it, the witch will be charged with murder. Based on statements made by Miss Turpin after she was caught, she intended to kill Hermione because she feared that a wizard she wanted would be chosen as an Ancillary. Miss Turpin was a former student of Hogwarts and had been granted permission to enter the grounds in order to make deliveries to the castle from certain shops in Hogsmeade.”

Harry knew Theo was having a very hard time dealing with guilt, thinking it was his fault Hermione was even exposed to such a danger. Of course, Harry knew that you couldn’t always see these things coming. Life was shocking and unexpected sometimes. Harry didn’t feel the need to bring up Theo’s name to the press. Let them do their own work and figure it out for themselves. It wasn’t some obscure secret that Theo had dated Lisa in the past; it’s just that no one had ever cared before. The press could also come to conclusion that Lisa Turpin was also responsible for that explosion at Theo’s lab in Malfoy Industries. The barmy bitch had set the blast to keep Theo busy and away from Hermione. Hermione had noted that the combustible ingredients were similar to many love spells, and it had been a psychotic display of what this witch thought was love.

People shouted out more questions, but Harry was done. He was having a hard time talking about this and wanted to stop.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, waving to the crowd. “You’ll have to excuse me. Hermione Granger is one of my best and oldest friends. This is a very difficult situation. With no changes, every hour just brings more waiting and mixed feelings. I’m always glad that she hasn’t taken a turn for the worse, but I’m also frustrated that there is no improvement. Those of us with her feel helpless and there is nothing to do but wait. Sorcery and elemental magic is a mysterious thing that we don’t fully understand. We don’t know what’s keeping her unconscious, including when or if it will end.”

Harry stepped away from the podium, feeling tears welling up in his eyes. Blaise gripped his
shoulder to keep his steady while Kings took Harry’s place.

“I know people will want information going forward,” Kings said diplomatically. “I will be receiving updates from Miss Granger’s home and will pass along information on a regular basis. Expect a brief statement about her condition at eight o’clock in the morning, noon, and eight o’clock in the evening. Do not attempt to go to Hermione’s residence. Not only is it heavily warded against visitors, but Aurors are patrolling the grounds and you will be arrested for trespassing. While Miss Turpin appears to have acted alone, we are not taking chances with security. I will return at noon with a status report. Thank you.”

Blaise, Harry, and Kings went back to the Minister’s office, ignoring the noise and questions shouted at their backs. Harry was intent on getting back. Even though there was nothing for him to do, it felt wrong to be anywhere else.

OoOoO

Sunday passed uneventfully, which was disappointing. Everyone was hoping and waiting for a change.

The wizards all took breakfast in Hermione's room. Severus gave her potions and stopped to talk for a while. After Pansy attended to her needs via magic, Hermione had her usual check up with Healer Adams. There was nothing different in any of the scans.

After Harry left to go give the press conference, Marcus showed Adrian, Draco, and Theo some of the massage techniques he had learned with Hermione at the spa. They all practiced on the sleeping witch. They knew it would stimulate her still muscles and they were hoping Hermione might respond to their touch, to the connection.

People came by to see Hermione and talk to her. The Weasley parents came over with George before lunch and sat with Hermione for a good hour, talking about old times. Her wizards knew how much Hermione valued her surrogate parents, so any lingering Weasley prejudice they had due to Ron was set aside. Theo stayed in the room reading a book in the sitting area while the Weasleys visited. It wasn't personal, but her wizards never left her alone with anyone.

The ladies who lunched, Narcissa, Arabella, Inge, and Serafina, created a lovely luncheon right in Hermione’s room and invited Pansy, Luna, and Selma. Draco, Marcus, and Theo nominated Adrian to stay in the room for that, which Adrian didn't entirely mind. He took his lunch plate across the room to the sitting area and listened in as the ladies talked. They certainly kept up a charming chatter that would’ve kept Hermione amused.

That afternoon, McGonagall came by with Kobayashi and Sasha. Severus joined them in the room while both Draco and Marcus kept watch over Hermione. They didn't like Sasha being around her too much. Kobayashi and McGonagall didn't really have much to add to their hypotheses about why Hermione wasn't waking up. The scholars all agreed that it was very much up in the air, that there was no way to see what was going on inside Hermione’s head. She could be further processing the magic and solidifying it with her mind, or there could be a chaotic mess in there. Kobayashi and Severus discussed the possibility of using Legilimency to try to see what was going on, but it seemed like a dangerous prospect. They didn’t want to disrupt something important that her mind might be doing, and the Legilimens trying it would be opening himself up to a huge force of elemental magic that he may not be able to withstand. Therefore, that idea was shelved.

One strange thing that happened during that visit was that Hermione’s eagle, Emilia, also came to visit. Sasha went to shoo away the large bird of prey, but Kobayashi stopped him. Emilia perched on Hermione’s headboard and surveyed the sleeping witch for a moment. Then she hopped down
and settled onto the bed right above Hermione’s pillow, just as if it were her nest. Emilia chirped and trilled, talking to Hermione as the rest of them had been doing for the past two days. After she was done talking, the bird reached out and rubbed her head against Hermione’s cheek. Marcus swore he saw Hermione’s lip twitch slightly, but then the bird flew away again and everything was the same.

That evening, after taking dinner in shifts, the four wizards took Hermione to her bathroom for a bath. Adrian and Marcus got into the massive tub with her. Between them and Mobilicorpus spells, it wasn’t too difficult. They washed her and passed her to Draco and Theo to dry. They dressed her in a fresh nightgown and took her back to bed, which had clean, new sheets thanks to the elves.

Healer Adams came again, Pansy applied more dittany, and Severus gave her another dose of nutritive, hydrating potions. After all the guests left, the four wizards, Harry, Pansy, and Severus settled into Hermione’s room to spend the rest of the evening with her. Pansy worked on some letters she was writing. Severus was doing some research into how to hone Hermione’s daily potions so they were most effective. Harry played wizarding chess with Draco while Theo watched. Marcus massaged Hermione’s hands and Adrian read Beedle the Bard stories. It was a quiet, cozy evening. Pansy and Harry retired first, leaving Theo to play chess with Draco. Severus left a little while later, reluctant to leave. He knew, however, that being well rested would help him think better the following day. Maybe Monday he would come up with a solution.

Adrian, Draco, Marcus, and Theo climbed into bed, rotating so that Adrian and Marcus were closest to her that night since it had been Draco and Theo the night before. They were all somber and quiet, but steadfast. They each knew they weren’t going anywhere and neither were the others. Another day of waiting had passed and there was still nothing to do but wait. They quietly said hushed goodnights to Hermione and went to sleep.

OoOoO

Sometimes she was in the middle of the tempest. It was dark and confusing. She felt cold, frustrated, and wanted to give up. Other times everything was still and the silence was deafening. She felt like she’d been lost and alone forever. It was hard to remember things, even who she was. She was everything. She was the earth and the sky. She was the fire and the ocean. But wasn’t she someone else? She was pretty sure she was someone else as well, but who?

She felt like she was missing pieces, important pieces whose absence caused pain. She would sometimes look to see if maybe a limb had been severed, but she had all the requisite parts. She was glad to see she had her arms and legs, it helped remind her that she was someone. If she was just rocks, wind, flames, and water then she wouldn’t need a body. People had bodies, so she must be a person.

There were so few answers that sometimes she wanted to quit trying to figure things out. Then the pain would set in and she would become absolutely sure that she was missing something important. She couldn’t live with that kind of pain, so she tried very hard to figure out the cause. It was hard though. Sometimes the pain would recede, and she felt better able to think.

Whipping through the wind were sounds she could sometimes catch. She adored those sounds. They usually sounded like people, sometimes like music. The sounds made her happy and they felt familiar. About half the time, the sounds lessened the pain, as if those particular sounds were part of what was missing. They weren’t all the same, but that was okay. It made her feel like she was close to answers and that it would be wrong to stop trying and just live with the pain. If she did that, she might lose the sounds and then she’d definitely go mad.

She wanted to go to the sounds, to see where they came from and to hear them more clearly, but
she was afraid to move. She did think, however, that she might find answers in those sounds.

It was timeless where she was and she was always alone. There was no day or night, no others. It was just the earth and the ocean, the fire and the wind. Sometimes it was light, sometimes dark. Sometimes it was warm and dry, sometimes cold and wet. It was what it was.

In a moment when the sky was clear, she saw something different, which is exciting. Anything different was cause for excitement. A dot in the sky grew bigger and it became clear that it was a large brown bird. She smiled at the bird. This bird looked familiar.

"I know you," she said. The bird trilled and hopped in response. "Do you know me?"

The bird chattered away and she reveled in the sound. It was so nice to hear something clearly that wasn't her own voice, the wind, or crashing waves. It occurred to her to ask the bird questions.

"Do you know what the sounds on the wind are?"

The bird chirped and hopped once, it seemed like a nod.

"Should I be trying to locate the source of the sounds?"

The bird chirped louder and seemed to be excited by that question. She nodded to herself, decision made. She couldn't just sit idly by, waiting for the sounds to come to her. She needed to find them.

She had another question for this bird, but hesitated. It was such a personal subject and she was so very attached to the pain. It motivated her.

"I feel like... like I'm missing something important. There are parts of me that should be here, but they aren't and I miss them. It hurts. Do you know what I'm missing?"

The bird clucked sympathetically and leaned in to stroke her cheek with its beak. It was a sweet gesture and seemed as if it were meant to be comforting. She took that to mean she was missing something, something important.

"Do you think I can find it, the thing that I'm missing, if I try hard enough? I don't know what to do or where to go, so I just stay here. But I could start moving."

The bird hopped and trilled happily, which she took as affirmation of her idea.

"But where should I go?" she asked the bird. This place seemed too vast. What if she started walking and she got further and further away from those beautiful, happy sounds?

The bird hopped away and jerked its head, then flew off in that direction. Well, she figured that direction was a good start. At least it was something to do, which made her happier.

OoOooO

Harry didn't go to work on Monday. He didn't want to leave Hermione's house. It felt like it was time to hunker down and stay close. He ate a large breakfast in the dining room with Pansy and Severus. The four wizards again opted for a breakfast in the bedroom.

When Healer Adams arrived, they all went upstairs as well. There was nothing to see. The check up was exactly the same as it had been the day before, and the day before that. Pansy did the same spells to attend to her physical body and Severus gave her the same potions.

Theo settled into the bed, sitting up against the headboard. He pulled Hermione's sleeping form up
and nestled her in his arms. Harry noticed that one of them was usually touching her. Harry climbed into the abnormally large bed and also leaned against the headboard. He'd brought several newspapers and began reading articles aloud. Harry read articles from the Quibbler, the Daily Prophet, and the Muggle Times from London. Harry and Severus explained some Muggle things from the paper that the others didn't understand. Harry was sure Hermione would've found some of their assumptions and questions amusing.

Pansy had convinced Adrian, Draco, and Marcus to play cards with her again, but they weren't playing for money this time. Harry was proud of his wife's talent with card games, since he was pants at it himself.

“Sirs, I apologize for the interruption,” Nobby said after knocking gently on the door around mid-morning. The elves clearly deferred to Adrian, Draco, Marcus, and Theo since Hermione was indisposed. “There are two witches here that are not on the admission list, a Miss Bones and a Miss Figgelowe.”

“We forgot to put Susan on the list,” Adrian realized aloud. “I’ll go let her in. Nobby, you can add Susan Bones to the admission list. We want her to keep working on the house. Hermione would want that and she’ll be happy to see the progress when she wakes up.”

Harry nodded. Losing Hermione just wasn’t an option and they were all actively not thinking about that possibility. To stay positive, they had to keep looking forward even if they weren’t moving forward yet.

“I’ll come see what Figgelowe wants,” Theo sighed, pressing a kiss into Hermione’s temple. “Draco, Marcus?”

Draco slid into Theo’s place and cradled Hermione to him while Marcus followed the other two out of the room. Harry smirked. The four of them were very serious about caring for his friend and he was glad. She deserved that.

OoOoO

Bronwyn fumed on the front step. That appalling elf creature had made her wait outside, like someone of no importance. It was infuriating to be told what to do by a half-breed freak of an elf. She was part of the research team and she had business to conduct. While she was arguing with the thing to be allowed in the house, another witch approached. Bronwyn didn’t recognize her, but they were in the same boat. Apparently, this witch needed to get inside the house but was not on some master list that probably didn’t even exist. The freakish elf shut the door, leaving them outside, to fetch someone. Whomever it fetched better straighten out this problem immediately.

“I’m Susan Bones,” the other witch said. “I’m Hermione’s interior designer. How do you know her?”

Bronwyn fought the urge to roll her eyes, but didn’t try too hard. She was trapped outside with the help. It was not to be tolerated. The other witch looked very somber. Everyone was walking around moping these days. This witch was probably worried that she wasn’t going to get paid if Miss Perfect died.

“I’m the Department of Mysteries research expert on Sorcery,” Bronwyn reported loftily, looking down on the slightly shorter witch.

“That must be interesting,” Susan said.
“It is,” Bronwyn sniffed. “The Ministry is always an interesting place.”

“Yes, I know,” Susan said, leaning against the house. “I’ve worked at the Ministry since I was a child, first summer jobs and then for about a year after school. My aunt was the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement before Voldemort killed her. The year I worked there, I was the Assistant Director of the Improper Use of Magic Office for a year. That kind of work wasn’t my passion, though. Now I get to do something I love. You must love research with your job.”

Bronwyn narrowed her eyes at the witch. What was her agenda? What was she getting at? Before she could decide, the door opened again.

“Good Morning Ladies,” Adrian Pucey said to them. “Please come in.”

Adrian gestured for them to come into the front hall and Bronwyn glided in, quite regally if she said so herself. Marcus and Theo were waiting for them inside. Bronwyn was happy to see Marcus. She wanted to make it clear to him that she was available to… comfort him during this time.

“Susan, I’m so sorry for the oversight,” Adrian continued. “I forgot to put your name on the list that we made for Nobby. I rectified that already, so you shouldn’t have any problem coming and going as you need.”

“That’s one of the things I wanted to ask about,” Susan said hesitantly. “I wasn’t sure if I should go ahead with the plans we had made, or if I should wait.”

“Go ahead with the plans,” Marcus interjected definitively. “When Hermione wakes up, more of the house will be finished and that will make her happy. She wanted the library and her study done next.”

Bronwyn did manage to suppress her eye roll this time. Did these wizards really think she was going to wake up? Everyone was being so dramatic about this. It was in all the papers and it was all anyone talked about. The Daily Prophet headline that morning was Coma Watch – Day Three. Sorcery was dangerous and everyone knew that. Nevertheless, there could be only one in existence at a time. It really was selfish of Miss Perfect to hang on like this when the next Sorcerer or Sorceress could be born. The sooner Hermione Granger was out of the picture, the sooner Bronwyn could start predicting and searching out the next one. She was sure that she could position herself better with the next Sorcerer and Sorceress. Then she’d be in a position to benefit from all of that power.

“Yes, the plan is the study and library next,” Susan confirmed. “I’ll continue with the renovations. I can cast a sound barrier spell around the room we are working on so the noise doesn’t disrupt anyone. I’ll also keep my crew very small. It may take longer with less people, but because of security issues, I only want to bring in people that I know and trust.”

“Harry is coordinating security with the Aurors,” Marcus nodded. “If you write out the names of your crew, he can check them all out. They will be allowed to come in, but only if you are with them.”

Susan nodded, as if it were entirely reasonable. Bronwyn sighed. They were really going overboard. She was just a Sorceress Potentiate, and a dying one at that, not the Queen of Sheba.

“Miss Figgelowe, what can we help you with today?” Theo asked brusquely.

“Director Penrose asked me to bring over out summary for the third ritual,” Bronwyn explained.
“He and the Minister decided to go ahead and prepare for the third ritual to be held as planned on Saturday at two o’clock in the afternoon. Because of the crowds expected, they have a lot to coordinate.”

Bronwyn thought the whole enterprise an utter waste of time. Miss Perfect would probably be dead before Saturday, but if not she’d still be in the coma.

“Thank you for bringing it,” Theo said tersely, putting out his hand.

“Don’t you want me to go over it with you?” Bronwyn had planned to stay for a while and chat up Marcus for a bit. Miss Perfect obviously wasn’t shagging him anymore and Bronwyn had planned out her seduction. She looked over at the impressive wizard, his large arms crossed over his broad chest. She gave him her best sympathetic, but sultry look.

“No thank you,” Theo responded. His hand was still extended. “I am quite familiar with the third ritual. If I have any questions about the Ministry’s summary, I’ll be in contact. I don’t want to take up any more of your time.”

Bronwyn reluctantly opened her case and withdrew the files. Theo took them and stood there staring at her.

“Was there something else, Miss Figgelowe?” Adrian asked her.

Bronwyn gritted her teeth and shook her head. It seemed she was not so subtly being asked to leave. She wasn’t a mere delivery person; she was a valuable researcher on this project! She was a representative of the Ministry of Magic for Merlin’s sake. She also had her own agenda to see to, but these two wizards weren’t making it any easier.

Bronwyn was certain Marcus was ripe for the plucking. She knew his history; she read the tabloids. He had quite the appetite for witches during his Quidditch days, and after. She was sure he needed an outlet, and as soon as she had her hooks in him, there was no way he would want to get away. First, though, she had to get to him. Adrian and Theo were standing in her way. Bronwyn always got what she wanted. No matter, she would get to Marcus another way.

“Do let me know if you need any assistance, any assistance at all,” Bronwyn said, standing as tall as she could manage. She was addressing all of them, but looking at Marcus. Maybe he would see the invitation in her words and come to her. That would make things easier.

“Good day, Miss Figgelowe,” Theo said firmly. He went and opened the door for her.

Bronwyn left the house, her head held high. She was making no progress and that had her quite cross. If she were getting somewhere with Lucius Malfoy, that would be one thing and she would be able to tolerate biding her time with Marcus. Lucius, however, was harder to get to than Marcus was. She thought about ways to create opportunities for herself as she walked to the Apparition boundary.

As she neared the boundary, Bronwyn saw a distinctive figure with platinum blond hair materialize. This may be her lucky day. Unfortunately, another striking blonde was right behind him. So, maybe it wasn’t her lucky day after all. It was, however, an opportunity to remind Lucius Malfoy of her, even if he did have his wife with him.

“Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy,” she said, smiling, “how good to see you.”

Bronwyn focused on Lucius to gauge his reactions. Lucius appraised her, an eyebrow raised. Bronwyn was sure he would like what he saw. She certainly liked what she saw. Lucius Malfoy
was an attractive wizard. He wasn’t quite as impressive as Marcus was, physically, but he oozed power and what was sexier than that?

“Good morning,” Narcissa Malfoy responded airily. Her narrowed eyes didn’t match her light tone at all though. “Lucius, go on ahead, darling. I’ve been meaning to say something to this witch from the Ministry.”

“Of course,” Lucius responded, looking amused for some reason. He gave his wife a kiss on the cheek and Bronwyn received a brief nod as he parted. She watched the graceful wizard walk away for a moment before turning to his wife.

“Is there something I can do for you, Mrs. Malfoy?” Bronwyn asked, attempting to lace her voice with sweetness. Maybe she could ingratiate herself with the wife. Being friends with the wife would make it easier to get to the husband.

“Yes, there is,” Narcissa said, smiling. Her smile was off, though. It was a little scary. “I understand you are working on these rituals and that you have business here. Please attempt to conduct yourself properly, which would mean not ogling and trying to flirt with my husband. I can see that you have great confidence in yourself and your… I guess I’ll call them ‘charms’. This is your first and only warning, and I suggest you take it. Whatever your plan, you will be unsuccessful. Better women than you have tried to entice my husband and he has never once strayed. I have the utmost faith in his fidelity.

“What bothers me is your lack of respect for me,” Narcissa continued with her frighteningly sweet tone. “Do you think I am some simpleton who is unable see what you are trying to do? Or do you think I am powerless to do anything about it, that I am so weak that I will tolerate your behavior? It must be one or the other since you behave so brazenly in front of me. I assure you, I am neither of those things. You aren’t from here, so maybe you are simply ignorant.

“I am not a witch with whom you want to tangle. Please ask around. The Malfoys have a certain reputation for ruthlessness, as you probably well know by now. The part you don’t seem to understand is that when asked which of the three of us they would rather have to cross; people choose Lucius and Draco before me. I’m the dangerous one in this family. Not being a Malfoy by birth of course, I just can’t seem to rid myself of some of the Black family ways. We can cause hurt and pain you’ve never imagined. Just think about that before you do something that won’t be excused with a warning.”

Narcissa Malfoy smiled that scary smile one last time and happily strolled away. She was even humming a little tune. Bronwyn had to rethink things. She would check out what she said, but she had a hunch Narcissa wasn’t bluffing about her reputation. Bronwyn had heard of Narcissa’s sister, who was downright insane and seemed to be the thing nightmares were made of. Being Lucius Malfoy’s mistress would be one thing if he had a vapid, ineffectual aging debutante as a wife. This witch, however, may make it much more trouble than it would be worth. That meant that Bronwyn would just have to focus her energy on getting Marcus.

Chapter End Notes

Next - She has to wake up sometime, right? Cause I said this story would be 39 chapters and if she never wakes up the next 10 chapters would be so boring.
Draco was half-asleep a little before eleven o'clock Monday night. He was pressed up against Hermione with Marcus at his back. Marcus had an arm tossed over Draco and Draco moved to do the same to Hermione. Something strange got in his way though. Something substantial was sitting atop Hermione's rib cage.

"What the fuck?" Draco muttered, his sleepy mind rapidly trying to get up to full speed.

"What is it?" Theo mumbled from the other side of Hermione.

"Lumos," Adrian said from next to Theo.

Soft light filled the bed and they could see a massive red bird comfortably nesting on Hermione's torso.

"What the bloody hell?!?" Draco exclaimed, confused and startled by the creature on his witch. He raised his hand to push it off Hermione, but Marcus caught his wrist in the air.

"Wait," Marcus said quietly. "Don't scare it."

"What if it's hurting her?" Draco contested.

"I don't think it is," Theo said, sitting up. "Turn up the light, Ades."

The light got brighter and the bird was easier to see.

"It's Fawkes," Draco gasped. "What is he doing?"

"Remember what Lovegood said about other elemental creatures?" Marcus said. "The Phoenix uses elemental fire magic. Maybe he can reach her."

They all looked at the small, sleeping witch, but she seemed the same.

"Can you reach her, Fawkes?" Adrian asked the bird, hopefully. Fawkes squawked, but none of them knew what that meant.

"I don't think Fawkes would hurt her," Theo added.

They all watched the Phoenix while it did nothing. It just sat on Hermione, occasionally ruffling his feathers. At one point, it looked to be sleeping.

"Well, we don't all need to be awake to watch a bird sleep," Draco grumbled around one o'clock in the morning.
"Let's do hour long shifts then," Adrian offered. "I'll start and in an hour, I'll wake Theo. Then he can wake Draco, and Draco, you can wake Marcus."

"Sounds good," Draco said, flopping down against his pillow.

Adrian sat awake and read a book to stay awake. Just as his hour was over and he nudged Theo awake, Fawkes moved. The two wizards watched the Phoenix hop off Hermione's torso and perch next to her head. Fawkes began chirping to her, pausing at times as if he were having a two-way conversation.

Adrian and Theo didn't want to move or speak, so they sat quietly; still as stone. If Fawkes was talking to Hermione, they didn't want to disturb the conversation in any way. Finally, he was silent, the communication seemingly over. Fawkes leaned over and rubbed his head against her forehead. He paused for a moment and the wizards saw drops of liquid fall onto her head. Theo gasped involuntarily. Phoenix tears. Those were a powerful substance.

Then Fawkes was upright. He hopped down to the foot of the bed and began grooming his wings, as if he didn't have a care in the world.

"Did you find her? Did you talk to her?" Theo pressed.

Fawkes looked at him and squawked again. The wizards felt this sound was more of an affirmation this time, but did admit they could be hearing what they wanted to hear. All of a sudden, the Phoenix was gone into the darkness of the room. Adrian recast his Lumos out into the dark space, but there was no sign of the large bird. If it weren’t for the long tail feather he left, there would be no evidence of his visit.

Theo reached across their witch and swatted Draco on the chest.

"It hasn't been two hours," Draco grumbled, turning his head.

"Wake up, you prat," Theo hissed, slapping at him harder.

"What?" Draco whined, sitting up. Marcus stirred as well.

"Fawkes is gone," Marcus observed.

"He talked to her," Adrian informed them.

"Well, it sounded like he talked to her," Theo clarified. "He chirped and there were pauses along the way, as if he were listening to another side of a conversation. The most interesting part though, was that Fawkes cried on her."

"Was he upset?" Draco asked, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"No, you idiot," Marcus huffed. "Phoenix tears have strong healing properties."

"Did he heal her?" Draco asked, studying Hermione. "Physically she is just fine, as far as we know. So maybe he was just sad."

"He didn't look sad," Adrian observed.

"Cause you're an expert on bird facial expressions," Draco said, rolling his eyes.

"I think he was trying to help," Adrian continued, ignoring Draco's attitude. Everyone knew Draco was cranky when he first woke up, and they were all sensitive of late.
"Nothing's different yet," Marcus noted. "Should we go wake up Pansy and have her scan Hermione?"

"I don't know," Theo said reluctantly. "Nothing's different. Why don't we let everybody rest? We can tell them what happened in the morning."

"They come to check on her every morning anyway," Adrian sighed, lying back down. "I'd rather not hear that there's no change, again. Instead, I’m going to let this be a positive sign."

The four wizards settled back down to sleep, all of them still awake. They wanted something to be different, some change. They had already agreed to wait this out for as long as Hermione needed, but they each had varying levels of tolerance with waiting. They fell asleep resigned to another day of the same, sticking close to Hermione, biding time, and reminding each other to have faith.

OoOoO

Hermione's eyes opened to darkness and she was disappointed, so she sighed.

After the brown eagle had left her in that timeless place, she'd followed the sounds and began to recognize the voices. She’d figured out who she was. She was Hermione Granger! Now though, she was also the earth, the sky, fire, and water. It took a while for her to process that. She was herself, but more. She was a person, an individual, but her body and mind were connected to a larger whole. Moreover, they were connected in a way that could never be severed.

It was a lot to process and it was still hard to make sense of things. Knowing who she was though was an enormous help in organizing the chaos around her. She also realized what she was missing, her wizards.

Moving around the timeless place toward the voices made her better able to hear what was happening. She didn’t feel so lost and alone. She liked hearing articles from the newspaper, and the banter between her wizards and her friends. She had been surprised to learn she'd only been unconscious for a few days. It had felt like forever. She wanted to join them, to talk to them and put in her opinion during their discussions. Hermione was never one to bite her tongue if she had something to say. It was nice to know that about herself again. It was so odd not to know anything about yourself, your likes, dislikes, or personality traits. Hermione was happy knowing, which was another trait of hers; she was always happy to learn and know things.

Despite all she knew, she became stuck trying to acclimate to the new parts of her. When she remembered who she was, she also remembered that she was stubborn and opinionated. She wasn't the kind of witch who could just accept the strange new symbiosis with the elements without missing a step. That was more Luna's personality, so Hermione tried to take deep breaths and think about what Luna would do.

It was hard though, and she was getting frustrated. She wanted to get away from this timeless place and back to her wizards. Her beautiful wizards whispered sweet things in her ear even though she couldn't reply. Her attentive wizards never left her, even though she was so far away. Hermione found herself ranting and cursing, not for the first time, because it was dark, wet, and cold again. She was supposed to be able manipulate these elements and she couldn't even keep herself warm and dry.

All of a sudden, she saw a light in the darkness. The brightness came closer and she recognized it.

"Fawkes?" Hermione asked, mouth agape.
The Phoenix seemed to preen proudly at her recognition.

"What are you doing here?"

The Phoenix chirped, which she didn't understand. Somehow, though, she just knew he was there to help her, as if he had brought up the thought to her mind in response to her question.

"How can you help? Can you help me get control of all this mess, so I can go home?"

Fawkes chirped and she got the idea that there was no control; the only way was to give in and let the chaos surround her.

"But that's suicidal!" Hermione objected. "I'll be lost again and I can't do that. It was too hard to find my way out. I need to get control."

Fawkes chirped argumentatively. Hermione had the thought that she needed to be less stubborn. She had to give herself over to the elements. It wasn't for her to control them, but for her to accept them as a piece of her and to respect them for what they were. Hermione huffed. Fawkes may be right, but she was still scared of losing herself. What if she forgot who she was again? She had forgotten her wizards too, which had been so painful.

"I don't know if I can," Hermione whispered.

Fawkes chirped sympathetically. Hermione was scared and he knew it. Instead of a new thought coming up from the Phoenix, Hermione had flashes of memories. She remembered times in school when she'd been scared, but had gone on despite that. She remembered the running, the hiding, and the battles. She remembered the disastrous ending with Ron and being scared to set off on her own. She remembered trying new things and going new places, setting fear aside. She remembered Severus telling her she was strong and stubborn, that she would persevere no matter what. She remembered Adrian telling her he was proud of her, Draco reminding her of her strength, Marcus and his staunch support, and Theo's faith in her. These memories gave her the will to do what Fawkes was suggesting.

"If I get lost again, please try to come find me," she said to Fawkes. The Phoenix nodded and Hermione took a deep breath.

Hermione let the chaos wash over her, inviting it in while at the same time chanting her own name over and over again, so she wouldn't forget. The flood of it all was crippling. She felt drops on her face and thought the rains had returned. It was Fawkes, dropping tears on her. It helped the pain in her head and she finally relaxed into it.

Hermione watched Fawkes leave, thinking he'd been right. She couldn't control this and it would be madness to try. Hermione could feel the magic, its unique and primal beauty. It was stunning and amazingly complicated. As she sunk into it, she realized that it was an organized chaos. She hadn't really been open to looking at it before because she was so concerned with controlling it. Now though, inside it, she could see what she hadn't been able to before. These forces were glorious and had their own life, a life that was meant to be part of hers.

Time passed and Hermione finally felt entirely at one with the magic. They had reached an understanding. She was happy because of her achievement, but also because she could go home now. She knew exactly where she was and what to do.

Therefore, when Hermione opened her eyes to darkness, she was disappointed. She'd already seen plenty of darkness. She sighed into the dark, but then her unused eyes adjusted. It wasn't really the
darkness; it was just… dark. She realized that dim moon and starlight filtered softly in through windows. Her other senses responded to the situation and she felt the softness of the bed, the warmth of bodies around her.

Hermione smiled. She was back. She was in her bed, surrounded by her wizards. She wanted to create a light to see them better, but didn't want to wake them. They had been so worried for days and hadn't been sleeping well. They'd already been disturbed by Fawkes that night, so Hermione stayed still and let them sleep. Somehow, she knew that dawn was coming soon. Then she would have plenty of light to see her wizards. They waited for her and she could wait for them.

Hermione lay very still. She thought about and felt out her new magic. It really did feel different. Before, magic felt like a tool she could access. She could call upon her tool and direct it where she wanted. Now, her magic felt like a necessary part of her, like the marrow in her bones. It was inside her, flowed through her, and influenced her as much as she influenced it.

It now made much more sense to her that her magic would choose her mate. The person would not only be matched to Hermione, but would be her magic's mate as well. It had seemed so strange to her before, but now she understood that it couldn't be any other way. Her elemental magic had feelings; she could sense them. It wasn't as strong as her own feelings, so she thought it would be easy to figure out where the emotions were coming from. Right now, her magic was happy and energized, mostly because the binding had gone so well. Hermione had accepted the magic as an equal, and that's all it had wanted from her.

Hermione did wonder about something she'd often read. Sorcerers and Sorceresses were often described as having an affinity for a particular element, one they identified with the most. Hermione mentally interacted with each element inside her and didn't feel a pull to any particular one. The earth magic was nurturing, strong, and solid. Hermione enjoyed how dependable and practical it felt, as if she could always count on it. The water magic was sensitive, flexible, and emotional. Hermione liked how it bent and molded, supporting her and the other elements, but it never lost its own identity. The air magic was objective, communicative, and quick. Hermione appreciated the challenge that air presented, hard to catch sometimes, but always present. The fire magic was focused, confident, and passionate. Hermione was drawn to its enthusiasm and energy, as it motivated her and the other elements.

Hermione heaved a contented sigh, then her brow furrowed. She tried to recall what she'd heard while she was sleeping. They'd said the second ritual was a few days ago, so it must be at least Monday or maybe even Tuesday. She really hoped it wasn't already Wednesday or Thursday. Hermione had wanted to spend individual time with each of the four wizards piled into her bed, to spend an evening with each of them before the third ritual. Now she felt it was even more important. Although her magic had theoretically always been with her, it wasn't able to manifest itself and interact with the world. That's what those first two rituals were for. Now that her magic was free, she wanted it to get to know these four wizards. It was Hermione's hope that her magic would find ideal mates from among them. She might not get to choose by herself, but it didn't hurt to try and stack the deck in her favor.

The sun had started to rise and the room was getting brighter and brighter. Hermione lay quietly and watched them. They were so lovely, and not just physically. Draco and Theo were closest to her and easiest to study, but she craned to see Adrian and Marcus as well.

Hermione was looking directly at Theo when his eyes fluttered open. He saw her and his eyes went wide with shock.

"Good Morning, Theo," she whispered, smiling.
His face broke into a wide smile.

"I'm glad you're back," he responded.

"I'm glad to be back."

Theo closed the small space between them so quickly Hermione hadn't seen it coming. His lips were on hers and his arms circled around her. Hermione sighed happily and lost herself in him, in the taste and feel of him. She had missed them all so much, she barely even thought about the fact that she hadn't brushed her teeth for days, literally.

"Come on, Theo," Draco chastised sleepily. "We all agreed, no messing with Granger while she's unconscious. It's not proper."

Hermione giggled and Draco shot up, staring at her.

"How very gentlemanly of you all not to molest me as I slept," Hermione said, grinning.

"Hermione!" Draco shouted, lunging for her. He pulled her close, which was awkward since Theo still held his arms around her as well.

Draco's shout woke the other two as well and soon the bed was abuzz with chatter and swarming with movement. Hermione was covered with enthusiastic kisses and the wizards were piling on each other to get close to her.

“Okay, okay!” Hermione said, laughing. “I just woke up, don’t smother me!”

“You did wake up, kitten.” Adrian grinned joyfully. “I don’t think I could be happier than I am right now.”

“You had us so worried, princess,” Marcus told her, nuzzling her neck.

“I had myself pretty worried to tell you the truth,” Hermione shared, reaching out to pet and touch the wizards as much as she could. “It was... like nothing I’ve ever experienced before. It was as if there was no time. It felt like I was there forever. I couldn’t remember who I was or what happened. It was painful and I wanted to give up, but I could hear things. I could hear you, but I couldn’t understand anything. It was all just noise. Emilia, my eagle, showed up out of nowhere.”

“I told you!” Marcus said to the others, before turning back to Hermione. “Emilia came and sat by your pillow one day, chirping and trilling like she was talking to you.”

“Well, she did,” Hermione confirmed. “I was so lost and needed something to motivate me to change. Emilia did that. After she left, I followed the sounds and the closer I got, the more I could hear. Then I could recognize your voices and remember who I was. That was necessary. Then I had to actually accept the elemental magic as an equal part of me, which I didn’t want to do. If you hadn’t noticed, I’m pretty stubborn and I don’t like giving away control.”

“Except to Theo in bed,” Draco teased.

“That’s different,” Hermione said, blushing.

“It can be argued that the submissive is really the one with the control, because it can only go as far as they allow,” Theo pointed out.

“So how did you do it?” Adrian asked, bringing Hermione back to her story.
“Fawkes convinced me it was the only way out if I wanted to come back,” Hermione said with a sigh. “I was afraid I would get lost again and forget myself if I gave myself over to the elemental magic.”

“But it worked,” Marcus stated.

“It did,” Hermione said, smiling, “and I couldn’t be happier. Fawkes was right. The idea that I would be in control of this powerful magic was absurd. That’s just not how it works.”

“How do you feel?” Theo asked.

“Amazing,” Hermione said. “I mean, I haven’t tried to get out of bed, so that might be an issue. Otherwise, I feel great. I can feel the magic inside me and everything fits so perfectly. I want to try it out. I haven’t done magic in weeks, well not on purpose anyway!”

“Maybe we should wait for Healer Adams,” Marcus suggested. “I’m sure you’re right, but you’ve been in a coma for almost three days.”

“So it’s Tuesday then?” Hermione confirmed. Marcus nodded. “Good. That means I’ll have time to go on a date with each of you every night this week until the third ritual, like I planned.”

“Kitten, you need to recover,” Adrian protested. “We can spend alone time together later.”

“No!” Hermione objected sharply, startling the wizards. She took a breath and softened her tone. “I don’t need to recover. I feel better than I have in ages. Everything feels right inside me. What I need to do is spend time with all of you. There is no ‘later.’ My magic is going to make a choice on Saturday and that is going to be for the rest of my life. I want my magic to choose from the four of you, but it doesn’t know you like I do, not really. I need to spend individual time with each of you so the magic can see how wonderful you each are.”

“So, we aren’t dating you, we’re dating your magic?” Draco asked, brow arched in his typical fashion.

“In a way,” Hermione said. “I’ll be there too, of course. The Ancillary isn’t just a mate for me, but for my magic as well.”

“If you want dates, you’ve got them, princess,” Marcus soothed her, pressing a kiss into her palm. “You and I can go out tonight. It’ll go Flint, Malfoy, Nott, and then Pucey.”

Adrian scowled a little at going last.

“You did get to take her out on a date first out of all of us,” Draco pointed out.

“Fine,” Adrian grumbled. Hermione laughed and gave him a kiss, which made him stop pouting.

Hermione pulled away from Adrian when she heard a gasp near the bed. She looked over to see Nipsy staring at her.

“Missy Sorceress!” the small elf squeaked. “You are up!”

“I am, yes,” Hermione affirmed, smiling. “And you know, I am starving. I feel like I haven’t eaten in days!”

Hermione laughed at her own joke while Draco rolled his eyes and Marcus snorted.

“Anything Missy is wanting, Nipsy is bringing,” the elf nodded vigorously.
“I think I need a very large breakfast,” Hermione said. She was ravenous. “A ham and cheese omelet with onions and mushrooms, fruit, hash browns, rashers… oh and oatcakes would be lovely, plus loads of tea.”

“And the Masters?” Nipsy asked.

“All that sounds good to me,” Marcus shrugged.

“Just poached eggs, toast, and fruit please, Nipsy,” Adrian said, shaking his head at his friend’s appetite. “Also, after you see Kiki, can you tell the others in the house that Hermione is awake? Go ahead and wake them up if they are still sleeping. They’d want to know.”

“I’ll have fried eggs, rashers, and hash browns,” Theo told the elf. “I’d like some parchment and a quill.

“Oatcakes and fruit for me,” Draco yawned, stretching his tall frame. “Why don’t we have breakfast out on the terrace? You look like you could use some sun, Granger.”


The jubilant looking elf nodded and popped away.

"Do you think I have time for a shower?" Hermione asked them, sitting up in bed. She stretched her muscles experimentally and felt fine.

"Sure, we'll help," Marcus nodded. He tried to scoop her up and carry her, but Hermione shook her head. She needed to see if her muscles weak.

Walking to the bathroom wasn't too hard. The first couple of steps were shaky, but it resolved well. Wizards, hovering and ready to catch her if she fell, also surrounded her so there was little risk involved.

Adrian reached in and started the shower, then started to strip. Apparently, this was as going to be a group effort. Hermione watched Adrian, Draco, and Marcus shuck their sleep clothes, which hadn't been much to begin with.

Hermione absently drew up her nightgown to take it off, but Theo stopped her. He looked so sad, which was not at all fitting for the happy shower time Hermione was aiming for.

"What's wrong?" she asked worriedly.

"You haven't asked what happened or anything about the attack," Theo almost whispered.

"You know, I forgot about that," Hermione said, realizing she had done just that. It wasn't something she thought of in that timeless space. She recalled there was a lot of blood coming out of her torso before she passed out.

Hermione turned to the mirror and lifted her nightgown up over her head. A long faded scar ran from her left breast diagonally across her stomach down to her hip.

"I assume dittany was used, which is why it looks so faded," Hermione observed, tracing her finger over the long line.

"I'm so sorry, Mi," Theo said, his eyes welling with tears.

"Sorry for what?" Hermione asked, confused. She didn't know what he was talking about. He
looked to fraught with guilt, though, which made Hermione think the worst. "Does the scar bother you? You don't find me attractive anymore, so you are leaving?"

"What?" Theo asked, looking shocked. "No! Why would you think such a thing?"

"Because you look so... upset, like you have something horrible to tell me," Hermione replied, brow furrowed. "And that’s the worst thing I can think of."

"I do have something horrible to tell you, but it's not that I'm leaving you," Theo said, pulling her close to him. "It's just, all this, your attack... it was all my fault."

Hermione looked at him, still very confused. She looked over at the other three, who were just shaking their heads.

"We've been telling him it isn't his fault," Marcus added, looking at Theo sternly. "Maybe you can convince him."

"It is my fault," Theo bit out angrily. Clearly, this had already been discussed while she was sleeping. "If it weren't for me, none of this would've happened and you all know it!"

"Theo, why don't you tell me what happened," Hermione said gently, laying her hand on his face.

"Remember Lisa Turpin, the witch I used to date, who worked over at Bronzed Eagle Books?" Theo asked, hanging his head. Hermione tipped his face up and nodded. "She did this to you with the Sectumsempra curse because she wanted me back. She thought I was hers and that she needed to kill you, to get me back."

"In what world are the actions of a crazy witch your fault?" Hermione asked him gently. "That's like saying it's Harry's fault that Voldemort killed all those people trying to get to him. Is it Harry's fault?"

"Of course not," Theo scoffed. "That's different. Voldemort was psychotic and he would've done crazy things regardless of Harry."

"Exactly," Hermione said, kissing Theo gently on the lips. "That Lisa witch was barmy and she would've done crazy things regardless of you."

"But she wouldn't have done them to you," Theo pointed out.

"I'm strong. I can take it. I have a lot of people to help me," Hermione shrugged. "The curse wasn't ideal, obviously, but I think I would've been stuck in my head regardless. I had to work things out with my magic."

"You should be cross with me," Theo ordered.

"Well, it's not up to you how I feel, it's up to me," Hermione reported firmly. "Is that part of why you're so upset? You thought I would blame you and get angry?"

"Maybe," Theo mumbled.

"Look at me," Hermione instructed. She put both hands on Theo’s face and looked into his eyes. "You are not to blame for this. You didn’t do anything wrong. The way I feel about you has not changed at all. Do you understand me, Theo?"

"Yes," he whispered.
“Would I lie to you?” she pressed.

“No,” Theo responded.

“Good,” Hermione said with a nod. “That’s enough of that then. I don’t want to hear another word about it.”

Theo nodded. Hermione looked over at the other wizards.

“We tried to tell him,” Draco pointed out, coming over to the two of them. He slung his arm around Theo. “Let’s get cleaned up.”

Hermione smiled as Draco pulled Theo into the shower. Marcus slid his arm around Hermione’s waist and they walked together into the large shower. Adrian smiled and held open the door. The five of them enjoyed an unfortunately quick shower. Hermione would’ve liked more of a sexy shower time, but she was extremely hungry for food.

Adrian wrapped her in a towel and Hermione went into her dressing room. She found a very comfortable striped jersey dress in white, blue, and orange. It was soft and loose, which was exactly what she wanted. Hermione skipped shoes, but did pull on an ivory cardigan to keep her warm in the often chilly spring morning air. On her way out of the room, she spied the rose quartz necklace her wizards had given her after the first ritual sitting on a table with her other jewelry. Hermione slipped it over her head and went to eat her breakfast.

Draco was waiting to escort her out onto the terrace, where her breakfast was waiting. Also waiting were the other three wizards, Severus, Harry, and Pansy. Harry grabbed her and swung her around.


“We’ve been waiting for you to get up for ages, you lazy bint,” Pansy teased, grinning.

“I’m happy to see you both, too,” Hermione said, squeezing Harry and then hugging Pansy.

Pulling away from her friends, Hermione went to Severus. She nestled deep into her friend’s arms.

“You had me worried there for a while,” he murmured into the top of her head.

"My sincerest apologies," she smiled, squeezing her friend tight. Hermione knew how sensitive Severus really was. He didn't let many people in, but when he did, his feelings went deep. There was no limit to what he would do for them. "You were the one who said that I was too stubborn to give up."

"I'm glad I was right," he said softly before smiling wryly. "But then, I'm always right."

"So I've learned," Hermione returned, smiling broadly.

They all had a wonderful breakfast on the terrace. Hermione ate everything on her plate, which was a lot. She was swimming with tea as well.

Theo penned a note to Kingsley so he could tell the press that Hermione was awake. After attaching it to Emilia, Theo sent a Patronus to his father with the news. Adrian, Draco, and Marcus followed suit with their own Patronuses. Severus wrote to Minnie and sent his raven off to Hogwarts to relay the good news. Harry sent Hedwig to the Burrow with a similar note. Hermione didn't want everyone to find out from the newspaper.
Hermione was lingering at the table, being filled in on what happened while she was out, when Nobby appeared. Healer Adams was there for her check up. She told the elf to send him up. Everyone followed her back into the bedroom, not wanting to miss anything the Healer had to say. While privacy was nice, they had all been working on her health for days without her. Hermione though they deserved to hear about the outcome.

"You're awake!" Healer Adams exclaimed upon seeing her standing in her bedroom.

"Indeed I am," Hermione said laughing. "I woke up before dawn, maybe an hour before. I feel wonderful and I just ate an enormous breakfast. I'm eager to try out my magic, but I was strongly advised to wait until I was medically cleared."

"Then let's get to work," Healer Adams said. He gestured for Hermione to sit on the lounge chair in the sitting area. Everyone crowded around and watched, but Healer Adams didn't do anything but look at them. "Some room would be appreciated, gentlemen. Pansy, do you want to begin the basic medical scan while I look at her magic?"

The wizards all took two steps back as Pansy and Healer Adams got to work. The medical scans checked out. The brain scan was normal this time around as well. Healer Adams was doing much more complicated scans that took longer, but eventually he was done.

"Well?" Marcus asked as soon as Healer Adams lowered his wand.

"It's my pleasure to officially announce that Sorceress Hermione Granger is in perfect health. The second ritual was successful and your magic is settled and fully integrated into your mind and body. You have gone from Sorceress Potentiate to Sorceress. The only step next is to anchor your magic with an Ancillary for long-term stability."

"But I have enough short-term stability to use my magic now though, right?"

"Give it a try and we'll see," Healer Adams nodded.

Hermione grinned and her eyes eagerly sought out her neglected wand. She hadn't even bothered carrying it with her most of the time, not since she'd burned Severus. Her magic was too dangerous. Hermione didn't see it anywhere.

"I think Nipsy put your wand in your dressing room," Adrian reported as he disappeared into the other room. He returned with the vine and dragon heartstring that Hermione had managed to recover after the war. She'd never thought she would see it again after the Snatchers took it.

"Thank you," Hermione said, kissing Adrian.

It felt nice to have her wand again. Hermione decided to try an old, familiar spell. She pointed the wand at a book sitting on the table.

"Wingardium Leviosa," she said clearly.

Nothing happened. Hermione furrowed her brow. That was strange. She repeated the spell, but the book still didn't move. Frustrated, Hermione said the spell a third time. That time the book moved. It flew upward so quickly she could barely see it. The book slammed into the ceiling and then fell back down.

"Maybe a different spell?" Harry suggested.

Hermione huffed. She felt so good. She could feel the magic in her. This didn't make any sense.
"Lumos," she said. A blinding light emanated from the tip of her wand. Everyone turned away, shielding their eyes.

"Bloody hell," Hermione lamented, tossing aside her wand. “This should be working! What’s wrong with me?”

“Why don’t you try it without your wand?” Draco suggested. Everyone looked at him. “What? She did all the rituals without a wand.”

“Draco has a point,” Severus drawled. “Wands are used to channel magic, but elemental magic is very different. Since the elemental magic is part of Hermione, it might not need any channeling through a wand.”

Hermione sighed. If this didn’t work, she didn’t know what to do. She turned and pointed to that same blasted book that refused to cooperate. She said the Levitation Charm again, but this time the book floated up nicely and Hermione breathed a sigh of relief.

“Interesting,” Healer Adams noted. “So a wand isn’t necessary.”

“A wand seems to be a hindrance,” Theo pointed out.

“As long as I can do magic again without causing any accidents, I’m happy,” Hermione smiled.

Nobby appeared in the room to announce that Luna and Selma had arrived, as well as to inform them that Susan had arrived an hour ago and had been working.

Hermione went downstairs to see the progress. She loved everything Susan had been doing to her study and the library. She was glad her wizards insisted on moving forward, despite her being unconscious. She was also happy to see Luna and Selma. Blaise arrived shortly as well. Soon, the house was full of her friends. Neville came over with Percy and George Weasley. Bouchard, Kobayashi, and Sasha arrived just ahead of the Malfoys, Flints, Arabella, Serafina and Ted.

It really was a wonderful day. Hermione’s four wizards, Blaise, George, Harry, Neville, Percy, and Sasha played a very spirited Quidditch game that morning. Hermione watched for a while, but also talked with all of her guests and practiced her magic.

Hermione found there were some new things that she could do with considerable ease, which may have been possible before but were difficult. She could manipulate the elements with very little energy. She whipped up a wind that sent the wizards playing Quidditch well outside the designated field of play. She could create balls of fire in the palm of her hand, both the usual hand-held Bluebell flames and regular fire. Hermione got adept at throwing them as well, which the Quidditch players did not find as amusing as the spectators did. She coaxed the water in the stream on her grounds to stop and go, as well as made little whirlpools. She even managed to create little pockets of rain. Never one to excel in Herbology, now plants seemed to adore her. Leaves unfurled at the touch of her finger and she could definitely promote growth.

A beautiful lunch was arranged on the grounds and several canopies were put up for shade. It was a lovely spring day and Hermione couldn’t seem to get enough of being outside. She guessed it was the result of spending so many days cooped up and because her magic wanted to be out in the elements as much as possible. Hermione didn’t know how her elves managed such a wonderful meal. They set up a makeshift dining room, even if it was just canopies, tables, and chairs, as well as served delicious food for two dozen people. If she were to entertain like that frequently, she would definitely need to hire more elves.
The mood of the day was uniformly joyous. Everyone ate, talked, and laughed. Chatter and the clinking of glasses filled the air. Hermione couldn’t have been happier.

“I’d like to make a toast,” Lucius Malfoy announced, standing up. Everyone quieted to watch him. “I think I speak for everyone when I say that we could not be happier to have you back, Hermione. Let us all raise a glass to the witch that brings us together today, to the Sorceress.”

There were shouts of ‘Here Here’ and ‘Cheers’ as glasses were raised. Hermione blushed a little. She was never going to get used to all the attention.

“There is one more thing,” Lucius continued, still standing and smiling. He was looking right at Hermione, smiling broadly and genuinely. It was an expression she’d never seen on Lucius Malfoy’s face before. “Hermione, my lovely wife and I owe you our gratitude and are forever in your debt. You and your magic have given us something that we never thought we would have again. We wanted you to be the first to know, so clearly it had to wait until you woke up. I would like to announce that Narcissa and I are expecting another child.”

Gasps sounded all around and Hermione couldn’t stop smiling. She had an idea of how much this meant to them and she was so glad. She left her seat to embrace Narcissa and express her congratulations. Hermione wasn’t the only one. The Flints were on their feet, as were Arabella and Serafina. Hermione looked over to see Draco still sitting, his mouth agape.

“Not excited to be a big brother?” Hermione teased him, putting her arm around his shoulders.

“He’s probably afraid this next kid will be better looking than he is,” Marcus said, laughing.

“And smarter,” Theo put in.

“I just… I can’t believe it!” Draco finally managed. “I remember them trying for so long when I was younger. They always wanted a larger family, but it just never could happen. All the Healers in the world didn’t make any difference.”

Draco sprang up and lifted Hermione up off the ground, holding her tightly to him.

“Thank you, Granger,” he whispered to her.

“Don’t thank me,” she replied, blushing again. “It wasn’t just my doing, you and Theo helped. It would’ve happened that night I stayed over at the Manor. We don’t need to tell everyone exactly how it all happened though.”

The four wizards laughed.

“You can chalk it up to the mystery that is Sorcery, kitten,” Adrian told her.

The Malfoy’s good news added to the happy feelings. It seemed like there was plenty of reason to celebrate. Kiki brought out an amazing cake that added to the party-like atmosphere. It ended up being a very long lunch.

Of course, everything slowly wound down, as was inevitable. People started leaving, although they seemed reluctant. They made plans to meet the next day, again around lunchtime, to discuss the final ritual. Marcus left as well, saying that he some things to arrange for his hot date that evening. Hermione rolled her eyes, but also blushed slightly. Marcus would be back to pick her up at seven o’clock that evening and Hermione planned to relax until then.
Chapter End Notes

Next - Marcus and naked times
Hermione checked her reflection one last time. She didn't know what Marcus had planned for them that night. He'd loved her leather trousers, so she decided to go with leather again. She wore a dark purple leather sleeveless dress that stopped just above her knees. Hermione paired it with very high black heels so she would be taller, although no heels would ever put her on eye level with Marcus.

Almost everyone had gone. Hermione had spent the afternoon relaxing, talking to Susan about the renovations, and reading a little about the third ritual. Blaise had been advertising for eligible wizards to attend the last ritual, but Hermione didn't want to think of that right now. She had a date with Marcus.

"You look delicious, kitten," Adrian smiled as she came out of the dressing room.

"Marcus does love leather," Blaise added.

"Which knickers did you put on?" Theo whispered in her ear, coming up behind her and wrapping his arms around her waist. "I want to picture them."

"Who says I'm wearing any at all?" Hermione teased. She did have on a pair of black boy-short style knickers, but Theo didn't need to know that.

"You are being quite naughty," Theo scolded.

"When it's time for our date on Thursday, you'll have to do something about that," Hermione giggled.

"You can bet I will," Theo affirmed. He smiled and gave her a soft swat on her rear.

Draco had already gone home to have a nice dinner with his parents. The whole family was excited about their new addition.

"Ready, princess?" Marcus asked, coming into the room. His eyes devoured her. "You look gorgeous."

Hermione smiled and managed to hardly blush at all.

"Am I dressed alright for what you have planned?" she asked.

"You look perfect," Marcus said, pulling her flush to him. "I hope you don't mind a low-key night, though. You said you wanted your magic to get to know us, so I thought I would plan my idea of a perfect date."

"That's a wonderful idea!" Hermione praised. She really thought it was. The four wizards were so
different, but she found it impossible to choose between them. Each one complimented her in some way; at least she thought so. She hoped her magic would feel it as well.

"Marcus' perfect date? So that's just shagging, then?" Blaise teased.

"Right, so all you tossers need to clear out and give us some privacy," Marcus said, rolling his eyes.

Hermione shook her head at their teasing.

"What are you all up to tonight?" Hermione asked them, picking up her bag and a thin black cardigan to wear when it got chilly later.

"Theo and I have invited ourselves over to Blaise's house for dinner," Adrian smiled.

"Have fun," Hermione said. She gave Adrian and Theo each a goodbye kiss, then she and Marcus left.

Marcus' arm wrapped around her waist and they walked to the Apparition boundary. It was a beautiful night. Marcus took Hermione side-along to their destination. Hermione looked around and saw they were in a bustling city similar to wizarding London.

"We're in Edinburgh," Marcus informed her. "I like this city, the energy and the people. If it were the weekend during the day, I'd take you to a Muggle rugby game. Those blokes know how to have a good time, even though it would be better with flying."

Hermione laughed.

"There's a pub here in wizarding Edinburgh that I like," Marcus said, leading her down the street, his arm still firmly wrapped around her. Hermione smiled and leaned into him as they walked.

"What do you like about it?"

"It's easy and not pretentious," Marcus said after a moment of thought. "The food is great and the people are friendly. It's all simple, but homey and comfortable. They also have loads of fun. I started going there when I was still playing Quidditch. It's not the sort of place groupies hang out and they never made any fuss over me, if they knew who I was. When I'm there, I'm just another wizard."

They went inside the Dancing Cockatrice, which looked just how Hermione pictured given all that Marcus had said. It was an out of the way place with plenty of character. Forest green walls complimented the dark mahogany wood of the booths and large bar that dominated most of the pub.

"Marcus Flint, you right bastard!" the bartender shouted jovially as they entered.

"Just another wizard, huh?" Hermione teased as Marcus waved to the older wizard behind the bar.

"Well, a wizard that spends all his Galleons on drinks and can't be beaten in darts, no matter the challenger," Marcus said, grinning.

"You've just never played against me before," Hermione said confidently.

"You're that good are you?" Marcus asked, looking skeptical.

"We can make a nice friendly wager, if you're sure of your own skills," Hermione shrugged.
“Absolutely,” Marcus said, grinning. “First, though, let’s get something to eat.”

Marcus led Hermione to a corner booth so they could sit side by side. They were hardly there a minute when a stout witch about ten years older than they were approached the table.

"You've a nerve showing your face in here, lad," she teased, clearly happy to see Marcus. "It's been weeks since we've seen you and you missed the billiards tourney. I had Galleons to bet on you, you selfish wretch."

"I'm so sorry, Fiona," Marcus said, doing a reasonable impression of remorse. "This slip of a witch here has taken up all my time of late."

"Don't blame me for shirking your responsibilities," Hermione objected, laughing.

"It is nice to see you with a witch," Fiona acknowledged. "We were beginning to think all that gossip about you was false, just a cover for being a poof. Now, what can I get you two to drink?"

Marcus ordered a pint of locally brewed dark ale while Hermione asked for a cider.

"I've never brought a witch here before," Marcus offered when Fiona left. "This place is too personal, almost like taking someone home to meet my parents."

"Thank you for sharing it with me," Hermione said sincerely. She leaned in and gave him a soft, lingering kiss.

As Marcus tried to deepen the kiss, Fiona brought their drinks.

"What can I get you to eat?" the witch asked, looking amused at Marcus' glare. It was a look that intimidated most people, but the folks at this pub clearly knew him well enough to see past the hard shell.

"You order first, Marcus," Hermione told him. She hadn't really looked at the menu.

"I'll have the Cullen Skink for starters, the Angus rib eye medium rare with the neeps and tatties, and then the sticky toffee pudding for dessert," Marcus said.

"That sounds great," Hermione said wistfully. Every time she sat down to eat that day she was famished. "I'll have all of that as well."

"A wee lassie like you?" Fiona asked, looking her up and down as best she could with Hermione behind the table. "You've nowhere to put all that!"

"You'd be surprised," Hermione told her.

"All right then, wee lassie," Fiona said, grinning. "It'll be up shortly."

Marcus draped his arm over Hermione's shoulders and she nestled into him. She couldn't get close enough. Marcus leaned down and pressed a kiss into the top of her head.

"So, have you decided what you want to wager in darts?" Hermione asked.

"I'm still thinking. I want to win something good, since I'm definitely going to win."

"Cocky," she scolded.

"Honest," he corrected. Hermione rolled her eyes and snorted softly.
Fiona returned with their bowls of soup and crusty bread, cutting off their conversation. The Cullen Skink was everything it should be, rich and hearty with big pieces of smoked haddock, potato, and onion. Hermione devoured every last bite, much to the amusement of Marcus and Fiona.

The steak that followed was perfect. Hermione's plate was soon empty, as was Marcus'. Fiona was impressed with how much she ate, laughing at their cleared plates.

"You can put it away can't you," Fiona chuckled.

"Give us a minute before dessert, yeah?" Marcus told the older witch. "We're going to play darts first."

Fiona nodded and the couple walked over to the dartboard.

"What are the stakes?" Hermione asked.

"Full body massage for the winner," Marcus announced.

"Sounds good," Hermione said, smiling. That was a win-win as far as she was concerned. If she won, she'd get a massage from Marcus, and if she lost she'd get to rub Marcus all over. So really, she couldn't lose. Of course, her competitive nature urged her to do her best regardless.

"And no using magic, princess," Marcus said, looking at her suspiciously.

"I don't cheat," Hermione said, slightly affronted.

"Good," Marcus said with a wink. "I'd hate for a sudden breeze to blow my darts off course."

"If that were to happen, it would be my magic cheating, not me," Hermione teased.

Marcus laughed and ordered another round of drinks. They had so much fun playing darts. While Marcus didn’t cheat, Hermione found out that he didn’t exactly play fair either. He brushed up against her unnecessarily when it was her turn. He would wait until her shot to lean in and murmur something in her ear. The actual words were ordinary, asking if she wanted another drink or some other meaningless thing. His voice, however, was low and rumbled seductively. The powerful effect he had on her, coupled with the fact that it felt like she hadn't really seen him in ages, did throw Hermione off her game. In the end, Marcus did win, but only by a small margin.

"Seems I've won myself a massage," Marcus smiled, pulling Hermione flush to him.

"It would seem so," Hermione agreed, shaking her head and chuckling.

"Then let’s get out of here," Marcus said, grinning.

"What about dessert?" Hermione teased, circling her arms around his waist.

"I’ve got it covered," Marcus replied, before turning his head to shout. "Fiona, wrap up dessert. We’ll take it to go."

Hermione threw her head back and laughed at Marcus, so eager to leave. Truth be told, so was she.

"Where are we going?" she wondered, still chuckling.

"You'll see," he responded, winking.

"Here you go, you rude lad," Fiona admonished. Her scolding didn't have much impact though,
because she was smiling and holding out a take away box.

"Thank you for everything," Hermione told the witch. "It was all delicious. This is a lovely place."

"I'm glad you like it," Fiona beamed proudly. "We don't get such illustrious persons as you here often."

Hermione was surprised they had recognized her. No one had mentioned it or treated her any differently. Fiona must have noted her surprise.

"Aye, we read the papers and know all about the famous Sorceress," Fiona told her. "Just as we know this rascal here was a famous Quidditch star once upon a time. But in the end, you're just people like the rest of us."

"That we are," Marcus said, smiling. He pulled a handful of Galleons from his pocket and gave them to Fiona. It looked like more than enough to cover their bill and a healthy tip.

"This lassie is a nice one," Fiona told Marcus, pointing her finger at him. "See that you don't bollocks it all up."

"I'll do my best," Marcus said, laughing.

Marcus held their dessert in one hand and pulled Hermione close with the other. They walked to the Apparition point without talking much at all. It was a beautiful evening and being with Marcus felt extremely comfortable. They didn’t need to fill the space with chatter.

Marcus held her just a little closer and Hermione felt the pull of the side-along Apparition. When it was over, she found herself deep in the woods. If it weren't for the bright moonlight, she wouldn't be able to see much at all.

"A forest? Are we going camping?" she asked.

"Almost," Marcus chuckled, turning them both around.

A very small cabin was nestled among the trees. It was only one level and looked very natural among its surroundings, as if it sprang from the ground. It was made with stone and logs that matched the woods. A light was on inside so Hermione could see the roughly hewn porch and the flagstone path leading up to it.

"I got this place years ago," Marcus said, leading her to the cabin. "It's not much, but it's private and quiet."

"It's lovely," Hermione assured him as she stepped inside the tiny log house.

It was really one main room. A lounge area was to the right and a kitchen-dining space was to the left. A large stone fireplace was the focus of the lounge. There were two doors straight ahead, both open. Hermione could see one was the bedroom and the other a bath.

"Do you want to start a fire while I get dishes for our dessert?" Marcus suggested.

Hermione nodded. The fireplace was already filled with wood so it took nothing for her to send a little ball of flame into the kindling. It faltered slightly, but Hermione sat on the hearth and said a few encouraging words. Soon, a merry little fire blazed brightly, warming the room. It got cold in the mountains at night, even in June.
"Are we very high up?" Hermione asked as she shrugged off her light sweater.

"Yes," he reported, bringing two plates to the couch. "There isn't anything else up here for a good distance. The area is popular with mountain trolls and there's a relatively small cluster of giants on the southern slope, so this isn't a booming vacation spot. Wards to keep them away from the cabin aren't too difficult to manage though."

Hermione took off her shoes and curled up next to Marcus on the couch. She started in on her sticky toffee pudding, which was so good she moaned. Marcus stared at her, lust filling his eyes.

"So you brought me up to a deserted mountain country to have your way with me?" Hermione teased, licking her spoon. Marcus watched her tongue for a moment before responding.

"Would you expect anything else?" he finally said, grinning. His look turned serious though. "We don't have to do anything you're not ready for. You know that right, princess?"

"Of course," Hermione said. She knew every single one of her wizards would treat her with respect. They might push her boundaries and challenge her, but they would never pressure or make her regret things. "I've had weeks of foreplay. Now, I want everything."

Hermione slid her hand up his thigh and Marcus groaned softly.

"You just woke up," he managed. "You were asleep for days. Are you sure you're strong enough?"

"I feel better than ever," Hermione told him seriously. She set the remainder of her pudding on the end table, and then plucked Marcus' barely touched dessert from his hands. Hermione climbed into his lap. "I'm strong and healthy, so you better not hold back on me. I want everything you've got."

"I do like a witch that knows what she wants," Marcus finally said after a moment.

"Let's go into the bedroom and I'll pay up on that bet," Hermione smiled, sliding to her feet. She tugged the large wizard after her and he followed, chuckling.

The bedroom was simple, like the rest of the place. The main features were another huge stone fireplace and an enormous bed. Hermione started another crackling fire before turning to the large wizard.

Marcus was dressed comfortably in jeans and shirt. Hermione could've easily spelled his clothes away, but she wanted to undress him. She reached up and unbuttoned his slate grey shirt, exposing his muscled chest little by little. She realized she'd probably seen Marcus naked or shirtless most often out of the four. Their first date required nudity after all. Despite that, Hermione was always awed by his physique.

Hermione slid his shirt off and ran her fingertips along every muscle ridge. On impulse, she leaned forward and ran her nose along his chest, inhaling the earthy, masculine scent. Marcus always smelled that way. He reached for her zipper, but Hermione pushed his hands away.

"I've a bet to pay," she reminded him. "You wanted a massage, so you're going to get one."

Hermione unzipped the denim trousers he wore and pushed them down his hips. Marcus kicked them away, along with his shoes. He stood in front of her naked, and it seemed like a perfectly natural, comfortable state to him. Marcus was a wizard who not only should be nude as often as possible, but also relished the freedom he felt without clothes.

"On the bed, face down," she managed to instruct, trying to use her stern Prefect voice. If she were
going to keep from jumping on him, she would have to be firm with herself. Also, face down meant she wouldn't be confronted with that irresistible erection that was almost too much to resist.

Marcus smirked at her, but complied. He stretched out on the bed, filling the space. Hermione stepped onto the bed and realized that her dress would only get in the way. She unzipped it and tossed it aside. Marcus tried to sit up and turn to look at her, but she straddled his bum so he could only turn his head.

"You just relax," she encouraged. Hermione tried to recall what they had learned in massage class. She murmured a lubrication charm that coated her hands with lightly scented oil. Hermione warmed her hands slightly and dropped them down to Marcus' bare back. He groaned at the sensation.

Hermione pressed her palms into the small of his back, leaning into him as she pushed up along his spine. She really didn't feel the hardship of losing that bet. She had Marcus, naked, muscled, and oiled at her fingertips and this was losing? Hermione smiled as she explored and rubbed his back. She paid special attention to his broad shoulders. When she felt compelled to run her tongue along the nape of his neck, Hermione didn't hesitate.

Marcus groaned and bucked his hips slightly.

"Just relax," Hermione purred in his ear, taking his earlobe between her teeth. Marcus huffed, as if she said something ridiculous. Of course, if their positions were reversed, she would have trouble really relaxing. She would imagine all the sexy things he would do to her at the end of the massage.

The small witch refocused and worked every muscle in his neck, shoulders, and arms. By the time she got to his hands, he was much more relaxed. There was no tension in his heavy body.

"That feels so good, princess," Marcus moaned. "I love how your hands feel on me."

"Mmmm," Hermione agreed. She slid off the small of his back and down his legs. Marcus moaned deeply as she pressed her thumbs into the arch of his foot. "I'm trying to remind myself that this is losing. You having to lie here naked and still while I get to explore and rub you doesn't feel like losing."

Marcus' deep chuckle rumbled in his chest. Hermione worked her way up his surprisingly slender ankles to his muscled calves. His thighs were thick and firm, like tree trunks. Something about Marcus made Hermione want to take up drawing and do detailed studies of male anatomy. His body was too perfect not to try to memorialize it in some way.

As Hermione slid her hands over his hamstrings to his arse, she sighed. Marcus' rear end was so firm that you could bounce a Galleon off it. She kneaded the round muscles and he gave off a half moan, half growl.

"Careful, princess," Marcus warned. "You can only tease me so much before I have to have you."

Hermione smirked. She knew that already. She could tease Draco endlessly and Adrian was too sweet to tease for long. She could play with Theo, knowing it would have delicious consequences. Marcus, however, had little tolerance for teasing and playing before he was at least a little sated.

"So have me then," Hermione challenged him. She bent forward and sank her teeth into the flesh of his arse. It wasn't hard enough to break the skin, but Hermione was sure it would leave a mark.

OoOoO
Marcus growled when he felt her sharp little teeth bite down on her arse. He spun over quickly so that he was on his back and Hermione suddenly found herself straddling the tops of his legs. His erection was massive and standing strongly in front of her. That massage had driven him barmy. When she bit him, Marcus had almost come. He sometimes stuck on how small she was and forgot that his tiny princess was a warrior. She was strong, certainly strong enough to handle him.

While Hermione was looking a little slack jawed at his cock, Marcus took the opportunity to flip again and pin her beneath his large frame. His thick hardness was pressed against her belly. Marcus’ eyes blazed with lust and he slammed his lips down to hers. Hermione gripped his face and devoured his lips with the same intensity. Marcus’ large hands roamed over her roughly with a frantic edge. He was trying to touch her as much as she had touched him during his massage. It had been so difficult to keep from grabbing her, from touching her. Marcus was a sensory person. He needed to touch, to taste, to smell.

Hermione groaned into his mouth as his hand covered her breast and tugged at her nipple. He loved how his large hands fit her body. His other hand pulled her leg up over his hip as he ground himself into her center. Marcus could feel that her knickers were drenched. Only that thin, wet fabric kept him from sliding inside her tight little body. It was all too much to take. Hermione wrapped her other leg around his hips and pressed herself into him. It would be so easy to tear away those pants and sink into his princess. He’d been fantasizing about that very thing since he saw her that day in Diagon Alley a few weeks ago. Marcus focused on restraining himself, but it was difficult.

"Please, Marcus," she moaned, breaking their kiss. "I want you inside me."

Her breathy plea made it even more difficult for Marcus to practice the restraint he was known for. He had a reputation for excessive shagging and fighting, but he always stayed in control of those situations, everything he did was a deliberate choice. Marcus was like a rock, solid and immovable once he set his mind to something. Hermione though, she made him feel impulsive and reckless in a way that was unfamiliar but liberating.

"There's no where I'd rather be than inside your sweet quim," Marcus responded honestly. His already deep voice was even lower and raspy. "But you have to be patient, princess."

Marcus guided her legs back down to the bed and Hermione pouted. Of course, he wanted her to wrap her legs around him, lock her ankles, and not let go until several orgasms later. Practically though, Marcus was a large wizard. He didn’t want his first time with Hermione to be painful or uncomfortable for her in any way. This wasn’t some slut he picked up for the night, this was his princess – the only witch he had ever and would ever love. He couldn’t tolerate the idea of hurting her in any way.

"Now don't pout," Marcus clucked teasingly. He hooked his fingers around her wet knickers and slid them down her legs, leaving her totally naked, just as he was. "We have to get you ready for me."

"I could've just vanished the pants," Hermione complained, reaching for him to come back to her.

"No, princess," Marcus chuckled. "I wasn't talking about your adorable little shorts. We have to get you ready for me."

Marcus reached down and leisurely stroked his cock, which was engorged and at its maximum length and girth. Her eyes went wide with comprehension of what Marcus was really saying. Marcus guessed it might have been several months since she’d had sex. Even then, Marcus was, admittedly, more... gifted than most.
"The last thing in the world I want to do is hurt you," Marcus murmured, running the tip of his nose down her sternum. He stopped in the valley between her breasts and inhaled deeply. "I love the way you smell, princess."

Marcus' hand slid up to the juncture between her thighs and his fingers began teasing her center.

"Let's see if we can get you wetter," he rumbled. She was already wet, but Marcus wanted to make her come once so her muscles would be relaxed. He hoped her magic wouldn't force him to come, but even if it did Marcus was sure he'd be ready again soon.

"I don't think that's possible," Hermione gasped as he pushed one of his large fingers inside her already slick channel.

Marcus latched onto one of her nipples, making Hermione whimper and arch her back. He added a second finger and pumped them in and out of her at a steady pace.

Marcus switched to her other nipple and increased the speed of his fingers. Hermione was writhing beneath him, encouraging him to give her more, to go faster. Obligingly, Marcus added a third finger and began to scissor them, stretching her tight, velvety walls. To make it good for her, he swept his thumb over her hard little clit every time he pushed into her.

Hermione was thrusting her hips in time with his hand, moaning and panting. Marcus admired the light sheen of sweat on her chest and dragged his tongue up the valley of her breasts. She tasted sweet, salty, and perfect. She was coming undone around him and he loved every second of it. Watching her build up effectively distracted him from his own rock hard, weeping cock. His princess was raw and beautiful when she came. It made him proud to be responsible for causing such a glorious sight.

"Oh, Marcus, I'm coming," she cried out. "Oh, gods!"

A moment later Hermione dug her nails into his bicep and reached her peak. Marcus watched her fall apart, enraptured. He also noted, thankfully, that no magical discharge went through him, wringing his own orgasm out of him. He was glad because he wanted to come inside his princess.

Marcus rolled onto his back, pulling his limp, sated witch along with him so she was straddling his hips. Hermione looked relaxed and Marcus smiled. She sat up; his still hard member nestled between her legs.

"I want you on top to start, princess," Marcus told her. "That way you can control the depth and pace until you are comfortable."

Hermione nodded and grinned at him. Her eyes were shining with excitement and happiness. It made Marcus' chest tighten with emotion. He couldn't get enough of this witch and he definitely couldn't lose her. Hermione Granger was the key to him, his missing piece. Who would've guessed?

Marcus slid his hands over her body, up her thighs and hips, across her belly and over her ribcage. He went over her breasts to her shoulders and down her arms. Before the night was over, he was going to explore, touch, and taste every part of her. Going back to her hips, Marcus gripped her and lifted her up. He positioned her opening right over the bulging head of his cock.

"You ready for me, princess?" Marcus rasped. The lust and emotions of the moment made it hard for him to speak.

"Always," she assured him, caressing the side of his face with her small hand.
Hermione sank down a little, taking the tip of him into her warmth. Marcus hissed and closed his eyes. He so wanted to buck upwards and push himself all the way in. She sank down further and Marcus heard her sharp intake of breath. He opened his eyes to look at her. She had a wondrous expression of pleasure and pain on her face.

"Okay, princess?"

"You are so big," she groaned. It sounded like a satisfied groan, not a pained or anxious sound. "I can't wait to be full of you. I want you so much."

Marcus smiled and watched her slide further down, stopping to let herself adjust. It wasn't just length, it was the girth that witches had trouble with. She was about three quarters of the way now. A little more and he would be fully seated inside her. So far, she felt perfect. She was tight, but not uncomfortably so. She was heaven.

Hermione had both hands on his chest, supporting herself, while Marcus rested his hands on her hips still. He wasn't pushing, just waiting and ready to help with whatever his princess needed. She locked eyes with him and pushed the rest of the way down. They both let out moans of satisfaction. Marcus fit inside her perfectly, like a glove made for him. He wondered what he did to get so lucky.

"You feel so good," Marcus panted, wanting to move but not daring to do it before she was ready.

"This is perfect," she replied. "This is right."

"I love you, princess," Marcus blurted, "more than anything."

He hadn't meant to tell her like that, with his cock inside her. It seemed like the kind of thing to say over candles and champagne. That's how Ades would tell her. He hoped she didn't take it the wrong way and want to stop.

"I wanted to make sure you knew," Marcus hastily added. "You don't have to say it back."

"I love you, too," Hermione said gently. She leaned down and kissed him gently, sweetly and loving. Marcus' heart swelled and he held his witch close.

When she started to pull away from his lips, Marcus didn't want to let her go. He sat up with her and brought her legs around his waist. Marcus knew he was a little deeper in this position, both of them sitting up with Hermione in his lap, impaled on his cock. This way though, he could keep kissing her, tasting her, and hold her close.

Hermione began to move slowly, grinding herself down on him. Marcus ran his hands down her back to her arse. He began lifting up and down, slowly and gently.

Hermione moaned against his mouth, not releasing the kiss either. Marcus had never 'made love' to anyone, but he wanted their first time together to be like that. They were connected, his cock deep inside her and their tongues caressing and exploring each other's mouths.

Sitting up together like that, Marcus had free range with his hands. He kept one hand on her arse, helping her raise and fall on him. His other hand ran down her spine, palmed her breast, tugged on her nipples. He finally broke their extremely long kiss so he could lick, nip, and taste her skin.

Hermione sped up slightly and Marcus helped her.
"Feels so good," Hermione panted, "so full. I'm already close. I'm gonna come."

Marcus grunted his agreement, unwilling to remove his mouth from her breasts. He had been close for ages and could've come three times over by now, but he wanted his princess to come again before he did.

Hermione held onto his shoulders and arms, bracing herself as they moved together. Marcus couldn't think of anything more beautiful than how she looked right then. He felt her fingers dig into him and her walls tightened even more around him, which he didn't think possible. Marcus felt her internal muscles flutter with her orgasm and watched her come. The impossible tightness gripped him and he couldn't move. Her clenching around him, the spasm of her orgasm massaging his cock, pushed Marcus over the edge. His hands gripped her arse and hip tightly and he came harder than he ever remembered coming in his life. A mix of endearments and curse words sprang from his mouth.

Entirely spent, Marcus fell backwards, taking Hermione with him, his cock still inside her. Her small frame covered his and they both tried to catch their breath.

"Are you okay, princess?" He finally managed to ask as he stroked her back.

"Mmmm," she hummed her reply, rubbing her cheek against his chest. "I'm better than okay. That was amazing."

"You were amazing," Marcus corrected. She was such a real, honest, passionate witch. There was no artifice, no falseness. After so many years of groupies, Marcus had become jaded about sex. This, however, was different. This was about them, their connection, their attraction, and their feelings for each other. It wasn't just about getting off.

"I know you already know," Hermione smiled, "but that's some impressive equipment you've got."

"I'm glad you like it," Marcus responded, smiling. "It's all yours."

"An embarrassment of riches," she chuckled, drawing circles on his chest. "You know that I'd still love you even if you didn't have the most impressive cock in the world, right?"

"I'm glad," he responded softly. Marcus felt himself blush a little and mentally berated himself. He just wasn't used to affection and tenderness from anyone besides his parents and sometimes his few close friends. Mostly, people wanted to be around him for his size, his fame, his money - anything besides himself.

Hermione held his face in her hands and kissed him. He felt himself harden again inside her and she moaned. She must've felt it too.

Marcus rolled them over so he was on top, nestled between her thighs.

"I need to have you again, princess," Marcus told her.

"You can have me all night long."

Marcus grinned and began thrusting shallowly. He was going to last longer this time and make her come at least twice before he let go. Then he was going to take her up on her statement. The night was just beginning.

Chapter End Notes
Next - Hanging out. Plus, we'll see what that Bronwyn is up to.
Hermione sluggishly blinked awake. The light was bright in the room and she wondered what time it was. Marcus wasn't in the bed next to her, but she heard noise coming from the main room of the cabin.

Hermione stretched experimentally and felt a number of aches and twinges in her muscles. She smiled happily at the memory of how she got her workout. Being with Marcus was just as thorough and athletic as she imagined it would be.

The first time, Marcus was gentle and so concerned with making sure he didn't hurt her. He was unusually large, so she appreciated his care, even if he was overly protective at times. That first time was so tender and emotional; it could only be described as loving rather than shagging. After that though, they did it three more times.

Marcus relaxed, knowing he wouldn't hurt her. He was exceptionally thorough and seemed intent on tasting every part of her body. They both tasted to their heart’s content, especially after Marcus smeared what was left of their sticky toffee pudding over her body. The pudding was why they ended up in the shower with Hermione on her knees and Marcus' cock in her mouth. That led to an ambitious balancing act where Hermione was pressed against the cold tile while Marcus vigorously thrust in and out of her. His stamina was incredible and he wore Hermione out. The sun was starting to rise when she finally fell asleep tucked in Marcus’ arms.

"You're up," Marcus observed from the doorway, grinning. He looked spectacular. Marcus only wore his jeans, which weren't even buttoned up all the way. The faded denim combined with his bare feet and chest made him look delicious.

"Mmmm." Hermione smiled at him from her sprawled out stretch underneath the crisp sheets.

"How do you feel?" Marcus asked, advancing on her like a predator.

"Great," she responded, reaching up and pulling him back into bed with her. "I’m only a little sore."

“Oh, no. Did I hurt you, princess?” Marcus held himself away from her slightly, surveying her critically, looking for injury.

“Absolutely not,” Hermione assured him, pulling him down to nestle him between her legs. “I just haven’t had such a good workout in I don’t know when. What time is it?”

“It’s a little after eleven,” Marcus sighed. Hermione knew he wanted to stay at the cabin for the rest of the day, preferably in bed. She was seriously tempted to do that as well, but people were coming to her house for lunch and to discuss the final ritual. “I made tea so we can have a cup before we Apparate you home.”
“You are the sweetest wizard,” Hermione smiled. She laughed when he made a sour face. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone.”

“Tell anyone you want. They won’t believe you,” Marcus chuckled, “because I’m only sweet to you. Come on, princess. We better get up before I change my mind and try to keep you here all to myself.”

Hermione let Marcus go and the pair got up out of bed. They dressed and each had a cup of tea on the front step of the cabin. It really was beautiful up there in the clean mountain air. Marcus reminded her that he would bring her back whenever she wanted.

They Apparated back to Hermione’s house, appearing in the front hall. She immediately heard voices down in the sitting room. It sounded like Adrian, Draco, and Theo. Hermione went upstairs to change while Marcus sauntered toward the voices, looking very much like the cat that ate the canary.

Hermione chuckled and rolled her eyes. She assumed there would be at least a little bit of locker room talk amongst her four wizards. She didn’t mind. The time she spent with each of them individually was important, but Hermione didn’t want it to be a secret. She didn’t want the others to feel suspicious or awkward when she was out with one of them, as if they were off doing something clandestine. That’s the way jealousies and hurt feelings would begin to fester.

Hermione had really only slept for a few hours and had showered right before sleep. She pulled on a comfortable pair of jeans, a floral sleeveless shirt, and a light ivory cardigan. After finding a pair of violet flats that complimented her floral shirt, she made her way downstairs. Hermione stood in the doorway of the sitting room, which held her four wizards as she had thought. They were all looking at Marcus, who was reclining in a somehow boastfully relaxed manner. She was only apart from the other three for a night, a night when she was wonderfully occupied, but it was still enough for her to miss the others just a little bit.

“I can’t wait to be with her,” Draco was saying wistfully.

“Good thing we have a date for tonight then,” Hermione laughed from the doorway.

“There you are, kitten.” Adrian smiled and crossed the room to her. He pulled her close and kissed her sweetly before leading her to the couch to sit between him and Theo. Theo leaned over and gave her a naughtier kiss that lingered.

“Have fun last night, Mi?” Theo asked, putting his arm around her. Adrian still held her hand.

“I had a wonderful time,” Hermione reported, nestling herself between the two wizards.

The five of them were only able to chat together for a moment before the others started arriving for the planning meeting. It was just like the day before, Hermione’s house was full and the elves outdid themselves with a wonderful lunch. Everyone involved in the ritual planning was there, chatting and socializing. It didn’t seem like anyone wanted to actually work.

“Shall we get things done?” Severus finally asked, although it was more of an order than a question. Hermione watched her wizards huff, grumble, and roll their eyes.

It was unpleasant to think about and plan a ritual that may separate them, but it had to be done. They all knew it, but they didn’t like it.

“This ritual will obviously be a little different than the others,” Hermione began. “The crux of the ritual is my magic calling to its mate. There will still be a ritual circle and the two ritual leaders, but
they have to remain outside the circle. Unlike before, when the circle could be broken, it will act as a kind of ward during the third ritual and only the chosen can cross into the circle.”

“Research indicates that the wizard or wizards chosen will feel a pull and then be allowed to enter the ritual circle,” Theo reported dryly. “Only the chosen may enter. The Ancillary candidates picked by the Sorceress will be positioned to stand North, South, East, and West on the edge of the ritual circle.”

“Of course, there will be many more wizards there than the approved candidates since your magic may choose anyone from the crowd. At least the chances of injury are slim to none this time,” Percy offered, trying not to look at the four disgruntled wizards. Everyone in the room knew what they wanted and knew they were not happy about Blaise and the Ministry’s efforts to recruit more Ancillary candidates. “Notices have run in every major wizarding paper across the globe. The Ministry Portkey Department has been working overtime to handle the extra traffic. Hotels anywhere close to Hogwarts are entirely booked. We are expecting a crowd at least comparable to the Quidditch World Cup, but probably larger. After all, no one needs tickets for this.”

“The number of single, available wizards planning to attend is staggering, Piccola,” Blaise spoke up. “Everyone seems eager to throw their broom in the pitch, so mentally prepare yourself for the crowd. It will be huge. Travel and security are going to be issues.”

“Hogwarts grounds will be entirely open to the public since all the students are gone,” Minerva reported. “Of course, the castle itself will be warded against any uninvited guests. Hermione, I would suggest that you Floo directly into the castle with your candidates in order to avoid the crowd. We will keep a path clear from the castle to the circle for you.”

They talked a bit more about specifics. The ritual circle would include lapis lazuli and jade as they aid in the creation of harmonious relationships as well as true love, respectively. Sage would be burned in the ritual fire to increase the potency of Hermione’s magic. While everyone dissected the details and debated the merits of certain plants and minerals, Hermione wondered if there was anything she could do to sway the outcome.

“Don’t furrow your brow so much, Granger,” Draco whispered in her ear after he sat down next to her. “It’ll give you premature wrinkles.”

“I don’t like this,” she said, sighing softly and leaning into him as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

“None of us do,” Draco agreed, pressing his lips into her temple. “It must be done. So let’s just hope your magic adores us as much as you do. I mean, you can’t resist me, so why should your magic be any different.”

Hermione chuckled at his ego. She appreciated his efforts to soothe her when she knew he was also worried.

“So where are you taking me tonight?” she asked, changing the subject to something much happier.

“We are going out on the town tonight,” Draco reported, “so be prepared to be the center of attention. I know you had laid back and low key last night with Marcus, but tonight is going to be different. We are going to dinner at the most exclusive restaurant in wizarding London and then out dancing at the hottest club in the city. Of course, the tabloids are wild for me so don’t be offended if they run pictures of Draco Malfoy and his mystery date.”
Hermione snorted. They both knew that she was just as much a celebrity as he was, if not more, at this point. She liked his plan though. It was very Draco. He did enjoy the flash and drama. While it wasn’t always Hermione’s cup of tea, there was something alluring about embracing her celebrity from time to time. Blaise and his mother had already warned her that it was inevitable.

“So I better wear something spectacular and sexy,” Hermione smiled. “I wouldn’t want the papers wondering about the identity of a mysterious frumpy witch with ever-dashing Draco Malfoy.”

“I do have a reputation to uphold, Granger,” Draco agreed, using his best haughty Malfoy voice. “Be ready by seven o’clock tonight. You may want to have a nice afternoon kip. I plan on keeping you up all night.”

“Oh, the club’s open all night?” Hermione asked, her face the picture of faux innocent confusion. “No, but your legs will be,” Draco purred into her ear. Hermione swatted him on the arm for his crudeness, but she had to admit that he made her excited.

“You just expect to get everything you want then?” she chided him, knowing full well that Draco would never push her to do anything more than she was ready for. Of course, she was absolutely ready for all of him. But Hermione didn’t need to contribute to his already inflated ego by explicitly stating that.

“I’ve already told you, Granger, Malfoys get what we want.” Draco smirked and then ducked his head to nuzzle her neck. Hermione moaned very softly as he placed a kiss on her throat. Draco never failed to get her excited and make her want to behave in the most inappropriate ways. He definitely brought out the naughty side of her and she wondered just how bad they would get that night.

“I think we’re ready to adjourn,” Severus stated loudly, pulling Hermione from her thoughts. She blushed slightly at her former lover’s slightly disapproving gaze. He was never one for public displays of affection. Hermione had almost forgotten that they were sitting in a room full of other people. “There isn’t much to do, so we can meet briefly on Friday afternoon to go over things before Saturday.”

“Sounds good,” Hermione managed to reply. Draco didn’t even have the good grace to look abashed at his behavior or to put a little more space between them, but that wasn’t surprising. He was shameless.

People started drifting out of the house to do other things. Penrose left with McGonagall, which Hermione found incredibly charming. Kobayashi went with them back to Hogwarts because he wanted to practice his Mermish. He promised to ask their opinion about the Sorceress and the ritual. Bronwyn was sent off to procure supplies, which she seemed to hate; although Percy didn’t seem to mind his half of the supply list. Percy did invite Hermione over the Burrow for lunch the next day on behalf of his parents, which she happily accepted. Severus went with Bouchard to talk about and dissect the potions they’d made for the previous rituals since there wasn’t a big potion to make this time around. They were asked to write about it for Potions Quarterly. Kingsley and Blaise began talking about how to further publicize the third ritual, but upon seeing the glares from her four wizards they wisely moved their conversation to Kings’ office. Lucius happily went home to his pregnant wife. That left Hermione, her four wizards, Harry and Pansy, Luna and Selma, Neville, and Sasha lounging around the house. Harry was still in charge of her security detail of Aurors, who hadn’t left the grounds, and Pansy’s shift at St. Mungos didn’t start until that evening.

Susan Bones came in to discuss further renovation of the house. The library and her study would be finished by the end of the week. Hermione, Adrian, and Pansy discussed interior design at length
while Neville, Sasha, and Theo engaged in an interesting conversation about magical education. Neville was excited to teach at Hogwarts in the fall and Sasha was considering teaching somewhere after he finished his apprenticeship. Theo just enjoyed the topic in general. Harry, Luna, Selma, Marcus, and Draco played what sounded like a rousing game of cards. Just as Hermione was considering a mid-afternoon nap, Nobby discreetly got her attention.

“Madam, the Aurors have detained a gentleman who Apparated to the front walkway,” Noddy reported quietly, although he did draw Adrian’s attention. “He claims to be a friend of yours and a representative of the family who sold you this house. I wouldn’t interrupt, except the Aurors have him bound and he is quite insistent that you will wish to see him. He says his name is Gunner Bech.”

“Gunner!” Hermione’s eyes went wide. She had no idea what he was doing there, but his family wouldn’t take it well if the British Ministry of Magic bound and arrested him for visiting a friend.

“Who’s Gunner?” Pansy asked, brow raised.

“An old friend,” Hermione explained, “and a Danish Count. I don’t want an international incident because the Ministry arrested part of the Danish royal family.”

“Harry can deal with it,” Pansy offered before yelling over to her husband. “Harry, your Aurors have caught one of Hermione’s ex-lovers trying to drop by for a visit. Go have them untie the Prince of Denmark before it sparks a wizarding war, won’t you?”

"Gunner isn't a prince," Hermione automatically corrected, rolling her eyes. It didn't matter if Pansy thought princes were sexier; it was still a fact that Gunner was a count.

Regardless of his royal title, Harry was quickly up and followed Nobby out.

"Why is your former lover here, kitten?" Adrian asked, a bit of an edge to his voice. Hermione thought of Draco and Marcus as the excessively possessive ones, but of course, any of them could be insecure. Adrian would be the last one to spend individual time with her and she knew he wasn't happy about it. He was a sensitive wizard who needed to be reminded how much he meant to her.

"Yeah," Draco snorted. "Isn't it bad enough we have to tolerate the Siberian shape shifter over there?"

Sasha shook his head, but grinned a little proudly at the same time.

"I don't know why Gunner is here," Hermione explained rationally. She made a point to reach out and hold Adrian's hand as she spoke. "I'm sure he'll tell us when he comes in."

"I imagine all of your unattached former lovers will be here for Saturday," Luna reported simply. "Why wouldn't they?"

"Great," Draco muttered, throwing down his cards. Hermione was tempted to point out again that Draco and her other three wizards have significantly more conquests under their belts than she did. She held her tongue though, because they were all so worried about losing her on Saturday.

"You are a hard witch to visit, min kaere," the Dane laughed from the doorway. Hermione was glad that he retained his sense of humor, despite his temporary detention.

"If I knew you were coming, Gunner, I would've made arrangements for a less hostile welcome," she responded, getting up to greet the wizard.
Gunner hadn't changed much since she'd seen him last, which was over a year ago. He was quite dashing still, a favorite of the Danish tabloids and of single witches across Northern Europe. He wasn't quite as pretty as Adrian, but no one was. In fact, Gunner was not very tall and hardly muscular, but his pretty face and charming demeanor were incredibly attractive. He was the most charming wizard she'd ever met. Of course, charm often lacked real substance and depth. Gunner may not be a complicated wizard, but he was lovely company.

"Just less hostile and not warm?" Gunner teased, taking her hand and raising it to his lips. Hermione laughed at his teasing. Gunner was an adamant flirt who had no limits. He could make an old crone blush. Even wizards tended to give him a pass because of his winning ways.

Hermione did notice four particular wizards that did not seem charmed by Gunner in the least. All four of them rose from their seats and began advancing toward Hermione.

"I think I see the hostility now, min kaere," Gunner remarked upon seeing the wizards, although he was still smiling.

"This isn’t hostile. I can show you hostile of you want it," Marcus said casually, but his glare was sharp and contrasted his tone. Hermione gave the large wizard a glare of her own, not that it did much good.

"I surrender," Gunner laughed, holding up both hands.

"Gunner, let me introduce you," Hermione said. "You've met Harry Potter."

"Yes, he called off the Aurors," Gunner said, giving Harry a little bow of thanks. "Although I'm beginning to think I was better off with them."

"Over there is Harry's wife, Pansy Potter, and Susan Bones," Hermione continued. "That's Luna Lovegood and you may remember Selma. This is Neville and Alexisandr. Immediately behind me are my four chosen Ancillary candidates. This is Adrian Pucey, Draco Malfoy, Marcus Flint, and Theo Nott."

"Ah," Gunner said, nodding knowingly. "Now I understand the hostility. Your wizards fear I will spirit you away from them."

Draco snorted behind Hermione. His ego was too... robust to contemplate anyone stealing a witch away from him.

"Well, fear not, gentlemen," Gunner exclaimed a bit theatrically. Hermione knew he was trying to diffuse the situation. "I came by to say hello. This estate used to belong to my uncle and I spent many lovely summers here. It has been neglected for so long, I'm surprised you were able to actually move in."

"Susan is handling design and renovation," Hermione explained. "She's very talented. Also, my wizards here made sure I had a space that I could be comfortable in and call home. It was a wonderful gift."

"You have very attentive, caring wizards," Gunner noted, clearly trying to get in their good graces.

"So you aren't here for the third ritual?" Theo asked skeptically.

"Of course, I must attend," Gunner said sounding apologetic, which Hermione didn't buy. "I've been ordered by my people and my country to present myself as a candidate. I have no illusions that I will be chosen."
“And why is that?” Adrian asked, with his eyes narrowed slightly.

“I’ve actually spent time with the lovely Miss Granger,” Gunner explained, laughing. “It would be folly to think that I am any kind of match for such a brilliant and singularly unique witch.”

“Oh, hush,” Hermione said, waving her hand. Gunner was always full of compliments and flattery. She tried very hard to suppress a yawn, but failed. “I’m so sorry, Gunner. You caught me right before I was going to take a nap. But you are free to stay and socialize if you have time.”

“I understand entirely,” Gunner said. “After all, I stopped by without any notice. I wanted to say hello. I know you’re busy.”

“Send me an owl and we can find time to catch up,” Hermione said, stepping to Gunner to give him a hug. She ignored the sounds of growling coming from the wizards behind her. The hug was short and appropriate for a pair of friends, but all four of her wizards were frowning when she turned back around. They really were feeling insecure leading up to the ritual. Hermione wondered if there was anything she could even do to make them feel better.

“Marcus, thank you again for last night,” Hermione said, reaching up to kiss him on the lips. Marcus’ chest rumbled, which sounded a bit like a purr. Hermione moved over to Draco. “I’m looking forward to tonight.”

“Me too, Granger,” Draco said, giving her a positively naughty leer. Hermione rolled her eyes and moved on to Theo.

“Thank you for all your help with the research, Theo,” she said, stepping into his arms and pressing her cheek to his chest.

“I’ll always be there for you, Mi,” Theo said, kissing the top of her head. Then he leaned down to whisper in her ear. “I have a feeling that you are going to be a very naughty girl tonight with Draco. He’s a very bad influence on you. Tomorrow night, you will tell me what you’ve done and I’ll decide the consequences.”

Hermione’s cheeks flamed pink and she nodded, looking down. She was excited to spend time with each of her wizards, but now she had a particular fantasy about her night with Theo to look forward to. His dominance was so exciting. Only Adrian was left and waiting until Friday night to spend time with him seemed so far away.

“Can you come tuck me in, Adrian?” she asked, reaching out her hand. Adrian’s beautiful face broke out into a beaming smile and he rushed to take her hand.

Hermione waved her goodbyes to the rest of her friends and followed Adrian out of the room. He seemed eager to take her upstairs.

In her room, Hermione kicked off her shoes and tossed her sweater onto a chair.

"Do you have time to stay with me for a while?"

"I always have time for you, kitten," Adrian replied earnestly. He also took off his shoes and shrugged off the tailored, lightweight robe he wore.

They crawled into bed and Adrian opened his arms to her. Hermione snuggled against his chest, letting out a contented sigh.

"I missed you, kitten."
"Friday seems like too far away," Hermione explained looking up at the beautiful wizard.

Adrian leaned down and kissed her on the lips. Being with him was so tender and emotional. Hermione arched into him and groaned. He was so lovely. Sometimes she couldn't believe he wanted to be hers.

"None of that now, kitten," Adrian scolded. Despite his words, his eyes were half-lidded and his voice was rough with lust. "You really do need to rest. I imagine Marcus tired you out and I bet Draco has a very long night planned."

Hermione pouted slightly, even though he was right.

"Don't worry, kitten," Adrian assured her as they nestled into bed. "You and I are going to have a wonderful night together."

"Mmmm," Hermione hummed her agreement. She was sure being with Adrian would be amazing.

Hermione fell asleep listening to his heart beat and breathing in the strangely delicate but masculine scent that was Adrian.

OoOoO

Bronwyn sighed into her empty glass of wine and signaled the bartender for another, despite the fact that it was still fairly early in the afternoon. She was so irritated. The bitch pulled through and everyone was celebrating. As far as she was concerned, there was nothing to celebrate. To top it off, she was supposed to be out fetching supplies for the last ritual. She hated that she had to run errands like a common House-elf.

Bronwyn wasn't getting anything she wanted and it was entirely unfair. The Potentiate wasn't male, so she wasn't going to be an Ancillary. The Potentiate was hardly even a Potentiate anymore. Miss Perfect had all the elemental power and was extremely strong. Nothing could touch her now. Bronwyn scowled into her new glass of wine.

Bronwyn hadn't been researching Sorcery all these years for nothing. Those dreams of capitalizing on the power of a Sorcerer were certainly thwarted. Therefore, she felt that she should at least have snagged herself a rich, influential wizard for all her troubles. That scary Narcissa Malfoy had effectively warned Bronwyn away from the delicious Lucius. A few subtle questions to coworkers told Bronwyn everything she needed to know. The Black family witches were notoriously dangerous and powerful, so powerful that many of them descended into madness because their magic became too difficult to manage. As long as Narcissa was around, Lucius was off limits.

That left Marcus Flint. He was really the one Bronwyn wanted. She'd wanted him for years. If she was getting nothing else, she was at least determined to have Flint! Bronwyn slammed her hand down on the bar, punctuating her fervent, slightly inebriated thoughts and attracting the attention of the other patrons in the bar.

Just as Bronwyn was dismissing her fellow early-afternoon drinkers, she spied a distinctive redhead down the bar. There were so many damn Weasleys, and it seemed they were divided when it came to Miss Perfect. If she recalled, the two Quidditch players in the family, both realized that Granger wasn't so great. If only Marcus Flint shared his fellow athletes' shrewd assessment. Bronwyn made eye contact and surveyed the Quidditch player across the bar. Athletic people were never too bright in her experience. It should be easy to manipulate the fiery, famously emotional redhead into helping her get what she wanted. Bronwyn got up to join her new friend and signaled the bartender for another round for them both. It shouldn't take too long or too many drinks to
figure out the angle she'd need to use to get the help she wanted. Bronwyn was firm. There was no way she would come away from Saturday empty handed.

Chapter End Notes

Next - Dramione
Hermione's nap was perfect. She slept soundly, wrapped up in Adrian's arms. He lounged on her bed while she took a very quick shower. Then Adrian followed her into the dressing room to pick out a dress.

Hermione stood and critically surveyed her clothes.

"I assume Draco's going to take me somewhere very posh," Hermione said, mentally excluding most of her dresses. Much of what she wore was casual for daytime and work.

"Of course he will," Adrian confirmed, chuckling. He steered Hermione to a seat and began going through her dresses, quickly bypassing most things, as Hermione had done in her mind. "Draco will take you to places that are posh, exclusive and very on trend. This dress will be perfect."

Hermione furrowed her brow. Adrian had pulled out a dress she'd purchased recently with Blaise and his mother. It was a fuchsia dress with a deep v-neck. It was made of a series of tight bands, so tight it looked painted. Just trying it on in the store made Hermione blush, but it was so flattering, and Blaise and his mother had been insistent.

"Don't you think it's too... tight?" Hermione ventured. "I don't think I can even wear knickers in that dress."

"All the better," Adrian said with a wink. "Just try it on. You did buy it, probably because you look both classy and devastatingly sexy in it. There's no sense in hiding that."

Hermione took the dress. He did have a point. She discarded her robe and slipped the dress on, under Adrian's appreciative gaze.

"You are right about the knickers," he agreed, running his hands up and down the clingy fabric. "You can't wear anything under this at all. Draco will love it."

Adrian leaned down and caught her lips in a hard kiss. Hermione leaned into him, forgetting about everything except Adrian. When he finally pulled away, Hermione was breathing heavily.

"I love it, too," Adrian said, his voice thick and raspy. He took a step back and several deep breaths. A teasing glint came to Adrian's eye. "Draco will be here for you in ten minutes, which isn't near enough time for me to ravish you."

"Not nearly enough time," Hermione agreed, laughing. "When I get you to myself, I'm going to take my time."

Hermione chose a pair of strappy silver heels and sat to put them on. Adrian took the shoes and knelt in front of her. After he gently slid on her shoes, he slowly ran his hands up her ankles, to her
calves, and her thighs; all the while never breaking eye contact.

“Such smooth skin,” Adrian purred. He nudged her knees apart and caressed the sensitive skin on her inner thighs. Hermione’s breath caught in her throat. His fingers danced up her thighs to her center and ghosted over her slit ever so lightly. “And so wet.”

Hermione moaned and opened her legs wider.

“What happened to not having enough time for this?” she asked, a bit breathlessly.

“Our dinner reservations aren’t for another ten minutes,” Draco said from the doorway. “So there is a little time.”

Hermione looked over at her date for the evening, Adrian’s fingers still tracing her damp folds. Draco looked wonderful in his silvery grey robes. He looked stylish and effortless, which Hermione assumed cost loads of Galleons.

"I was just warming her up for you," Adrian said to his friend, smiling. He quickly kissed her inner thigh and breathed in her scent, then removed his hand from between her legs and helped her up.

Draco closed the distance between them and took Adrian by the wrist. He lifted the other wizard's elegant fingers and sucked them into his mouth.

Hermione held back a whimper and felt herself grow even wetter than she had been. It really wasn't fair for them to tease her like this. Draco pushed her boundaries and made her behave rashly. To get her excited even before the date began seemed unfair.

"Mmmm," Draco hummed, releasing Adrian's fingers, "tastes delicious."

"Don't we have somewhere to go?" Hermione interjected.

"Don't be so impatient, Granger," Draco teased. "I brought you a present."

"A present?" Hermione wondered what he'd done and was a little excited. Like most witches, she was flattered when a wizard she fancied brought her a gift.

"I'll leave you to your love tokens," Adrian said, winking at Draco. He pressed a kiss into Hermione's temple and left the dressing room.

"You look gorgeous," Draco said, blatantly leering. "That dress is..."

"Tight," she supplied.

"Sexy and a little glamorous," Draco corrected, pulling a jewelry box from a pocket of his robes. "This is to add a little more glamour."

Hermione opened the royal blue velvet box and found a pair of sparkling earrings. They were long and clearly made of diamonds.

"Now, none of that 'it's too much and I don't need presents' business, Granger. I know it’s on the tip of your tantalizing little tongue," Draco began to admonish.

"I wasn't going to," Hermione defended. She wanted her wizards to be themselves and do what felt natural. That way her magic could appreciate them for who they were. These bright earrings throwing of flashes of light were beautiful and drew attention without being entirely ostentatious - just like Draco.
Hermione removed them from the box with Draco's help and put them on.

"I love them," Hermione smiled at the platinum blond genuinely. "Thank you so much."

She could've sworn that she saw Draco's porcelain skin pink with a slight blush.

"It's my pleasure," he replied; his leering back in full force and accompanied by his trademark Malfoy haughtiness. "My witch should be dripping with jewels."

Hermione smiled and rolled her eyes. The couple left the dressing room and went downstairs. Hermione wanted to say goodbye to her other wizards. Adrian had joined Marcus and Theo in the sitting room. All three seemed to be waiting for her as well.

Marcus gave out a low whistle when she walked in the room in Draco's arm.

"That's some dress, princess," he commented appreciatively, his eyes roaming over her curves. "You will attract a lot of attention in that."

"You definitely are going to get into trouble in that dress," Theo remarked.

"I won't allow any unwanted attention and I'll keep her out of trouble," Draco said, looking slightly affronted.

"No, you will be the cause of the trouble," Theo chuckled. "You can barely keep your hands to yourself as it is."

"Adrian picked it out," Hermione reported, blushing slightly.

"Maybe Theo should punish me then," Adrian said, winking at the lanky, bookish wizard.

"I may just have to," Theo responded.

"Other than that, what will you three be up to tonight?" Hermione said, laughing.

"Not much," Adrian shrugged. "We were talking about going into Muggle London to the cinema."

"Theo said there was a film showing where blokes run around and blow things up," Marcus added.

"There's always a film like that playing somewhere," Hermione said shaking her head. "You three enjoy yourselves."

Hermione kissed them each goodbye, starting with Marcus since he was closest to her. He was as raw and all encompassing as usual. Adrian's sweet, lingering kiss was next, followed by Theo.

"If you do punish Adrian tonight, tell me the highlights tomorrow," Hermione told the dominant wizard.

"Remember that you will have to account to me tomorrow night for any naughty behavior tonight," Theo said sternly, though his wink was playful. Hermione was so glad Theo liked to play the same kinds of games she did.

Hermione nodded and kissed Theo goodbye. She and Draco went to the front hall Floo and Draco called out their destination.

Managing not to stumble too badly with Draco's help, Hermione found herself in a very posh and exclusive looking restaurant. It was richly decorated in warm, polished wood and jewel tones. The
place looked entirely unfamiliar and Hermione asked Draco if it was a new restaurant that had opened in her absence.

"It's a dining club," Draco explained. "They don't advertise and it's for members only. The food is magnificent."

"And you're a member," she concluded.

"Of course," Draco said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. Hermione chuckled and walked with him away from the Floo towards the reception area. A very sleek and tailored middle-aged wizard bowed deferentially to them.

"Mr. Malfoy, Sorceress, it's an honor," the host said. "May I show you to your table?"

Draco nodded and they followed the wizard to a very centrally located table in the small dining room. There were only nine other tables in the room, all full. Hermione noted some fairly influential figures in the wizarding world seated around them, watching the couple sit. Conversation halted while they sat, but soon resumed.

“This place is beautiful,” Hermione observed. It was. The walls were a rich, royal blue silk. Chandeliers dripping with crystals cast soft lighting over the room. The table was draped with ivory raw silk, threads of gold running through it.

“You deserve it, Granger,” Draco said, winking at her.

“Good evening,” the waiter greeted them. He was nearly as sleek and tailored as the host had been, but he looked a little flustered approaching them. “Tonight we have five planned options, but the chef is prepared to make anything you would like.”

“I’m sure whatever is on offer is fine,” Hermione smiled. The waiter nodded and stood up a bit straighter.

“Tonight the chef has beef ribs with lingon berries, roasted quail with pickled quail eggs, sheep’s milk ricotta tortellini with black truffles, poached salmon with golden trout roe, and a slow-roasted duck breast with sansho,” the waiter recited. “The chef has paired starters with each dish as well as suggested wine options.”

"I think I'll have the quail," Hermione told the waiter.

"I'll have the salmon," Draco reported.

The waiter praised their choices and was off to put in the orders. He was back almost immediately with wine and a small plate of grilled octopus.

Dinner was wonderful. The food was extraordinary. Not only did it taste exquisite, but the presentation was dramatic and sophisticated, just like Draco. They talked about so many things, but tried to focus on the future. Draco was excited for his sibling and talked about the directions he wanted to go with his work. Hermione talked about the work she wanted to do as well, half expecting Draco to protest that she didn't need to work any longer because she was the Sorceress and had plenty of rich wizards, ready to support her. To his credit, Draco understood how important it was to her that she be challenged and retain her independence.

"I can see why you're a member of this club," Hermione told Draco as she finished an haute cuisine version of bananas foster. "The food is artistic and delicious."
"I do like having the best," Draco said, winking in response. Hermione had the impression he was talking about her and was torn between blushing and rolling her eyes, so she did both. "I picked an exclusive, private place for dinner and it occurred to me that I deprived you of the opportunity to show me off. Now that we've finished, let's go out where you can flaunt me."

Hermione laughed aloud while Draco helped her up from her seat. On their way out of the restaurant, the chef stopped them briefly to offer Hermione her own free membership to the dining club. She was welcome back anytime. Hermione thanked him and decided she would probably never get used to her increased celebrity.

"Let's walk a bit," Draco suggested, leading Hermione outside. Looking back, Hermione noted that the club was in a nondescript warehouse-like building with no indication whatsoever as to what was inside. She guessed they really wanted to keep that dining club obscure.

"Are we walking somewhere particular?" she asked idly. Hermione didn't mind walking. It was a beautiful spring night; her towering heels were charmed to be as comfortable as her old trainers.

"There's a club nearby," Draco said casually, entwining their fingers together as they strolled. "Do you like to dance, Granger?"

"I do," Hermione replied, smiling. "Shall I guess that dancing is one of your many hidden talents?"

"I don't have any hidden talents," Draco scolded, although he couldn't keep the grin off his face. "All my many talents are up front for all to see. Why would I hide my brilliance?"

"Modesty thy name is Malfoy," Hermione laughed.

"I never understood the concept," Draco replied honestly.

"It's probably for the best," Hermione nodded. "I don't think modesty would look good on you. It wouldn't be natural."

Draco laughed and led her around a corner. Hermione saw a long queue of young people and a well lit club entrance in the distance. Hermione paused at the end of the queue, but Draco wrapped his arm around her waist and kept walking.

"As if I would stand out here waiting," Draco scoffed, sauntering leisurely past the waiting witches and wizards.

Of course Draco Malfoy didn't queue up, Hermione thought. She sent some apologetic looks to the people waiting, but they didn't look irritated at getting passed. Instead, they looked a bit awed, pointing and nudging their friends as the couple passed. Hermione would've been irritated that some people get preferential treatment and made that observation to Draco, who laughed aloud in response.

"People come to a club like this to see and be seen," Draco explained, as if it were the most obvious thing. "They're going to let us in without waiting and with no charge because it's good business for the club. People will come here because we came here. You're a trend setter now, Granger, you better get used to it."

"Well, I only went to clubs to dance and socialize, not to see and be seen as you say," Hermione said, pouting slightly. She had no interest in becoming a trendsetter.

"We are going to dance and socialize," Draco grinned. "But you also get to show me off and make all the other witches jealous."
"And some wizards too," Hermione said, her grin matching his.

They'd made their way up to the front of the queue and Hermione saw flashes go off as photos were taken. A large wizard guarded the door, appearing to take his job very seriously. He wasn't as big as Marcus, but he was pretty intimidating. The big wizard's cool detached demeanor faltered when he saw Draco and her. The doorman just stared while more pictures were taken.

"Hello," Hermione finally said, smiling. The wizard opened his mouth, but nothing came out. She looked at Draco, who just looked amused and ran his hand up and down her back.

"We'd like to go in please," Hermione continued, "if there's room of course."

"Of course, Sorceress," the wizard finally stammered, bowing low at the waist. "We are honored by your presence, Sorceress."

He doorman managed to open the door for them while still bowing.

"Thank you." Hermione smiled at the flustered wizard as the pair went inside.

The inside of the club was similar to other places Hermione had been. Dim lighting illuminated a long bar, tables and booths scattered around, and a dance floor that was already pulsating with bodies. This club had a second balcony level all around the perimeter that looked down onto the dance floor and was accessed by four staircases in each corner of the club.

Hermione only had several moments to take it all in when a slick looking wizard eagerly approached them. He was hard to hear over the music, but Draco seemed to understand what the wizard was saying and guided Hermione to follow him. They ascended one of the staircases up to a large room on the balcony level. There was no one in the room, but there were comfortable looking white couches. It was still dim and little sparkling lights danced along the walls in time with the beat of the music. It wasn't as loud in there though and Hermione could hear the wizard that brought them there. He was the manager and this was one of their VIP rooms. He was fawning and solicitous, which Draco didn't seem to mind. She was pretty sure this wizard would've tried to accommodate any request they could possibly make. A witch dressed in a tiny black dress was introduced as their dedicated waitress and she quickly left to get them drinks. Draco dismissed the manager and pulled Hermione down on one of the couches.

"Aren't we going to dance?" she asked as Draco nuzzled her neck.

"Of course," Draco murmured before he started dropping kisses in a line from her earlobe to her collarbone. "But first I need to touch you. I had to sit and look at you all through dinner without putting you in my lap and feeding you, which I think showed magnificent restraint."

"Dancing is full of touching," Hermione groaned. She pressed herself against him, her actions completely at odds with what she was saying.

They were there to dance and she really wanted to dance with Draco. Just sitting with him lit a fire in her and she knew that dancing together, rubbing against each other would be combustible but she couldn't help it. It was so easy to lose control and all sense of propriety with Draco. He continued to kiss and nip her neck and shoulder while one of his hands grasped her arse. Hermione ran her hand up his thigh and caught herself before she palmed the growing bulge in his trousers. They were in public!

OoOoO

"I thought I saw you two come in," a familiar voice called, jolting Hermione. She pulled away
from Draco slightly, but couldn't get far due to the blond wizard's grip.

"Go away, Blaise," Draco ordered imperiously, purposefully using his most haughty Malfoy voice. Hermione twisted to see the dapper Italian wizard leaning against the door frame. Draco used the term 'door' loosely, as three of four of the walls were entirely clear and possibly inappropriate for private activities. That didn't stop Draco's hand from creeping up his witch's thigh. He'd been itching to touch and taste her since he walked into her dressing room earlier that night.

The sight of beautiful Ades on his knees in front of their delicious witch had affected him instantly. For a moment, Draco had been tempted to toss aside his plans for the evening and propose that the three of them stay in and try to determine how many orgasms the human body could endure before it gave out. Draco quickly disregarded his impulse. This was his alone time with his witch and there's no way he would give it up, not with their future as uncertain as it was. Draco pushed aside his worries about the upcoming ritual and resolved to live in the moment. Draco was very good at enjoying life in the moment.

"It would be rude of us if we didn't come by to say hello," Blaise responded, apparently ignoring Draco's tone and actions. Hermione on the other hand, she took his roving hands in her own and effectively stilled his illicit attempts. "Besides, this space is much too big for just two people."

Draco sighed and turned to really look at Blaise. The intrusive Italian seemed perfectly at ease inviting himself into their VIP room while others loitered on the other side of the doorway. Draco spied the Russian shifter and a few scantily clad witches.

"You did say I would get to show you off," Hermione said, laughing.

"Fine," Draco huffed, rolling his eyes and motioning for Blaise and his group to sit. He wasn't really bothered because he did want to show off his witch. The dress she wore managed to be classy while leaving very little to the imagination. Also, she was sparkling with diamonds that he gave her. Draco wanted everyone to see that this magnificent creature chose to spend her evening with him.

Blaise and Sasha introduced the three witches they brought as the waitress brought the drinks he and Hermione had ordered. Draco didn't bother paying attention. He just mentally referred to the witches as Blond, Blonder, and Redhead. Hermione, sweet Gryffindor that she was, actually attempted to engage them. She would soon realize that Blaise's dates were short term entertainment. Draco swallowed half of his drink, absently listening to the others talk about the club, the music, and the other people. The nameless witches had managed to position themselves so they could see down into the main club, be seen by the masses, and still drape over Blaise and Sasha.

"Look!" Blonder squealed, bouncing excitedly in her seat. "I think that's Heathcote Barbary!"

“Oh sweet Merlin,” Draco muttered as Hermione craned her head to look over the balcony at the Weird Sister. How many of his witch’s former lovers was he expected to put up with in one day? He already had to socialize with the Russian and then there was the Dane; and now a rock star. Draco pouted, fully understanding that he was indeed being unreasonable but not caring. Sure, he had his share of partners in the past; actually, probably more than his share if he were being honest. It wasn’t that he considered these other wizards to be competition. Draco actually felt very secure in Hermione’s affections. He knew that she would never blow him off for another wizard just as certainly as he knew that he was the one taking her home that night. So let these other wizards come, Draco decided, puffing out his chest. Hermione chose him. He was hers.

“Be nice,” Hermione scolded quietly as the lanky musician approached. It seemed that as Draco
was working through his jealousy in his head, Barbary had made his way to their room.

“Hermione Granger! Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes?” the wizard exclaimed, sauntering into the room without reservations. Draco watched Hermione stand to greet the singer. He was tall and thin, but the pink mohawk he wore made him look even taller. He was dressed in dark pink leather pants and a black shirt, totally foregoing traditional wizard robes.

“Hello Heath,” Hermione said. She smiled and her greeting was friendly, but not effusive. She kissed him briefly on the cheek and Draco noticed a dark haired witch trailing after Barbary glaring at Hermione. “It’s been ages. How have you been?”

Draco stood and wrapped a possessive arm around his witch while Barbary responded in some boring fashion. Hermione introduced him to everyone in the room and Blaise’s witches could hardly contain their enthusiasm. Blond and Blonder squealed so much their speech was hardly decipherable. Draco focused on Barbary’s witch, who had been introduced simply as Gia. One jealous, psychotic witch had already harmed Hermione and Draco wasn’t taking any chances. Gia did shrink back a bit under Draco’s disapproving stare and stopped glaring at Hermione, focusing instead on showing Blond and Blonder that she had already staked a claim on the rock star.

Everyone chatted and drinks flowed into the room. The room began to fill up even more as acquaintances came to say hello. Hermione’s presence was a huge draw and Draco watched everything swirl around her. She laughed and talked, appearing to enjoy the attention for a little while. Draco stayed right by her side and was in constant physical contact with her. After about half an hour Hermione finished her drink. He didn’t want either of them to drink too much. He had more planned for the evening. So Draco suggested they dance and led her down to the floor.

Draco guided her through the throng of people moving with the music in the dim light of the club, finally finding space for the two of them. He always enjoyed going out dancing, but being there with Hermione was better than he imagined. She pressed herself up against him and his hands roamed over her body, holding her to him tightly. They moved together as one entity, the pulsing music directing them. Draco felt as though he was on fire, he was getting so overheated. During the next song, Hermione turned so that her back was pressed into his chest as they moved. Draco’s hands gripped her hips, pressing himself into her. He couldn’t get any harder, it was impossible. Hermione ground her arse into his raging erection and Draco couldn’t take the foreplay any longer.

Keeping her pressed tightly to him, Draco maneuvered them back the way they came. Instead of heading up the stairs back to the VIP room, Draco pushed Hermione into the darkened alcove just behind the stairwell. He pressed her roughly against the wall and their lips crashed together. Their kisses were a chaotic clash on lips, teeth, and tongues. Hermione nipped at his lips and Draco tasted as much of her as he could. Both of their hands were in constant motion. Draco squeezed her arse with one hand and slipped the other inside the deeply cut neckline of her dress, her skin damp with sweat from the dancing and the heat of all the other bodies in the club. Hermione pulled him against her, her hands roaming over his back and then up under his shirt.

Draco gasped when he felt her palming his cock through his trousers.

“You’re playing with fire, Granger,” he growled into her ear, taking her earlobe into his mouth and sucking on it.

“You make me crazy, Draco,” she groaned. “I want you so badly.”

Draco pushed her up against the wall a little higher and pulled one of her legs around his waist. In that position he could move his hand from her arse up her leg. When he reached her bare center she was dripping wet. Draco rubbed and explored her, making Hermione gasp and grip his shoulder.
“This is the second time you’ve neglected your knickers when we’ve gone out,” Draco scolded. He pushed two fingers inside her soaked channel and she moaned. “I’m going to make you come so hard, Granger, right here in this club.”

Hermione whimpered and her grip on his shaft tightened. The feel of her hot little hand on his cock was almost more than he could bear. Draco set a rhythm with his fingers, sliding in and out of her. He angled his thumb to brush over her clit and Hermione wailed, loud enough to hear over the music. Draco surreptitiously glanced around and saw that they were safely ensconced in their dark corner. He belatedly muttered a Notice Me Not spell and focused back on his witch.

“Oh gods, Draco,” she panted. Her hand clutched at his shoulder, digging into his flesh. “That feels so good.”

“That’s it, Granger,” Draco managed to bite out. Hermione was moving her other hand, the one down his trousers, at a similar pace to the one he had set between her legs and it was driving him mad. He didn’t want to come just yet though so he focused on his witch. Her breath was coming in gasps and she was rocking her hips into him as much as she could given the position. “Come for me. Come for me right here.”

Hermione threw back her head and Draco captured her scream in a frantic kiss. Her body shook as she came, her slick warmth tightening down on his fingers. Draco couldn’t wait to be inside her. The thought of sliding his cock into her sweet pussy, combined with her hand stroking him was more than he could take. Draco came inside his trousers, hard, his mouth still locked with hers in a kiss.

“Fuck, Granger,” Draco finally uttered, breaking away from her luscious, swollen lips.

“Can we?” Hermione asked her voice a bit breathless. She managed to push herself into him even more.

“Yes, that’s what I was saying,” Draco grinned. “We need to fuck, Granger, but not here. Let’s go.”

Draco set her down on the floor, stepping back from her slightly. The distance felt enormous. Hermione silently and quickly spelled them both clean while they straightened their clothes. Draco took her hand and began leading them toward the door.

“Should we say goodbye to the others?” Hermione asked.

“Probably,” Draco shrugged. “But I want to be inside you more than I want to talk to any of those people.”

Hermione shook her head but laughed. Draco knew she was just as eager to leave and wasn’t interested in any more delays than he was. The satisfaction they just achieved moments ago just made him eager for more.

When they got near the door, Draco paused and looked back up at their VIP room on the second floor. The party was still in full swing in their room and Draco doubted they’d really be missed. Nonetheless, he sighed and pulled out his wand. Draco cast a quick Patronus and sent it to Blaise, informing him that he and Hermione were leaving for the night and reminding him to be safe. Hermione smiled at his actions and gave him a sweet, lingering kiss on the lips. Draco knew he was grinning like a love-struck fool. He knew he couldn’t begin to get enough of her, but that wasn’t going to stop him from trying. He led her outside the door and Apparated her away as he
leaned down to kiss her.

OoOoO

Hermione felt the tug of Apparition as Draco’s lips captured her own. She saw that they had traveled somewhere she had never been before. Hermione looked around. It was a sleek, modern looking living room that was tastefully decorated. She spied an equally elegant bedroom through an open set of double doors.

“I got us a hotel room tonight,” Draco said quietly. He led her over to a large window and Hermione saw an amazing view London, the city lights blazing in the night. “I hope you don’t mind. I wanted to have you all to myself. There can be issues with privacy at your house or at the Manor.”

“I don’t mind at all,” Hermione replied, turning to face him, her back pressed against the cool glass of the window pane. She wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him to her. She wanted more of him. Hermione had come to terms with the fact that Draco made her lose all sense of propriety, but she still blushed a little thinking about what they’d done at the club. It was so exciting, being so close to all those people. They could’ve been caught at any point. Hermione had never done anything like that before. But then, she couldn’t imagine anyone else inspiring that sort of behavior besides Draco. If Draco hadn’t led them out of there, Hermione was not entirely sure what she would’ve done. She imagined that she may have begged him to take her right there up against the wall.

Draco pressed his hips into hers and lowered his forehead down to touch hers. His breath was just slightly ragged and Hermione felt that his arousal had returned. Draco didn’t move, however. He closed his eyes and held her tightly around the waist. Hermione got the sense he was hesitant for some reason, which didn’t really make sense to her after all they had already done.

“Is something wrong, Draco?” she asked gently. She ran her hands over his shoulders and down his arms.

“No…no, of course not,” Draco tried to scoff, but his tone was somewhat lacking. Hermione tipped his face upward so she could look at him. There was the slightest flicker of self-doubt in Draco’s eyes, which seemed so very out of place for the usually overly confident wizard. “What could be wrong? I have my witch all to myself.”

Hermione just kept looking into his eyes, eyebrows raised expectantly. They had gone through too much together, had too long of a history to not be honest with each other. They were intimately acquainted with each others’ past faults, so there really was no point in being shy now.

“I just don’t know what to do,” Draco finally responded, his voice a whisper. Hermione knit her brows together. Did Draco have doubts about her? Maybe all that had happened in this short period of time was too much, too dramatic for him. After all the darkness of their youth, Draco embraced a fun, spontaneous lifestyle and the last several days had not been fun for him at all. Hermione’s breath hitched in her chest and tears began to swell in her eyes. She dropped her gaze, unable to look at him.

“I’ve never been in love,” Draco continued. His voice had a pleading edge, as if he were worried how she would respond. Hermione’s eyes snapped back up to his. A declaration of love was not what she had been expecting and her chest felt like it would burst. “I mean, I’ve had plenty of sex but it has always been just about the sex. I’ve been with people I cared about and people I liked very much, but…but, never love.”
Hermione cupped his face in her hands and pulled his lips to hers, pressing herself as close to him as possible. In that moment it wasn’t about the fire and the friction that usually dominated their encounters, it was about warmth and comfort. Draco responded to her kisses with an equal intensity, clinging to her as if he was drowning and she was going to keep him afloat. Hermione promised herself that she would always do her best to take care of Draco. He was so confident and brave, but underneath that he was soft and vulnerable. Hermione didn’t imagine that it was a side many people often saw, but he loved her and trusted her with his whole self.

“I love you too, so very much,” Hermione said, pulling her mouth from his but keeping her face pressed to his. “I think love makes sex better. The sex becomes an expression of that love and there is no wrong way to express love. You just do what feels right.”

“So anything goes then?” Draco teased with a wide smile. That disturbing self-doubt was entirely gone from his eyes and he seemed to be returning to his playful self. Hermione giggled. Draco would never be one to wallow in his feelings for too long.

“I didn’t say anything,” she responded, mirroring his teasing tone. She pushed his robes down his shoulders and Draco let it drop to the floor, leaving him in his shirt and trousers.

“But Miss Know-It-All Granger said there is no wrong way to do it.” Draco grinned. He was very slowly sliding the skirt of her dress up her legs. Just as he was about to expose her naked bum, Hermione darted out from between his arms, laughing at his startled expression.

“You’ll have to catch me first,” she cried, taking off for the other side of the suite. She saw Draco quickly shake off his surprise and a devilish grin spread over his face. His eyes practically glowed with mischief.

Draco began stalking toward her. Hermione giggled again, she couldn’t help it. She also couldn’t suppress the shiver of excitement that went through her. Draco was coming for her. She was getting wetter and wetter in anticipation. It wouldn’t due to get caught too soon in the game though so Hermione forced herself to pay attention.

“You better watch out, Granger,” Draco mock growled. “I am going to get you, and when I do...”

Draco dashed for her and she twirled away from him. His finger tips just made contact with her waist, sliding over the smooth fabric of her dress. Hermione let out a girlish squeal and sprinted into the dining area of the large hotel suite. Draco was hot on her heels as Hermione kept putting dining chairs between them to slow his pursuit. They were both laughing as Draco knocked the chairs out of his way.

"The big bad Death Eater is coming for you, Granger," Draco teased, making Hermione laugh even harder. She loved that they’d settled their past so completely, leaving them free to play games

"Oh no," she giggled. "I'm just a poor, helpless little Muggle-born witch. "Whatever will you do to me?"

Hermione sent a gentle stinging hex to Draco's arse while she played the damsel in distress, making him yelp. She could never pretend to be entirely helpless. Hermione could not stop laughing and Draco took advantage of her distraction to catch her around the waist.

"That's it!" Hermione shrieked as he lifted her up on the dining room table, positioning himself between her legs. "I have you now, witch."
"Mmmm." Hermione smiled and hummed in satisfaction, running her hands up his warm, solid chest. She wrapped her legs tightly around Draco's slim waist. "You do have me. What's the big bad sexy Death Eater going to do to me now?"

"I think you know," Draco purred, leering openly at her. He leaned forward and caught her lips with his. His kisses were so passionate and intense, all consuming.

Hermione didn't want to wait anymore. She needed him inside her. He was already pressed up against her bare center, her dress pushed up to her hips. She could feel how hard he was for her, how ready. Hermione reached down and unfastened his trousers, never breaking their kiss. She pushed the fabric away and wrapped her hands around him. Draco had such a beautiful cock, so long and smooth. He groaned into her mouth as she stroked him.

"Let me in, Granger," he breathed.

Hermione guided him to her and Draco pushed inside. He hissed in pleasure as Hermione threw her head back. He felt so good inside of her.

"Gods yes, Draco." Hermione groaned, enraptured by the feel of him. He wasn't moving so she opened her eyes and watched his face. He was staring down at her so reverently, so lovingly, that it made Hermione's heart swell. She cupped his cheek in her hand and he pressed his face into her palm. The moment was filled with emotion and nothing needed to be said.

Draco's smirk came back full force after the tender moment. He ran his hands up and down her legs, which were still wrapped tightly around his waist. Draco smile was entirely wicked and a slight shiver went down her spine.

"I always knew you wanted my cock, Granger."

Draco slid out slowly as he talked and punctuated the word cock by slamming back into her. Hermione gasped. She leaned back from his slightly and gripped his shirt in her fists.

"You always knew that did you, Ferret?"

Draco slammed into her again, hard, and Hermione grunted. She wanted him hot, fast, and hard there in the table. She had been burning for Draco for what felt like ages. Draco smirked at her again and she pulled his shirt apart, buttons popping and scattering around the room. His bare torso glistened with a sheen of sweat, highlighting the muscles in his chest and abdomen.

Hermione stared at his abs as they tensed, his muscles clenching as he moved roughly in and out of her. It felt so good and she knew he wouldn't last too long. Hermione dragged her nails down his chest, leaving harsh red lines down his alabaster skin.

"Fuck, Granger," Draco hissed. Clearly he enjoyed the sting of her scratches. His thrusting became a bit wilder, which Hermione loved.

"Yes," Hermione groaned, lying back on the table. "Fuck me, Draco. Fuck me hard."

Draco gripped her thighs for leverage and pounded into her with abandon. Hermione was losing herself to the sensations, the feel of him, the sight of him panting and moving over her, and the sound of him. Draco was never a quiet wizard and that extended to sex. Hermione knew she was babbling encouraging words, but she would be hard pressed later to recall exactly what she'd said. She relished the beautiful, filthy things that Draco was saying.

"Fuck yes, Granger," Draco panted. "That's it, that's my witch. You have the sweetest mouth. I
can't wait to put my cock in it."

Hermione reached up and gripped the edge of the table to stabilize herself. She was so close to coming she felt that she was going to explode any second, which she told Draco.

"You should see what I see; that'll make you come," Draco moaned. "All I have to do is look down and I can watch my cock disappear into your gorgeous pussy. You’re so wet for me, Granger. My cock comes out dripping with you. Fuck, this is the most glorious thing I’ve ever seen in my life."

Hermione’s orgasm kept building and building as Draco talked, finally crashing over her. Her back arched and her thighs clenched around Draco. She barely recognized her own voice as a scream ripped through her, it sounded so primal and raw.

Within seconds, Draco let out his own roar as he came. He gripped her legs so tightly, Hermione was sure there would be some lovely finger shaped bruises on her thighs. He collapsed down on top of her, his head resting on her chest as they both struggled to catch their breath. Draco made no move to pull out and Hermione kept her legs wrapped tightly around him.

“That was fucking amazing,” Draco managed to say after several moments. “I think my cock loves your pussy almost as much as I love you. It’s so wet and tight. Now that I’ve been inside, I’m never fucking leaving.”

“Never?” Hermione laughed.

“No, never,” Draco confirmed. He turned his face to run his nose up her chest. “You’ll just have to figure out a way to go about your business with my cock in you. It can’t be helped.”

Hermione pulled his face up to hers and kissed him, savoring the unique flavor that was Draco.

“Want to try the bed next?” she asked, smiling. “Or were you planning on doing it in the lounge area?”

“Whatever and wherever the lady wants, as long as we’re shagging.” Draco returned her smile. “After all when two people are in love, there’s no wrong way to express it.”

Hermione couldn’t have agreed more.

Chapter End Notes

Next - Weasleys and the Burrow!
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer - Don't own Harry Potter
Now - Weasleys!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione felt lazy, slowly waking up. She moved to stretch, but found her movements hampered by the wizard wrapped around her from behind. She was firmly ensconced in Draco’s arms, his leg thrown over hers. She craned her neck slightly and was able to see the bedside clock. Hermione wasn’t surprised to see that it was already late morning. There was no way she got more than four hours of sleep last night. As with Marcus the night before, Draco had kept her up very late.

Hermione knew she was expected at the Burrow for lunch shortly, but she was not excited about the idea of extracting herself from her wizard's warm arms. Draco certainly wasn't going to wake up and roust her out. The past few weeks have proven that the indulged Malfoy heir was not a morning person.

Hermione snuggled down into Draco and let her thoughts drift back to last night. She replayed their activities at the club and blushed at her first foray into sex in a public place. That first time together on the dining room table was intense. Despite Hermione’s suggestion that they find the bed, they hadn’t made it there right away. Draco had insisted on trying to stay inside her as long as possible, so he picked her up and carried her; her legs wrapped around him and his trousers around his ankles. It wasn’t the smoothest operation and they ended up on the lounge floor, laughing. Since that was where they fell, that was where Hermione rode Draco. At least from her position on top of him, Draco finally managed to get her dress off. He’d commented that she should never wear anything more than heels and diamonds as he fondled her breasts. It turned out that Draco loved a pair of very high heels on a witch. Hermione had ridden him fast and furious, leaving rug burns on his arse. It seemed that there was always a sense of frantic urgency when shagging Draco.

After she came twice and Draco came once, Hermione refused to try to move again while still joined together. Her refusal led to a great deal of name-calling and another game of chase. Draco ended up tackling her into the suite’s large, opulent bed. They were finally entirely naked though and they wrestled for control, changing positions so often Hermione lost count. She also lost count of how many orgasms she’d had. It was fun, playful, and all around wonderful.

Remembering it all was making her excited though and Hermione didn’t have time to indulge herself. Even with Draco sleeping, she knew it wouldn’t take too much effort to rouse him and have him again. Hermione groaned at the thought of his length sliding inside her.

Hermione steeled her resolve and gave a slightly petulant sigh. She needed to Apparate home, shower, and change clothes before heading over to the Burrow. Draco protested her movement by tightening his grip.

"I have lunch with the Weasleys today," Hermione said softly. She managed to sit up but could not resist caressing his face, arms, and shoulders. Draco didn’t care for the Weasleys, so she certainly wasn’t planning on bringing him along. Besides, he clearly needed more sleep.
Draco gave a disapproving grunt and pouted, never opening his eyes. She smiled and shook her head at him, sliding out of the bed.

Hermione quickly found her clothes from last night and put them back on, thankful that she could Apparate directly to her bedroom at home. Her dress did look a little worse for wear. After giving Draco’s sleeping form a kiss goodbye, she was back in her house.

Apparating was easier than it ever had been. It was as if she moved within air currents. She imagined her Apparition now was more like how Veela did it. Hermione thought about it a bit more as she took a quick shower. She was able to use her magic again, but it felt so different.

Standing in her dressing room, wrapped in a towel, Hermione thought about her plans for the day. She had a lunch date at the Burrow and was hoping to spend the early afternoon with the Weasleys. She had missed them. That evening though, she had her date with Theo. She wasn’t sure what they were doing, just that he would pick her up at six. He had told her that they would be going out, but that the setting wouldn’t be fancy. Hermione thought about the times Theo had picked out clothing for her in the past few weeks. He had provided her with very proper looking dresses, but then the underclothes were entirely scandalous.

Hermione pulled on sensible knickers with a practical bra; certain that she wouldn't be comfortable hanging around the Burrow in scandalous underclothes, even if they were properly covered. She put on jeans and a comfortable striped shirt, knowing she’d just have to change before her date with Theo. Slipping on a pair of red flats, Hermione thought how strange it was not to carry her wand anymore. She grabbed her large brown leather bag and put on the necklace her wizards had given her.

Hermione called Nipsy, who gave her an update on events at the house that morning. There were a few items in the post, but nothing that couldn't wait. Susan was almost done in her study and the library would likely be finished that night. Hermione fought the urge to go and see. Since it was so close to done, she decided to wait to see the finished product when Susan deemed it ready. Nipsy assured her that they were on schedule to do two of the guest rooms and start on the guest bath that afternoon and the next day as planned.

Hermione frowned slightly because she was reading the guest rooms for her Ancillaries. Susan would come and meet with them on Monday and get direction about their personal spaces. The guest rooms had to be ready for Saturday night though. If the worst happened and she was bound to a wizard or wizards that she didn't know, there was no way she was inviting them into her own room. Even the idea of having anyone else in there besides Adrian, Draco, Marcus, or Theo was repellant to her.

"Are you alright, Missy Sorceress?" Nipsy asked timidly. "Do you want the Missy Bones to be making other arrangements?"

Hermione realized she'd gone from a slight frown to an angry scowl, so she snapped herself back to the moment.

"No, Nipsy. Everything is going according to the plan. We're you able to find those other things I asked for?"

"Oh yes, Missy Sorceress," Nipsy replied enthusiastically. "I was finding all of them right in the box you said. I will bring them to you now. Kiki, Poppy, and Bobo have made your baskets ready too. They are in the kitchen waiting your approval."

"Great, I'll go down to the kitchen if you want to meet me there. Thank you so much. You're doing
The elf blushed and was gone. Hermione walked downstairs, taking in her new house as she went. It felt amazing to have a place to call home, a place that was really all hers.

There were four very large baskets on the kitchen counters, mainly filled with produce. After her magical discharge the past Friday night, Hermione’s land was excessively fertile. The orchards were heavy with fruit and the kitchen gardens were overrun with vegetables. Poppy and Bobo worked tirelessly to tame it with help from Frissy and Kiki.

When Hermione checked in with them the day before, rather than being annoyed at the extra work, the elves insisted that they were thrilled beyond anything they’d ever known. Hermione didn’t speak German, but Bobo was gazing at her in an adoring fashion when he hadn’t before. Apparently, too much growth wasn’t a problem for him and he was in his element. Poppy loved all the flowers and made it her goal to fill the house with as many fresh cut blooms as possible. Hermione had spied bouquets in her bathroom, dressing room, and bedroom. There was a large arrangement on the kitchen table.

Kiki enthusiastically began cooking, canning, and preserving. She made jams, jellies, chutneys, sauces, and pickled more things than Hermione could think to pickle. Kiki also began drying herbs and spices as well as preparing to make wine and cordials. All the work reminded Hermione that she should harvest potion ingredients sometime in the near future. Regardless, there didn’t seem to be an end in sight for the bounty they were experiencing. Hermione assumed that fall and winter would stop the influx of food, but she wasn’t entirely sure.

“This looks perfect, Kiki,” Hermione gushed. It really did look fabulous. Molly was going to be a bit overwhelmed, but Hermione had to do something with this stuff and she didn’t want to arrive at the Burrow empty handed. “I appreciate all you are doing to make use of our unusual harvest. I’m afraid that we still have too much for even you manage before it goes bad, especially the fruit. I knew the orchards were extensive, but I didn’t really have a concept for how much fruit they would yield.”

“If the ever so generous Missy Hermione wishes to give things away, Kiki can be sending extra to places and peoples that needs it,” Kiki volunteered.

Hermione listened as Kiki explained that the Ministry’s Displaced House-Elf unit provided housing for those in need, but that they relied on charity for food beyond the bare minimum. Frissy had spent a great deal of time in that housing and had told Kiki how sparse the resources were at times. Kiki also reported that Hogwarts often donated extra supplies to the orphanages and rehabilitation centers that opened up after the war. Hermione couldn’t stop praising Kiki for her ideas and the elf finally ducked inside a cupboard out of embarrassment. Hermione was just so proud of her and happy to be able to help others. Kiki came back out when Hermione promised not to say anything nice to her for the rest of the week.

Nipsy had arrived, struggling somewhat under the weight of the items she carried. Hermione
quickly relieved her of her burden and smiled at how thrilled Arthur would be with her gift. She shrunk Arthur’s present and the baskets, tucking them into her large bag, and was off to the Burrow.

The Burrow looked very much as it always had, which made Hermione smile. She had so many wonderful memories in that ramshackle looking house. It was a beautiful spring day and the sun was shining. Hermione just stood for a moment and enjoyed the moment. She let her magic reach out and play with the breeze, burrow into the warm ground, and dive into the little pond. Despite her last visit to the Burrow when she broke up with Ron, she still considered the home a happy place.

Hermione walked toward the odd structure and found that, upon closer inspection, it did look a bit different. The wood was painted a nice tan color, the windows seemed uniform, and all the windows had red shutters. Overall, the whole structure seemed overall more stable and secure.

Arthur answered her knock on the door and admonished her for knocking, assuring her that she could come right in as she always had. Hermione nodded her understanding and followed him inside.

“It is so good to see you well,” the Weasley patriarch enthused. Hermione remembered, or rather was told, that Arthur and Molly had come to see her while she slept.

“It’s good to be well,” Hermione agreed.

As with the outside, the inside of the house looked a bit more put together, not quite as cluttered. Hermione realized that she was used to the Burrow being full of people, but that no one lived there anymore besides Arthur and Molly. All of their children were grown and on their own. No wonder it was tidier.

“You’re here!” Molly swept Hermione up into a tight hug. “How do you feel?”

“Amazing,” Hermione assured the older witch. Molly was holding her at arm’s length, examining her critically. Hermione grinned. Molly would always be looking to care for and mother someone. “I feel amazing, really. I feel strong, energized, and healthy. I don’t need a wand any longer, which is taking some getting used to. Elemental magic in general is taking some getting used to. It feels right and good, just different.”

“Come and sit!” Molly steered her to the kitchen table. “Have some tea. Lunch will be ready soon. Charlie’s around here somewhere, so he should be down in a moment.”

“I’d love to see Charlie!” Hermione really enjoyed the dragon tamer’s company. “I brought you some things.”

Hermione pulled out her bag as she sat. She put the small baskets on the table and then enlarged them all.

“Hermione, this is too much!” Molly protested.

“I know, it’s a lot,” Hermione agreed. “Before the last ritual, I kept having uncontrolled magical discharges. The result was that the land around me became overly fertile. All the plants grew, matured, gave fruit or blossomed. I can control the magic now, but the land around my house is just bursting. I’m afraid that we have more than we can possibly use.”

“Well, if it’s extra, it was very nice of you to think of us.” Molly began unpacking the baskets, exclaiming over some of the items. She wasn’t used to fall produce in June, but it was all ripe and
ready to eat.

“I have something for you, Arthur,” Hermione told the wizard. She pulled the items out and enlarged them. “I brought you duplicates of every owner’s manual I have for all of my Muggle electronics.”

“Owner’s manuals?” Arthur looked excited as he began looking through the considerable stack Hermione gave him. No one else she knew would want or welcome such a gift and it made her laugh aloud a bit.

“There are instruction manuals here for my television, stereo, laptop computer, mobile phone, and iPod. I think there are some for my old Muggle microwave, toaster, and blender as well.”

“This is wonderful, Hermione,” Arthur beamed. “Thank you so much!”

“Feel free to still ask me any questions you have,” Hermione encouraged him.

“Now you’ve done it,” Charlie teased, bounding down the Burrow stairs. “Dad’s never going to give you a moment’s peace now.”

“Charlie! Percy hadn’t mentioned you were coming to visit.” Hermione got up and hugged the most rugged Weasley.

“How could I not, ‘Mione?” Charlie scolded. “Our little Hermione is becoming a big strong Sorceress and must be bound to some wizard! You know I had to come and help any way I could.”

“Thank you, Charlie,” Hermione smiled. “That means a lot to me.”

“You’re family,” Charlie said, shrugging, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. He gave her a wink before he turned to his mother. “Who else are we waiting on? I’m famished!”

“Percy and George will be here any minute,” Molly answered. “They have to wait for their lunch breaks. Bill and Fleur won’t be by until after lunch. I had promised to watch the children for the afternoon today and they both wanted to come by to see you, Hermione. Ginny is supposed to be here by now, but she had practice all morning. You know that can go long.”

Molly instructed Charlie to set the table for seven and admonished Hermione when she got up to help. Hermione managed to use Charlie’s earlier words against the Weasley matriarch. If she was indeed family, then she shouldn’t be sitting around like a guest when there was work to do. Arthur was already engrossed in the Muggle instruction manuals and Hermione wondered if she should’ve waited to give them to him until after lunch.

As was typical at the Burrow, everything seemed to happen at once in a form of controlled chaos. Percy and George both came through the Floo within a few minutes of each other. Then, almost at the same time, Ginny walked through the front door. Ginny had clearly come from Quidditch practice, still in her gear and looking a bit muddy. Hermione sat back and enjoyed the noisy activity.

Soon enough they were all seated and enjoying Molly’s home cooking. Hermione sat between Ginny and Charlie, with Percy and George across the table. Molly and Arthur took the ends. The conversation flowed constantly. Hermione directed it away from herself, asking Ginny about her practice that morning. Ginny seemed generally happy and very much her old self, as Hermione had known her years ago. She loved Quidditch and very much enjoyed both the challenges and fame of being a professional athlete. The two witches had never had very much in common except for the war and Ginny’s family. That seemed to be enough though.
After Hermione invited Charlie to talk about the changes at the dragon preserve and had George update all of them about his new products, several of the Weasleys pointed that she’d avoided talking about herself.

“I don’t mind,” Hermione assured them. “So much of my day is spent focused on me, my rituals, my magic…I just don’t want to neglect you all. Not everything has to be about me.”

“Which is true and it’s admirable that you keep that in mind,” Molly said soothingly. “We are very interested, though. I know it would set my mind at ease to know that you really are feeling better after that awful waiting period.”

“You’re right,” Hermione acknowledged. “Well, my experience after the last ritual was very different. Even though my body was unconscious, my mind was busy. I guess you could say that I was lost inside my own head. To me it felt like ages, not just three days. It was during that time that I was able to come to terms with my elemental magic. It really does feel different from my magic before. I can’t use my wand anymore, for example.”

“You don’t need a wand at all?” Arthur asked.

“I don’t. In fact, trying to use a wand is less effective.”

“So if everything works, why do you need this third ritual I’ve been reading about in the papers?” Charlie wondered.

“The elemental magic is in me, it’s part of me. But it’s very strong, too strong,” Hermione explained. “From what I’ve read, strong elemental magic can damage the person it’s attached to over time. The Ancillary is supposed to help shoulder the burden if you will. The magic can be spread out a bit that way. The Sorceress isn’t strained and the Ancillary can access the elemental magic to some extent. The magic isn’t bound to him, isn’t part of him as it is in me, but he would be bound to me. I imagine the magic travels through that bond. Without an Ancillary, the elemental magic would overwhelm me and take over. As time went on, I would become less and less myself.”

“So you get one Ancillary then? Or more? The papers are a bit confusing,” George admitted.

“In history, Sorcerers and Sorceresses have typically had one or two,” Percy offered. Hermione was grateful. He knew the subject of Ancillaries was a bit sensitive for her at the moment. “Research seems to show that the stronger the elemental magic, the more Ancillaries are needed to help ‘shoulder the burden’ as Hermione said.”

“Do you have your Ancillary candidates chosen?” Ginny asked.


“That’s quite the group of snakes,” chimed a voice from the doorway.

Everyone turned to see Ron and his girlfriend Ginger. Ginger was holding the most adorable little girl. Hermione couldn’t help but smile at the shy strawberry blond baby, who was pushing her face into her mother’s shoulder.

“I thought you had Quidditch practice all day,” Molly said, breaking a fairly long silence. “Are you hungry? I can get more plates, there’s plenty of food.”

“It always seems that you schedule lunches with my former fiancée when I have Quidditch practice,” Ron observed.
“Well, you do have practice a lot,” George retorted. “It isn’t about you, Ron. Sit if you want to sit, go if you want to go.”

“Maybe we should ask the Sorceress what she wants,” Ron pointed out, with just a little bit of a sneer when he said the word Sorceress.

“I don’t mind,” Hermione said honestly and simply, shrugging her shoulders.

Ron just looked at her critically, as if he didn’t believe her.

“Do you want to hash this out right now?” Hermione asked, meeting his narrowed gaze with her own steady gaze. When he didn’t respond, she went on. “That’s fine with me. I imagine they wanted to visit while you were busy in order to spare everyone the awkwardness that is happening right now. It’s probably better if we just have whatever words we need to have.”

Ron still didn’t reply, so Hermione decided to continue.

"I can start if you like," Hermione offered. Her feelings about Ron Weasley weren't a big deal to her anymore. It had been years. She'd moved on, as had he. Hermione really had better things to do than spend emotional and mental energy on Ron. "We used to be friends, good friends. We tried being something more, but it didn't work out. That's fine with me. In fact, it's more than fine. Did I wish you would've ended the relationship before you started...dating other witches? Of course I do. Regardless, I believe I made my displeasure known last time I was here. I'm perfectly willing to let it go, to put the past in the past where it belongs. I love your family and I like spending time with them. I've missed them. In order to make it more comfortable for others, it would be nice if we could get along. I think it would be nice if we could at least be civil acquaintances. Maybe someday we can be friends again."

Hermione watched Ron think for a moment. Various emotions had played out across his face as she was talking. Ron didn't do well with change. Eventually he just nodded and Hermione accepted that. He probably needed more time. Ron was never a quick thinker.

Ron, Ginger, and little Melody found space at the table and lunch resumed. There was only dessert left, but they ate it at the table to keep Ron and Ginger company. Melody was just delightful in her high chair, shoving fistfuls of food into her baby mouth.

"Getting back to what we were talking about, I just have one more question and then I'll drop it," Charlie spoke up. Hermione nodded. "Since you've chosen four Ancillary candidates, why is the Ministry urging every available wizard to go?"

"I've been told by the centaurs and Veela that I have to make a perfect match," Hermione explained with a bit of a sigh. "I know who I want, but my magic may pick someone it deems better suited. If it isn't an ideal match, the person won't support my magic as an Ancillary should."

"Got it," Charlie nodded soberly. "I'm sorry, 'Mione. No one should have their choices taken from them."

"Thanks." Hermione had tears swimming in her eyes. She worked so hard at accepting what she couldn't change, but she still hated losing her choice. Charlie wrapped an arm around her shoulders and Hermione leaned into him.

"And you couldn't have picked just one token Gryffindor for your harem?" George teased, breaking the sad silence.

Hermione couldn't suppress her laugh and wiped away her tears. She really loved George.
"I read that the Ancillary is meant to compliment the Sorceress," Ginger offered. When everyone looked to her, she wilted a bit at the attention. Hermione gave her a warm smile and Ginger rallied a bit. "So it makes sense that a Slytherin would balance out a Gryffindor."

"An excellent point," Arthur pointed out.

"Yes, they can be everything our Hermione is not." George grinned. "She is honest and forthcoming while they're sneaky and scheming."

Hermione rolled her eyes at his teasing and smiled. She knew George rather liked her wizards. Molly shook her head and she began clearing the table. Arthur got up to help her.

"She's sweet and they're scary," Percy added, smiling.

"Well, I'll be there in case you decide you want a Gryffindor, as well you should." Charlie smiled and puffed his chest out.

"Us as well," George said, putting his arm around Percy.

Hermione was touched by their support, as always. The guys began helping their parents while Ginger freed the baby from her highchair and took her into the lounge. Hermione and Ginny got up to follow her.

"This is the most adorable child I've ever seen," Hermione said, wondering if Ginger wanted to talk to her at all. "How old is she?"

"She is wonderful," Ginger responded. She looked both proud and love struck about her daughter, as well she should. "She's a year and a half now."

"I can't believe you lot are putting yourself up to bond to my fiancée!" Ron admonished his brothers. "You can't do that!"

If Ron was trying to keep his voice low, he wasn't trying very hard. Hermione could hear him clearly, which meant Ginger could as well. Hermione frowned and looked over at the quiet witch. Ginger saw her and looked down, blushing and setting the baby down on the floor. Ginny just rolled her eyes.

"It's none of your concern what your ex-fiancée does," George hissed. "When it comes to saving Hermione's life you better believe we'll do whatever we have to do."

"It wouldn't be a hardship to be bound to such an impressive, attractive witch," Charlie said lightly, clearly trying to diffuse the situation.

"I second that," George said, his tone of voice less hostile. Clearly, Charlie knew how to manage his brothers. Hermione shook her head. "Hermione's grown up quite nicely. Fred had such a crush on her that last year. He was obviously on to something."

"Just don't expect me to help you out when Marcus Flint rearranges your face for talking about his witch like that," Percy snorted. "All four of those wizards are possessive and protective. And none of them is someone I'd want to cross."

Percy's voice trailed off as he talked. The brothers obviously moved to another room. Ron snorted and said something in response, but Hermione couldn't hear it. It was probably just as well.

"That's quite a list of wizards you have for Ancillary candidates," Ginny finally said, breaking the
silence that had descended amongst the witches as they listened to the wizards.

"I never would've imagined myself with any of them when we were back in school," Hermione admitted. "But now I can't imagine being without them. I really hate the idea that someone else might be picked."

Hermione knew her tone in that last sentence was very emphatic, but she did hate the idea of losing any of her wizards. Ginny just watched her curiously and Ginger seemed sympathetic.

"I feel like I should mention that I have a history with Marcus," Ginny said. Hermione felt Ginny was studying her reaction. She just raised her brow and waited for Ginny to continue. "He is quite the insatiable wizard isn't he?"

Hermione smirked, feeling as if she were channeling Draco, and appraised Ginny. She knew the witch was implying something that never happened, not for lack of Ginny trying though. Nevertheless, what was the point? Why did she want Hermione to think she slept with Marcus? Ginny was always competitive, even when there was no competition. Maybe she wanted Hermione to think she got there first or wanted her to feel threatened. Ginger moved down to sit on the floor with the baby, but Hermione noticed that she watched the interplay closely.

"Yes, I know your history with Marcus," Hermione responded a bit coolly. "He's told me all about his past. If he slept with someone in the past that he knew I would meet or socialize with, he told me about any encounters he had with them. I don't begrudge anyone for finding Marcus attractive. What witch wouldn't? He was, and probably still is, very much pursued. Of course, he couldn't take up all the offers he got."

Hermione held Ginny's gaze for a moment before continuing.

"I don't judge him," Hermione said. She slid down on the floor with Ginger and the baby. With a wave of her hand, Hermione levitated the blocks in front of the baby. Little Melody looked mesmerized for a moment before she burst out into a little baby laugh and waved her arms around. Hermione couldn't help but smile. "I have past lovers. Marcus has past partners, probably more than most, but he's an adult, who engaged in consensual activity with other adults. I'm sure I'll run into witches he's been with, but I honestly don't mind. His past makes him the person he is today. And since I love who he is today, why would I complain?"

Ginger gave her a relieved smile. Hermione wanted to be clear that even though Ginger had been with Marcus during her groupie days, Hermione bore her no ill will. The past was in the past.

"Your other three besides Marcus are no angels either," Ginny snorted. She seemed irritated. Hermione didn't much care.

"Nope," Hermione said, grinning happily. "But then neither am I."

Ginny scoffed. Hermione guessed Ginny didn't think she was capable of bad things. Hermione knew she'd developed a reputation in school as a goody two shoes, but that was over simplified. People are complex.

"I'm a Sorceress now after all," Hermione went on, still playing with the baby. "I can create a hole in the earth to swallow you up, drown you, blow you away in a hurricane, or just set you on fire; all with the wave of my hand."

Hermione turned to look at Ginny and waited a moment, holding her gaze steadfastly.

"It would be so easy and take very little effort. Not that I would; unless of course you hurt someone
Ginny seemed to pale. Hermione turned back to the smiling mother and baby in the floor with her.

"So Ginger, what do you do?"

Hermione saw Ginny get up and leave out of the corner of her eye.

"Well, right now I just take care of Melody," Ginger murmured.

"That sounds like a big job to me."

"Before I was with Ron, I worked for a Quidditch supply firm. I designed clothing."

"That is so interesting! I've never been artistic at all," Hermione admitted. "What kind of clothes did you design?"

They bounced blocks up in the air for Melody while Ginger talked about making shirts and accessories for female fans. Her company made fan clothing for all the teams, which Ginger liked. Everything was so bright and colorful, and she had to find fun ways to incorporate the team logos. Hermione wasn't sure she agreed with Pansy's assertions that Ginger was 'dim.' She just seemed shy and very unsure of herself.

"That was nice what you said earlier about the past bringing us where we are today," Ginger said.

"I meant it," Hermione assured her. "It has certainly been true for me. I'm glad this isn't awkward between us. It's been nice getting to know you."

"It has," the other witch agreed. "The Weasleys talk about you all the time and now I understand why."

Hermione protested that she wasn't anything special.

"You are though," Ginger insisted. "You're a good person. Molly always talks about how kind you are. Arthur says that you're the bravest witch he ever met. George says you are incredibly smart. They've all missed you so much."

"Hearing all that praise would make me hate me if I were you!" Hermione laughed. Ginger chuckled along with her.

"Meeting you now, I understand. You seem nice...genuine. You aren't trying to get things from people. You aren't eager to be a powerful Sorceress. You're just trying to live your life. I admire that. For most of my life I've been searching for approval from other people. I don't know if Marcus told you much about me."

"A little," Hermione admitted. Ginger just nodded and squared her shoulders.

"When Melody was born I realized I never wanted her to be looking around for approval from others, doing just about anything for even a little bit of affection. I want her to approve of herself and I want that to be enough for her. I want her to be proud of herself and to love herself. I figured she'd look to me for an example. So I'm trying hard to learn how to love myself."

"That's wonderful, Ginger." Hermione reached over and squeezed her hand. "I wish you all the luck in the world on that journey."

"I wish you luck too. I can tell you are attached to your candidates, from the way you look when
you talk about them. I hope it works out."

As Hermione was thanking her, the Floo blazed to life and Bill's family spilled out. Hermione got up to say hello to all of them. They'd never been close, but Hermione was happy to see them all so well and happy. Bill and Fleur's four-year-old daughter, Victoire, and two-year-old son, Louis, were adorable. Louis toddled over to Melody and tried to grab the blocks Hermione had left floating in the air.

After visiting briefly, Bill and Fleur left. Percy and George had to get back to work. Ginny and Ron both had post-practice planning meetings with their respective teams. After dating Viktor, Hermione knew how much work athletes actually had to put in outside of games.

Arthur, Molly, Charlie, Ginger, and Hermione took the three children out into the garden to enjoy the pleasant spring weather. Hermione, Charlie, and Ginger played silly little games and entertained the children while the grandparents watched. They tired the children out easily. While Molly and Ginger settled them in for afternoon naps, Hermione relaxed with Arthur and Charlie. They stayed outside and soaked up the sun.

Soon enough, the wizards asked for a demonstration of Hermione's new power. She admitted that she hadn't fully tested herself since the power was only a few days old; so the three of them set out to experiment. They trooped into the vegetable garden where Hermione coaxed happy plants into growing right before their eyes. She showed them her little handheld fireballs and Charlie asked to see how large she could make them. The fireballs got incredibly big and Molly scolded them all when she came out of the house, so they quit playing with fire.

Hermione manipulated the water in the nearby pond, soaking Charlie with a wave as part of her demonstration. Ginger came out shortly after Molly, as all the children had finally fallen asleep. Ginger wondered if Hermione could pull water up to the surface from the groundwater deep under the dirt. With a little concentration, Hermione found she could. Of course, this resulted in Charlie getting wet again. Luckily for him, Hermione could banish water as well as summon it. They were all giddy when Hermione realized she could manipulate the air well enough to levitate. Charlie and Ginger grabbed brooms from the shed and challenged her to use her levitation to fly. It took a few false starts, but Hermione became fairly comfortable flying pretty high and fast. She did stumble twice, but the broom riders caught her. They all laughed when she told them how disappointed Harry would be that his recent gift of a new broom was now entirely unnecessary.

It was late afternoon when Hermione decided to leave, despite all the fun she was having. She wanted a quick nap before she had to get ready for her date with Theo. She said goodbye and hugged all the Weasleys, plus Ginger, and hoped she would see them all again soon.

Chapter End Notes

Next - Theo's turn for a date!
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer - Who owns Harry Potter? Not me!
Now - Theo! And a little bit of BDSM...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione Apparated just outside her house. She thought she would walk through the gardens for a few minutes before her nap. She had about three hours until Theo was to pick her up. Just as she set off, she heard someone appear behind her and turned to see Marcus.

"Hello, princess," Marcus greeted her happily.

"Marcus!"

Hermione was just as happy to see him. She used her new levitation control to float up just a bit so she should wrap her arms around his neck and kiss him. Marcus returned her kiss enthusiastically and crushed her against him.

"That flying is a neat trick," he observed when she broke the kiss.

"I practiced today at the Burrow." Hermione floated back down. "Ginger and Charlie Weasley flew on brooms to spot me. I only stumbled twice. I was about to take a turn in the garden. Would you like to join me?"

Marcus nodded and tucked her hand into his arm.

"How was the cinema last night?"

"Good! The film was about a group of men that were planning a theft. It was interesting. Theo explained a bit about Muggle special effects and tricks to make things seem real when they're not. I'm not entirely used to Muggle London. It's such a strange place. How was your date with Draco?"

"Lovely." Hermione smiled as flashes of the evening played through her mind.

"A photo of the two of you going into the club made the cover of the Daily Prophet. I don't think I could stand to go out with you if you wore a dress like that." Hermione looked at him curiously. "I wouldn't be able to wait until we were in private to have you."

"What makes you think Draco waited?" Hermione asked, arching an eyebrow.

Marcus laughed loudly, throwing his head back. Hermione asked about his day and Marcus talked a bit about his work. He worked all morning to arrange everything so he could be on leave the next day and all of the next week, at least. Marcus explained that all four wizards planned to arrange their business the same way.

"Either way, whether we are chosen as Ancillaries or not, we won't want to be doing anything as mundane as working for some time," Marcus said, shrugging. "Speaking for myself, if I'm chosen, I'll want to spend at least a week celebrating, preferably naked. And if I'm not chosen, in going to
spend the week so pissed that I won't be able to stand. I think the others have very similar plans."

"Let's not think about the alternative right now," Hermione suggested. "I would like a little rest so I'm not sleepy tonight with Theo. Do you have time to join me?"

"There's nowhere else I'd rather be, princess."

OoOoO

Theo Flooed over to Hermione's house at fifteen minutes to six o'clock. He was excited and really hoped she would enjoy what he had planned.

The large elf, Nobby, greeted him.

"Madam will be down shortly, Master Nott. Master Flint is in the sitting room if you would like to wait there."

"Thank you, Nobby." Theo nodded and walked down the hall.

In the sitting room, Marcus was standing at the sideboard pouring himself a drink.

"Make it two," Theo instructed. Marcus nodded and picked up a second glass.

"She'll be down soon," Marcus offered as he handed Theo his glass. "Apparently, I'm 'not helpful' when she's trying to dress."

Theo chuckled took his drink and leaned against the wall. He wasn't sure why he was so anxious.

"Were you nervous before your date on Tuesday?"

"Initially." Marcus swirled his glass. "It's a lot of pressure, mate. She wants her magic to get to know us so it will choose from us. I was worried that I wouldn't make a good impression. But there's no other choice. I realized the only thing I needed to do was be myself, be genuine, and be honest. Do what you feel is right, don't inhibit yourself. That way her magic will really get to see you, to know you, and that's the point."

"Right, you're right. I need to relax and enjoy being with her. I need to stay out of my head and stop over thinking. But if that's who I am, an over thinker, shouldn't I be just that?"

Marcus laughed and Theo rolled his eyes.

"What are you over thinking?" Hermione asked from the doorway.

Theo turned to look at his witch. All of his anxiety evaporated when she smiled at him. This was Hermione and she was his match. There was nothing to think about, no puzzle to solve; he already knew the answer and it was Hermione.

"Nothing," Theo replied, smiling. "Nothing at all."

"You look wonderful tonight, Theo," she said, walking up to him. He was wearing grey trousers, a white button down shirt, and a light blue sweater. Given what he planned that night, Theo opted not to wear wizard robes.

"You look lovely, Mi," he responded. Theo wondered if she had dressed with him in mind. She wore a full blue skirt that fell just below her knees. Her ivory colored shirt was tucked into her skirt and had sweet ruffles down the front. A light grey, silvery cardigan sweater covered her shoulders.
She also wore very high open-toed grey heels with a thin strap around the ankle.

Theo loved it when she looked prim and proper, but wore naughty under things; which of course made him wonder what she wore under this sweet outfit. The fact that Hermione enjoyed playing his games just proved that she was indeed the perfect witch for him.

Hermione smiled and walked over to join him, wrapping her arms around his waist and kissing him hello. Theo adored this witch more than anything. He broke the kiss before it became too heated. They had a schedule to keep. Theo was keenly aware that he was the only one of the four Ancillary candidates that hadn't taken Hermione out on a date. They'd spent a great deal of time together, buried in books, discussing, researching, problem solving. Theo loved that they were so intellectually compatible. He didn't feel neglected or short changed at all, because they'd spent most of their alone time in a library; they both loved libraries. Nevertheless, Theo was eager to spend time alone together.

"What are you lot up to tonight?" Theo asked Marcus, still holding Hermione close.

"Family time," Marcus responded. "My parents want me over for dinner and Draco will be with his parents as well. Ades and Blaise are taking their mothers out to some new restaurant. I'm sure they can make room for Ted if your father wants to join them."

Marcus was grinning wryly as he made that last statement and Theo snorted. His dad was never a social wizard, even when his mum was alive. Theo had seen his dad step out of his comfort zone more often in the last weeks than he could ever recall. His dad just adored Hermione; which wouldn't be obvious to everyone, but Theo could see it.

"Dad's working on one of the new wards about which he and Hermione spoke. He is pouring over some Arithmancy equations."

"Now that we know what everyone else is doing, what are we doing tonight?" Hermione asked, her voice teasing as she looked up at him.

"We are going to Muggle London for dinner and then over to the British Museum," Theo smiled.

"Really?" Hermione beamed. "I haven't been to the museum in ages! I used to go there all the time as a child."

"There’s a special exhibit there that I thought you’d like."

Marcus ambled slowly over to the embracing pair and kissed Hermione’s upturned face. Of course, his kiss was neither quick nor simple. Theo scoffed softly and rolled his eyes. Marcus didn’t commit to many things, just his parents, his close friends, and Quidditch; until their witch came along of course. The few things the large wizard did commit to, he did so entirely and with his whole being. Apparently hearing Theo’s scoff, Marcus leaned back from their witch but wrapped his arms around them both.

“Don’t be jealous, Theo,” Marcus scolded. Theo furrowed his brow. He wasn’t ever jealous of his friends’ relationship with Hermione and Marcus knew that. “I love you too.”

After realizing what Marcus was talking about, but before Theo could get away, Marcus planted a firm kiss on his lips. Theo knew the others had each been with wizards before to some degree, but it wasn’t something he’d really thought much about until recently. Marcus was an attractive wizard and a good kisser. Who wouldn’t appreciate that?

“There,” Marcus said, grinning. Hermione seemed torn between giggling and appreciating the
scene. “Now be off you two. Enjoy your night.”

“Yes, Marcus,” Theo replied.

“We’ll see you tomorrow, right?” Hermione asked.

Marcus nodded and ushered them out of the room.

“Marcus is a good kisser,” Hermione commented as they walked to the front hall, smiling.

“That he is,” Theo agreed. Hermione’s smile became broader.

They reached the Floo and stepped in together. Theo called out their destination and they arrived at the Leaky Cauldron. Their arrival caused a bit of a stir with the patrons, but Theo didn’t dwell much on that. They were just passing through. Hermione gave a wave to the owner. Theo thought maybe his name was Tom. Regardless, Theo steered her out the front onto Charing Cross Road where he flagged down a taxi.

“There’s an Indian place I like near the museum,” Theo explained after he gave the driver their direction. “Do you like Indian food?”

“I do. London is one of the best places to get really good Indian food, besides India of course. Do you come into London often?”

Theo talked a bit about where he’d gone and what he’d done in London over the years. They had to watch what they said because of the driver, but it wasn’t too difficult. After the war, Theo found that he enjoyed Muggle London quite a bit. He always liked learning new things and, as wizards, they didn’t have anything like Muggle technology. He was amazed at how adaptable and inventive Muggles were, not having magic to rely upon.

The restaurant was not too busy, but doing fair business for a Thursday night. Theo and Hermione had no trouble being seated. They put in an order for aloo bonda right away while they looked at the menus. Theo loved those little fried potato dumplings and always got them for starters when he came.

“I just love how no one here knows who I am,” Hermione whispered across the table.

“Welcome to Muggle London, Mi.” Theo was happy to provide her with a nice, quiet dinner out where no one would recognize them. He understood that Draco liked to make a splash, the front page of the Daily Prophet attested to that, but Theo preferred his privacy. He knew he wouldn’t be afforded as much privacy as he was used to if he were to bond to Hermione as he hoped, but Theo considered the loss a more than fair price to pay.

Conversation flowed easily between them; it always had, even back in Hogwarts. Theo found the way Hermione's mind worked fascinating. They could easily talk about their work, ideas, things they'd seen or read about. He'd despaired of ever finding a witch that was equally intellectually and physically stimulating. Then Hermione came back into his life.

Together, they chose three small versions of different dishes to share. Hermione exclaimed at how wonderful everything looked as the servers set out dishes of Chicken Tikka Masala, Rogan Josh, and Palak Paneer.

"Do you think you'll work?" Theo asked as they ate. All of her time had been devoted to researching and living through the Sorcery rituals. Theo wondered how she planned to spend her time. A witch like Hermione needed to be intellectually engaged in life.
"I have to do something," Hermione responded, her brow furrowed. "I imagine that many companies or the Ministry would hire me, but..."

"But you don't want anyone thinking they own a Sorceress," Theo finished for her, wandlessly casting a Notice Me Not spell.

"Right," she sighed. "I have so much power and there is so much good I could do. I've also studied so hard and learned so much! Is it awful that I want people to think of me as a Potions Master, an Arithmancy Master, and then a Sorceress?"

"That's not awful at all. You are those things. You worked hard to Master in two fields. You earned that recognition."

"I know that being a Sorceress is unfathomably important. I love that I have the power to do great things. It's only...well, as you said, I worked hard for my education. I didn't do anything to be a Sorceress. It's just something I was born to be. It's as if I were given loads of adulation for being short or having brown hair."

"Firstly, many beautiful people are adored for their physical qualities that are primarily the result of genetics. So, that's not as absurd as you are trying to make it sound. Secondly, you did earn your elemental magic, Mi. You poured your blood, sweat, and tears into those rituals - literally."

"I know."

"I'm frustrated because I want to work in Potions and Arithmancy. I don't even know what a Sorceress is supposed to do. It's not like there's a job description."

"Maybe you could be a consultant," Theo suggested. "You could choose to only work on projects you like or find interesting and that are pertinent to your fields. That way you would still have plenty of time to work on your own ideas and projects. If a project comes along that focuses on your Sorcery, you can choose that. Do you need to make money? I'm sure the Ministry will give you a salary to just live in England if you want."

"I'm sure they would." Hermione snorted. "Then you get back to the idea that no one should feel they own a Sorceress. I have enough money. That shouldn't be too much of an issue. I still don't know what a Sorceress is supposed to do. The research focuses on the rituals, on getting to be a Sorceress, not what to do when you are one. Everything just says how beneficial having a Sorceress is, how prosperity blooms and whatnot."

"It is rather vague," Theo agreed. "You are powerful and you are brilliant, which is a formidable combination. If you want to use your skills to help people, you only need to figure out how to do that. You could do something as simple as set up an office in the Ministry and meet with people seeking help once a week or every other week."

"I guess I never considered something so practical," Hermione responded, looking thoughtful. "People could write and I could make appointments with those I think I could help. There could also be a drop-in day once a month. I know I can make land more fertile as well as people and animals. It's clear to me that I can be of assistance to farmers and people wishing to reproduce, but other than that, I'm not sure."

"I imagine you'd be wonderful in a natural disaster," Theo offered. "There's no one else I'd call if there was a fire, flood, or earthquake."


Dinner passed quickly and Hermione was excited about going to the museum. Theo was glad he
chose this activity for their date. They walked the short distance to the museum, but the front gates were shut.

"Oh no! It's closed," Hermione observed, pouting slightly.

"I take it you weren't aware that the British Museum had a wizarding wing? Did you think they left the ancient magic artifacts with the Muggles?" Theo was amused. Hermione rolled her eyes at him. "Right this way."

Theo led her to one of the large pillars flanking the wrought iron gate. He gestured toward the shadowed side of the pillar.

"Just like platform nine and three quarters," he encouraged.

Hermione stepped through the stone and Theo followed. Hermione looked around intently at the cobblestone courtyard.

At the door, Theo produced two tickets from his pocket.

"It's a preview of a new exhibit," he explained as he held the tickets up against the door. "It's artifacts from ancient Egypt."

"A preview?"

The double doors opened on their own.

"Dad and I donate a fair amount of money. As benefactors, we're invited to preview exhibits before they open to the general public. All the same pieces and items are here, except it will be less crowded. There are usually some experts and archeologists on hand to tell us what we are looking at as well to encourage us to keep donating."

A conservatively dressed witch sat at a reception desk inside the bright, expansive hall. The witch's eyes grew wide as she recognized Hermione.

"Nott, party of two," Theo said, handing the witch their tickets. She just sat there for a moment.

"Of course," the witch eventually responded. She accepted the tickets. "The lecture will begin shortly, third door on the left."

"Lecture?" Hermione asked, her tone excited. Theo chuckled. It shouldn't be surprising that Hermione would appreciate a lecture.

"Remember that I said they had various experts attend these things to talk about the pieces?" Theo guided her to the door the witch had indicated. "They usually like to start with a formal talk to set the stage for what we will see in the exhibit hall. It’s not usually too long, but I’ve found them informative."

Hermione seemed practically giddy as they walked into the lecture hall. The lights were just going down as they entered, so they found seats in the darkened room. It wasn't overly crowded, but there were probably about seventy-five other people there and a half dozen museum staff.

Theo listened to the talk about where, when, and how the artifacts were discovered. It was very interesting, but Theo was distracted watching Hermione. She was clearly interested and paying rapt attention. He loved watching the joy play out on her face.
Theo had always enjoyed the History of Magic, so much so that not even Binns could ruin it for him. He loved Ancient Studies as well and read many books on the subject when he was younger, before Hogwarts. It was interesting to him how magic slowly evolved and how ancient cultures used it. He already knew quite a bit about ancient magical Egypt, but it was still interesting.

The speaker was talking about how the magical and non-magical folk lived side by side long ago, but that it wasn't an equitable relationship. The magical people were considered gods and ruled the non-magical. Even after they separated, the non-magical Egyptians tried to continue many of the magical practices they'd seen. The lecturer talked about non-magical Egyptians trying to preserve part of a person's essence after death as an example. Given the amount of artwork done by magical Egyptians, wizarding archeologists believed that they tried to create something like the portraits magical people have had for the past several hundred years. Unfortunately, they had yet to come across any paintings that were sentient.

"I wonder if they have a Muggle Egyptologist on staff, since they want to use the mythology from the non-magical Egyptians to guide their research." Hermione looked adorable when she was thinking.

"Go ahead and ask," Theo suggested. The lights had risen and there was time for questions before they opened the exhibit hall.

Hermione raised her hand and Theo couldn't help but laugh aloud. The expression on her face was just so Hermione as she always had been back at Hogwarts, genuine and eager.

“Yes, there in the back…oh dear Merlin, Sorceress! Please forgive me, Sorceress. I hadn’t realized you were here. Please, I look forward to any question or comment you may have.”

Theo frowned as Hermione’s eagerness dimmed slightly. She really didn’t want people to treat her differently. Theo understood that she wanted to be Hermione, not just the Sorceress. She took a deep breath and pasted a warm smile on her face.

“No forgiveness is necessary,” she assured the nervous looking moderator. “I very much enjoyed your talk.”

Hermione went on to ask her question and Theo watched the audience. His witch was attracting attention, but that was inevitable. It was just a little jarring after such a quiet dinner. The moderator praised Hermione’s question as a wonderful idea, not giving either of the two lecturers on stage a chance to answer her. Hermione huffed quietly as she sat back and Theo squeezed her hand. It was going to be very hard for her to have discussions and debates if people automatically agreed with her.

“I’ll always be here to argue with you, Mi,” Theo said with mock seriousness.

“Thank you,” she responded. “If I believe that you ever say something to me just to be agreeable I will… I don’t know, set you on fire!”

The couple laughed, trying to keep the noise down. They focused on listening to other people talk, neither of them interested in venturing another question or comment. Soon enough, the lecture portion of the evening ended and they were instructed to proceed to the exhibit hall. Despite the fact that they were in the back of the room, it seemed that everyone was waiting for Hermione to go first. With a bit of a shrug and a resigned sigh, Theo led her past all the others to the doors. The lecture moderator rushed to their side. The portly, balding wizard looked pale and was sweating. Theo could practically smell his anxiety wafting in the air.
“Please let me welcome you, Sorceress,” the wizard managed. “I am Rufus Einsworth, one of the museum’s program managers. I didn’t see your name on our list of attendees. If I’d known you were coming, I would have reserved seating for you at the front.”

“Miss Granger is here as my guest,” Theo responded. “We would prefer no special attention or treatment. We’re here to see the exhibit, like everyone else.”

“Of course, right,” the wizard assured them. “If everyone will follow me.”

The witch and wizard that had been giving the lecture approached the couple as they walked. The wizard was about middle aged, but the witch was closer to Theo’s own age. They were both blond and bespectacled.

“I’m so glad I didn’t know you were in the audience,” the witch proclaimed, smiling brightly at Hermione. “I would’ve been so nervous!”

“The attention that comes as a Sorceress is taking some getting used to,” Hermione finally said.

“Oh not that! Not that being a Sorceress isn’t amazing. It’s just… you’re Hermione Granger! You’re one of the smartest witches in just about forever. When we give these talks, it’s mainly for amateur enthusiasts and wealthy donors, not scholars!”

“If it puts you more at ease, I’m the enthusiast donor,” Theo said.

“I beg to differ, Mr. Nott,” the wizard spoke up. “I read your paper in the Charms Journal last week so you can’t pretend that you aren’t a scholar. Please allow me introduce ourselves properly. I’m Darwin Chase and this is my daughter, Brigid.”

Theo and Hermione fell into conversation with the Chases about their work. They were excellent companions to have as they walked around the exhibit hall. They pointed out interesting things about the artifacts on display. Theo and the Chases were lingering over a case filled with reed wands as Hermione moved on to stand in front of a large wall painting of an ancient Egyptian. Theo came to stand behind her when she laughed loudly.

“Mi? What’s so funny?”

“Oh, come now. The joke is a bit off color, but it’s still funny.”

“What joke?” Theo was certainly confused now. The Chases had joined them as well as several others.

“The one about the ibis that this painting…oh.” Hermione stopped her explanation and put her hand to her mouth in surprise, just realizing what she was saying.

“The painting spoke to you?” Darwin Chase demanded, looking back and forth between Hermione and the still painting on the stone. A crowd was gathering now.

“Well, yes,” Hermione admitted. “My Ancient Egyptian isn’t wonderful, but I understood the gist of his joke I think.”

“Is he talking now?” Brigid wondered, staring at the painting in awe.

“Yes, he realizes that I understood him because I laughed.” Hermione listened intently. “He doesn’t understand why no one hears him since we seem like magical people. Their sounds and images are protected from the non-magical Egyptians, so they appear non-moving and non-
speaking. He says that if you want to see and hear them all you need to do is invoke a basic Earth magic spell on the stone. They made it simple so even children could access the spirits left in the painting.”

Theo listened to Hermione say something in what sounded like Ancient Egyptian. Of course, pronunciation of the language in hieroglyphics was just a guess, since the language hadn’t really been spoken in thousands of years. Whatever she was saying, Hermione sounded exasperated.

“He was saying that magical folk today must be intellectually deficient since we don’t seem able to manage basic Earth magic. I was trying to explain that most of us don’t practice elemental magic, but I’m not sure he understood. Does anyone here speak Ancient Egyptian? He can hear all of us, even if we can’t hear him.”

Darwin Chase jumped at the chance and began rattling off some kind of conversation, with Hermione as a go-between. After about fifteen minutes, Theo was getting frustrated. They were on a date. Hermione shouldn’t have to work, as fascinating as it may be, especially to the Egyptologists. Hermione saw his sigh and gave a huff of her own.

“Wait, wait,” Hermione held up her hands. “I understand that communicating and finding a way to unlock the paintings is an important and fascinating endeavor that will revolutionize Ancient Studies. I do, however, want to get on with my evening, as selfish as that may be. Can you ask him if he minds if I just try to unlock this one painting so you can all communicate directly?”

Darwin asked the question and Hermione must have received an answer. She nodded to the still painting and stepped up to the stone. When she put her hands on the slab, the museum staff almost looked as if they were going to intervene. Touching the artifacts was not generally permitted, but no one was going to stop the Sorceress. Theo felt a slight breeze and dust swirled off the stone slab. After that though, the painting of the ancient Egyptian turned and smiled at the crowd, eliciting gasps from the audience. His voice was rich and Theo understood a little of what he said. It seemed that he was thanking Hermione for her assistance.

“There!” Hermione smiled. “His name is Intef and I will now excuse myself from the conversation.”

Theo and Hermione were able to stroll through the remainder of the exhibit easily. It seemed most of the other patrons wanted to stay with the newly mobile Intef, not that Theo blamed them. Any other night and he would be there too, but nothing would distract him from his witch tonight; not even a two thousand year old Egyptian.

“Ready to move on?” Theo asked when they came to the end of the displays.

“Where are we going next?”

“My place.”

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Hermione hardly felt the pull of Apparition any longer, so she was able to look around Theo’s place as soon as they arrived. She knew he had his own flat; that he didn’t always stay at Nott Castle with his father. The lounge was simple, but nice.

“Would you like something to drink, Mi?”

“A glass of wine would be nice.” Hermione had spent the last two hours touching Theo in some way. She held his hand during the lecture and they were usually touching in some fashion as they
looked at the exhibit. Theo’s mind was fascinating and challenging. Discussing and debating with
him was so exciting, in more ways than one.

Hermione followed Theo to an efficient, but uninteresting looking kitchen, and took the glass of
wine he offered her.

“‘To having you all to myself,’” Theo said, raising his glass and smiling. They toasted and
Hermione chuckled. She loved being surrounded by all her wizards, but she loved being with them
individually just as much.

“Tonight has been wonderful,’” she told him honestly. Theo understood the know-it-all, swot part
of her personality, and seemed to embrace it fully. None of her other wizards would’ve had as
much fun at a museum exhibit.

“The night’s not over, Mi. Let me give you a little tour.”

Hermione heard the commanding edge to his voice and got excited. She followed him, sipping her
wine, as he showed her the dining areas, powder room, guest bedroom, and his study. Hermione
smiled at the various projects in different states of completion around his study. It would be easy to
be sidetracked by Theo’s study, but she refused to look back. She wasn’t here for that. Hermione
followed Theo to his bedroom, which was like the rest of his flat, simple but nice. This was where
she wanted to be.

“Did you wear this outfit for me?” he asked, taking the glass of wine from her hand. His voice was
firm and strong.

“Yes,” Hermione responded, her voice already breathy.

“We’ve talked before about punishment, Mi, but we haven’t set any ground rules. I’ve assumed
you’ve engaged in this kind of play before.”

“I have.” Hermione wanted to squirm, she was so very ready. Theo, however, remained a few steps
away.

“So you know this kind of relationship is meant to push a person, which isn’t always comfortable. I
won’t ever ask you to do anything that I don’t think that you are capable of. It won’t always be
easy, but that’s not the point is it?”

“No, it’s not.” It had taken Hermione some time to fully embrace and understand how empowering
it was to give up control to her partner. It had been Severus that introduced her to her submissive
side; not that it had surprised her one bit that Severus enjoyed being a Dominant.

“When we assume these roles, I expect you to refer to me as Sir. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Sir.” Hermione was sure that her knickers were soaked already.

“This kind of relationship takes a great deal of trust, Mi. I trust that you will obey me and you have
to trust that I will give you what you need. Do you trust me?”

“Absolutely, Sir.” She did trust Theo, with her life.

“If anything I say or do is too much for you, I’m trusting you to let me know. What is your safe
word?”

“How about microwave, Sir?”
Theo smirked at her response and nodded. He stepped close to her and Hermione leaned toward him slightly, eager for him. He ran his hands up her arms to her shoulders and then down her back.

“I said it earlier tonight, but you really do look lovely tonight. You look like such a good girl in your sweet skirt and little sweater. Are you my good girl, Mi?”

“I try to be, Sir.” Hermione trembled just slightly with anticipation. Theo removed her sweater.

“It’s hard to be good all the time, isn’t it?”

Hermione just nodded. Theo was unbuttoning her top, exposing the silver corset she wore underneath. It was simple with no pattern on it, just a hook and latch system down the front.

“This is very good, Mi. Did you wear this for me?”

Hermione nodded again as he tossed her shirt aside. He unzipped her skirt and it fell to the floor. Theo stepped back and circled her. She stood in her heels, tiny silver knickers, and the corset. Hermione couldn’t stop the shiver that went through her as Theo appraised her.

“You are being a very good girl. I’m afraid you have been naughty though, Mi.” Hermione looked at him questioningly. “Last night. I imagine you and Draco got into some trouble.”

Hermione blushed and looked down. Theo put a finger to her chin and lifted her face up.

“Tell me,” he commanded.

“At the club we went to,” Hermione managed to say. “We danced. It was too much. I wanted him so badly and I didn’t want to wait.”

“What did you do, Mi?”

“We went into a dark corner, under the stairwell, so it was mostly hidden.” Theo arched an eyebrow and waited for her to continue. Hermione was so wet, both from remembering what happened and anticipating what was going to happen next. “Draco pushed me up against the wall. His hand went up my dress and I put my hand inside his trousers.”

“And you both came, there in the club?”

“Yes, Sir, we did.”

“You enjoyed it.”

“So much.”

“That was naughty, Mi. I’m afraid you will need a punishment for that kind of behavior.”

Theo put his hand on her back to guide her. She became a little confused when they walked past the bed and Theo opened one of the closet doors. Hermione caught her breath as he led her inside. It definitely wasn’t a closet, but was a small room. The walls were a plain white and the one window was covered with a thick dark grey curtain. The remarkable part about the room was its contents. On the far side of the room, chains with wrist and ankle cuffs were hung from the ceiling and bolted to the floor. To the left was a large armoire. Hermione couldn’t begin to imagine what was inside. To her right was a padded wooden bench with two different levels.

Theo led her over to the bench and moved to stand behind her. He slid her knickers down and she stepped out of them, leaving her in just the heels and corset.
“Be a good girl and kneel here.” Theo indicated to the lower padded level on the bench. “Then lean over and hold the handles at the top.”

Hermione bent forward so her torso was resting on the larger, higher part of the bench. Her hands found two wooden dowels, which she gripped tightly. She was kneeling and her bum was presented perfectly to Theo. He was standing behind her, so she couldn’t see him, but she felt his hands caressing the backs of her thighs.

“Since this is your first punishment, I’m going to use my bare hand.” Hermione’s breath caught. Theo’s hands moved up over the roundness of her arse. It had been ages since she’d really been spanked. Viktor just couldn’t do it properly. He was too worried about hurting her, not realizing that the pain was part of the whole point. “You’ll have ten slaps on your bare arse for not being able to control yourself with Draco.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Hermione braced herself, waiting. It seemed like forever before the first blow fell. Theo’s large hand landed swiftly on her right cheek, hard. The sting made her eyes water. It was perfect.

“Count them out, Mi,” he instructed firmly.

“One.”

“Two,” she cried after the second slap fell on her left cheek. Theo wasn’t holding back. It felt wonderful.

“I don’t think you really tried to control yourself with Draco, did you, Mi?”

The third slap came with a sharp sting on the already sensitive right side.

“Three,” she gasped. “No, Sir. I didn’t try to control myself.”

“You liked being in public, didn’t you?” The fourth slap connected on the newly tender left side. “I think it excited you even more.”

“Four.” Hermione grunted slightly. “Yes, Sir. I liked it. It was exciting to think that we could be caught.”

“That is so very naughty,” Theo admonished. The fifth slap made contact and a tear tell from her eye.

“Five.”

“As I said, you can’t be good all the time.” The sixth slap landed and Hermione let out a short wail.

“Six,” Hermione remembered to say, after a moment.

Theo moved a hand over her center, exposed to him. His touch was so light, teasing, but she was so wet that his fingers slid over her lower lips.

“That’s my good girl, so wet for me. You like this so much, don’t you?”

“Yes, Sir.” As she answered, the seventh slap sounded sharply with a crack as it hit her skin. She hadn’t anticipated it because Theo’s other hand was still toying with her dripping slit. The surprise combined with the rawness of her skin made her yell out louder that time.
“Seven,” she gasped, drawing in deep breaths. Tears fell from both eyes.

“You also like telling me about Draco,” Theo said knowingly. “And I have to admit, I liked hearing it. I liked seeing you with him, and with Marcus and Ades.”

A finger pushed inside her roughly while another finger flicked her sensitive nub once. It was almost too much sensation and Hermione whimpered. As Theo slid two fingers inside, the eighth slap landed hard against her arse. Hermione didn’t even try to stifle her cry or tears.

“Eight,” she grunted.

“You have the sweetest little pussy, Mi. Did you know that?” Hermione just panted. She did recognize that Theo’s voice seemed rougher as well. “You don’t need to answer. It was a rhetorical question. I’m saying it, so it’s true. You are doing such a good job, taking your punishment like a good girl. You needed to be punished didn’t you?”

“Oh yes, Sir.”

The ninth blow made contact. The way that Theo was doing it, it wasn’t becoming numb every time she was hit. Instead, it was as if the skin on her arse was hypersensitive. It was incredibly intense.

“Nine,” she wailed.

“That’s it,” Theo crooned. “There’s just one left, my sweet witch. You look so beautiful right now. Your skin is bright red, like a cherry. I’ve never seen anything more lovely.”

“Ten.” Hermione screamed out the last number as the final slap was delivered. She gripped the wooden handles on the bench so tightly her knuckles were entirely white.

“Such a good girl,” Theo groaned. His hand was still moving in and out of her pussy. Hermione could feel her own juices dripping down her thigh. His other hand caressed her tender bum, rubbing gently. “I need to be inside you now.”

“Yes,” Hermione hissed. “Please, Sir.”

Theo’s hand moved away, but almost immediately, Hermione felt the thick head of his cock press against her opening. He nudged her knees apart slightly and thrust inside. Hermione cried out as Theo filled her. He felt enormous in his position and she was thankful that she was so well lubricated. She heard a strangled moan escape his lips and felt his forehead come down and rest between her shoulder blades for a moment.

“So good,” Theo groaned as he began to move inside her. “You feel so good, Mi. Perfect.”

Hermione could hardly string together two thoughts as Theo pounded into her from behind, his abdomen brushing up against her reddened arse with every thrust. The combination of pleasure and pain was exquisite and Hermione couldn’t find any words. She just cried out as he pushed inside her. Theo was hard and fast, but somehow seemed measured and controlled at the same time. One of his hands gripped her left hip and the other hand held her right shoulder firmly, just at the base of her neck.

Hermione could feel her orgasm coming. It had been building ever since he put his finger inside her. It climbed higher and her whole body started shaking. She could feel it. She was so close.

“Come for me,” Theo commanded harshly. “Come on my cock.”
Hermione’s muscles clenched as she came, hard, and screamed out Theo’s name.

“That’s it,” Theo panted. “Fuck, yes. I’m going to come inside you now. I’m going to fill you up. Do you want that?”

“Oh yes… yes, Sir,” Hermione moaned, her muscles still trying to relax from her own climax.

Theo’s grip on her tightened as he came with a shout. He collapsed on her back, his breath ragged. Hermione barely noticed the stinging in her arse, as his body pressed against hers.

“I love you so much,” Theo said calmly and factually as he caught his breath. Hermione closed her eyes and smiled, her cheek pressed against the leather padding on his spanking bench.

“I love you too, Theo, so much.”

Chapter End Notes

Next - Hanging out with wizards and Hogwarts
Hermione felt a wonderfully soothing sensation down her shoulders, back, bum, and backs of her legs. As she woke up further, she realized someone was rubbing her.

"That feels good," she murmured.

"I take care of my witch," Theo responded, dotting kisses up her spine. "It's just a healing salve. I wouldn't want you to be uncomfortable today as you sit in your meeting; unless you'd like a little reminder of your punishment last night?"

"That might be nice," Hermione admitted, blushing slightly. She imagined sitting around a table with the large group, her backside tender.

"I'll just rub the salve into your shoulders and back to soothe the muscles." Hermione didn't have to roll over to see that Theo was smiling. "I'll also treat your wrists, but the ache in your arse and nipples will be yours to keep. You earned it, Mi."

Hermione moaned contentedly as Theo rubbed in the salve. He only put a thin layer on her bum, focusing on other sore areas. As Hermione let him work, she thought back to how she became so sore.

After the spanking bench, Theo chained her to the wall by her wrists. She was just barely able to stand, and that was only because she still wore her high heels. Theo unhooked the top of her corset, freeing her breasts. It was then that the blindfold went on and Theo began to tease. His touch was light and never firm enough. Hermione would've sworn it lasted for hours. His hands and mouth were everywhere. Hermione felt like she would burst. After she felt the nipple clamps go on, her legs were lifted up so her thighs rested on Theo's shoulders. Almost before she realized what was coming next, his mouth was on her center.

It was amazing. Blindfolded, Hermione could only feel and she gave herself over to sensation. The nipple clamps had some kind of cord on them because she felt Theo tug them, sending waves of delicious pain through her.

The first time she came, Hermione thought her body would give out. Theo kept going though, his mouth still firmly placed between her legs. Her clit was sensitive and his continued attention was almost too much, but later Hermione realized that had been his plan. His hand joined his mouth and Hermione felt fingers exploring. When he pushed into her tight, puckered hole, Hermione started begging. She wanted him inside her, needed him to fill and stretch her. Theo had his own agenda, however, which included making her come a second time with his mouth. By that time, he had two fingers vigorously thrusting into her arse and Hermione clamped down on him as she
Entirely spent, Hermione dangled limply from her wrist cuffs. Theo slid her legs off his shoulders and Hermione couldn't steady herself. Theo stood in front of her, praising and petting her. He wrapped her legs around his waist and slid inside her, still praising and caressing her bare skin. He supported her somewhat, but part of her weight was still being held by the chains. Theo removed the blindfold and spent what felt like forever moving in and out of her firmly, kissing and caressing her. Theo continued to make good use of the nipple clamps. Hermione came twice more and marveled at Theo's control. He went steadily for ages before he finally came with a roar.

It was only after Theo came that he unchained her, rubbing her sore arms and laying her gently down on the bed in the other room. He removed the clamps and peeled off her corset, which was soaked with sweat. Hermione couldn't move much, but she wanted to stay close to Theo because she was so emotionally and physically wrung out. He understood this and spooned her, keeping her close. Despite their closeness, Hermione wanted him back inside her for additional closeness. Theo readily complied and held her close as they made love slowly in the bed. Hermione knew that being submissive and giving up the control for so long made her emotionally raw. Theo was a good Dominant and understood how hard it was to be submissive. He truly did give her what she needed.

Theo finished up administering the salve as Hermione was recalling the night before. She rolled over and looked up at him.

"What time is it?" Hermione wondered if they had time to do more. She lightly dragged her fingers up his bare arms, over his shoulders, and down his back.

"Just past nine," Theo replied, grinning. Hermione smiled as well. It was still early. She and Theo hadn't stayed up as late as she had the previous two nights with Draco and Marcus. The activities that she and Theo engaged in took more out of her. Maybe with practice she could do it all night, but as it was, Theo had pushed just as far as she could stand it.

Theo bent down and kissed her. Hermione savored him and pulled him close, cradling him between her legs. He reached down and explored her folds.

"So wet for me already, Mi?"

"I was thinking about last night," she admitted.

"Last night was amazing," Theo agreed. He rolled onto his back, taking her with him. Hermione found herself straddling his narrow hips, Theo's cock jutting up in front of her. "Now be a good witch and ride me."

"Yes, Sir," Hermione assented enthusiastically. She rose up and positioned him, quickly sinking down onto him with a moan.

"Your sweet pussy just needs to be filled, doesn't it, Mi? If the others were here, would they join in? Maybe Ades could take you from behind while you rode me and sucked Marcus off. Draco would love to watch that."

Hermione pictured what he said and groaned. That sounded perfect to her.

"You are such a strong witch," Theo continued. He gripped her hip with one hand and the other caressed her breast softly. Her nipples were still sensitive. "You ride me so well, Mi. You're the only witch in the world who can take all I have to give and all the while keep up with Draco, Marcus, and Ades. You are strong, smart, thoughtful, and kind. I am so proud of you."
"Oh, Theo." Hermione was overwhelmed. He knew how to make her feel strong and cared for. "I love you."

"I love you too, Mi, more than anything."

It didn't take Hermione long to reach her climax and Theo followed soon after.

After a moment of relaxation, Hermione suggested Theo grab whatever he needed for the day. It was incredibly easy for her to Apparate them both directly to her bedroom, onto the bed even.

"That's handy," Theo commented, pulling the blanket over their naked bodies.

Hermione chuckled and cuddled into her wizard. They had less than two hours until they were expected for Hogwarts for lunch and planning. She called Nipsy, but stayed in Theo's arms.

The little elf didn't seem to think it strange at all, merely came and asked how she could be of help. Hermione asked for an update on what was happening in the house.

"Missy's library is finished," Nipsy shared excitedly. Hermione almost jumped out of her bed, despite her nudity, but Theo held her steady. Hermione growled a bit, but accepted the delay. She nodded at Nipsy to continue. "The study is finishing now; Nipsy is being organizing things with Missy Bones before coming in here. The guest rooms and bath will be done by tonight."

"You're having guests?" Theo asked. Hermione looked away. She couldn't look at him and talk about having wizards besides her four.

"In case," she managed to say. "If tomorrow doesn't... go well. There's no way some other wizard is going to stay in here."

"It'll work out, Mi, somehow," Theo said gently, lifting her face. "Nipsy? Are Adrian, Draco, or Marcus here?"

"Yes. All, Master Theo Nott. Master Marcus Flint is in the kitchens eatings the foods while Master Adrian Pucey and Master Draco Malfoy are sitting with him."

"Can you send them up?" Theo asked, pulling Hermione closer. "Oh, and breakfast; something simple."

Nipsy nodded and was gone.

"We had talked about meeting here and going to Hogwarts together," Theo explained. "I think you could use the comfort that comes from having all of us nearby."

Hermione felt so grateful that she could just kiss Theo, so she did. The thought of having all four of her wizards around her made her feel so much better. The speed with which the others arrived was amazing.

"Did you two stay here last night?" Ades looked a little confused. He climbed into the bed as he spoke.

"No, we were at Theo's flat." Hermione kissed Adrian before he settled himself behind Hermione. She hissed slightly as Adrian brushed against her tender bum.

"Are you okay?" Marcus immediately went to her side.

"Yes, I'm fine," she assured him, kissing him firmly on the mouth. "It's just a little tenderness left
over from last night."

Marcus glared at Theo, who threw his hands up in surrender.

"I offered to heal it," he defended himself. "She declined, which I understand. When I look across the table today and watch her squirm in her seat, I'll remember how beautiful she looked positioned on the spanking bench, taking her punishment."

Hermione blushed slightly, but more at the compliment than anything. She wasn't embarrassed that she liked submissive play and she felt it was important that her relationships with her wizards were transparent amongst themselves. Marcus was protective, but he needed to trust Theo.

"You have a bench?" Draco grinned as he lounged across the foot of the bed. He looked excited. "Are you naked under there, Granger?"

"Yes," Hermione supplied, holding the blanket to her. Lounging about on display, nude, with those four would make it impossible to be at Hogwarts by noon. "And Theo doesn't just have a bench, he has a whole room. It's wonderful."

“So that’s what you do after you change the understanding of history?” Draco teased, unrolling a copy of the Daily Prophet and tossing it onto the bed.

Hermione rolled her eyes at the headline. It said Sorceress Unlocks Secrets of Ancient Egypt and there was a photo of her from a week ago. She and Theo explained what actually happened at the museum.

Nipsy and Frissy brought several trays of fruit and breakfast pastry, along with tea. The five of them stayed in bed, ate a little bit, and talked. No one wanted to bring up the ritual tomorrow since they would inevitably talk it to death that afternoon. Hermione enjoyed being close to her wizards. They were such interesting and unique individuals. It was hard to imagine her future without them, but she wouldn’t let herself get carried away. It still wasn’t certain which one or two of her four wizards she would be able to keep, if any.

Ideas flitted through Hermione's brain; but as soon as she had them, she refused to entertain them. She imagined where in the house she and Theo could put a bondage room, like the one he had in his flat. She wondered if the basement would be too clichéd of a location before she forced herself to abandon her thoughts. Would Marcus set up a Quidditch pitch in the North field? If they had children, Marcus would teach them all to fly. Then Hermione pushed away the mental picture her thoughts created. Hermione smirked to herself when she thought about Draco hosting parties at the house. He never did anything by halves. She admonished herself for thinking about it.

"You seem lost in thought, kitten," Adrian observed, kissing her shoulder.

"It’s hard not to think about our future together, all of us together,” she admitted.

They all nodded in agreement. At least Hermione wasn’t the only one with that problem.

“I better clean up and get dressed.” She sighed, but didn’t move. “I can’t wait for this to be over, but I’m also scared and want to put it off for forever.”

“I think we all understand that,” Draco chuckled. “We are coming with you, so don’t worry about that. Then you’ll go out with Ades here, which I’m sure will be all sorts of romantic.”
“You mean he won’t be getting her off in the darkened corner of a crowded club?” Theo teased.

“You heard about that, huh?” Draco looked entirely unrepentant.

“Why do you think I got the spanking?” Hermione laughed. She could always count on her wizards to lighten her mood when she needed it.

“Draco’s right, we’re here for you,” Marcus said, nudging her softly. “Go take a shower because you still smell like sex, which is distracting as hell. Then throw on something comfortable to wear and we’ll go.”

Hermione chuckled and crawled out from under her blanket, surrounded by her protective cocoon of wizards. Of course, she was still naked, so there was a fair amount of gawking that made her laugh.

After a quick shower, Hermione thought about what Marcus said. She decided to wear comfortable clothes and didn’t care if she looked too casual. The ritual planning group mainly consisted of her friends and they didn’t care how she looked. The people that weren’t her friends, she didn’t care about their opinions of how she dressed. Hermione pulled on her soft, comfortable jeans and an old Hogwarts t-shirt, smiling at the appropriateness of her choice. She slid on black flats and put the rose quartz necklace from her wizards around her neck. After grabbing an ivory colored cardigan to ward off the chill so prevalent in the old castle, Hermione was ready to go.

Adrian, Draco, Marcus, and a cleaned up Theo were ready for her as well and the five of them Apparated just outside Hogwarts. They walked in silence up to the castle, which looked deserted. All the students were gone for the summer and the grounds wouldn’t open to visitors until the next day.

On their walk, they did have a chance to see the almost completed construction going on around the ritual site. The Quidditch bleachers had been moved to circle around the site for spectators. Additional, lower wooden bleachers were surrounding the area as well. Hermione couldn’t imagine all those seats filled with wizards who wanted to be her Ancillary. They didn’t even know her. How could they want to be bound to her for life? She guessed that the elemental power was a big draw for most people.

“How any tips on how to make myself unattractive and drive away wizards?” Hermione attempted to joke as they made their way closer to the castle.

“Not possible, princess.” Marcus said, putting his hand on the small of her back.

“You are wonderful, kitten,” Adrian added, lifting her hand to kiss it. “People can’t help but adore you.”

“I have some suggestions if you prats aren’t going to be helpful,” Draco interjected, making Hermione laugh aloud. Draco winked at her before he continued. “Remember back in school when you were a bossy know-it-all? You could do that again.”

“I happen to like a know-it-all,” Theo remarked.

“As long as you get to be the bossy one,” Ades teased.

“And you are entirely too attractive,” Draco continued. “With your sweet little body, wizards will forgive that fact that you’re a nagging swot, so you really need to up the ante, lay it on thick. Be as annoying as you can possibly be. I have faith that you can be incredibly annoying if you try.”
Hermione was laughing so hard her eyes were watering.

“Oh, and be scary!” Draco exclaimed. “You have always been scary, so that won’t be difficult.”

“Scary brilliant,” Adrian said.

“Right, but also truly frightening,” Draco insisted. “You never saw her in battle. Our witch was a nearly unstoppable force before she was a Sorceress and now she’s even more powerful. Also, she’s never punched you in the face. She may be little, but she’s fierce.”

“I’m sure you deserved it,” Marcus pointed out.

“I’m not saying I didn’t,” Draco defended.

“At least I didn’t do any lasting damage to your face, thank Merlin.” Hermione was in much better spirits.

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The wizards were all pleased that Hermione seemed happier. They were each struggling with their own anxiety and fear, but there was nothing to be done for it. There was no question that each one of them loved Hermione and no one wanted to imagine his life without her.

The five of them entered the castle and moved directly into the Great Hall. Almost everyone was already there; ready to do the final planning for the last ritual. Draco nodded a greeting to his father, who was talking with Snape, Bouchard, and Healer Adams. Adrian saw Blaise standing with Sasha and Longbottom. Lovegood and Turan were close to the wizards, but clearly focused on each other. Marcus noted the presence of that awful Figgelowe witch so he could avoid her. She was hovering near the Minister of Magic, who was deep in conversation with Percy Weasley. Unfortunately, her eyes lit up when she saw him and Marcus didn’t bother to suppress his sneer. As if he would ever give up his witch. Theo was glad Master Kobayashi was there talking animated with Harry and Pansy about something. He was brilliant and had more life experience than anyone else. It was times like this that Theo really felt Dumbledore’s loss. That old man was a genius; sneakier than most people gave his credit for, but his mind was unparalleled. If a Slytherin thought a person was sneaky, that was saying something.

Those assembled turned to look at them, which made sense since Hermione was the guest of honor.

"Please forgive our tardiness," McGonagall said primly as she entered the hall from the other end. Penrose followed her closely and neither offered an explanation for their lateness. Draco had to stifle a shiver of revulsion. McGonagall turned out to be an okay witch, but that didn't mean Draco wanted to know anything about her sex life. In fact, he used a mental image of the Headmistress in her knickers when he needed to... cool his ardor.

"We can sit for lunch if everyone is here," the Headmistress went on to say.

The less than two dozen people found seats at four tables arranged near the far end of the hall. Marcus and Draco managed to sit right next to Hermione, which made them happy. Theo and Adrian got the two remaining seats. The tables were close to each other so they could turn and talk to others if they needed.

Things at Hogwarts never changed much, including the food. Lunch made all four wizards nostalgic for their school days, at least a little bit. After everyone had eaten and the food was cleared, people set about preparing for the actual meeting. Percy Weasley set up boards to write on
while others pulled out scrolls of notes and books filled with information. Theo had a good amount of information to unshrink as well. While he was organizing his notes, a House-Elf popped into the room and stood near Hermione. The little thing shuffled in place for a moment, looking nervous. However, Theo always thought House-elves seemed nervous.

"Yes?" Hermione asked gently.

"Miss Hermy Who Promised Never to Free Us," the elf started. Draco guffawed with laughter at her title. "We is hearing from others that you can be blessing land and fields. Now that you is being the big Sorceress, Hogwarts elves is asking you to be blessing our land here."

The elf looked very anxious as it waited.

"I would be happy to. After our meeting, we can go out onto the grounds. I’d like to involve the Headmistress and future Professor Longbottom. If Professor Sprout and Hagrid are available, I'd like them to come as well. I don't want to accidentally affect any ongoing Herbology projects or things like that."

The elf thanked Hermione profusely and disappeared.

"Maybe the elves here won't be so scared of you after this," Harry teased. Hermione just rolled her eyes.

Everyone turned their chairs toward the board Percy had set up. Adrian watched as they all looked to Hermione. He was sure that she didn't even realize the effect she had on people. She was more of a leader than she thought. People naturally looked to her for guidance, to tell them what to do. The only people that seemed to actively dislike her were the same people that appeared threatened by or jealous of her. Of course, Adrian realized he was biased regarding his witch's greatness.

"Let's get started," Hermione told the group. "This ritual is different from the others in several ways. The first and second rituals bonded my magic to me, element by element. This last ritual has two parts. The first part is a Calling where my magic calls out to another, to the one it wants to be its mate. After the Calling is complete, the Binding part of the ritual is done. The mate, the Ancillary, is bound to me in a ritual very similar to a wedding. We may as well start with the materials and preparation."

Marcus listened idly as they discussed and debated the fine points. He didn’t have anything to add, but followed the discussion. They agreed to burn sage in the ceremonial fire along with the holly and hawthorn branches, since it was supposed to increase the potency of Hermione’s magic. The ritual circle would be lined with crushed jade to promote true love as well as pulverized lapis lazuli for harmonious relationships. Marcus didn’t know how crushed was different from pulverized, but others seemed to feel it was a pertinent point. All he really cared about was that the ritual would begin at two o’clock. He would be there much earlier than that, ready and waiting.

Hogwarts grounds would open to the public at dawn. Shacklebolt assured the Headmistress that he’d arranged for a veritable army of Aurors to be present for crowd control. Harry affirmed that almost every field Auror volunteered to be present. No one wanted to miss seeing a Sorceress bind to her Ancillary. In fact, many others in the Magical Law Enforcement Department who didn’t do field work volunteered as well, so no one anticipated security would be an issue. Percy liaised with the Department of International Magical Cooperation to assure that they would be on hand with translation charms and to deal with all the foreign dignitaries. Most magical communities were sending a representative to witness such a momentous occasion.

“We all know that thousands of wizards will descend upon this castle in the hopes of being
chosen,” Hermione piped up when people began speculating about number of wizards coming. “I personally don’t want to spend time talking about that. I will just trust the Aurors, the Ministry, and International Cooperation to handle that. I’d rather talk about the Calling.”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

“After Minerva and Lucius cast the ritual circle, they must stay outside it,” Severus explained. “Once Hermione goes inside, no one else may enter. Research leads us to believe that it is literally impossible for anyone besides the chosen Ancillary to enter the circle. The Ancillary candidates are positioned just outside the circle, at North, East, West, and South. Once she is in the circle, Hermione will perform the Calling.”

Theo talked about what the Calling would actually entail. Calling spells in general were not easy and required a lot of power.

“Research isn’t entirely clear what happens next,” Theo admitted, rubbing his hand through his shaggy hair. “Most accounts just say that the Ancillary felt a pull that propelled him or her into the circle with the Sorcerer or Sorceress. We have no data on how far the Calling actually reaches. The Ancillary candidates are positioned next to the circle, so they don’t have far to go. History indicates the Calling can bring an Ancillary from as far away as two or three Quidditch pitches. Of course, the limits of this have never been tested.”

“Just tell me where to stand,” Draco said, winking at Hermione.

“I had to think about that, but it’s pretty clear to me where you all belong,” Hermione said, smiling. “Draco, you’ll be South of the circle by the ceremonial fire. Adrian, you’ll be North between the circle and the lake. Marcus will be West, representing Earth, and Theo will be East, representing Air. I’d like you all to stay in your positions, no matter what; even if it takes a long time to do the Calling. If the elemental magic goes in its natural direction, I want you all there.”

“No one really knows or understands how Ancillaries are chosen,” Severus reported. “Some writings indicate that a Sorceress demonstrated an affinity for one or two elements; that she was particularly strong when it came to working with water or fire, for example. That would be the element most likely to become overloaded because it was the strongest. When the elemental magic gets too strong, the Sorceress siphons some off to her Ancillary through their bond. He then has access to that power. It will magnify his own magic. If the Sorceress has two elements that tend to be overly strong, she’ll Call two Ancillaries.”

“So, if three or even all four elements are strong, can she Call three or four Ancillaries?” Marcus asked, his brow furrowed. He would never claim to be a scholar, but he didn’t see a reason why his princess couldn’t keep all four of them.

“In theory,” Severus acknowledged. “It hasn’t happened in recorded history though.”

“Neither has a twenty-three year old Sorceress,” Adrian interjected. His faith had always been strong, that it would work out for the five of them because it had to. Now, it seemed like a real possibility. Even if there was no history of it, there was nothing in the literature against it.

“Well, does it feel easier to work with one element over the others?” Sasha asked. It really was the obvious question.

“No,” Hermione reported, looking a bit irritated. “I read about the others having relative strengths, affinities, but I just don’t feel that. Maybe that is a product of my unusual path to get to this point.”
“You’ve always been a strong witch,” Harry pointed out. “Maybe you just don’t have relative strengths, because you are strong across the board. It doesn’t seem like you are weak in any area. I think it’s possible you are strong in all four elements and might need an Ancillary to deal with each one.”

“You should prepare yourself mentally for the possibility of Calling anywhere from one to four Ancillaries,” Luna added.

“I like that idea,” Hermione said, smiling. “Of course, we don’t know what will actually happen until it does.”

“After all are Called, does the Binding start?” Turan asked. “Or does it work one at a time?”

“The literature is, again, vague about this,” Severus reported, sounding irritated. Everyone was sure that if Snape could go back in time and punish the people that recorded those past rituals, he would. As a professor, he would never accept work that was anything but clear and precise. “The language is inexact. It seems that the magic itself initiates the Binding as soon as the Ancillary enters the circle. The Sorceress and her Ancillary do need to verbally consent.”

“That is where Minerva and I come in,” Lucius offered. “We will ask the questions to complete the Binding and say the spell.”

All four Ancillary candidates were deep in thought as the final details were discussed. They really felt like there might be hope; that all four of them could properly bind to their witch. It might be unprecedented, but what about the past three weeks had been normal? It was strange, unusual, and the best time in their lives. The times in the past few weeks that they’d all been together felt right. Could that really be their future? All of them fervently hoped, but there was a tiny part in each of them that didn’t think he could possibly be so lucky.

Chapter End Notes

Next - Adrian!
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: JKR owns Harry Potter, not me!
Now: Adrian!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Five

When it was agreed that they'd talked through the ritual and prepared as much as was possible, the planning group started to break up a little. Adrian felt they could've wrapped up an hour before, but he didn't begrudge anyone being thorough. Moreover, if it helped Hermione feel better, feel prepared then Adrian would happily go along.

Healer Adams went back to work, as did Shacklebolt and Penrose. Lucius went home to rest and to prepare more for his part in the ritual. They wouldn't have a piece of sky continually recharging the participants. From what he learned, Adrian believed that the last ritual would be less taxing and there was slim to no chance for injury. He was happy about that.

Master Kobayashi went down to the lake to continue what he called a "fascinating" conversation with the Merpeople. The sweet Lovegood girl accompanied him.

Snape and Bouchard were working on a new potion inspired by the Sorcery rituals. From what Adrian understood, they wanted to use the same principles that bound Hermione's magic to her in order to assist people whose magic never properly manifested. If it worked, it may help a large portion of the Squib population. Turan was assisting them with their theory, so the three of them went upstairs to the library to check on some ideas.

The Headmistress excused herself to get word to the elves, Sprout, and Hagrid that they were ready for the expedition Hermione had agreed to. Hermione stood and began helping Percy and Theo put everything away. Adrian pulled her into his lap, leaving Percy and Theo to fend for themselves.

"I'll come pick you up at six if that's all right with you," Adrian told her, nuzzling her neck. He loved the way she smelled.

"That's perfect. Should I wear anything particular?"

"Just wear something you know I'll love," Adrian purred. He ran his hand up her denim-clad thigh. "You're beautiful in anything."

"We get it, you all adore Hermione," Harry interjected teasingly. "Merlin knows what the five of you do when the rest of us aren't around. We don't need to see it."

Adrian chuckled and Hermione rolled her eyes at her friend.

"Speak for yourself, Potter," Draco disagreed. "I love to see it."

"That goes back to me not needing or wanting to know what the five of you do in private," Harry retorted. Adrian laughed as Harry exaggerated his distaste in response to Draco's lust filled leer.
Adrian had to admit, he did adore Hermione; but he also very much enjoyed being with her and the others. Who wouldn't respond to so much beauty? Draco, Marcus, and Theo were all very attractive in their own ways.

"I want to know!" Pansy piped in. Adrian doubted she was entirely joking. "I'd welcome a blow by blow account, pun intended. Hermione, if you want to share, I'm ready at any time. I'll also take a pensive memory."

Everyone laughed at the Slytherin witch and Harry shook his head in mock exasperation. Even he couldn't keep the smile off his face though. Adrian briefly noticed that the Figgelowe witch wasn't laughing, but had a small sneer on her face. He idly wondered why she hung around before focusing back to his friends and the witch in his lap.

"What? I'm not kidding." Adrian heard Pansy tell her husband over the laughter.

"I know." Harry smiled and pressed a kiss into Pansy's temple. "All I ask is that you never tell me about it."

McGonagall returned to collect Hermione and Longbottom. Sprout and Hagrid were already outside with the House-elves that managed the castle's kitchen gardens. Adrian hated to let Hermione go, but managed because he was so excited to have the whole evening with her later that day. Hermione left him, Draco, Marcus, and Theo with goodbye kisses.

All four wizards sighed as they watched Hermione leave the Great Hall, causing several of the others to laugh.

"So how are you love-struck fools planning on spending the evening?" Blaise asked, still chuckling at their expense. Adrian grinned broadly. "Just going to sit around and be jealous of Ades?"

"No," Draco retorted with a haughty stare. "I'm not jealous of Ades, just irritated that I can't be there. Whatever I imagine him and Granger doing as I wank off tonight won't be as good as what really happens."

Pansy cackled with laughter, while most of the rest of them chuckled at Draco's outrageousness.

Adrian always thought that Pansy and Draco had the same wicked sense of humor. Harry groaned and clenched his eyes shut.

"You do realize that Hermione is like my sister, right?" Harry protested in a whiny voice. "I don't want to think about her that way."

"Fine, fine, we should stop," Adrian agreed good-naturedly. "You don't talk about a bloke's sister like that in front of him."

"So what are you going to do?" Blaise asked again. "If all goes well, this is like a stag night for the four of you. By this time tomorrow, you could be basically married."

Adrian didn't think any of them were comfortable making that presumption, but it was an interesting thought. By that time the next day, his life would be irrevocably altered, for better or worse. Shared looks with the other three wizards told Adrian that they were all thinking along the same lines.

"It's probably best that no one is alone tonight," Adrian spoke up. He knew all three of them, Draco, Marcus, and Theo, were prone to various forms of worry, wallowing, or over-thinking.

"I'm going to hang out with Dad tonight," Theo offered.
"I don't really have any plans," Draco admitted.

"Me neither." Marcus shrugged. "Everyone knows we are the Ancillary candidates, so I'd rather not go out. I'm not interested in being pestered or getting into a fight, which would happen if I get pestered."

"Why don't you and Marcus come over to our place?" Pansy offered. "We can have dinner and just hang out."

"Sounds good," Draco nodded.

"Just lay off the sex talk," Harry warned. Draco grinned devilishly and waggled his eyebrows at the bespectacled wizard. Adrian rolled his eyes. If he knew Draco, which he did, the blond would agitate his friend a few times for his own amusement.

"Unfortunately, we can't stay to enjoy the sex talk," Percy said with a sigh. He gestured to the Figgelowe witch. "We still have a few things to procure for tomorrow's ritual."

Figgelowe glared at Percy, but slowly gathered her things after he stood. Adrian watched her look at Marcus. He guessed she was trying to be coy or flirtatious, or some combination of the two. Marcus wasn't even looking at her initially. When he finally did, he just rolled his eyes. Adrian had seen that grimace of disgust he wore plenty of times in the past. Marcus really hated it when others didn't respect his choices. It was clear to all of them that Marcus did not want Figgelowe. He already had a witch, the best witch there was. Adrian smiled to himself. He knew that he was unbiased, but he really didn't care.

Percy and Figgelowe left, followed by Sasha. The Russian went to see if Kobayashi was done talking to the Merpeople.

"We better go home and put something together for you lot to eat when you come by," Harry said, standing. "Are you coming as well, Blaise?"

"I think I will," he nodded. "The city is packed and the parties last all night. People really want to celebrate the Sorceress. I was out all night for the last two nights in a row. Maybe it's time for a quiet evening. On a related note, I only got a few hours last night. I'm going to go home and nap."

Blaise, Harry, and Pansy all left, leaving the four Ancillary candidates alone in the Hall. They sat in silence for a while.

"Wouldn't it be wonderful if we all were chosen," Draco finally said, his tone wistful. The others nodded.

"I was a little annoyed to have to wait all this time for my date," Adrian admitted. "But now I'm glad to be able to spend this night before the ritual with Hermione."

"Our individual time with her is important," Theo said, standing to leave.

"I also like when we're all together, the five of us." Draco pouted slightly as he stood.

"I know, me too," Adrian assured him, also getting up from his seat. He pulled Draco in for a kiss, perfectly willing to comfort the sometimes petulant wizard. Draco needed a lot of reassurance. Since he was usually so confident, people didn't realize that he was so vulnerable regarding matters of the heart. The friendship between the two of them had always had a somewhat sexual component, which hadn't yet included actual sex. Adrian was sure sex wouldn't be too far off if they were both bound to Hermione. Draco kissed him back, hard. The younger Malfoy was a
passionate wizard.

"So what are you going to do with Hermione tonight?" Draco asked when they pulled apart. "I really do want to picture it later."

"I imagine I'll be doing the same thing you've all done with her," Adrian chuckled. Marcus and Theo were smiling, far away looks on their faces as they remembered their own individual time with their witch. "I'm going to love her."

"Loving her is the smartest and best thing I've ever done," Marcus stated.

"It's the smartest and best thing all of us have done," Theo affirmed.

The four wizards walked out of the hall together and talked briefly about what they would do following morning. Adrian watched as Marcus slung his arm around Draco's shoulder. He knew the large wizard would take care of their friend that night. They would take care of each other.

They all Apparated to their respective destinations, but would reconvene at Hogwarts the following afternoon. Adrian stopped by the date location to make sure everything was ready before going home. He showered and dressed carefully. He wasn't as interested in clothes and shopping as Blaise was, but Adrian enjoyed looking good. He wanted to make his witch proud that he belonged to her.

Adrian stopped by his mother's study and she wholeheartedly approved of his robe choice. She also told him to have fun and to give her love to Hermione. Adrian kissed his mother's cheek and made his way to Hermione house.

Adrian hadn't been in the foyer for more than a moment when Nobby informed him that Hermione was in the library. Adrian thanked him and went to find his witch.

The library was enormous, but he wouldn't have expected anything else from Hermione Granger. Late afternoon sun streamed in through the windows. There seemed to be an infinite number of shelves, most of them not yet filled. The light colored oak shone with polish. It wasn't a dark, stuffy library at all. The lightness of the wood of the shelves, tables, and chairs kept it bright. There was a comfortable looking scarlet couch and matching armchairs by the fireplace. It did seem perfectly Hermione.

Adrian finally spied his witch in a far corner running her fingers over a shelf. She wore a blush pink lace dress with thin straps. It came midway down her thigh and she had a rose gold metal belt on as well. Her gold heels were simple, with only one thin strap over the top of her foot and another around her ankle. Long gold earrings shone in the light.

"You look absolutely gorgeous, kitten," Adrian finally said. When she turned to him, her smile almost made him melt.

"You look gorgeous yourself," she replied, coming over to him. She ran her hands up his grey-blue robes and tilted her head up to kiss him softly.

"Enjoying your library?" He wrapped his arms around her.

"Definitely." She was clearly excited about what was likely going to be her favorite room in the house. "I was just setting some wards around the books. They should be airtight, water proof, and fire resistant."

"You will have the best cared for books in all of England, probably the whole world," Adrian
teased, kissing the tip of her nose. Hermione just laughed.

“And that would surprise who?”

“Not a soul. Did you need more time, or are you ready?”

Hermione was ready to go, so she picked up a pink cashmere shawl that had been lying on the table and they walked outside to the Apparition boundary. Adrian really hoped that she would enjoy what he had planned. He had considered and discarded so many different ideas. He was a complex wizard, but he wanted her magic to get to know him. He thought about going to an art gallery or an exclusive restaurant, but she’d already done similar things that week. Adrian decided to show him a side of himself that very few ever saw. He pulled her close and Apparated to their first destination.

Hermione looked around Diagon Alley and then looked to Adrian for direction. “The first part of our date is an errand,” he explained. They held hands and walked from the Apparition point to one of the small side streets. People stopped to look at them, but Hermione just smiled and acknowledged people as they went. The street wasn’t very large and not too crowded. Adrian directed her to a small market.

“I like this market because they have a really good stasis spell. Everything is fresh and perfectly ripe. They also have a good selection of interesting things.”

Adrian picked up a basket by the door and Hermione tucked her arm through his. She sighed and he studied her for a moment. She was smiling and it seemed to be a sigh of contentment.

“This is lovely,” Hermione explained as they walked to the produce section. “It’s so domestic and normal, comforting. I haven’t been the market since I moved back! What do we need to buy?”

“Shallots, a few herbs, lemons, parmesan, cream, a vegetable of some kind, and, of course, ice cream.”

“Of course.” Hermione looked at him with mock seriousness, her eyes twinkling. “Everyone needs ice cream.”

In the produce section, they chose a nice bunch of asparagus. They found the shallots, lemons, and herbs. They went to the dairy section for the cheese and a small container of cream.

"I didn't know you cooked," Hermione finally remarked. Adrian chuckled slightly. Cooking wasn't a common hobby for affluent witches or wizards. House-elves did that kind of thing. People with money didn't need to cook and few considered learning as a hobby. People who did learn to cook generally went on to do that as a profession. Adrian just thought it was fun. He liked creating something and he also liked feeding another person, giving them something to enjoy.

"Not many people do know. I don't cook for just anyone," he teased. "Growing up, things were generally dark, austere, and serious. Even my mother's natural joie de vivre couldn't counterbalance Hadrian. The kitchens were always such a warm, bustling place and the House-elves were always so welcoming. I'd started learning how to cook before I realized that was what was happening."

"So what are you making for me?"

"Me? I think you mean we," Adrian corrected, grinning. "There's no such thing as a free ride, even for a Sorceress. I'll be the chef and you'll be my sous-chef. Do you think your skills are up to the challenge?"

"I'm passable," Hermione admitted.
"While you were sleeping, Turan told us about some cooking classes you took in Turkey."

"I've learned a lot since I first began!" Hermione started to protest. Adrian laughed aloud.

"I'm sure you'll be excellent," he assured her. "Now, what's your favorite flavor of ice cream?"

They stood in front of a large case filled with small pint sized containers.

"That's a difficult question!" Hermione objected. "There are so many wonderful flavors. And there's gelato and sorbet as well! I think my love life is evidence that I couldn't possibly choose between such fabulous options."

Adrian laughed aloud, throwing his head back. He loved this witch so much.

"Then we'll just have to get four flavors, so everyone's included," he told her.

"Hmmm," Hermione studied the options. "Marcus would be... dark chocolate custard. It's complex, creamy, and has that bittersweet earthy flavor."

Adrian nodded his agreement and put the container in their basket.

"Draco is cherries jubilee, obviously."

"Oh, sure, obviously," Adrian teased, taking that container as well.

"Something light and unique for Theo. He's quirky and that's not for everyone," Hermione mused. "Lemon sorbet!"

She handed him the sorbet and turned back to the freezer case.

"Now for you." Hermione tapped her chin with her finger. "Something sweet and... luxurious. Aha! Dulce de Leche, perfect."

Adrian kissed her in front of the case, he couldn't help himself. Hermione was perfect for him. She seemed to understand him and his friends. Not only did each of them have her in their lives, but she'd brought them closer together than they otherwise ever would've been.

"Perfect is right," Adrian murmured when he pulled back. Hermione's sweet blush pinked her cheeks at the compliment.

They paid for their items and Adrian was impressed with the market staff. He came there often, so he knew them. They hadn't treated Hermione differently, aside from some wide-eyed staring when they first walked in.

Adrian Apparated them outside the market to their destination. It wasn't quite yet seven o'clock. Being that midsummer was the next day, the sun wouldn't actually set until after nine o'clock.

"This isn't your house." Hermione was facing the wrong way, so Adrian gently turned her.

"Oh, wow," she said, her eyes going wide. "This still isn't your house. Who does this belong to?"

"Me of course," Adrian laughed. He took her hand and led her down the wooden dock to his boat, waiting at the end. "I never got a flat or a place of my own because I didn't need to. I come here when I want some space, just me and my little boat."

“I’m pretty sure the correct term is yacht.”
“Well, maybe. However, it is a small yacht.”

Hermione laughed and rolled her eyes. He was being honest; there were larger yachts out there. Adrian wasn't trying to minimize his wealth or the things he had; in fact he enjoyed nice things and was glad he had never wanted for material items. At the end of the day, however, Adrian just wanted to be happy and comfortable. He didn't care for ostentatious displays of wealth. He'd never bought anything just for the purpose of impressing people. Of course, people did happen to be impressed at times, but that was an unintended side-effect. Adrian knew Hermione was unimpressed by wealth, but considered how people behaved and what they did with their resources.

"Well, it's quite a boat. Have you taken it far?"

"I've gone to the French Riviera, the Amalfi Coast, Greece, and all around the Mediterranean."

"That must've been nice." She sounded wistful.

"It was," Adrian affirmed. "But it would've been better if you were there."

Adrian knew that it was true. Everything was better with his witch.

"Maybe you need a vacation after tomorrow?" he ventured. They stood in front of the gang plank and he gestured to the boat. "There are three staterooms. It sleeps six comfortably with room for a two person crew. You could take it wherever you like, even if I'm not..."

Adrian let the end of his thought trail away. He didn't want to think about that, let alone say it aloud. Hermione squeezed his hand and shook her head.

"No talk like that tonight."

"No," he agreed. "We have better things to do. And you have work to do, kitten!"

Hermione laughed as he led her onto his boat. They walked onto the back deck and up a few steps to the outdoor dining area that Adrian planned to use later. He slid open the glass doors that led to the lounge area. Past that was the small kitchen. It was a boat, after all, so everything was a bit compact. Expansion charms were used to give more space, but there was a limit to the amount of charms that could be done. The boat still had to float. Adrian didn't mind being cozy with his witch. There was a small indoor dining area next to the stairs that led up to the bridge, another small lounge area, and the sun deck. Another set if stairs off the kitchen led down to the staterooms.

On the bridge, Hermione watched as Adrian started the boat with a tap if his wand. He gave it coordinates and they were underway at a nice, slow pace. After enjoying the scenery for a while, they went below to the kitchen.

Adrian set Hermione to work chopping, shallots and herbs to start. He got out the ingredients for the risotto he was making. They talked as they worked and Adrian showed Hermione a few tricks he'd learned over the years. She told him all about her experiments in cooking, those that worked well and those that did not.

When the roasted asparagus was just about finished and the parmesan and mushroom risotto was done, Adrian got out the monkfish he'd prepared earlier. It was a delicate fish and quick to pan roast.

The boat had come to a stop out into the open ocean. They could see the shoreline off in the distance. Adrian had Hermione set the table out on the deck, while he put the finishing touches on
everything. Soon, the food was on the table, candles were lit, and the wine was opened.

"A toast, to a spectacular chef," Hermione said, raising her glass.

"And to an amazing witch," Adrian replied.

"This food is what's amazing," Hermione groaned after they'd both been eating for several moments. Adrian was getting uncomfortable watching her mouth and listening to her groan. He'd never been so attracted to, so drawn to anyone before. Hermione had to be meant for him, he just knew it.

They talked more as they ate, about their hobbies and the things they did in their spare time. Adrian was surprised to learn Hermione was an avid knitter. She'd learned so she could make clothes for House-elves, but continued even after none of them had wanted them. Now she made clothes for free elves that she knew, but generally made things for friends or herself. Her last project was a black scarf for Severus.

Adrian told her about his artistic phase. He'd taken up painting, then sculpting, and eventually jewelry making, but very few people knew about that last one. He loved art and beauty, but was wizard enough and discerning enough to see that he was a mediocre artist at best. He liked creating, but had no interest in keeping what he'd made. All of his friends and their families were recipients of his creations over the years.

As Adrian cleared the dishes with a few flicks of his wand, he gave in to her requests and promised to show Hermione some pieces he'd made. He only asked that she pose for him in return. She agreed and Adrian was sure he got the better end of the deal.

"Now's the hard question," Adrian said, his voice and expression somber. Hermione looked at him expectantly, her brows slightly furrowed. "Which of the four flavors do you want for dessert tonight?"

Hermione laughed lightly.

"Dulce de Leche, of course," she said, as if it were obvious.

Adrian laughed along with her and excused himself to get their desserts. Hermione declared the ice cream delicious and the perfect end to a perfect meal. Adrian couldn't help but agree.

"I think you're partial to some of the other flavors as well," Hermione pointed out, her tone teasing and her eyes sparkling.

"As you said earlier, who could choose between such fabulous options?" Adrian knew she liked watching him with the others. She'd liked it when he kissed Theo and couldn't stop staring at him with Draco. He loved that it excited her, but he would never do it just for that reason. He was attracted to the other three wizards.

"I can't blame you there," Hermione agreed. "I can understand why you've all said that you like seeing me with the others. It's exciting to watch."

"It is, very much so. Do you have a fantasy about us with each other?"

When she blushed, Adrian knew that she most certainly did.

"You and Draco are just so beautiful together," she managed, still blushing.
"Tell me, kitten," he encouraged, his voice silky.

"I think about having Draco inside me while you're inside Draco," she admitted softly.

"Draco is a stunning wizard, who I love. We've been friends for decades. It would be exhilarating to be with the both of you at once. Where are Theo and Marcus?"

"Watching to start I think." The flush was creeping down her chest and Adrian knew she was getting wet just thinking about it. "Then they'll join in later."

Her voice was husky. Adrian moved closer to her and kissed her. She tasted like the ice cream and herself, wonderful. Hermione pulled him closer and moaned softly. Adrian broke the kiss and reached for his ice cream. A second later it was running over her shoulder toward her breast. She laughed and shrieked at the coldness. Adrian just followed the path it left with his tongue.

"We wouldn't want to get your lovely dress all sticky," he told her, unzipping the pretty pink garment. He pushed the straps off her shoulders and pulled the top of the dress down. Adrian smiled as he dropped another spoonful of ice cream on her other shoulder. This time it made its way unimpeded to her bare breast.

"I think you taste better than ice cream," he groaned before taking her hardened nipple into his mouth. Hermione just moaned a response, her head dropping back and her eyes half shut.

His hands were sliding up and in between her thighs when she abruptly stood up.

"Kitten?" He was a little confused. Any anxiety her departure may have caused was erased by her sweet, loving smile.

"You've made me entirely too messy."

Hermione slipped out of her heels and unclasped her metal belt, letting her push her dress all the way off. Adrian only got to admire her light blue knickers for a moment before they were gone as well. Seeing her standing gloriously naked in front of him made the momentarily stunned Adrian get up from his chair. He'd only managed one step toward her when she turned.

"I need to get cleaned up," she called over her shoulder.

By the time she dove off the back deck, Adrian had only discarded his robes. He had to stop on the deck to pull off his shoes and socks.

"The water is wonderful," Hermione called and Adrian couldn't find it in him to care about his shirt or trousers.

He dove in wearing the rest of his clothes. There was an initial burst of cold, but soon the water felt like the Mediterranean, which was odd for the ocean off England in late June.

Hermione swam to him and they embraced. His lips found hers and Adrian didn't think he'd ever be able to let her go. She managed to get his soaking shirt unbuttoned and Adrian pulled it off. He felt her reach down and unbutton his trousers as well. Adrian kicked in the water a few times and the heavy, water-logged fabric dropped off of his legs. Finally, he was naked, just like she was.

"You are so beautiful," Hermione breathed, her hands all over him. She was wet, slick, and Adrian was going mad as she rubbed up against him. He could barely focus on keeping his head above water.
"No, kitten," he managed, his voiced ragged with lust. "I've seen beauty and it's you. No one and nothing compares to you. I thought I'd seen and done everything, but then I saw you three weeks ago. You are my everything. You fill a hole inside me that I can't believe I didn't realize was there. I love you, more than anything."

"I love you too," she said, her hands cupping his face. Her legs wrapped around his waist and Adrian realized that they'd stopped treading water, but neither of them were sinking. In fact, it felt like the water was holding them up, supporting them.

Adrian was free to run his hands over every part of her body. His lips and teeth kissed, licked, and nibbled along her neck, shoulders, and chest.

"I want you so much," Hermione moaned, pressing down onto him.

Adrian reached down and caressed her slick folds. She gasped and clutched his shoulders.

Adrian felt like a fumbling fifth year. He had never been anything but smooth and suave with his partners. Hermione made him feel raw and primal. It made sense. He saw how she made the others feel. Marcus felt beautiful and precious instead if tough and unpolished. With their witch, Draco had real moments of vulnerable and reserve instead of usual confident and haughty self. Shaggy who was always in some state of disarray felt entirely put together and invulnerable with Hermione. Adrian didn't know how she did it.

"Ready, kitten?" He didn't recognize his own voice. It was gravelly and rough.
"I've never been more ready," she whispered directly in his ear.

Adrian pressed the head of his cock into her opening and froze. Just that much was already warm and perfect. He panicked for a moment. He didn't know how to do this. None of his flings, love affairs, or liaisons prepared him for this; this was Hermione.

She took his face in her hands and tilted it up, her eyes boring into his. Everything he needed was right there written on her face; all her love, acceptance, and desire for him. She was home. Adrian's breath caught and his eyes filled with tears.

"I know," she soothed. "It's a lot, love like this."

Adrian just nodded in response.

Hermione brushed a light kiss on one cheek, then the other, and finally his lips. She pulled back and nodded to him. Then, Adrian pushed all the way in. His chest was tight with emotion and his witch held him, murmured sweet words in his ear.

They began moving together, the water still holding them and somehow helping them move. The pleasure of all the sensation was almost overwhelming. Hermione's heat was easily distinguishable from the warm water surrounding them. Her hands touched and caressed him; her lips kissed him, while Adrian did the same to her. He reveled in being joined together, in being one with her. Adrian couldn't think of anything besides his witch.

After some time passed, Adrian had no idea how much, it seemed as if the water rocked them faster, or maybe it was them. Their caresses and kisses became more urgent as the pleasure built. Their bodies pressed tightly together and Adrian lost sense of where he ended and Hermione began.

Hermione began to flutter around him as he drove into her with their shared urgency. Soon, she her channel clamped down on him and her body tensed. Her eyes locked on his and he watched her come. Adrian had never seen anything so raw and beautiful.
The picture he had in front of him pushed Adrian over the edge. He wouldn't have been able to stop it if he tried. Neither of them broke eye contact. Adrian had never felt so exposed.

Hermione pressed her forehead to his. They floated together, still joined and holding on to each other in silence. Adrian listened to the sound of the water lapping against the boat.

"I love you, Adrian." Her voice was whisper soft.

In that moment Adrian was certain that he'd never be with another witch, even if he wasn't chosen. He would be devastated, heartbroken, and unwilling to function. If he ever recovered enough to want to take a lover, he would exclusively be with wizards.

"I don't have the words," Adrian replied. "I can't begin to express how profoundly I love you. I can't...tomorrow, I can't..."

Adrian's voice cracked and he had to stop. He was about to say he couldn't lose her, but they had no control over what happened.

"I understand," she soothed, stroking his arms and shoulders. "I can't imagine losing you. I also can't fathom living without Draco, Marcus, and Theo. it would be like asking me which one of my limbs I'd like to sever. You told me something that stuck with me. You told me to have faith, that I had to trust in my magic and myself."

Adrian nodded. He had told her that. His own faith had always been strong, but everyone was entitled to a crisis of faith now and again. The consequences of losing her were just too enormous.

"I remind myself to have faith in how much I love all of you," she continued. "That has to mean something. Trust that I love you and that I always will."

Adrian nodded and pressed his cheek to hers. There was no physical way to be closer to her. He was still inside of her, softened though he may be at the moment. He didn't want to separate though. They stayed that way for a few minutes and watched the sun set.

When it was full dark, Adrian suggested they move to back to the boat. He was still inside her, but he was hard again. This time, he wanted to have the space that a bed affords. He wanted to be able to touch and taste all of her.

Hermione was moving against him rhythmically, ever so slightly. She reached out and pushed the water with one hand. That one small push propelled them all the way back to the boat.

"Show off," Adrian teased. He sighed as they finally came apart.

"No, this is showing off," she giggled. Adrian tread water and watched as she rose out of the water. She paused for a moment and stood on the water before levitating up to the back deck of the boat. She lounged across the deck and smiled at him as he inelegantly hauled himself out. "If you want to see a really neat trick, look there."

Adrian looked over and saw his trousers and shirt floating on top of the water. He reached down and pulled them out, tossing them up on a deck chair to dry.

"Such a show off," he teased again. "I have things to show you as well."

Adrian scooped her up and carried her inside. He deposited her naked, giggling form on the bed in his stateroom. He Accioed his wand and said a spell to light all the candles he had set out in the room, covering every surface. There were easily a hundred of them. Hermione looked gorgeous.
bathed in candlelight.

"I'm going to make love to you until neither of us can move," Adrian told her, grinning.

One crook of her finger and the inviting look in Hermione's eyes told Adrian that he was in for a long night.

OoOoO

He stepped out of 12 Grimmauld Place and took a deep breath in the springtime night air. The Potters were good hosts. They tried to be supportive and distract them from the next day, but it wasn't really possible.

He looked up at the stars and studied them, but then he laughed at himself. He wasn't a seer and had no talent for divination. If he and Hermione Granger had a future together that was written in the stars, he wouldn't be able to see it. Regardless, they just had to be together. He wanted it too much for it to turn out any other way. And he was a wizard that always got what he wanted.

He heard a sound and turned to see a familiar witch standing a few paces away on the sidewalk.

"What are you doing here?" he sneered.

She lifted the wand she had clutched in her hand and pointed it at him. He laughed.

"You really think you can take me on your own?" he scoffed. He was certain that he was stronger than this witch.

"What makes you think I'm on my own?" she retorted.

He spun around at the sound of a second voice casting a spell, but didn't move fast enough. He felt the full body bind lock his muscles in place and he fell to the ground. He seethed with anger and didn't think it was possible to get angrier. That was, until a familiar face loomed over his. Ronald Weasley.

"You think you can take my witch?" Weasley snarled. "You think you can have whatever you want, but you can't. Tomorrow, you won't be there and I'll take your place. I'll tell Hermione you changed your mind. Given your history, I don't think anyone would doubt it."

His rage was palpable. If any part of him could move, Weasley and this witch would be dead. His lips twitched already. He knew the Weasel's spell couldn't hold him for long.

"Not here," the witch hissed. "Let's go!"

She cast an Incarcerous charm and he was tied up in ropes. Then a Mobilicorpus levitated him up. The witch grabbed on to him and he felt the pull of side-along Apparition. Panic was setting in. He was sure he could get out of this eventually, but would he be in time? What would she think if he didn't arrive for the third ritual? Would she really believe that he'd abandoned her? That couldn't happen. He had just over twelve hours to get out of this.

As soon as they landed in the dusty, abandoned room, he started planning. Nothing and no one was going to keep him away from Hermione Granger.

Chapter End Notes
Next: the calling!
Wait, was that ending a cliffhanger? ;-}
Chapter Thirty-Six

Hermione woke up with the immediate knowledge that today was the day. She didn't slowly wake and recall that the third ritual was finally upon her, it was forefront in her mind. Today was Midsummer. This was it.

She rolled over on the silk sheets and looked at Adrian, who was also awake.

"Good morning, kitten," he smiled.

"How could it not be, since I get to wake up with you?"

Adrian's beautiful smile beamed.

Being with him had been everything she imagined. After the emotional first time in the ocean, Adrian had kept his word and they had made love for hours. There wasn't part of her that he didn't caress and attend to. The candle light and luxurious sheets felt as if she were transported into a romance novel. Adrian did not disappoint. He was attentive and passionate. Hermione had read about tantric sex and sex magic, but the texts described an emotionally driven discipline that had been difficult for her to imagine. The intensity and connection discussed were not something she could truly picture. Now though, she had an idea of what the text referred to. Somehow, being with Adrian had been intense, passionate, emotional, controlled, and romantic. All of her wizards made her feel cherished, but Adrian had a special way of making her feel adored and treasured.

"It's quarter to eleven o'clock," he told her, running his fingers over her cheek and down her neck.

"Minnie invited me over to Hogwarts for brunch at eleven thirty. She said a witch should be with other females before her wedding, that it was a traditional time to give advice to the new bride." Hermione sighed. She wanted to go and she loved Minnie. "I'm just so worried, Adrian."

"I know, kitten." He pressed his forehead against hers. "Me too, we all are."

"What will you do this morning?"

"Spend time with my mother. It's just been the two of us for so long. If all goes well today, she'll be living alone for the first time in... well, ever."

"I hadn't thought of that." Hermione felt bad. She was so focused on the changes in her life and what she wanted, she didn't think about how it would affect others.

"She's rather excited to be honest. I'm a little offended." His eyes shone with mirth.
"Do you know what the others are doing?"

"The same as me, I believe. They'll be spending time with their families. No one knows what today is going to bring and being with family is comforting."

For a moment, Hermione wished her parents were there. But there was no way they'd understand what happened to her or what she needed to do. Their panic and confusion wouldn't soothe her. It was better to tell them everything after it was over.

Hermione pulled Adrian in for a deep kiss.

"I love you, Adrian."

"I know you do. And I love you now, and I will continue to love you at the end of the day, no matter what. I expect that whatever's supposed to happen will happen."

"Have faith?" She smiled at him. She was trying to have faith in herself, trying to trust that the strength of her love for each of them meant something.

"It's all we have." He returned her smile. "I have faith in you."

Another several kisses later, Hermione managed to tear herself away and Apparate home. She went straight into her bathroom to clean up quickly, again thankful that she had cut off all that long hair. She dressed in a white dress with a bold orange, red, and green pattern. She found green heels that matched and pulled on her denim jacket. The castle was always chilly, even in the spring.

When she was dressed, Nipsy found her leaving her room. The small pink-clad elf walked with Hermione as she made her way to the Floo.

“All is as planned with the house, Missy,” Nipsy updated her. “Missy Bones is finished with the rooms discussed. I is having some problems with the post.”

It looked as if it pained Nipsy to admit any problems. Hermione just waited.

“There is many many many letters for the Sorceress from wizards wanting to be picked for the Ancillary. Nipsy knows Missy has picked the Masters. When the letters started coming after you was waking up, Master Harry Potter and Master Draco Malfoy was telling Nipsy to ignore them. And Missy was telling Nipsy to listen to the Masters. Just… now there are so many and they are taking up spaces all over the study. Can Nipsy be destroying them, or are they for keeping?”

“Go ahead and destroy them,” Hermione confirmed. “There shouldn’t be any more arriving after today.”

Hermione thanked the small elf for all of her hard work and asked her to pass along her thanks to the other House-elves as well. She didn’t know what mood she’d be in when she came home that evening, so she wanted to make sure they knew they were doing a good job.

Floo travel was never smooth for Hermione, but she’d adapted well enough over the years. She continued to arrive with a slight stumble, no matter how hard she focused on being graceful. She would’ve preferred to Apparate, but Hogwarts grounds had been opened to the public at dawn and even she wasn’t allowed to Apparate directly into the castle. So when Hermione stumbled into the lounge in the Headmistress’ quarters, it took her a moment to get her bearings. She was further thrown off by the shouting.

“Surprise!”
Hermione looked around to see a group of witches, rather than just the Headmistress. Luna, Selma, and Pansy were standing next to Minnie, as was Molly Weasley.

“We thought we’d help you celebrate your last hours as a single witch,” Pansy explained. “Here’s where I would hand you a glass of champagne, but I’ve been told you shouldn’t drink alcohol before the ritual. So, punch will have to do.”

Hermione took the proffered glass and laughed at Pansy rolling her eyes. She imagined the Slytherin witch argued against the no alcohol policy, but lost to the others.

“Thank you for this,” Hermione smiled. “Not just the punch, although I’m sure it’s wonderful; for being here today.”

“We wouldn’t miss it for anything,” Selma told her, guiding her to a seat. “A witch needs other witches around at a time like this.”

“I remember how nervous I was before my wedding, and that is nothing compared to this,” Molly told her, sitting next to her on the couch. Minnie sat in a chair, as did Pansy. Selma moved to sit next to Luna on the other couch.

“You were nervous to bind to Arthur?” Hermione was a little surprised. They were such a well-matched, solid couple.

“Of course! All manner of worries ran through my head. Was I ready to be married? Did I really want to forsake all others? Was Arthur the right wizard? Would marriage change what we already had?”

Pansy laughed aloud. Everyone turned to look at her.

“Sorry,” Pansy apologized. “I think I had all of those thoughts as well. I’m glad to know it’s normal. My mother isn’t the kind of witch to share her private thoughts with me, even if she’d had them.”

“It’s a big step; it changes your life,” Minnie said. “It’s perfectly normal to be nervous that you are doing the right thing. In your case, you don’t really have a choice so I imagine your nerves will be worse.”

“So we’re here to talk, be supportive, and try to soothe your nerves,” Luna explained. “As best we can at any rate.”

“I’m glad some level of panic is normal.” Hermione smiled and sipped her drink. “It makes this feel more like a real wedding day, not an uncommon ritual that will possibly bind me to a stranger. How did you all manage the anxiety?”

“I was pacing and in quite a state,” Pansy admitted. “Draco offered to get me out of there in that moment. He said he’d take me off someplace that no one would find me and I wouldn’t have to marry Harry. That stopped me in my tracks. I wanted to marry Harry, of course. The idea of going anywhere without him was not an option. Draco knew that, but he likes to be dramatic, as you well know.”

“I’ve noticed,” Hermione said wryly.

“My experience was similar, if not less dramatic,” Molly chuckled, smiling at the Slytherin witch. Hermione wondered if the two had ever really spoken before. “The thought of not being married to Arthur was much more terrifying than all of my other fears.”
“I really hope that I will be able to bind to all four of them,” Hermione admitted. “My fear is that I won’t.”

“Then trust that your magic will do what you need it to do,” Luna smiled.

“Now, being bound to four wizards is something none of us can give you advice on I’m afraid,” Molly laughed.

“I’m sure some of the same basic issues apply,” Minnie chimed in, grinning. “Communication is important to all relationships, for example; as is a good stinging hex.”

They all laughed at the serious look on the Headmistress’ face. The witches talked about the relationship advice they’d heard over the years, some of which had helped, but some had decidedly not. The conversation was comforting to Hermione and it continued as they sat down to eat in Minnie’s private dining space. Brunch was lovely, but Hermione didn’t have much of an appetite.

“It’s one o’clock, Hermione,” Molly finally said. Hermione heaved a sigh.

There wasn’t the elaborate cleaning process as there was for the other rituals, but she did need time to get ready.

“Even though this isn’t technically a wedding, we thought you might want to wear something a bit nicer than that plain white shift you wore in the other rituals.” Pansy wrinkled her nose at the thought of the dresses Hermione had worn before.

Pansy reached behind a door and brought out a large box. She set it on the table.

“Luna, Selma, and I picked it out,” Pansy explained.

Hermione opened the box and found a gorgeous, long white dress. The material was gauzy and soft. It really was nothing like the sturdy white shifts she wore for the other rituals.

“We thought we could help you with your hair and makeup as well,” Selma chimed in.

“This is beautiful. I would love to wear this. Thank you so much.” Hermione was getting misty eyed.

Minnie and Molly left the younger witches, each going to attend to their own business. Minnie had to get ready herself and go help Lucius cast the ritual circle before she arrived. Molly had arranged for some of the castle elves to watch her grandchildren, so everyone could attend the ritual. No one really thought the ritual site was a good place for children, and babysitters were scarce that afternoon.

Hermione put on the dress with help from the other witches. Selma attended to her short hair, which was not a demanding job, while Luna applied her makeup.

“So where are those wizards of yours this morning?” Pansy asked, leaning against the wall.

“Family time I believe,” Hermione answered, trying to keep her eyes wide so Luna could line them.

“Huh, that’s odd. Lucius was complaining earlier that he hadn’t seen Draco. He and Narcissa were expecting him for breakfast.” Pansy shrugged. “Lucius did get here very early, though. He probably just missed Draco, who doesn’t wake up until he absolutely has to as a general rule.”

“He definitely isn’t a morning person,” Hermione agreed, smiling.
When the others declared that she was ready, Hermione took a deep breath and studied her reflection. Her hair and makeup made her look glowing. The long gauzy white dress was gorgeous. She looked as close to a bride as she felt she should.

"You look lovely," Luna said, smiling.

"Amazing," Selma confirmed.

"Everyone who sees you will fall over themselves to get your attention, not that they aren’t already," Pansy snorted. "The guys will love it though, seriously."

"Thank you."

Hermione blushed slightly. She did want to look spectacular, but not for the throng of spectators. She wanted her wizards to be surer of this, of her, than they were of anything else. She knew they loved her, she believed it with all her heart. It was silly, but part of her was counting on their collective strength of will to make this turn out the way they thought it should. None of them were passive or easily dissuaded once they had chosen their path. "Thank you for everything; for the dress, the help, for just being there for me these past weeks. It means the world to me. A witch can't go wrong with friends like you three."

"I'm so proud of you, fistik," Selma said, hugging Hermione. "We all are. You've handled these past weeks with grace and a little bit of flair. I don't think anyone else could've done what you've done."

"Definitely proud," Luna echoed. She went over and hugged the two witches.

The three embracing witches looked at Pansy expectantly.

"Oh no," she objected. "I don't group hug. It's a Slytherin thing. The no group hugging rule is explicitly posted in our common room. I'm proud of you, glad we're friends and all that, but still, no group hugging."

The other three descended on Pansy and enveloped her, laughing all the while.

"If anyone finds out, we'll make sure they understand this was not consensual," Hermione promised.

It was a quarter to two o'clock so the four witches went downstairs to the main hall where a small group was assembled. Kingsley stood with Penrose, Kobayashi, Bouchard, Sasha, and Healer Adams.

"Lucius and Minerva are out casting the circle now," Kings informed her. "You look lovely."

"Thank you."

"So very lovely," Sasha practically stammered after he closed his mouth. Hermione wanted to roll her eyes at her former lover, but it really was flattering. Hermione chuckled when she recalled her discussion with her wizards the previous day about making herself unappealing to wizards. The beautiful dress, hair, and makeup wouldn't help.

Hermione took a moment and thanked them all individually for all their help. It warmed her heart to have such supportive friends, several of whom dropped what they were doing in order to come to her aid. She wanted to make sure they knew she appreciated them.

Out of the corner of her eye, Hermione saw movement and turned to see what appeared to be the entire Weasley clan, minus Percy and the children. Molly had taken Bill, Fleur, Ron, and Ginger to
drop off the little ones with the castle elves. Arthur, Charlie, George, and Ginny must have joined them.

“Wow, ‘Mione, you look stunning,” Charlie enthused, coming over to hug her briefly.

“There’s not a wizard alive who could resist you,” George added, giving her his own squeeze.

Hermione thanked them and greeted the rest of the Weasleys with a wave. Ginny looked a little disgruntled, Ron appeared agitated, and Ginger seemed as if she hadn’t slept. Hermione ignored her own curiosity and focused back on herself. She only had a few more minutes until she had to go outside.

Severus swept into the hall, his black robes billowing and looking very much as he had back when he was a professor there. Hermione almost didn't notice Percy behind him.

"Your Ancillary candidates are beginning to assemble outside," Severus told her as he pulled her into a tight embrace. "Two have arrived."

Hermione nestled into Severus, finding comfort in his arms. She was a little surprised that he allowed such affection in front of so many people, but if there was ever a time for his love and support it was then. She was still so nervous.

"Draco and Marcus aren't here yet," Percy supplied. "Adrian and Theo just arrived with their respective parents. Ted and Arabella went to the front section we've reserved while Adrian and Theo are assuming their positions. Bronwyn was unforgivably late, but Neville pitched in so everything was set up for Mister Malfoy and the Headmistress to begin the circle."

"It's probably for the best that Draco and Marcus arrive just before you get started," Pansy snarked. "They go mental even thinking about all the wizards coming today. I looked out the window upstairs. When they see this crowd, they’re going to go absolutely mad."

Hermione chuckled into Severus’ robes, still holding onto her friend.

“It doesn’t help that your ex-lovers are here, creating more irritation for your chosen,” Pansy continued. “No offense to the present company that includes.”

“None taken,” Severus and Sasha said in unison, making Hermione laugh. She needed that, the humor to lighten up her mood. She noticed that several Weasleys looked surprised at her past relationship with the dour Potions Master. Ron’s face had gone beet red. Hermione couldn’t bring herself to care, even a little bit.

Hermione stepped away from Severus and squared her shoulders. It was almost time to start. Harry walked in and when the doors opened, the noise of all the people outside was almost deafening.

“I just checked with the Aurors and all is well,” Harry reported. “I didn’t check the ritual circle specifically, but it looked like Lucius and McGonagall were doing something over there. Are you ready?”

Hermione nodded and wiped her sweating palms on her dress, hoping it wouldn’t mess the lovely garment too much.

“Will you walk with me, Harry?” Hermione asked her oldest friend. He took her hand in his.

“Of course.”
“I’ll save you a seat,” Pansy told her husband, kissing him on the cheek. “Let’s go everyone. I think we should give the Sorceress a moment to herself.”

Hermione gave Pansy a grateful smile and everyone began to file out of the castle. They didn’t have far to go. Percy had arranged for about thirty seats right next to the ritual circle for close friends, family, the centaurs, and the Veela. She’d insisted that the Weasleys sit there as well. Molly and Arthur were her surrogate wizarding parents. Charlie and George were like brothers. Finally, she and Harry were alone.

“You look beautiful, ‘Mione.”

“Thanks.” Hermione took a deep breath. “Did you see them?”

“I saw Theo and Adrian earlier. They look as nervous as you do. Right before I checked in with the lead Aurors, I saw Draco arrive with Narcissa. He looked cocky as ever, but even he was pale.”

“How can you tell?” Hermione chuckled, making fun of Draco’s eternal paleness. Harry laughed along with her.

“I saw Flint’s parents sitting with Theo’s dad and Adrian’s mum, so he must be around somewhere,” Harry shared. “It’s a bit mad out there with the noise and number of people. But I’ll be right here with you until I can’t be anymore.”

Hermione tightened her grip on her friend’s hand and nodded. She took another deep breath and they headed out the door.

Harry was right, it was madness. Hermione was entirely overwhelmed by the sheer noise and number of people, all there to watch her complete the third ritual or to try to be part of it. Cheers sounded as she left the castle and began walking with Harry. The path from the castle to the ritual site seemed to take forever. She was so glad she’d asked her friend to go with her. Hermione couldn’t imagine taking this walk by herself.

Finally, she was close enough to ritual circle to see it clearly. Hermione spotted Adrian first, standing in the North position, and was shocked by how upset he looked. Something was wrong. She found Theo and then Draco; each wore similar expressions. She looked to the West spot, but didn’t see Marcus. Where was Marcus? Hermione felt a wave of panic go through her. She stopped in her tracks. She wasn’t going to enter that circle without Marcus.

"Marcus isn't here!" she explained to Harry. Her friend looked to where the big wizard was meant to be and, not seeing him, began scanning the area.

Hermione turned and walked over to the reserved seats and found the Flints.

"Have you seen Marcus today?" she asked Pius and Inge, who were beginning to look worried as well.

"No, we thought he was with you," Pius answered.

Hermione felt the panic raise and start to take over. Something must’ve happened to Marcus. Nothing would keep him from her, she was certain. If he was conscious and free to move, he would undoubtedly be with her. She couldn’t lose Marcus. She needed him. He was part of her; he was one of the pieces that made her whole. She couldn’t survive without him. Emotions crashed around inside her; it was chaos. Her magic surged inside her, reflecting her emotional turmoil. She had to find her wizard. She needed him and had no idea where he was. The only conceivable place he could be was there, with her, but he wasn’t!
"Sorceress, please! You must stop!" Hermione heard yelling and realized that it was Avian, the male Veela. He was in full Veela form, his black wings outstretched and flying with difficulty in a strong headwind. Hermione wondered why he was flying.

Hermione looked and saw that she was about thirty feet up in the air. Wind was whipping around, making it hard for Avian to stay near her. She saw the spectators holding on to their seats and their hats, also being blown by strong winds. It looked as if the ground was shaking as well. The stands swayed, people were struggling to keep from falling to the ground. Hermione knew she must be doing that. Her emotions were out of control. She tried to focus, but it was difficult.

"I don't know if I can stop it," Hermione shouted at the Veela. "I need Marcus. He's my mate."

"Call him," Avian yelled back. "Do the Calling and bring him to you."

Hermione wondered if that would work. She focused on trying to calm down. If she didn’t calm down, she couldn’t solve the problem in front of her. She closed her eyes and told herself that she would find Marcus. There was no way she would lose him. She was a bloody Sorceress. She would tear the world apart to find her wizard and Merlin help anyone that tried to get in her way.

The wind died down, but there was still a breeze in the air; like a lingering threat. The ground stopped shaking as well, but Hermione could hear rumbling. She stayed up in the air, surveying the crowd. A silence had fallen over everyone as they watched her and waited, most people still trying to hold on to something solid.

“'I want Marcus Flint,’” she said, her voice loud and echoing. Her statement was met with continued silence. “If anyone has him or knows where he is, bring him to me immediately.”

“I meant the ritual Calling, Sorceress,” Avian said, circling near her.

“I know that,” Hermione snapped, her voice a normal volume. She allowed herself to float down to the ground, where a slightly rumpled looking Harry was waiting for her. Her friends were watching her, anxiety clearly etched on their faces.

Avian landed next to her, looking a bit irritated that his feathers were so ruffled. “Someone must have done something to Marcus. He would be here if he could, so someone has to be stopping him.”

"Hermione, I think you're jumping to conclusions," Ron admonished, stepping out of the reserved seating. "This is Marcus Flint we're talking about. He isn't the sort to be happy with just one witch. Given his reputation, isn't it more likely that he simply decided not to show up today?"

"No, that isn't likely at all," Hermione responded simply, snorting slightly at the absurdity of Ron’s statements. She didn't doubt Marcus for a second, but she had no clue why Ron would want her to.

"It's not possible," Harry agreed, dismissing Ron’s comments. "Flint would definitely be here if he could. Something's wrong."

"Look, he clearly isn't coming," Ron huffed. "He's not here, I’m here. I'll take his place."

Hermione's eyes widened in shock. Did Ron really imagine that he was going to be one of her Ancillary candidates? Not only would her magic never choose him, but neither would Hermione. Not again. She was blown away by Ron's presumption. They didn't end on good terms and weren't even friendly anymore.

"But...you're not single," Harry managed to stammer, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

"I'm not married," Ron defended. "You know we're supposed to be together, 'Mione. You can stop
this foolishness and I'll forgive you for leaving."

"Forgive me?" Hermione was incredulous. She almost engaged in an argument with him, but stopped herself. He didn't have time to fight with Ron. Ron didn't matter, Marcus mattered. "You know what, never mind. I'm not going to get into our history, Ron. I have more important things to do, like find Marcus."

"You need your perfect matches," Harry said, clearly thinking aloud. "Without the right match you won't survive."

"Marcus has to be one of my matches," Hermione said with conviction. The earth rumbled beneath her feet, punctuating her statement. She saw people trying to get their footing and hold on, but she didn't care.

"He's not coming! Don't you understand what’s happening?" Ron yelled, his face as red as his hair. "He can't come and I'm here!"

"What did you do?" Ginger hissed, stepping toward Ron and grabbing his arm.

Ron rolled his eyes and tried to jerk away, but Ginger held on. Hermione watched the couple for a second. She didn't have time to be a spectator at a domestic dispute.

"What did you do, Ron?" Ginger repeated, her voice hard. "You had something to do with this, didn't you?"

That got Hermione's attention. She stared at Ron, her eyes narrowing.

"What did you do with Marcus?" Ginger demanded.

"You don't know what you're talking about. Just sit down and shut up," Ron retorted angrily. Hermione had known Ron for seven years and she knew when he was hiding something.

"Answer her," Hermione directed.

"She's a barmy bint that doesn't know anything," Ron scoffed. Hermione could tell he was nervous, despite his bluster.

"I know you weren't home at all last night," Ginger retorted. "Where were you?"

Hermione felt her anger seething and bubbling. She was a few feet off the ground and her magic crackled around her like blue flames. Ron just stared at her.

"Answer her!" Hermione demanded again, her voice booming and shaking the nearby stands. Ron's face drained of all color and his expression lost its previous condescending, haughty sneer. He looked more like a trapped animal. "Or do I need to compel you?"

Hermione lifted her hands out in front of her and blue flame danced along her skin. The fire at her fingertips flared up and balls of fire popped off her to twist in the wind. Apparently, during their time apart Ron had forgotten what she was capable of. Four years ago she could easily best Ronald Weasley and now it required no more effort than snapping her fingers. Ron was shaking but still silent.

"Do you know how easy it would be for me to destroy you?" Hermione wasn't using any Sonorous charm, but her voice echoed clearly through the entirely silent crowd.
"It wasn't my idea," Ron whispered before his eyes rolled back up into his head and he fell to the ground in a dead faint.

Hermione let out an exasperated huff.

"I'm so sorry, Hermione," Ginger said, her eyes downcast. "He was behaving strangely and I should've figured out that something was going on. I knew he still clung to the idea that you'd change your mind about him. I just never thought he'd do something this...awful."

"It's not your fault. You didn't know." Hermione sighed. She looked over to the other Weasleys. They looked collectively shocked and horrified.

She gave them what she hoped was a forgiving look. She couldn't blame them for what Ron had done, but she didn't have time to placate them. She needed to find Marcus. "Does anyone know what Ron did with Marcus?"

No," Charlie spoke up after they'd all looked to each other. "He had dinner with me and George last night. He left just after ten o'clock."

"He showed up at home around dawn," Ginger supplied. She looked down at his unconscious form with a mixture of disappointment, pity, and anger. Hermione was quite familiar with that range of emotions when dealing with Ron. No one was making any effort to move him from where he fell, which didn't bother Hermione in the least.

"Ron isn't that creative," George reported, looking at his brother with disdain. "If he took Flint someplace, it would be a familiar location."

"He said it wasn't his idea." Hermione furrowed her brow. "I'm worried he had a partner in this. That person is an unknown."

"Hermione," Severus said gently, coming toward her.

"I know," Hermione snapped at him. She knew her hostility was misplaced, but she also knew what he was going to say. "I need more time!"

"I know you do, but you simply don't have it." Severus' voice was still gentle, but sad as well. "Look at Lucius and Minerva."

Hermione looked at the ritual leaders. They did look strained. The ritual began when they cast the circle so they were magically supporting the area on their own. When Hermione stepped inside, she would share the burden. The circle wouldn't last forever and the ritual had to be completed once it was begun. A tear fell from her eye.

"I can't do this without him," she whispered.

"If you don't do it, you risk losing the other three," Severus reminded her.

Silent tears streamed down her face as she looked to her other three wizards, still holding their positions. She could see they all wanted to come to her, but they were doing the right thing. They had to be in the proper location for that element to encourage her magic to choose them. It may not be absolutely necessary, but it would likely be helpful and they'd agreed not to waste any advantage, no matter how small. Adrian looked heartbroken, Draco was outraged, and Theo was angrier than she'd ever seen him before. Marcus was missing and she couldn't jeopardize her chances with the other three. If she tried to stop the ritual, her magic might never bond with an Ancillary.

"Harry, I need you to help me," she told her friend. She tried to wipe away her tears. "Get as many
people as you need and do whatever you need to do. I need you to find Marcus as soon as possible."

Harry nodded, looking determined.

"Any assistance that you all can give would be appreciated," Hermione told her friends.

"I have a locating spell that might help," Kobayashi volunteered. He went to join Harry along with Marcus' parents, Narcissa, Ted, and Arabella. Pansy, Luna, Selma added to the group, as did Arthur and Molly; everyone looking resolute.

"Thank you," Hermione told the group.

"You may be able to Call your mate, as the bird said," Ronan told her, gesturing to Avian. She looked at the centaur.

"But we don't know where he is, how far away he might be," Hermione lamented.

"If he is mate to your earth magic and your magic wants no other, it will find him. Earth magic is strong," Bane asserted proudly. Both centaurs held their heads a little higher. "Earth is strong and constant, not transient. It may not be as flashy as tornados and flames, but the earth is steady and dependable."

"And stubborn," Hermione smiled, thinking of Marcus.

"Very," Ronan confirmed, smirking at Bane who rolled his eyes.

Hermione nodded at the centaurs and turned toward the ritual circle. Minnie and Lucius were clearly fatigued, holding the circle together was taking its toll. Hermione looked at her wizards. All were grim faced, but they looked determined. They were disturbed by Marcus' absence as well. She took a deep breath, straightened her spine, and stepped into the circle.

As soon as Hermione was in the circle the perimeter, made up of lapis lazuli and jade, flared into blinding blue and green lights. The light shone so that Hermione couldn't see outside the circle until it dimmed several minutes later. She was officially closed inside the circle and wouldn't be able to come out until the ritual was complete.

Chapter End Notes

Next- how many wizards will it be? ;-)
Hermione stood in the center of the ritual circle. She looked around to Adrian, Draco, and Theo. She focused on each of them for a moment, making eye contact. They each gave her a nod that they were ready to begin; giving her much needed moral support. No one wanted to proceed without Marcus, but it had already begun and there was no way to stop it. Hermione just had to trust that either Harry would find Marcus soon, or that her magic would find him as the centaurs and Veela thought it might.

Hermione closed her eyes and focused on her magic. She could feel that it was ready. Air, Earth, Water, and Fire were all attuned with her, the power of each element poised to act.

"Evoco Optivus," she said with a clear, firm tone.

Hermione poured everything she had into those two simple words, which literally translated to something like Summon the Chosen. Magic was often deceptively complicated. The words were simple, but to get them to work properly required a great deal more. If that weren't the case, every first year could summon a fully formed Patronus. For the Calling, the elemental magic was essential; without it, they were just meaningless words that did nothing. Those words, channeling the elemental magic, and strong focused control combined to create the Calling.

Hermione could sense and feel the elemental magic ever since she’d woke up from her coma. It was a constant presence. She felt her magic extend and stretch out of her body, each element extending outward like an elastic ribbon.

The fire magic stopped pulling, so Hermione looked in the direction it took. She felt it make contact and saw Draco’s eyes go wide.

Hermione couldn't restrain her smile. Her fire magic had quickly reached out and taken hold of Draco Malfoy. She was so happy and so was her magic, she could feel it. Draco began advancing toward the circle. The crowd's silence was broken by a buzz of murmurs and whispers as people reacted. When Draco reached the edge and stepped over the glowing perimeter, he looked partially astounded and partially elated. He approached her and kissed her, hard. Of course, Draco wouldn’t be bothered by the massive crowd watching them. Hermione wanted to laugh; she was so joyous and giddy.

"I'm so happy you're here," she told him after they broke the kiss. Hermione clung to him for a moment and didn't care how it looked. Tears of happiness were brimming in her eyes and she saw them in his as well, though he'd never admit that.

"So am I, Granger," he responded, grinning widely. "I knew there was no way you could resist me."
Hermione laughed at his cocky bravado and wiped her eyes.

"What next?" He asked, looking toward Adrian and Theo.

"I felt all four elements reach out. Fire went to you and made contact, but the others are still out there."

Hermione concentrated on the directions her magic took. It seemed fire had moved fastest, but that wasn't too surprising. Fire was quick and impulsive. The other three elements were still moving, just slower.

Air was moving in sweeping arcs, as if it were being blown by the wind, so it was hard to gauge where it would ultimately land. Hermione felt it stop, as the fire had. She looked up and saw Theo staring back at her, his brow furrowed. Hermione felt the Air magic firmly take hold of something and saw Theo look down to his waist. Of course, no one could see it, but it was there and it was forceful. Theo began moving toward the circle, pulled by the air magic, but also excitedly walking himself.

Again, the volume of the crowd increased as they chattered and commented about Theo's movement. Theo practically leapt over the circle boundary and hastened to get to her and Draco. Theo swept her up and kissed her. He was full of emotion, but so was she. She had Theo and Draco with her and no one could take them away from her, ever.

"This is an amazing sensation! I felt the magic take hold of me and I can still feel it. It isn't holding me anymore, but I can feel it swirling around me; like a breeze." Theo said as he pulled away from her, smiling.

"I feel it flickering around me still, like a flame," Draco confirmed, still grinning broadly.

The trio basked in each other's company for a moment before turning to attend to what was occurring outside the circle. Minnie and Lucius were conferring with each other and trying to catch her attention. Hermione frowned and shook her head at them. They weren't ready to do the Binding yet, but she did already have two Ancillaries; that was as many as anyone in history had ever had. The buzzing crowd became hushed again, watching the interaction.

"I can still feel my water and earth magic out there," Hermione explained to Theo and Draco. "Doesn't that mean we're not done?"

"All we need now is Adrian and Marcus," Theo said with determination, nodding his agreement.

All three of them turned toward Adrian, who appeared conflicted. He looked so happy for the three of them, but he carried an air of dejection. More than two Ancillaries were unheard of, but Hermione knew her magic wasn't done. She mouthed the words 'I love you,' to him, knowing he couldn't hear her. Adrian's smile looked a little broken, but he held his hand up to his heart and mouthed the same words back.

Hermione closed her eyes and focused. She held hands with Draco and Theo, squeezing them and searching within herself for more power. She whispered the spell again to encourage the water and earth to find their mates and bring them to her. She could feel them. The earth magic seemed to have picked a direction and was steadily going, stretching further and further away from her.

The water magic seemed to be trickling and flowing over everyone present. Hermione began to worry that her magic was seeking out another person, rather than going to Adrian. She steadied her nerves and tried to have faith that it would make the right choice. When she felt it stop moving and
take hold of someone, she held her breath. She kept her eyes closed, not able to bear looking in case it wasn't Adrian.

The crowd was in an uproar. No one had counted on three Ancillaries. Hermione had hardly dared to dream that herself.

"Yes!" she heard Draco say over the noise. Hermione opened her eyes and saw a shocked looking Adrian being pulled into the circle. She almost ran to him, but Draco and Theo were still holding her hands. When Adrian was standing in front of her though, they let go and she threw her arms around the beautiful wizard. His gorgeous smile was brilliant and his cheeks were wet with tears of joy. Adrian squeezed her so hard she almost couldn't breathe, but she didn't care. She'd breathe later. Now she had three of her four wizards, and it made her feel like her chest would burst.

"Took you long enough," Draco teased. Adrian laughed.

"I was starting to worry, kitten," Adrian admitted.

"You said to have faith," she said, smiling at her wizard. Adrian just chuckled and held her tighter.

"Hermione," Minnie called from the perimeter. "What do you want us to do?"

"Should we start the Binding?" Lucius yelled.

Hermione shook her head. She needed Marcus. Her earth magic was still going, still moving away, and she wasn't going to stop it.

"I think my magic is headed toward Marcus," she told the other three. "I can feel it moving. It's been going in the same direction since I cast the spell. I just don't know how far it can reach."

Her wizards nodded their understanding.

"Is there anything we can do, any way we can help?" Adrian asked.

Hermione honestly didn't know.

"Should you be touching the earth more?" Draco asked.

Hermione was already barefoot, but it couldn't hurt to increase the contact. She hiked up her lovely white dress and sat down on the ground, her bare legs touching the earth. She pressed her palms flat as well. The crowd was quiet, just a few murmurs moving through the stands as everyone watched her.

Hermione sat for what felt like an eternity, but was probably more like ten minutes. She was honestly losing hope. The earth magic was still moving, but it was stretching thin. Hermione began to worry that it would snap or return to her empty handed.

"I need Marcus, we need Marcus," she lamented to her wizards, tears beginning to fall again.

"We know, Mi," Theo said, rubbing her shoulders and neck. As Theo touched her skin, she felt the earth magic stretch further.

"Come sit with me, all of you," Hermione demanded. "I think Theo touching me gave me a little extra strength. I need skin to skin contact from each of you."

"I would be a pleasure, Granger," Draco smiled. He quickly covered her right hand with his own and put his left hand on her leg. Adrian mirrored Draco's position, but in the left side. Theo knelt
behind her and kept his hands on her shoulders.

Hermione felt the others adding to her magic. The rudimentary bond formed from the Calling must have opened a connection that allowed Hermione to pull from their magic as well as her own. With the extra power, she felt the earth magic surge forward; still going in the same direction.

All of a sudden she felt it make contact and tighten around someone, someone far away. Hermione cried out in joy. It had to be Marcus, it just had to be. He truly was the only missing piece.

The earth magic was supposed to be moving back toward her now, but it wasn't. It was holding tight to whomever it had and it was pulling him, but he wasn't budging. Hermione cried out again, this time in frustration.

"I have him, but he can't move," Hermione grunted, digging her fingernails into the dirt. There was no way she was letting go of Marcus, even if it took everything she had.

"Maybe he’s restrained in some way," Theo guessed. The others nodded. It made sense. Hermione knew there was no way that Ron could keep Marcus somewhere he didn’t want to be without serious restraints. Marcus was physically and magically strong.

"Should I keep pulling then?" Hermione wondered. "I don’t want to hurt him."

"Do you really think Marcus would care that he got hurt if it meant being with you?" Adrian asked. Hermione knew Adrian was right and told him so. Marcus would be so angry if she held back out of concern for his physical well-being. She could hear him now, telling her that broken bones were nothing and easily mended compared to not being able to be together. So she did what Marcus would’ve wanted her to do; she pulled on him with everything she had, possible pain and physical damage be damned.

There was a small amount of movement, so Hermione kept a hold on him and kept pulling. She funneled everything she had and everything she could draw from her three wizards into the earth magic that was extended out of her body. It was exhausting, but there was no other option. Hermione was sweating from the exertion. Elemental magic was strong, but this was no easy task. Her earth magic was giving its all and Hermione was trying to replenish it from the actual earth. The other three elements were helping her as well, supporting her and keeping her going as much as possible. Despite the power she had, her muscles were shaking. Nothing short of complete magical depletion was going to stop her, however.

Adrian, Draco, and Theo were beginning to feel the drain as she kept taking from them as well, she could tell. Hermione had to be mindful she didn’t permanently damage one of her other wizards.

"I see Mother," Draco panted. Hermione wanted to turn and look, but she couldn’t break her connection to the ground. Narcissa had gone with Harry and must be back to report, something. Hopefully, it was something good. “She’s smiling and talking to Father. Yes, she’s gesturing and nodding at me. I think they found him. They must have found him. I think she’s trying to say that they found him, but the others are still en route to get him."

"As long as they hurry," Adrian managed to say. “I don’t know how much longer she can hold on to him."

“We have to hold on. If the connection snaps…” Theo gritted out. It sounded as if his teeth were clenched.

Hermione didn’t even want to think about the end of Theo’s sentence. She was afraid that the
thinly stretched earth magic would break the connection if she pulled too harshly. If she eased back on the amount of power she was pouring into the connection, she was afraid the magic would lose its hold on Marcus.

Just when Hermione felt she had nothing left to give, she felt her earth magic coming back to her and coming back very quickly. She panicked, thinking the connection snapped and that was why it was coming so quickly. No one could walk or run as fast as it was moving. She concentrated and tried to feel all the way down the ribbon of magic and felt that there was still someone at the end.

“Marcus is coming,” Hermione breathed, exhausted and relieved. She took deep breaths, trying to regain her strength. Since Marcus seemed to be moving on his own, she didn’t have to pull him toward her. The power she was taking from the actual earth and air around her was replenishing her, rather than being burned as soon as she got it. She was also able to stop siphoning power away from the others.

“Thank Merlin,” Adrian sighed, collapsing down to the ground while still touching her. After a moment, Hermione was able to stand and began looking in the direction her magic had gone. She could feel him coming closer. The crowd was deathly silent as she watched. Adrian, Draco, and Theo all managed to find their feet as well. They too took up the watch. In her peripheral vision, Hermione could see the spectators go between watching her and following her gaze.

Finally, Hermione saw someone coming. Two small figures were flying rapidly toward the circle. As they approached, she recognized Harry and Marcus flying on brooms. The fact that Marcus was coming made her start crying again, this time with relief. She felt that she’d been so close to losing him.

As they got closer to the large ritual circle, Harry veered off, but Marcus kept coming. It appeared that he had no intention of landing outside the circle. Hermione could see his face now, which was clearly bruised. His left arm was also cradled closely to his body at an awkward angle. That combined with the fact that he wasn’t using his left hand to grip the broom, convinced Hermione that he was injured in some way. His face was the very picture of determination. When they made eye contact, his relief was obvious and mirrored her own.

Marcus was coming straight at her and easily crossed into the ritual circle. He jumped down off the broom while it was still two meters from the ground. As Marcus hit the ground running, the broom kept going. Hermione barely noticed that it crashed and splintered. She was entirely focused on her wayward wizard. She rushed to him and they practically collided with each other as they embraced.

“No!” Hermione heard a shriek coming from the reserved seating near the circle. She turned her head to see Bronwyn angrily advancing toward her, running to her. “Marcus Flint is mine!”

Hermione narrowed her eyes at the witch. Bronwyn had done this. She had enlisted Ron and, together, they had taken Marcus from her. Clearly, they intended on keeping him away from the ritual until it was too late. Rage rose within her, but her fatigue kept her from losing control. Bronwyn was still running at her and she looked as angry as Hermione felt. The demented witch was pulling out her wand as she came to the perimeter, refusing to slow down in response to the shouts coming from behind her. The shock of Bronwyn’s rapid movement had worn off and people were trying to catch her. Charlie and George were closest to her when Bronwyn went to leap over the rocks that made up the circle. She slammed hard into the invisible barrier that was created when the ritual began.

If Bronwyn had been paying attention, she would’ve remembered that no one could besides the
Sorceress and her Chosen could cross the boundary into the circle until the ritual was complete. As the witch hit the wall, the blue-green light that had shined so brightly when Hermione entered the circle, flared up around Bronwyn and enveloped her. She hung in the air for a moment before she was repelled away from the barrier that she was never supposed to touch. The American witch was thrown back and fell into a burning, crumpled heap.

“Good,” Marcus hissed, watching Bronwyn. He then must have noticed Ron, still lying in a heap on the ground not far from where Bronwyn fell, because he growled low in his throat. “Weasley.”

Marcus started toward the unconscious Ron, but Hermione held him to her. He turned his face to hers and his eyes softened.

“Don’t leave me,” she murmured.

“Never,” Marcus promised, tightening his grip on her. He kissed her roughly, as if he were starving for her.

“I was so worried,” Hermione admitted after they broke the kiss.

“Me too. I felt something grab me and pull me. That was you, wasn’t it?”

“I had help,” Hermione replied, smiling and gesturing to the other three wizards.

Marcus kept one arm around Hermione and motioned for the other three to come to them as well. In mere seconds, Hermione was surrounded by her four wizards; the five of them holding onto each other tightly.

“So you got us all?” Marcus asked, his tone teasing.

“I’m a greedy witch,” Hermione responded. She couldn’t stop smiling. It was all too much, too perfect. She wiped the tears from her face. There had been so much crying; tears of fear, grief, relief, and joy.

“And too stubborn to let any of us go,” Adrian added.

“Thank Merlin for that,” Marcus sighed.

“Should we finish this?” Draco asked. “I want to get our witch away from here. Nothing I have planned is suitable for an audience.”

“Since when did that stop you?” Theo teased.

Hermione laughed, joy bursting from her. She didn’t care if Bronwyn had managed to kill herself or if Ron ever woke up. She had her wizards, all of them. It was everything she’d been hoping for.

“Draco’s right, about finishing this,” Hermione clarified. She turned toward Minnie and Lucius, who were both beaming as well. She led her four wizards over to the edge of the circle and nodded to the ritual leaders. “Now we’re ready for the Binding.”

“I’ll say you are,” Minnie replied, grinning. Lucius was clearly trying to maintain his haughty, aloof demeanor, but even he couldn’t manage it.

They arranged themselves into a semi-circle across from Minnie and Lucius. Hermione was in the middle, Adrian and Marcus fanned out to her left, while Draco and Theo were on her right.

“Sorceress, your magic has called and chosen these wizards to serve as your Ancillaries,” Lucius
said, his voice resonating loudly so that everyone could hear him. “Do you accept your Chosen?”

“I do,” Hermione replied, smiling at her wizards.

“Will you trust them, depend on them, and share yourself with them?” Lucius continued.

“I will.”

“Chosen, you have been called by magic to serve your Sorceress,” Minnie said, her voice now loud as well. “Do you accept this Calling?”

“I do,” they all replied in unison.

“Will you protect her, support her, and share yourselves with her?” Minnie continued.

“I will.”

Minnie and Lucius raised their wands.

“Coniunctio,” they said together.

Hermione felt the elemental magic that had reached out to each wizard attach to them and then dissolve. The magic had felt like elastic ribbon before, stretching out, but now it felt less tangible and less breakable. If she focused on it, Hermione could feel the bond. It was like a thin line of pure energy connecting her to each of them. It was indestructible and unbreakable, no matter the distance, she was sure. All of a sudden, the bonds were visible, glowed the blue-green color of the ritual circle perimeter, and then faded to nothing. The bond was set, it was forever. Hermione couldn’t be happier.

A cheer rose up all around them as people in the stands went wild. Her four wizards surrounded her once again, hugging and kissing her. After they collected themselves, they stepped out of the circle. Minnie squeezed Hermione in a firm hug.

"Congratulations," the Headmistress said softly. "I know you'll all be happy and you deserve it, more than anyone I know."

Hermione thanked her, touched by her mentor's words. She saw Lucius giving Draco a big hug, not caring that the show of affection didn't allow him to maintain his aloof Malfoy hauteur.

The ritual planning group they'd formed over the past three weeks descended upon them. Harry enveloped her, lifting her up and swinging her around. Hermione cackled with laughter, happy to share this with her oldest friend. She clung to Harry for a moment as she watched her wizards with their family and friends.

Narcissa was fussing over Draco, tears in her eyes while Lucius looked as proud as one of those white peacocks he had strutting around Malfoy Manor. Ted wasn't a demonstrative wizard, but he had a firm grip on Theo's shoulder while they talked to Luna and Selma. Arabella was much more comfortable with shows of affection. She was hugging and kissing Adrian, who was rolling his eyes but was clearly pleased with the attention. Sasha and Kobayashi were congratulating him. Hermione giggled as the stoic Marcus was surrounded by his very vocal and expressive parents. Hermione also saw flashbulbs going off as photos were taken.

"Thank you for finding Marcus," Hermione told Harry.

"My pleasure, but I didn't do it alone. Kobayashi's locating spell helped a great deal. Marcus was
all the way on the other side of Hogsmeade in an old building that George had thought about buying for overflow storage. When we got there, he was tied to a chair, but he and the chair were banging against the door. I imagine that, eventually, he would've broken through."

Hermione nodded, but she wasn’t so sure. She had been running out of power, trying to pull Marcus to her. If Harry hadn't found him when he did, well Hermione didn't want to think about that. Instead, she was going to watch her wizards and allow her happiness to surround her. She did notice that one of Pius' enthusiastic hugs made Marcus wince.

Hermione waved over Pansy.

"Marcus is hurt, can you check him out?" Hermione asked after accepting her new friend's congratulations.

Hermione accompanied Pansy over to her largest wizard, who tried to brush off Pansy, as Hermione anticipated.

"Marcus, I need you healthy tonight," Hermione told him, holding his gaze for a moment. She tried to convey her meaning with her eyes, not wanting to say it aloud in front of friends and family.

Marcus seemed to immediately understand and let Pansy run her diagnostic spells. Healer Adams also came over with his case of potions. A small crowd formed around Marcus, which he clearly didn't care for.

Hermione turned to the Weasleys while the Healers worked. They were hanging back, looking uncomfortable. Hermione went up to Molly and gave her a hug.

"Thank you all for your help," Hermione told them. She looked over to Ron, still passed out. Someone had covered Bronwyn with a blanket, so Hermione assumed that she didn't make it. She honestly couldn't bring herself to care that the witch was gone.

"What should we do with Ron?" George sighed. "Renervate him?"

They all looked at the unconscious Weasley for a moment, thinking. Marcus pushed past Ron's brothers and kicked Ron in the side. Hermione heard a crack, most likely Ron's ribs.

"Hey, hey," Charlie shouted. He, George, and Bill pulled Marcus away from their brother.

"He deserves it after what he did," Marcus hissed.

"You have to wait until he wakes up," George admonished. "Otherwise, it's not a fair fight."

"And when he wakes up, we'll join you in kicking his stupid arse," Charlie added, gripping Marcus, but glaring at Ron.

"I think you all should leave this to the proper authorities," Harry cut in, standing between Marcus and Ron. An on-duty Auror wearing uniformed robes approached them. Harry introduced him as the senior Auror in charge.

"I'll need you to come down to Headquarters to make a statement, Mr. Flint, so we can take Mr. Weasley into custody," the Auror commanded.

"I'm not going anywhere, except home," Marcus countered simply. "I've just bonded to my witch and I'm going home with her and my friends. If you want a statement, you can have it right now."
The Auror looked at a loss of what to do and kept sneaking looks at Hermione. He seemed a little frightened of her actually. She guessed that the display of her power earlier may have scared some of the audience.

"I had dinner last night at Harry and Pansy Potter's house," Marcus went on. "Draco Malfoy and Blaise Zabini were there as well. I left after eleven o'clock and went out the front door. I prefer Apparating to Floo travel. I saw Bronwyn Figgelowe outside and asked her what she was doing there. While she distracted me, Ron Weasley came up behind me and cast an immobilization spell. Figgelowe cast an Incarcerous charm and the two of them took me to some old, abandoned house. Figgelowe wanted to give me Amortentia, but Weasley didn't bring all the ingredients. They kept me tied up and immobilized throughout the night, refreshing their spells often because they didn't last long. Weasley left in the morning, but came back with the love potion ingredients before noon. Figgelowe stayed with me right up until the time the ritual was to begin. Her plan was to give me the love potion when she returned and convince me to tell everyone that I’d changed my mind about Hermione. After Figgelowe left, I was alone for a while. The spells started wearing off a little eventually, but not enough to fully move. I felt some invisible force take hold of me. It pulled me to the door of the old house, where I banged against the closed door over and over again. I was still tied to the chair. The chair was splintering apart, but so was the door. My left shoulder was dislocated and my upper arm bone broke from hitting the door so hard. Harry, my parents, and a few others opened the door and the force that was pulling me dragged me out of the house. My father held me still long enough to untie me from the chair and then he popped my shoulder back into the socket. Harry handed me a broom and I took off. The force pulled me here and into the circle. You all saw the rest."

Silence fell on the immediate crowd as they processed what Marcus had said. Hermione never would’ve believed that Marcus had left her for Bronwyn Figgelowe, none of them would have. Nevertheless, the witch was able to carry out most of her plan. That fact alone made a chill run along Hermione’s spine.

"I'll take Mr. Weasley in on charges of kidnapping," the Auror reported, but his voice rose up at the end as if he were asking a question. He was watching Hermione for her reaction, but she was refusing to respond. Ron had chosen his path and Hermione wasn’t going to help him, even if they had been friends long ago. On the other hand, she wasn’t going to condemn him either; she would let his own actions do that.

"Wait to Renervate him until you have him in a holding cell," Severus instructed. "That way we don't have to listen to him."

Hermione nodded at that. She certainly didn't want to hear anymore from her former friend. The Auror took her nod as general confirmation of his plans and was quickly gone, taking Ron with him.

Severus pulled her close and Hermione burrowed into his signature black robes. His actions would do nothing for his reputation as the scariest living person in Wizarding Britain, but then, Hermione didn’t care much anymore. Her gale force winds and earthquakes may have made her the new scariest living person.

“So you got what you wanted, you greedy witch,” Severus scolded, squeezing her tight. His voice was soft and soothing. His words reminded her that she did get everything she wanted, and no one could take her wizards away from her. The chill that Marcus’ story gave her was banished.

“I did,” Hermione confirmed.

The audience was starting to move and get louder, as people left their seats. Hermione’s group
closed in even closer.

“I’m happy for you all, I really am,” Blaise told her, shouldering past Bouchard and Sasha. “You effectively scared off all the other wizards I’d worked so hard to invite. Your magic is downright frightening. My point in coming over was to ask why you are all still here?”

“Yeah, don’t you have a newly formed harem to break in?” Pansy grinned.

“This crowd isn’t going to hold back for long,” Harry observed. “Some brave souls are still going to want to get close to the Sorceress, even if you could burn them to a crisp.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, but they did have a point. She let go of Severus and levitated several feet, so she was above her friends.

“Thank you all for coming today. I appreciate everything, truly. Avian, thank you for intervening and I hope you stay in touch.” The Veela nodded and gave her a small bow. “Ronan and Bane, your advice about earth magic meant a great deal to me. If the centaurs need anything from me, you need only ask.”

The centaurs nodded and Hermione hoped they would take her up on her offer. She looked around and found her wizards nearby. They each beamed at her and Hermione gave a slight tug on her bonds to them. Adrian’s eyes went wide with surprise and Draco laughed aloud. Marcus smiled and shook his head at her, while Theo gave her a smoldering look of disapproval.

“If my Ancillaries are ready,” Hermione continued, “I’d like to go home now.”

Chapter End Notes

Next - Entirely smut. Just a ton of smut. :-) 
And after the smut chapter, there will an epilogue and that's it!
Chapter Thirty-Eight

Hermione gathered her wizards and they all Apparated directly from Hogwarts grounds. She'd poured a little of her elemental magic across each bond, giving them the power they needed to work around the Apparition restriction. Hermione hadn't wanted to traverse the crowds to go past the boundary or get back into the castle. So in a matter of seconds, the five of them stood outside her house, their house now.

"This is our house," she murmured. It was a bit overwhelming. It wasn't everyday that she got everything she ever wanted. The shock of this perfect situation, the ideal outcome, made her slightly paranoid. She wondered if something had to go wrong to balance out her happiness. The idea that her wizards may not be as absolutely ecstatic as herself popped into her mind. She looked around at them. "Of course, if you all want it to be our house."

"Of course that's what we want, Granger," Draco said incredulously.

"What’s wrong, kitten?" Adrian asked gently.

"Have you ever worried that something was so perfect, there must be something negative waiting around the corner?" Hermione asked.

"You're worried that we aren't as happy as you are," Theo observed.

She nodded.

"Did I ever tell you that the four of us talked about staying together, no matter who was chosen?" Theo asked.

Hermione shook her head. She felt a bit silly. These wizards had been friends for practically their whole lives. She should've realized they had discussed the various possibilities among themselves. They loved her, but they loved each other as well.

"If two of us were chosen, we didn't want to split up the group, so we were going to offer to give you your cake and let you eat it too," Draco grinned. "Four for the price of two!"

Hermione giggled.

"We agreed that it felt better being together and we'd hoped you would think so too," Adrian said,
rolling his eyes and smiling at Draco.

"But your magic had the same plan we did," Marcus said. He lifted her hand to his chest, over his heart. "We're bonded now. Can't you feel me through the bond? Feel how much I love you, how much we all love you. We're all together now, nothing and no one is ever going to change that. I think we've already suffered through the bad things."

"You were attacked and Marcus was kidnapped!" Draco pointed out, as if she didn't know.

"I can feel it. I can feel each of you through the bonds." If she concentrated on them, she could pick up echoes of their emotions. "I just still don't believe this is all real. I'm afraid I'm in the best dream I've ever had."

"We're real and we're here, Mi," Theo grinned. "We're all going to live here together. We're a family and this is forever."

"Now though, I want my witch," Marcus all but growled. Hermione felt a wave of lust through the bond. "Let's all go inside."

"All of us, together at once?" Hermione asked. She felt a good old fashioned swoon coming on at the thought of having all four of them. Her lady bits were all dancing for joy.

"Unless you aren't ready for that," Adrian offered.

"No!" Hermione protested quickly, making them all grin. "I mean, no, that's fine. It's not like we haven't all slept together before."

"That was nothing, princess," Marcus said, picking her up and carrying her inside. Hermione tried to get down because Marcus’ left arm was still broken. He had hoisted her up with just his right arm. Hermione didn’t want to squirm too much and make Marcus work harder with his one good arm. “We were on our best behavior before. There’s no holding back now.”

Hermione moaned. All of them; she really had all of them, forever, and she was going to have all of them tonight.

They passed Nobby in the front hall and left instructions not to be disturbed. They also asked him to go to Flint Lodge, Nott Castle, Malfoy Manor, and Pucey Hall and ask the House-elves there to pack bags for each of the wizards. They had no intention of going anywhere for several days, at the very least.

OoOoO

Marcus almost ran Hermione upstairs to her room. He loved the bond, the connection to his witch, but he needed more. He imagined that he could be inside her by the time the others arrived because he could run faster than them, even carrying their witch. Their witch; he had to remember to share. This was the first night of the rest of their lives, it was special. Marcus recognized that he felt frenzied to connect with his witch because of the previous night. He had been genuinely scared that he wouldn’t make it back to his princess before it was too late. That bitch kept talking about their future; about all the sexual things she was going to do to him and about how she would drug him into compliance. She also kept rubbing up against him and touching him. If she hadn’t killed herself by trying to get inside the ritual circle, there was a good chance Marcus would’ve killed her himself.

Theo watched Marcus carry their witch into their room. He guessed he'd have his own room in the house, but Hermione's room would likely be their collective room. When they had their one-on-one
time, they'd go to his room, or to the bondage room he planned on installing in the house. He'd meant what he'd said about them being a family; the five of them, the witch he loved and three of his closest friends. The people that Theo would kill for were in that room.

Marcus set Hermione down, still touching her. Theo watched Ades and Draco follow them into the room. They were also touching each other, hands caressing chests and backs. They were all attractive wizards. Theo had to admit he was curious what it'd be like to be with them. They were already his best mates, the blokes he trusted with his life. Sharing a bond with Hermione made him feel even closer to them. An image of Draco chained up flashed through his head and his cock twitched. Theo decided it was inevitable and grinned.

Adrian went straight to Marcus and embraced him, trying to be careful of his healing left arm. He put an arm around their witch, who was pressed against Marcus' chest.

"You scared the shite out of us," Adrian scolded his oldest friend. Standing there in his designated place, waiting beside the ritual circle had been awful. He was horrified when it became clear to him that Marcus wasn't coming. He knew something terrible had happened.

Adrian pulled Marcus’ face to his own and kissed him. He poured all his relief and happiness into the kiss and Marcus responded in kind. Adrian didn't know exactly what his friend went through, but he knew that his stoic friend must've been terrified. Adrian couldn't imagine anything scarier than being forcibly kept away from their witch when she needed him.

Marcus broke the kiss and rested his forehead on Adrian's.

"I was scared, too," Marcus whispered, but they all heard him.

"You missed the show," Draco told him, coming up to stand behind Hermione. He ran his hands up and down her bare arms. "We were all worried for you, but Granger went absolutely mad. She was clearly taking my advice to scare away all those poncy Ancillary want-to-be wizards."

"What happened?" Marcus asked, smiling. Adrian grinned at Draco. The blond wizard knew exactly how to take them all out of gloomy places.

"Hermione saw you weren't there and her magic basically became enraged," Theo chuckled. "Wind picked up and started blowing people down. The earth shook. The people in the elevated seats were holding on for dear life."

"I didn't even realize I was doing it," Hermione defended. "I only knew something bad happened to you and that idea was devastating."

"So she devastated the crowd," Draco teased.

"What you did to the Weasel wasn't an accident," Theo added. "You knew what you were doing then."

"Ginger was the one that told us that Ron was probably involved," Hermione explained. "Then Ron was trying to be evasive and wouldn’t answer Ginger’s questions. So I decided that he would only respond to threats."

"He was a complete berk and fainted," Draco snorted. "You really should've set him on fire."

"I was still hoping he'd give up Marcus' location," Hermione pouted. Adrian felt compelled to lean forward and nip her lower lip.
"How are you now?" Theo asked Marcus. "I would've been beside myself if someone was keeping me from Hermione."

"I keep checking the bond to make sure I haven't lost her," Marcus admitted, looking down at her. "I have this irrational need to be inside you, to have that connection and assure myself."

"That's not an irrational need," Adrian said. "If it is, then I think we're all irrational. I've felt that need since I saw her walking toward the circle in that stunning white dress."

Hermione blushed and managed to look demure, which was impressive because Draco had his hand inside the top of her dress caressing her breast.

"I think I could use some reassurance as well," Hermione moaned. She reached down and palmed the substantial bulge in Marcus' trousers. "I can't think of any better comfort than to be as close to you as physically possible. Marcus, I want to feel your cock inside me, filling me up. I want all of you in me tonight."

"I love hearing you say cock," Draco groaned, biting her earlobe from behind her. "Let me get you ready."

Draco sunk to his knees and lifted the gauzy white dress up before anyone could respond. He dropped the skirt behind him so no one could really see what he was doing under there. Face to face with a pair of pretty pink knickers, Draco slid them down her smooth legs. He groaned as he nuzzled her thighs and inhaled her scent.

Today had been a rollercoaster of emotion for Draco, but being able to touch his witch assured him that everything was going to be okay. He'd overslept, missing brunch with his father. After a leisurely lunch with his mother, Draco was shocked that he wasn't the last one to arrive at the ritual. That was his first inkling that something was wrong.

Marcus would never be late for the ritual. Draco felt awful. He was so elated to get chosen first that he almost forgot about the others and that made him feel bad. He didn't even want to imagine what Marcus had gone through all night. If anyone needed to solace of Granger's wet heat surrounding him, it was Marcus.

Draco ran his fingers up to Granger's pretty pink slit. She was already wet, but Marcus was larger than any other wizard Draco had ever seen. He wanted their witch to be relaxed and ready.

Draco heard a muffled groan as he ghosted his fingers over her glistening folds. He imagined that Granger's mouth was occupied with one of the other wizards. Draco grinned and lifted her legs one at a time so her knees were thrown over his shoulders. This way she was spread out to him, and he could focus on that sweet pussy. He felt her lean back and knew someone was behind her, holding her up.

Draco chuckled. If anyone had told him four weeks ago that soon he'd have his face buried between Hermione Granger's luscious thighs, getting her ready to be fucked by one of his best mates while he and two of his other friends watched; he would've told that person they'd gone barmy. Now he couldn't imagine anything else. Draco ran his tongue up her center, savoring his witch and entirely confident that there's nowhere else he'd rather be.

Marcus could barely control himself. Hermione's little hand was rubbing his already painfully hard cock through his pants. Her eyes were half-lidded with lust and her chest was heaving as she gasped for breath. She was leaning back on Theo while Draco was enjoying himself between her legs. Marcus was jealous of his blond friend, but knew they had to prepare their witch for his larger than average size. If Draco wasn't in the way, he wouldn't be able to keep himself from just plunging in.
Theo unzipped the back of her dress. His princess looked gorgeous in the long white dress. Adrian pushed the straps off her shoulders, the fabric pooling around her waist and leaving her beautiful breasts bare for them all. Marcus mouth watered and he immediately leaned in to lick and suck on her. Theo's hand reached around to roughly pinch and pull on her other hardened nipple. Out of the corner of his eye Marcus saw Adrian kissing his princess. They were all pressed together, trying to be close to and please their witch. Marcus reached around and squeezed her perfect, rounded arse. His hand brushed against Theo's cock, which was hard and ready; but then again they were all hard, Marcus was sure of that. He impulsively rubbed Theo through the fabric of his trousers, just as his princess was rubbing him. Theo gasped and looked a bit startled, but he clearly enjoyed the attention, if his eyes rolling back were any indication.

"I'm so hard for you, princess," Marcus groaned, releasing her nipple with a wet sound. Adrian broke the kiss and moved his focus down to the breast Marcus had abandoned. "We're all hard for you. After Draco makes you come, I need you on my dick. I need you to ride me. Do you want that, princess?"

"Oh, Merlin," Hermione moaned. She was clearly close. "Fuck yes, I want that."

"Is that all you want, princess?" Marcus purred. She was still rubbing him, but her movements were becoming erratic as she headed toward her climax. Marcus kept a steady but slow rhythm on Theo, not wanting to push his friend over the edge. "I'm not the only one who wants to be inside you. Can you take two of us at once?"

"Yes, oh yes," she responded, nodding at Marcus as she panting.

Theo was overwhelmed. Marcus' large hand was expertly and firmly handling his cock. It felt wonderful. He was listening to what Marcus was proposing and almost shot off in Marcus' hand at the mental image of Hermione straddling the large wizard while he plunged in and out of her tight back opening.

Theo managed to pull up the skirt of Hermione's dress and find her bare arse. In the process he felt Draco, tongue deep in her pussy. Draco pulled back for a moment, making Hermione groan in frustration. Theo could hear how close she was. Draco sucked two of Theo's fingers into his mouth, swirling his tongue around and soaking them with his saliva. Quickly, Theo's hand was abandoned and Draco put his mouth back where it belonged. Theo used his wet fingers to probe the tight ring of muscle and chuckled when his witch cried out in pleasure.

"So good," she moaned. "More, I need more."

Theo felt Draco's fingers spreading Hermione's wetness from her slit up to her arse. Theo used the slick juices to push a finger all the way in. He could feel Draco's fingers moving in and out of her channel. Theo slowly added a second finger and began scissoring them to stretch her out. Hermione was thrashing slightly and panting.

"Do you like that, Mi?" Theo managed; his lips next to her ear.

"Fuck yes," she responded, her breathing labored.

Adrian was at a loss over what to do. There were so many options, so many things he could be doing with his hands and mouth. It really was an embarrassment of riches. Hermione was fondling Marcus' massive cock through his trousers. Her gorgeous tits were heaving and bouncing slightly, right in his face. He noticed Marcus' good right arm rhythmically moving behind Hermione and surmised that he was wanking Theo. He wanted to watch Draco licking and sucking his witch's
sweet pussy, but the dress was in the way. Actually, all their clothes were still in the way.

"We need to be naked," Adrian realized aloud, mainly talking to himself.

Adrian pulled Hermione's dress up to her waist, pausing to watch what had been hidden. Draco's mouth was covering her clit and three of his fingers were pushing in and out of her dripping center. Theo had two fingers filling her arse, moving them around slowly. Adrian eventually remembered his goal and pulled the whole dress up over her head, tossing it across the room. He took a step away from the others, wanting to be able to see everything.

"So gorgeous, kitten," Adrian breathed, taking in her nudity and his now unimpeded view of what the others were doing.

Adrian went up behind Marcus and gently removed the robe that was draped over his shoulders, mindful of his injured left arm. He couldn't decide how to remove his tight t-shirt so he just muttered a Divesto, leaving the large wizard’s chest bare. Hermione was looking at him greedily, as if she wanted to devour the muscular wizard. Adrian kissed his neck, dragging his teeth over the tender skin.

Meanwhile, Adrian's hands were unfastening Marcus' trousers, freeing that massive cock. Hermione barely paused her attentions, gripping Marcus firmly. The garment pooled around Marcus' feet and Adrian watched him kick off his shoes, shoving his trousers and the shoes aside with his feet. Adrian ran his hands down Marcus' well defined back and over his magnificent arse. He'd never given serious thought to fucking his friend, but now had no idea why that was. Fucking Marcus seemed like one of the most logical things in the world. Adrian reached around and cupped his bollocks, giving them a slight tug as he nipped his neck; making Marcus hiss and throw his head back.

It took Adrian a moment to remember that he had a goal and he sighed. There were so many attractive options. A few steps and Adrian was behind Theo. It didn't take long to remove the slender wizard's robe and button down shirt. Adrian knew they were pushing Theo outside his comfort zone since he'd never had sexual contact with another wizard until recently.

Adrian turned Theo's head to the side and kissed him as he and Marcus worked to push off his trousers. Theo groaned into Adrian's mouth and started exploring with his tongue. Adrian needed more contact and reached down to join Marcus in fondling Theo's cock. Theo's breathing was picking up and he was having a hard time controlling himself, so Adrian reluctantly removed his hand. He understood that Theo wanted to come inside their witch; they all wanted that, they needed to consummate their new bond.

Draco felt the fluttering and muscle clenching that told him Granger was coming. He focused on her hard little pearl, sucking and licking it. He was rewarded with a wail of pleasure and a gush of tangy sweetness. He loved this witch so much. It was hard to manage such strong emotions, especially since he wasn't used to them. He nuzzled his witch, lazily enjoying her taste as she came down, when she was pulled away from him.

"Hey I was eating that," Draco objected halfheartedly. While he would live between Granger's thighs if he could, he realized that it was a shared residence. He had noticed that Granger lost her dress, since he wasn't covered by the skirt, but he hadn't realized Marcus and Theo were naked as well. He felt horribly overdressed.

Adrian grabbed him and kissed him, sucking their witches' juices off his lips and tongue. Draco had no problem sharing her essence with his friends, especially this way.
The wizards pulled apart slightly as they watched their witch straddle Flint on the bed, sinking down in his huge cock. Marcus hissed and gripped her hip with his good arm.

"He's so big," Draco groaned.

"You want to feel what's it like to have Marcus fuck you?" Adrian asked, grinning.

"Definitely," Draco nodded. He'd known he was attracted to both witches and wizards since puberty. Usually, he was attracted to wizards like Adrian and Theo; slim, but muscled. Marcus Flint, however, had an amazing body, even if he was more muscular than Draco was used to.

Adrian moved to stand behind Draco, both of them watching as Granger moved up and down.

"That's it, princess, ride me," Marcus grunted.

"This is so hot to watch," Adrian whispered in Draco's ear. Draco leaned back into his beautiful friend and felt Adrian's cock pressing against his arse. Adrian's hands began moving under his robes, unbuttoning and removing clothing.

They both watched Theo climb up on the bed after a moment. He came up behind their witch and she turned her head to kiss him, still rocking on Marcus.

"You sure you want two of us at once?" Theo checked.

"Yes," she moaned. "I want to be totally filled."

Granger leaned forward slightly and Draco heard Theo murmur a lubrication spell. Then the bookish wizard began slowly working his cock into the tight ring of muscle. Draco was breathing heavily. He loved the look on Grangers face, that perfect mix of pleasure with just a touch of pain. He could only imagine how she felt, how stretched and full she was. It was probably close to being too full, at least until she adjusted to them. If anyone could take it, it was his witch. Finally Theo was fully seated and the three of them began to move, slowly but fluidly together.

"Fuck," Adrian moaned. Draco couldn't agree more. It was so sexy, watching his witch move back and forth between his friends. She would rise up off of Marcus, so just the massive head of his cock was still inside her, only to push Theo's dick all the way inside her arse. Then when she sank back down onto Marcus, Theo was most of the way out. She was constantly being filled, one way or the other. They didn't rush, but steadily moved Granger back and forth.

"That's my good girl," Theo praised, kissing and caressing her back. "You can take us both and it feels so fucking good."

"Yes," she agreed, breathlessly. She looked overwhelmed by the sensations.

"I need to come," Draco practically whined. He knew he could come now and be hard again soon, so he could fuck Granger tonight; which he desperately needed to do. If he didn't come once beforehand, he knew he wouldn't last long inside his witch.

"You deserve to come," Adrian purred, nipping his earlobe from behind him. "You took such good care of our witch, made her come and prepared her delicious pussy for Marcus."

Draco thought he'd come the second Adrian's hand reached into his trousers, freeing his engorged dick.

"You are ready," Adrian praised, caressing the weeping tip. "Did going down on our witch make
"So hard," Draco breathed. Before he realized what was happening, Adrian was down on his knees in front of him. It was almost too much; the scene in front of him, combined with Adrian's warm breath on his dick.

"She does have the sweetest little quim," Adrian groaned, dragging his tongue along Draco's length. "We are the luckiest wizards in the world."

"So lucky," Draco agreed. It was true, but he was pretty sure he would've agreed to anything his friend said at the moment. He was almost incapable of rational thought. His witch was flushed, panting, and being thoroughly fucked. Adrian was swirling the head of his cock around in his mouth. It was glorious. He recognized how lucky he really was, to have his witch and to have his friends. He loved all of them. It may have been mushy, but he was on the verge of coming and if that's not the time for tender loving feelings, when is?

Marcus was on the verge of coming too. Logically, he knew that they'd been joined like this for ten to fifteen minutes. It felt like forever and an instant at the same time. He was proud that he'd lasted this long, since part of him was sure he'd come the second he was enveloped inside his princess' wet heat. Another part of him wanted it to last forever, to stay connected to her in this way forever. He could feel Theo inside her as well, their cocks sliding against each other as they both moved. Marcus cursed his useless left arm. He wanted to palm her breasts, to feel more of her. He watched Theo's hand come around and pluck her nipples. The visual stimulation was almost too much, but he couldn't bear to shut his eyes. Marcus turned his head and saw Draco watching them from a few steps away, one hand down on Adrian's head. Adrian was on his knees swallowing Draco's cock.

"Look, princess."

Marcus watched Hermione look in the direction he indicated. Her eyes widened slightly and became even more lust filled, if that was even possible.

"That is so fucking hot," she moaned, staring. Marcus knew she'd like that. Now at least he wouldn't be to only one with too much visual stimulation.

"Tasting you made me so hard," Draco panted. Adrian appeared to be taking down all their friend had, which impressed Marcus. Draco had a substantial cock. "Adrian is so beautiful, isn't he, Granger? He has a very talented mouth."

"Yes," she cried out in agreement. Marcus noticed that she was increasing the pace, slamming herself down on him and pushing herself back on Theo. It was maddening and Marcus didn't know if he could take it.

"Fuck, Mi," Theo grunted, trying to restrain himself from just pounding into her arse. It was difficult. She was reaching for her climax, Theo could tell by the urgency of her movements. He was good at control and his stamina was exceptional, but Theo had never been in a situation like this; with the witch he loved more than life itself and three of his best mates that he loved as well.

Theo had to turn and look at Adrian and Draco, like his witch. They were attractive wizards and were sexy together. Adrian was working Draco's cock and the blond was panting and groaning. They were all watching when Draco came, warning Adrian what was about to happen. Adrian kept going and swallowed everything down. It seemed to be too much for Hermione to take and she was becoming frantic.

Theo decided to take control, which he was good at anyway. He steadied the rhythm, gripping
Hermione firmly on her hip, and reached around to rub her clit.

"It's time to come, Mi," Theo ordered. "Ride Marcus' cock and make yourself come. As soon as you find your release, I'm going to fill you up."

"Yes, Sir," Hermione groaned, digging her nails into Marcus' chest.

Theo felt her muscles start to tense and rubbed harder, still pulling and pushing her between him as Marcus.

"That's my good girl," Theo praised. "Take what you need. We'll always take care of you, sweet witch. We'll always give you what you need."

"Always," Marcus grunted.

"Forever," Draco added, smiling at their witch.

"Nothing can separate us, ever," Adrian said with finality.

Hermione went taut between Theo and Marcus, screaming her release and clamping down on both of them. Theo had to stop for a moment; it was too tight to move. The squeezing was too much for Marcus and he came with a roar. Theo moved in and out of Hermione's relaxed body a few more times before he climaxed. It felt amazing to be with her. Nothing ever had or ever would compare. She collapsed down on Marcus and Theo lay down on her back, all of them catching their breath. He wanted to stay inside her, but she needed all of them. Theo slid out carefully and tried not to whimper.

Hermione did make a little discontented moan as Theo pulled out. She still rested on Marcus, getting her breathing under control. Adrian smiled at his sated witch. She caught his eye and beamed a beautiful smile back at him. She lifted herself up and kissed Marcus, who looked boneless and as if he didn't have a care in the world. Adrian was glad. His friend needed that. Hermione broke the kiss and rolled off the muscular wizard. She stretched out on Marcus' right side and opened her arms to Adrian.

Adrian grinned and was next to her in a flash.

"You said to have faith and you were right," she told him, pulling him close. He had discarded his robes and shoes a while ago, but he was the only one still dressed. Hermione pulled off his shirt and he felt someone sliding his trousers and pants off his legs. Then someone also gave his arse a quick bite and he knew it was Draco. Adrian looked over his shoulder and the platinum blond gave him a naughty wink.

"You focused on us, now it's your turn," Hermione continued. She pulled him into a deep kiss, her tongue exploring and caressing him. Adrian idly wondered if she was trying to taste Draco.

Adrian moaned as his witch focused her attention on his neck, licking and biting. She ran her hands along his shoulders and chest. He watched Theo sit next to Marcus, both of them lazily watching and looking contented. Adrian chuckled, of course they were content. He felt a second set of hands and a second mouth kissing him down his spine.

Hermione ghosted her fingers over his cock. Adrian was so hard, it was almost painful.

"I want you inside me," she moaned.

"Don't you need some recovery time, kitten," Adrian managed to say. She just took Theo and
Marcus, who has an enormous cock, at the same time.

"No, I need you," she insisted, stroking him and kissing his chest. "I need all of you inside me. I feel this pressure to take each of you, to have you. The pressure to have Marcus and Theo has abated, but I still need you and Draco."

"Do you think it's a function of the Binding?" Theo asked. "Or do you think that's what you feel whenever you need your Ancillary?"

"I don't know," she groaned, writhing against Adrian.

"Enough!" Draco declared from the other side of Adrian. Draco sat up and pulled Adrian so he was flat on his back. He helped Hermione climb onto his friend, not that the eager witch needed much assistance. Draco held onto Adrian's cock and guided it so that their witch sunk down on him. Adrian gasped.

"When our witch says she needs to fuck you, you let her fuck you," Draco scolded. "You don't debate the reasons why she needs it. That can wait until later."

Draco knelt next to the couple. He leaned toward her and Granger captured his mouth with hers. Draco could feel the pressure she described in her kiss. There was a wonderful frantic quality to it, which was also clear in the way she was riding Adrian.

"Oh, fuck, kitten," Adrian was moaning. Draco chuckled. His pretty friend had been waiting too long, he was too close. All that had happened so far was an extended foreplay.

"Look at Ades, Granger," Draco instructed. "He needs to come so badly. Your perfect pussy is driving him wild."

Adrian was starting to thrash a bit. Draco recognized a wizard trying his best to hold back. Draco reached down and rubbed Grangers slick clit.

"Have I told you how much I love the fact that the Gryffindor Princess is bound to a pack of scary, evil Slytherins?" Draco teased. "Such a naughty Gryffindor trollop."

Draco gave her clit a pinch and she fell apart. It was just in time, because Adrian joined her climax with his own. She rode out her orgasm and Adrian looked as if he may pass out.

Draco caught his witch before she collapsed down onto Ades. He lifted her slightly and laid her down so her back was on Adrian's chest. He nudged Adrian's legs open and knelt between them. He hooked Granger's legs over his forearms and plunged inside her quim.

"You're so fucking hot and wet," Draco groaned. If it weren't for Ades and the magnificent blow job, he would've shot off just getting inside her.

Adrian sat up slightly to support her. Granger reached up over her head and wrapped her hands around the back of Adrian's neck to steady herself while Draco rammed into her.

"Perfect," Draco grunted. Ades held her with one hand while the other massaged her breast, pulling at her hard nipple.

"So perfect," she groaned.

Draco knew she was sensitive after all she had already done that night, but the night was just beginning. He moved at a steady, strong pace. Draco loved being inside his witch and was in no
rush at all to finish. He drove his witch higher and higher. He loved watching her pant and moan, her chest heaving. He spied Theo and Marcus watching intently, enthralled with their witch, just as he was. He met Adrian’s gaze and grinned at his friend. Draco had been plagued with uncertainty and regret before in his life, although he tried to never let that show. For the first time in ever, he felt absolutely certain and sure; he was in the right place, with the witch he loved and his best friends.

Marcus was still recovering. Being with Hermione with Theo had been intense. The bond enabled him to feel her. He thought he could feel Ades, Draco, and Theo through her as well, but he wasn’t sure. His left arm ached, but he didn’t care. He lay on the bed and watched Draco shagging their witch as she lay on Adrian. It was beautiful. He thought he would need more time, but felt his cock twitch. It was impossible not to respond to everything around him. Draco was pushing his princess and she loved it. Marcus smiled. She was getting close. He propped himself up on his good right arm and leaned over, flicking her tight nipple with his tongue.

“Yes, just like that, harder,” Hermione moaned. She was right on the brink; all her wizards could feel it. She finally came, wailing her pleasure. Draco kept pounding through her orgasm, but soon found his release as well.

Marcus laughed as Draco went limp on top of Hermione, who was resting on Ades.

“What a sticky, messy looking pile,” Marcus teased.

“Let’s run a bath,” Theo suggested. “We can all fit.”

“Good idea,” Adrian managed to grunt from underneath the two others, making Marcus laugh again.

“I do like to get clean before I get dirty again,” Draco added, lifting his head up from where he had rested it on Hermione’s chest.

“Again?” Hermione laughed. "I'm not sure you all can handle more."

"I think this elemental magic does wonders for recovery time," Marcus teased back, stroking himself. Hermione's eyes glazed over with lust and Marcus couldn't help but chuckle. She looked around to see that Theo was hard again too. So was Adrian, and even Draco was halfway there.

"It's a good thing I don't have any plans for the foreseeable future," their witch finally said heading toward the bath, four wizards eagerly trailing after her.

OoOoO

Hermione opened her eyes, a smile on her face. How could there not be? She was exhausted and surrounded by the wizards she loved. She was nestled into Marcus’ right side and Draco was draped over her right side. Adrian spooned Draco from behind and Theo was sprawled out on the other side of Marcus. Hermione didn’t think she could be happier. She had everything she wanted.

From the light, Hermione could tell it was already mid-afternoon. They’d enjoyed each other all evening, the entire night, and well past dawn the next day. Hermione was wonderfully sore and her muscles were useless. She lay in bed and drew strength from her elemental magic. She could feel it replenish her. As her magic worked, Hermione recalled the previous night.

The bath did, in fact, hold all of them. There was a convenient bench in the tub as well. It was the perfect height for Hermione to kneel on in order to swallow down Theo's long cock, while he sat on the edge of the tub. As she did that, Marcus shagged her from behind. It was wonderful.
Adrian sat on that handy bench and pulled her into his lap, impaling her on him. Hermione had been so wrapped up in Adrian's drugging kisses that she'd been entirely surprised to feel Draco's fingers teasing her bum. Soon after that, she had both of them in her. She loved being totally filled by two wizards at once; happy that her longtime fantasy was just as exciting as she'd imagined. Hermione did realize that it was probably so exceptional because it was these particular wizards. No one else could make her feel the way these wizards did.

They’d left the bathtub and ordered up a light dinner; taking a break, but not going so far as to dress themselves again. They kept going, none of them wanting to stop. It was as if stopping to sleep would mean they were giving up their loving, isolated bubble and rejoining the real world. None of them wanted that.

As the night turned into dawn they seemed to become more and more cohesive, more bonded. They also became more hedonistic; nothing was off limits, nothing was taboo. Hermione smiled at the memories. She had them all one at a time, and there were times when they were all together. Hermione realized another fantasy when Adrian was inside her and Marcus was inside him. Later, she sat in Theo's lap, her back to his chest, and rode him while she watched the other three. Draco was between Marcus and Adrian, trying to take as much of Marcus in his mouth as he could while Adrian pounded into him from behind.

The others let Theo come to them slowly. There was a great deal of touching and kissing as Theo became bolder with his friends. Eventually, past dawn, all of them were too spent to go on. They collapsed together and Hermione felt them each fall off to sleep through the bond. It was only when they were all slumbering blissfully that she closed her eyes.

Now, she was the first one awake. Her magic had replenished her beautifully. She felt alert, refreshed, and as if she could take on anything. She hadn't felt this good in ages. When her physical symptoms started back in Turkey, Hermione never would've guessed that it was the start down a long, difficult road that would bring her to this perfect place.

Hermione whispered for Nipsy and the tiny elf appeared. They conversed quietly. Nipsy delivered the update about issues that had arisen in the last day. There was nothing that couldn't wait and Hermione ordered breakfast for the five of them out on her terrace. She also said that they weren't to be disturbed for the rest of the day. Hermione had plans with her wizards. They were going to rest, eat, love each other and talk about their future together. They were hers and she was theirs, nothing could separate them now. This was the first day of the rest of their lives.

Chapter End Notes

Epilogue to come!
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Again, thank you all so much for reading! It was sad losing Granger Enchanted, but posting here has let me connect with new folks; which is a nice silver lining.

Disclaimer: Harry Potter is not mine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Epilogue

The months after the third ritual were a whirlwind of activity, as everyone settled into their new lives. Hermione and her four Ancillaries secluded themselves in their home for several days. Then, Adrian, Draco, Marcus, and Theo each went back to their previous homes to pack their belongings. They chose rooms in the large house and Susan was tasked with decorating them to each wizard's specifications. Rather than live amongst the renovations, Adrian took them all to the Mediterranean on his boat for a two week honeymoon of sorts.

When they returned, they had to deal with the trials against Ron for kidnapping Marcus and against Lisa Turpin for assault. They were also both charged with interfering with a Sorcery ritual, as Marcus was an established Ancillary candidate at the time of the kidnapping. It turned out that crimes against a Sorceress or her Ancillary were considered treason against the entire wizarding world and was punishable by death. Hermione, however, couldn't abide that penalty. Lisa was sick and needed treatment. Ron had at one point been a friend; also she couldn't do that to Arthur and Molly. In the end, Lisa was confined for life and treated for her obsession. Ron was sentenced to life in Azkaban, with the possibility of parole after thirty years if he was sufficiently reformed.

Things were rocky for the Weasley family because of Ron's actions. Business was down for George, Ginny was benched, and Bill was put on leave from Gringotts. Hermione made a statement supporting and absolving the Weasley clan of any wrong doing, which was helpful. Despite Hermione's show of support, Ginger was still harassed because she was closest to Ron and the most vulnerable. Her landlord voided her lease, she couldn't get a job, and she received enough anonymous threats that she worried harm would come to little Melody. Hermione insisted that Ginger and Melody come to stay in her newly renovated carriage house. Hermione liked the other witch, and she was grateful that Ginger had spoken up at the ritual as she had. That took a great deal of courage.

Ginger and Melody flourished on Hermione's little compound over the years. Ginger insisted on helping out as much as possible around the house and with Hermione’s Sorceress work. Hermione encouraged her to get back into clothing design. It turned out that Ginger was really quite talented. After Hermione and Pansy were both photographed wearing things Ginger made, there was a real demand for her pieces. She had a particular flare for maternity wear, which was a real growth industry in the years after Hermione became Sorceress. Ginger stayed with Hermione's family longer than was required because she became an unofficial extended family member. She only moved out when she, finally, officially became a Weasley. Charlie stayed in England and ended up spending more and more time with his incarcerated brother's ex-girlfriend. It was a good match, a happy marriage, and a few years later Melody Weasley got a half-brother/cousin, Arthur Frederick
Weasley.

Hermione set to work creating an Office of the Sorceress in Wizarding London. She hired Percy Weasley to manage everything. It took Percy and a staff of three more people to handle the requests, appointments, and appearances. Percy was a perfect fit and Hermione trusted his judgment, which was priceless. He liaised with the Ministry, foreign governments, and the sentient magical creatures like the Veela, Centaurs, and Merpeople. Percy enjoyed his job and reconnected with his old school sweetheart, Penelope Clearwater. They married and had two children, first Priscilla and then Prewett Weasley.

George Weasley never did marry or even have a serious relationship, but he was always incredibly social. He was a fixture at Hermione’s home and, after many years, even Draco admitted that he quite liked the Weasley. George was also the favorite uncle of all the Weasley kids, which was no surprise to anyone. George did become a father, in a way, via donations he made to Luna Lovegood and Selma Turan. He was the biological father of Diana Lovegood-Turan and later to Nasir George Lovegood-Turan. The Lovegood-Turan household split their time between England and Turkey, and the children were fully embraced by the Weasley clan.

Molly and Arthur loved being surrounded by the chaos of their eight grandchildren. Molly was perpetually dismayed that Ginny never wanted to have children. Hermione thought, and told Ginny, that it was admirable that Ginny recognized her own lack of a maternal, nurturing side. Ginny ended up swearing off wizards entirely, which was surprising to everyone who knew her history. Even more surprising, the lone female Weasley fell deeply in love with her own Slytherin, Millicent Bulstrode, and the two were very happy together. Ginny finally found someone who worshiped her entirely and without reservation, and that’s all she’d ever wanted. Ginny became the undisputed female Quidditch star of her time, as well as many other times. In the end, she even became reasonably friendly with Pansy Potter, since Pansy was still close to Millicent.

Pansy and Harry went on to have three children, two boys, James and Albus, and then a girl, Lily Violet. Harry had the close family he’d always wanted as a child and Pansy surprised herself with how easily she adapted to motherhood. Of course, all of their kids would tell you that Harry was a pushover; it was Pansy you had to watch out for and her word was law. The Potter clan was a frequent visitor at Hermione’s house. It was just easier to manage traveling with three children, as opposed to getting Hermione’s brood over to Grimmauld Place.

From the very beginning, Hermione and her wizards worked on balance. They tried to ensure that each of them had individual time with Hermione once a week, but they also made sure to spend time all together. It turned out that whenever there was more than one Ancillary, they needed to function cohesively to properly anchor the Sorceress. The four wizards, already close friends, became even closer. They loved each other. It wasn’t one witch with four separate relationships with four different wizards; it was a relationship of five people with each other. Just as Hermione had her relationship with each of them, they had individual relationships with each other that were loving and often sexual.

They were busy people, but managed the way that all families manage, by putting in an effort. Hermione had her Potions and Arithmancy work, but was able to use the lab she set up in the old barn on her property. Theo had lab space there as well and often worked from home. Adrian, Draco, and Marcus all created office space at home so they could spend more time together. The Sorceress’ presence was requested all over the globe and Hermione tried to travel one weekend a month, always bringing her Ancillaries with her. Prosperity did flourish around her. Magical birth rates increased over the years, both in the Muggle and Wizarding communities. Magical creatures also saw an increase in their numbers. Magically rich forests expanded to support larger Centaur herds. Hermione spent a fair amount of time in Veela enclaves. They saw an increase in overall
fertility, but also a more even ratio of male to female births. Hermione's wizards never did come to like that male Veela, Avian.

In that first year together, Draco got an adorable little sister, who was named Daffodil and was the image of Narcissa. Despite Draco's mock grumbling that the platinum blonde infant got all the attention, he adored the tiny girl he called Daffy. When other people outside the family tried calling her by that silly name, Draco hexed them. When Daffy got older, she learned to do the hexing herself.

On the one year anniversary of their bonding, Hermione and her wizards held an enormous party. It was lavish and over the top. Adrian and Draco organized it, but they all loved it, because it was the wedding reception they'd never had. Many of their friends and family stayed the night. That night Hermione got pregnant for the first time, as did several others staying on the grounds. Hermione's fertility overwhelmed all the contraception charms used that night and she was more than a little mortified.

Pansy and Harry hadn’t planned on having children so soon, but were thrilled with little James. Blaise and Susan Bones also became parents to a beautiful boy, Dante Zabini. They’d never planned on being a couple, but were very good co-parents to the much loved little boy. Susan admitted that she’d always wanted a child, she just hadn’t planned on doing it right then. Arabella Pucey enlisted Susan to work for her home furnishing and design empire, which was exceptionally successful. Blaise adored his son and did curtail his playboy lifestyle slightly in response to fatherhood. He later had a long-term relationship with an Italian witch and heiress that resulted in a little girl, Donatella Zabini, who would grow up to be as strikingly gorgeous as her grandmother.

Pansy Potter, despite her happiness, never let Hermione forget her part in creating her pregnancy; especially when morning sickness set in, when she got chronic heartburn, and when she couldn’t fit in any of her clothes. When they discovered that a Sorceress develops quicker than a regular witch, making Hermione pregnant for only six months, a heavy Pansy Potter went on quite a tirade. When they realized that Sorceresses were typically blessed with multiple births, Pansy quit her whinging and offered Hermione her sympathies, happy with just one baby at a time.

Hermione and her wizards had planned to have a child, but decided to be all-together that night. They didn’t care which wizard got her pregnant and knew that their family would grow as it should. A pregnant Sorceress turned out to be slightly dangerous. Her wizards worked overtime to help regulate her out of control magic. Luckily, it was only the last few weeks when they had to banish everyone from the home for their own safety, except her Ancillaries and the House-elves.

Hermione gave birth to Titus and Tiberius Flint. They would grow up to be huge wizards like their dad, as well as be two of the most vicious Beaters that professional Quidditch had ever seen. They had their dad’s down to earth practicality and love of the outdoors, but they had their grandparents’ gregariousness. They also had their mum’s do-gooder bravery; which got them sorted into Gryffindor, much to their father’s chagrin. They shared Gryffindor tower with James Potter, who inherited his father’s Marauder’s Map, and the three of them caused no end of trouble. Titus and Tiberius were nearly identical and only Hermione could always tell them apart, no matter what ruse they used to fool others. They particularly loved spending time with George Weasley and hearing stories about him and Fred during their youth.

After the twins were born, Marcus retired and stayed home to care for the children. He still did charity Quidditch events from time to time, but much preferred to take care of his family. When Titus and Tiberius reached their terrible twos, Hermione got pregnant again. This time, they ensured that no one else was around when they were all together with the goal of conceiving.
Six months later, Hermione had a second set of twins; this time a boy and a girl, Scorpius and Carina Malfoy. They both had the expected Malfoy platinum locks, but Scorpius’ were a mop of curls while his sister’s was straight. Scorpius was a replica of Draco personality-wise, dramatic and sarcastic but entirely charismatic and loveable. Draco lorded it over Marcus when Scorpius was sorted into Slytherin a few years behind his aunt Daffy. Scorpius and his sister were very close. He and their older brothers, Titus and Tiberius, were very protective over their first sister; however, Carina managed to be more devious than Draco ever was. Harry joked that she was a horrifying combination of Hermione’s intelligence with Draco’s Machiavellian tendencies, and he wasn’t entirely wrong. She was just as loyal and loving as her parents, which balanced out her evil genius. Carina also valued intelligence more than power, which wasn’t very Slytherin. She was the top student in Ravenclaw nearly all seven years of school.

Hermione and her wizards decided to only wait a year before trying to have children again. Hermione felt she could handle another pair, because they really had so much help. All four wizards were very involved in raising the children, no matter who the biological father was. The grandparents were also nearly constantly present. Of course, because Hermione planned on another set of twins, she gave birth to triplets. Alexander, Isaac, and Margaret Nott proved that even a Sorceress couldn’t control everything and effectively tipped the scales so the children firmly outnumbered the adults in the house seven to five.

Margaret had Hermione's curly brown hair, but otherwise looked a great deal like Theo's mum. She was a quiet girl, but had an uncanny knack for making people comfortable. People sought her out and automatically confided in her. When the others needed an ear or a shoulder to cry on, they went to Maggie. She was also the household's lone Hufflepuff, but house affiliation and cliques didn't matter to Maggie. She was inseparable from Diana Lovegood-Turan, a Ravenclaw, and Priscilla Weasley, a Gryffindor.

Alexander looked exactly like his father. He had Theo's laid back attitude, but also had a quick temper. His many siblings learned how far to push Alex because when he snapped, nothing good came of it. Alex did well in Slytherin. His scheming classmates first misinterpreted his laid back demeanor to mean that he was an easy mark, despite warnings from Scorpius and Dante Zabini. Of course, after one warning they let the other Slytherins figure it out on their own, since that is what Slytherins did. It only took one spectacular hex and everyone knew not to push Alex too far. Slytherins did excel at self-preservation after all.

All three Notts were brilliant, but Isaac was special. He had a unique way of looking at the world and he was insatiably curious. Isaac was smaller than all his brothers and looked like a masculine version of his mother. He was also very odd socially, much like his grandfather, Ted. The two of them were peas in a pod and would spend hours together. Isaac was more interested in his own studies than what his instructors wanted him to learn, most of which he already knew. He never cared about marks and didn't fit in with his high-achieving fellow Ravenclaws. The members of that house had a tendency to ostracize and tease people who were different, much as they had with Luna. The first time Isaac's books went 'missing,' his older sister, Carina, scared the wits out the entire house with a frightening display of hexes that reminded everyone that she was indeed a Malfoy and that no one messes with a Malfoy’s family.

Seven children was initially overwhelming to Hermione, but her wizards were able to calm her. Hermione always wanted a large family and she definitely wanted each of her wizards to experience fatherhood. It was the number that made her panic, but Molly Weasley provided her a great deal of moral support. She knew what having seven children was like. Hermione adored the children and each of her wizards was actively involved in childcare. They hired a small team of five more House-elves to wrangle the babies as well. Hermione had more than enough help.
When the triplets had their first birthday, Hermione realized she'd become slightly addicted to babies and started to think about getting pregnant again. Titus and Tiberius had just turned four, while Scorpius and Carina were two and a half. It didn't take anything to convince her wizards to try again. Adrian, Draco, Marcus, and Theo all grew up as only children. They wanted a house full of kids. Marcus joked that they only had enough for one Quidditch team, and they needed subs.

When the triplets were about a year and a half, Adele and Astrid Pucey were born. Both were lovely, bright, incredibly creative girls that turned out very different. Like Titus and Tiberius, the girls were nearly identical. Only Hermione could always tell which one was which when they were babies. By the time they were five, however, anyone who knew them could tell the difference. Adele liked darker colors and was tougher than her sister. She was adventurous and never backed down from a challenge. Adele was the kind of child reverse psychology was made for; she would try anything if someone implied that she couldn't do it. Adrian told everyone that Adele got her stubborn, adversarial attitude from her mother. Of course, Hermione would point out that Adele could’ve easily inherited her argumentative nature from her solicitor father. Astrid was more like her father in that she gravitated to beauty and art. Astrid turned out to be a talented artist and marched to the beat of her own drummer. Reverse psychology never worked on her because she was stubborn in an entirely different way. While Adele would argue and fight, Astrid simply did whatever she wanted with very little exceptions.

Despite their differences, Adele and Astrid were extremely close; they balanced each other well. It was quite surprising when they were separated at Hogwarts into houses that no one anticipated. Headstrong Adele became a Slytherin and dreamy Astrid a Gryffindor. Their parents decided they were good placements because Adele needed a place to channel her ambition while Astrid needed a place that recognized the inherent bravery of her individuality. Adele was a horrible influence on two of her best friends, Nasir Lovegood-Turan and Lily Potter, who were sorted into Slytherin the same year. Astrid was by no means alone in the Gryffindor tower, as her oldest brothers Titus and Tiberius were exalted sixth years. She also had the Potter brothers and two Weasleys, Priscilla and her cousin Arthur, for company.

There were two years that saw all nine of Hermione’s children enrolled at Hogwarts at the same time. Minerva McGonagall had wisely chosen to retire the year before the first set of twins enrolled, leaving the new Headmaster Flitwick with a daunting task. McGonagall and Snape both visited the school often. While Flitwick did appreciate their advice, he didn’t care for their gleeful expressions and the fact that they found a great deal of entertainment in the exploits of the Flint, Malfoy, Nott, and Pucey children.

The Headmaster kept inviting them because Titus and Tiberius had an unusual devotion to the former Gryffindor head of house and Headmistress. All the children grew up thinking of Minerva as their maternal grandmother of sorts, even calling her Nana. The Flint boys adored her blunt manner and she was the first one they owled when they were sorted into Gryffindor. The elderly witch cheered the loudest at their Quidditch games. Flitwick knew that a stern look from Minerva worked as well as calling their mother, the only other person who could manage them. The other biggest troublemaker was little Adele, who adored Severus. The children all called him Uncle Sev and for the longest time couldn’t fathom why everyone was so afraid of the black-clad wizard. It was just Uncle Sev. A few words from Severus calmed Adele the way no one else on the staff could ever manage. The little girl took everything he said to heart and never wanted to disappoint him.

While the Flint boys and Adele were the most likely culprits for mischief, the others were in no way innocent angels. Hermione was used to hearing from Neville, the Gryffindor head of house, as well as Sasha, the Ravenclaw head of house. After the Russian metamorphmagus finished his apprenticeship with Kobayashi, he went to teach Transfiguration at Hogwarts. The Slytherin head
of house, Hestia Carrow, had ample reason to contact Hermione’s household as well. Hermione wasn’t sure who the head of house was for Hufflepuff sometimes, because Maggie was as close to an innocent angel as was possible. Her siblings never let her take the fall, usually because she was an innocent bystander or co-conspirator at best.

Life could be surprising, even for a Sorceress with the power to control the elements. One of those surprises was Sabine Flint, born the year Adele and Astrid turned four years old and the only single birth in the family. The little girl was the very image of her mother, with a petite frame and a riot of curly brown hair. She had her father wrapped around her finger. In personality, she was more like Marcus. She was most comfortable with her family and close friends. Strangers experienced her as cold and taciturn, but like her father, Sabine didn’t care about that at all. She was sorted into Slytherin with her brother Alex and her sister Adele, where she was the brightest witch in her year.

The biggest surprise came two years after Sabine. Hermione’s last pregnancy was again twins, which was not unusual. The odd part was that the two boys had different fathers. The family was used to odd and happily welcomed Oberon Pucey and Cygnus Malfoy. Oberon would grow up to be as dashing as his gorgeous father, but didn’t have to rely on his looks entirely since he was smart as a whip. He was sorted into Slytherin with his sister Sabine, the only sibling left at Hogwarts when he and Cygnus began their first year. Everyone thought it was odd that the outgoing Oberon was brother to the taciturn Sabine, but they wisely kept their thoughts to themselves. Cygnus was the same platinum blond that only Malfoys could be, but that’s where the obvious similarities ended. Cygnus managed to be disheveled constantly, which was very un-Malfoy-like. He was also unwaveringly friendly and helpful to everyone, with none off the cool Malfoy hauteur. Even though everyone saw it coming, Draco pouted for a week when Cygnus was sorted into Gryffindor.

Life was different for the twelve children. Having the Sorceress as your mother was strange. People revered their mum, which they understood because they knew she was wonderful. They didn’t always understand the fuss she created. Also, no one else they knew had so many siblings or so many parents. They didn’t know anything else growing up and as they got old enough to realize how odd their home life really was, none of them would’ve chosen anything else. Their parents clearly loved each other and all of them. The kids were all very different people, as were their parents, but they were a strong and loyal group. Carina, Maggie, Adele, Astrid, and Sabine had monthly slumber parties, usually on the same night their mother had her monthly witches-only nights with her friends. Daffy, Diana, Priscilla, and Lily were frequent attendees to the girls’ sleepovers. The sisters would go on to keep the tradition all their lives, endeavoring to meet up at least one night a month. Titus, Tiberius, Scorpius, Alex, Issac, Oberon, and Cynus were just as close, even though they felt slumber parties were poncey. As adults, they did meet up at the pub at least once a month.

One thing all the children had in common was that they all strived to find love like they saw everyday in their parents. Once they’d seen the depth and strength of love their parents had, they wouldn’t accept anything less in their own marriages. Most of them had flings and short-term relationships, but none of them would settle down for anything but the real thing.

Hermione, Adrian, Draco, Marcus, and Theo loved each other for decades. They raised twelve outstanding children and had a staggering thirty-two grandchildren. The five of them worked together on some world-changing projects and were instantly recognized in any wizarding community. They were happiest just being together and their sexual connection never dimmed. Theo charted their sex life as a group for a decade as a research project, much to the embarrassment of the children; although Issac didn’t care when it was published. The role of the Ancillary needed to be very sexual, as that was one of the primary ways the Sorceress anchored her magic. Surges in magic needed an increase in sexual activity, since the release found in sex helped Hermione release
an overload of magic. Theo found notable events occurred around these periods of increased sexual activity, likely due to the increased elemental magic released out. After a weekend trip to a tree farm that specialized in rare wand woods, their groves effectively doubled. A mountain getaway for a week was followed by the feuding trolls in the area actually coming to a truce. One particularly exuberant vacation on Adrian’s yacht opened up a path to the supposedly lost city of Atlantis; where the people were happy to see new folks but objected to being designated as lost, pointing out that they knew exactly where they’d been the whole time.

Hermione always knew the five of them functioned best as a unit, but was devastated when she realized how closely linked they really were. It meant that the five of them would leave the world as a unit. None of them could possible survive without the others. For herself, she couldn’t imagine losing any of her wizards and being able to go on. What upset her was that their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren would lose all five of them at once. When she was one hundred and forty years old, Hermione told her children about her realization, but it turned out that they had reached the same conclusion decades earlier. They couldn’t imagine how any of the five could survive without the others and understood what would happen.

Eventually, at a ripe age of one hundred and fifty-three, Hermione went to bed with all four of her wizards and none of them ever woke up. It was midsummer and the one hundred and thirtieth anniversary of their bonding, which the world thought was exceptionally fitting.

Chapter End Notes

The End.

End Notes

Piccola = Italian term of endearment, literal translation something like “little girl”

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