

Draco Malfoy and the Face of Death



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Title: Draco Malfoy and the Face of Death

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Rating: NC-17

Pairing: Draco/Hermione

Summary: Ten days before his wedding, Draco's past catches up with him.

Author's Note: Written for the LJ **dracobigbang** celebration of Draco Malfoy's 30th birthday on 5 June 2010 and a sequel, of sorts, to part 1 of *The love match*.

Disclaimers: This story is rated **NC-17 for violence and sexual scenes**. Please do not read any further if you are not of legal age.

The main characters in this story were created by JK Rowling. No offence is intended and no profit is being made by borrowing them for use in this story, which is intended as a transformative commentary on the original.

Prologue: Sunday evening, Malfoy Manor

The Grand Ballroom of Malfoy Manor is filled with light—there are candles on the tables and in the wall sconces and floating beneath the stuccoed ceiling; there are Yule trees glittering with everlasting snow; there are garlands of evergreens twinkling with fairy lights; and, flanking the doors, there are green ice-dragons, breathing shards of frosty fire...

...

Moving in time to the music, Draco Malfoy takes a bottle of champagne from one of the coolers, scoops up a couple of glasses, and weaves his way through the dancing couples, heading for the doors.

He's almost there, when a sturdy hand grabs his arm, and stops him in his tracks.

"Where are you going with those, Malfoy?"

Draco sighs. *It's the world's second most annoying man.* "What business is it of yours, Potter?"

"Hermione's my best friend."

"And she's my *fiancée*," says Draco, looking down at Potter's sweaty paw, which is mauling a good seventy galleons-worth of raw silk suit, "at least, for another ten days, and then she'll be my wife—hence, the party. So, now we've got *that* sorted—"

"*Listen!* If you're sneaking off to meet one of your women—"

"One of my women?" Draco laughs. "Yes, that's *exactly* what I'm doing."

"If you ever cheat on Hermione," says Potter, "if you hurt her in any way, I'll slice them off, Malfoy."

"Nasty, Potter. Very nasty." Draco wrenches himself free of the bastard-who's-lived-too-long, and continues on his way.

...

He closes the Library door and—holding the bottle and glasses in one hand—he pulls out his wand and seals it and, for good measure, casts a couple of silencing charms.

There's no sign of her.

She must be hiding, the minx.

With mounting excitement, he scans the chamber—the alcoves, the bay windows—and then—*Oh yes!*—he spots her on the balcony.

She smiles down at him.

Seductively.

He climbs the spiral stairs.

She's perching on a table, swinging her little feet.

He leans against a bookcase and—champagne forgotten—he *looks* at her.

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Her robes are a deep burgundy red, and the tight velvet bodice—which is boned like a corset and edged with scarlet satin—lifts her breasts and displays them to perfection.

“Bloody hell, Granger,” he growls, “you have lovely tits.”

“You’re so romantic, Malfoy.”

Her hands are resting in her lap and she slides them down to her knees, grasps her skirts, and slowly inches them up her legs.

Oh, Merlin...

She’s wearing little black boots, like a Victorian lady’s, and jet black stockings, and...

Oh, fucking Merlin!

She’s wearing long, white drawers, which are gathered at the knees with black satin ribbons, and are—he has absolutely no doubt—completely crotchless.

“Well?” she says. “Are they as sexy in real life as they looked in the photographs?” (Working together on research projects for his father, they’ve discovered a *lot* of vintage pornography in the Malfoys’ Library).

Draco dumps the champagne on an empty shelf. “*You*, Granger, you’re the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.”

She reaches out, opening her legs for him and, when he comes to her, she wraps herself around him and pulls him close. “I thought you’d got lost, Malfoy.”

“Mm...” He leans down, and nuzzles her breasts. “I was having a nice little chat with your friend, Potter, and couldn’t get away.”

“Please, Draco,” she says, cradling him in her arms, “don’t insult Harry...”

“*He* was the one doing the insulting, Granger.” He runs the tip of his tongue up her cleavage.

“Oh! Oh, *Malfoy*...”

...

He owes it all to the Ministry of Magic (so he supposes he should give them a donation).

Because, if *they* hadn’t passed a Law for the Regulation of Magical Marriages, requiring all unmarried pure-bloods to marry half-bloods or Muggle-borns, *he* would never have proposed to Granger, and Granger would never have accepted him.

And if Granger hadn’t accepted him, *she* would never have tried—secretly—to cement their relationship with a complex cocktail of love potions and lust charms designed to take effect the first time he made love to her, and then seduced him the moment she’d got him alone.

And if *she* hadn’t seduced him—wearing, incidentally, the sexiest little pink satin and black lace push-up bra he’d ever seen (which she later admitted she’d bought specifically for the purpose)—*he* wouldn’t be where he is right now.

Between her luscious legs.

He slides his hands down to her hips and rips off a few million yards of burgundy silk skirt, leaving her wearing nothing but her corset, drawers, and stockings.

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Fucking hell, that should be illegal...

Of course, even the brightest of witches can make mistakes, especially when she's attempting too much magic too quickly and, for a moment—for many long, *excruciating* moments, actually—he'd thought that she'd hexed his balls to ache after sex, probably as some sort of revenge for the way he'd treated her at school—and, if he could have taken his hands off his cock at that point, he would have wrung her bloody little neck.

But it turned out that the pain was only—*Only!*—a side effect, and though it had briefly shaken his admiration for her—"You're supposed to be good, and moral, Granger, and—and a lot less like me, for Merlin's sake!"—once she'd convinced him that she'd meant well—"This is it, Draco—it's you and me, together, for the rest of our lives; we have to make it work!"—he could hardly have held such Slytherin-worthy sneakiness against her.

Besides, he thinks, as his fingers confirm that her drawers are, indeed, crotchless, *there's nothing like getting fabulous sex whenever he wants it to make a man forgive and forget.*

And the sex *is* fabulous.

It's the best he's ever had.

And he's had a *lot*.

Granger swears that it has nothing to do with the charms—"They shouldn't affect dimensions, or muscles, or—you know—lubrication, Malfoy,"—but, if the magic does eventually wear thin, he'll just get her to cast the charms again.

Sometimes he thinks he's died and gone to Muggle heaven.

...

His mouth finds hers and he gives her a long, tender kiss, which is her cue to unbutton his fly.

He feels her little hand free him from his shorts, and stroke him along his entire length—once, twice, three times—and then draw him down between her thighs. He's big, and she's quite small, so it takes a lot of gentle manoeuvring—of pressing forward, and waiting for her body to adjust—for him to enter her fully.

It *can* be frustrating but, tonight, it's perfect. She's holding him in her arms, and he's filling her, and she's all soft, and tight...

Her pussy's like a velvet vise, he thinks. *Oh yes...*

"What did your father want?"

"GRANGER!"

"What?"

"You don't talk about a man's father at a time like *this*. Merlin!"

"I didn't think anything could put the Slytherin Sex Maniac off his stride."

"That's 'god', Granger. Slytherin Sex *God*."

She reaches down between them, giggling—from her, a giggle's all kinds of delightful—and her fingers soon restore his good humour. "Oh, yes," she whispers, "you *are* a god."

He gathers her close and, occupying her teasing mouth with kisses, he slips back inside her.

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...

They'll taunt each other with words; sometimes they're crude, and sometimes they're angry but, once they start making love in earnest, they're always serious. There are times when Draco has no idea where his own body ends and where Granger's begins, times when he and she—man and woman—become one being.

He doesn't know whether it's his own heart or whether it's her magic.

But when it's right, like it is tonight, he really doesn't care.

...

Afterwards, he Scourgifies himself, but *her* body needs gentler treatment, so he uses his wand to dampen his handkerchief, and gently cleans between her thighs.

"What *did* your father want?" she asks, leaning back, and watching him work.

"Nothing." He wipes the handkerchief along her slit.

"*Oh...*" Her back arches, pushing her into his hand. Draco leans in and—fingers teasing her below—he kisses her. "We did," she gasps against his lips, "we did say—ah—no secrets between us, Malfoy. Remember?"

"*You* said no secrets between us, Granger, as I recall."

She pulls away from him with a hiss and, folding her arms across her chest, she pouts.

It's adorably silly—especially since his hand's still between her legs, so she's technically at his mercy—but it works because, for some reason, she owns him. "All right," he sighs. "It's nothing, really—when we go to Diagon Alley tomorrow, he wants me to deliver something for him. You can wait for me in Flourish and Blotts if you want—spend some of your book allowance."

"What is it—this thing you have to deliver?"

"I don't know. A letter of some sort."

"Why doesn't he owl it?"

"Oh, Granger, how should I know?"

"Did you even ask?"

"Of course not."

"And you wonder why he still treats you like a child?"

"*Don't*, Granger." He balls the handkerchief and throws it down on the table.

"I just..." She grasps his hand. "I just want to be here for you, Draco."

"I know." He raises her hand to his mouth. "I do *know*, Granger," he murmurs. Then, "Come on. If we don't get back to the party soon, Mother *will* send an owl, to shame us."

Chapter 1: Monday, Knockturn Alley

"I've still got to deliver *this*," says Draco, pulling his father's letter from his breast pocket.

He's taken Granger to the ice cream parlour, because—having discovered, whilst altering his will in her favour, that *she* already possesses a large fortune (awarded by the Ministry of Magic for outstanding bravery during the war) which she intends to leave to *him*—he's decided that the only thing that can possibly revive him is some Christmas pudding ice cream.

Granger sets down her spoon, and takes the letter from him. It's a large piece of high quality vellum, folded, and sealed with a blob of scarlet wax impressed with the Malfoy crest. She turns it over. "There's no name on it."

"I know. I had to memorise the address."

"Draco!"

"Don't say it, Granger."

But she does: "No name, and a secret address in Knockturn Alley. Merlin, Draco, you should have said no."

"How could I?"

"You could have shouted for me, and I'd have said it for you."

She's priceless—he has to grin. "Your ice cream's melting."

She pushes her bowl across the table.

He picks up his spoon and tucks in. "Look," he says, "I'll be five minutes—that's all. You go straight to Flourish and Blotts and I'll meet you there." He knows he's stroking her Achilles heel. "All right?"

She sighs. "All right. But be careful. If you're kidnapped and miss the wedding, your mother will never forgive you."

"What about you?"

"I'll just marry the *second* most eligible bachelor in Wizarding Britain."

"Gold digger!"

He puts a few sickles on the table, and they leave the shop.

"I won't be long." He leans in, and kisses her, and a sudden flash of light tells him that they've been photographed by some bastard from *Witch Weekly*. "Bugger," he grumbles. "I'll have to give them the slip."

"I'll see you in the book shop, then," says Granger. "*Please* don't get into any trouble, Draco."

...

He hasn't been down Knockturn Alley since Granger accepted his proposal.

It's darker and dirtier than he'd remembered, and parts of it are wet, and he's wondering where the water's coming from when it occurs to him that it might be something other than water, and he starts paying more attention to where he's stepping.

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He passes the filthy courtyards, and the suspiciously blank walls (no doubt hiding disillusioned doorways), and the empty shell of Borgin and Burke's, avoiding waifs, and strays, and gibbering idiots driven mad by potion abuse, until he finds himself at the address his father had given him the night before.

He knocks at the door, waits a few moments, begins to get impatient, raises his hand again, and the door opens before he can knock a second time.

"Hello, Draco..."

He can't say she's the *last* person he expected to see—that would probably have been the Dark Lord himself—but he's certainly surprised. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

Her professional name's Delilah Caine. She's a Muggle, the best bit of pussy at Madam Mafalda's, a Knockturn Alley brothel catering for punters with a wide range of unusual tastes, including—in the past—a certain young pure-blood with an unrequited passion for a Muggle-born.

There'd been a time when Draco had known Delilah very well—known her in what Muggles, according to Granger, term 'the Biblical sense'.

Twice a night.

Several nights a week.

But that was *before*.

"Is that any way to greet an old friend?" she asks, pouting.

Her hair is loose about her shoulders—just how he used to like it—and he's appalled, now, to see how much it looks like Granger's. She's wearing a slightly ratty pink silk negligee, which is hanging open to reveal a black corset trimmed with pink ribbons, black stockings, and no briefs—and he notices that her bush needs trimming.

"We were never *friends*," he says, with a sneer. "Here's your letter."

"It's not for me, lover," she replies, laughing. "It's for *him*!" She steps closer, and squashes her big tits against his chest. "He wants you to give it to him personally, Draco. And when you've done that, you can give *me* one, personally." She winks, and her hand slips between his legs.

Draco jumps back, yelping like a girl. "No way!"

He shoves the letter at her, and it falls to the floor.

"Oh, Draco! You've got it all *dirty*." She tilts her head, and smiles up at him through her too-black eyelashes, and he's ashamed to remember just how seductive he used to find her. "Pick it up for me, there's a good boy."

"Fuck off." He turns to leave, and—

Suddenly, he can't move.

Someone's caught him with a freezing charm.

And Delilah's all over him—her mouth, her hands, her tits—kissing and groping and grinding, and there's nothing he can do about it. He feels her unbutton his fly—"Please, Draco," she begs, "I've missed your big dick so much,"—and she reaches inside, and—*Fucking hell!*—there's one bit of him that *can* still move but, thank Merlin, it doesn't!

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Instead, something much worse happens.

"Draco?"

It's Granger!

The freezing charm immediately dissolves, and he's facing his future wife, his hair tousled, his cheeks flushed, and his trousers *gaping*...

"Oh, *Draco!*" She turns and runs.

"No! Granger!" He follows her, shouting like a madman: "Don't try to Apparate! For Merlin's sake, *don't!*"—he catches up with her and throws his arms around her, pulling her back against his chest—"please, Granger; *please* don't Apparate in this state!"

"I'm not *stupid!*" she says, trying to break free. Then she adds, bitterly, "Except, obviously, where you're concerned, Draco, because I actually thought I could trust you."

They've emerged into Diagon Alley and their raised voices are drawing attention. Draco's sure the photographer's still lurking nearby, just *waiting* for a chance to snap a noisy spat between the Malfoy heir and his bride-to-be. He needs to get Granger off the street, and quickly.

He risks letting go of her, and attempts to bribe her: "Let's have some lunch," he says, "and I'll explain everything."

"No." She folds her arms across her chest.

He tries threatening her: "I swear to you, Granger, if you don't come quietly, I'll throw you over my shoulder, and carry you—knickers showing, and big bushy head hitting everything we pass."

She scowls.

He loses his nerve: "Oh, Granger, *please!*"

"Fuck," she says, and he's taken aback, because she hardly ever swears. "What is it about a whining, pure-blood ferret-*bastard* I just can't resist?"

"I don't know," he says, "but let's hope I never lose it."

...

Ten minutes later, they're holed up in a room in *The Leaky Cauldron*. He's ordered a bottle of wine, some pumpkin pasties, and a fashionable Muggle delicacy, called 'chips', but Granger's refusing to eat. He pours himself a glass of wine and tells her exactly what happened.

"It's a well-known BDSM charm," he says.

Her eyes widen. "Well known?"

"Amongst punters. It freezes the body, but not the cock and balls."

"And do men like that—being helpless?"

"Some do. It's supposed to make the orgasm more intense."

"Have you ever tried it?"

"No."

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She looks up at him, suspiciously.

"I haven't, Granger."

"I don't want *us* to use it. Not ever."

"Good," he says. "Because *I* like touching you."

"Your father's behind this," she says. "He set you up, thinking that it would drive us apart." She grabs the bowl of chips and starts wolfing them down, and Draco recognises the signs—she's preparing for a fight.

"It... It does look that way," he admits.

"Can you think of another explanation? Unless... You don't owe this Madam Mafalda any money, do you?"

"I don't think there really is a Madam Mafalda, Granger... But, no. In fact, I always paid extra. They made a lot of galleons out of me."

"Why, Draco?" She wipes her fingers on a napkin. "I just don't understand it. You could have had any woman you wanted—and if even a tenth of what *Witch Weekly* said was true, you *did* have lots of women—so why go to a prostitute as well? What did she have—"

"Bushy hair," he says, softly, "like yours." And he knows it's time to tell her everything.

"It happened after the Battle of Hogwarts," he begins, taking hold of her hand. "I'd always fancied you, Granger—I was always trying to get your attention,"—she squeezes his fingers—"but that night, when I noticed how kind you were being to my mother, it became something more..."

He raises her hand to his lips, and kisses it. "Did you know they cast charms on us, in Azkaban, to stop us wanting sex?"

"No, I didn't..."

"They're not being humane, they just don't want any trouble. But it didn't work—not on me, at any rate—it just stopped me coming when—well, you know. I was going crazy—punching the bloody walls—until I started thinking of you." He kisses her hand again. "Once I had you—well—it worked again. It was *you* who got me through it, Granger. You kept me sane. And, when I came out, I... Well, let's just say I needed to find someone who reminded me of you."

"Oh, Draco..." She lays her head on his shoulder, and he gathers her into his arms. "Why didn't you come to *me*—and—and—"

"Ask you out?"

"Yes."

"What would you have said?"

"I'd have said yes."

"Are you sure?"

"I accepted your proposal, didn't I," she says, "and I seduced you in your mother's carriage on the way home from the Ministry. Doesn't that tell you anything?"

"It tells me," he says, "that I was stupid."

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"With that woman."

"Delilah."

"The temptress."

"Temptress?"

"*The Delilah*. She defeated the strongest man in the world," she explains, "by—you know—wearing him out."

"Oh."

"Was she—was she *good*, Draco?"

"I thought so at the time. But there's no one like you, Granger. Not for me, now. You're the only woman I want. If you ever left me, I'd be completely fucked."

...

Her brassiere's white.

He picks up his wand and runs the tip down one of her straps.

"Go on," she says.

He murmurs the words and the cotton becomes green lace, the full cups shrink to half cups, the simple stitching becomes under-wiring.

"Green?" she says.

"Do you want red?"

"No, you can have your green. But..." She vanishes her skirt. "I want *these* to match."

He grins, and casts the spell, and her sensible white knickers become a tiny, green lace thong.

He sets down his wand, and coaxes her onto her stomach, and spends a moment or two just admiring his handiwork, and the way the thong outlines the curves of her lovely arse.

...

Despite their earlier quarrel, their lovemaking's tender.

Afterwards, they lie together, sharing the last of the wine. "You're the only woman I've ever known," he says, "who's as up for it as I am."

She turns onto her side and, leaning on her elbow, she looks at him, thoughtfully. She's still flushed from the sex—and also, he thinks, from embarrassment. "When I accepted you," she says, "I'd no idea it would turn out like this. I knew it'd be easier to have sex with you than with Nott or Zabini,"—the suitors she'd rejected—"and I hoped it'd be reasonably pleasant. But I never thought I'd actually *want* you." She blushes. "Not the way I do..."

Draco reaches out and tucks a clump of bushy hair behind her ear. "I *always* knew we'd be at it like bunnies. I suppose it's the real reason I couldn't risk seeing you when I came out of Azkaban. I knew that, once I'd had you, I'd never be able to give you up. And *that*,"—he turns onto his back, and folds his arms behind his head—"that would have wrecked my father's plans for me."

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"An arranged marriage?"

He nods.

"Did he have someone lined up?"

"Astoria Greengrass."

"Daphne's sister? Did you meet with her?"

"A couple of times."

"What was she like?"

He shrugs. "She seemed all right—better than Daphne, at any rate. We talked about our family histories, and swapped potion recipes..."

"You didn't make love to her?"

"No."

"What went wrong?"

"I told you—we only met twice."

"But you're a fast worker." He can tell she's grinning. "I'll bet you were just oozing the old Malfoy charm. But maybe she thought it best to keep you waiting until your wedding night."

"Not a philosophy *you* subscribed to, thank Merlin."

"Well, I'd read that the secret of married love was *good, regular sex*," she says, leaning over him, "so I thought, *The sooner the better*." She kisses his nose.

Draco pulls her into his arms, laughing.

She snuggles against his chest and, within moments, they're both fast asleep.

...

Terrified, Draco scans the Room of Requirement.

The fire's mutating, forming a gigantic pack of fiery beasts: flaming serpents, Chimeras and dragons rise and fall and rise again, and the detritus of centuries on which they're feeding is thrown up in the air into their fanged mouths, tossed high on clawed feet, before being consumed by the inferno...

Draco has his arms around the unconscious Goyle, and the pair of them are perching on a fragile tower of charred desks. Potter dives; Draco sees him coming, and raises one arm ... but Goyle's too heavy and Draco's hand, covered in sweat, slips—

"Crabbe," he cries, sitting bolt upright, "Crabbe! *CRABBE!*"

"Draco—*Draco*—it's all right," says Granger, wrapping her arms around him. "It was just a dream—*Draco*—it was a dream, sweetheart. Shh, *shhhhh...*"

She hugs him until he's stopped shaking, and then—because he's too exhausted to know what he's doing—she gently encourages him to lie down, and she holds him, and—just as she's had to do every few nights since they first started living together—she soothes him back to sleep.

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...

"What time is it?" he sighs.

"A little after seven."

"Seven? You should have woken me."

"You looked so comfortable," she says.

(They never mention his nightmares once things are back to normal).

He gives her a quick peck on the cheek, then climbs out of bed and hunts for his wand. "Come on, Granger," he says, "I want to speak to my father before dinner."

"What about?"

"What do you think?" He casts a quick cleaning charm on himself. "Delilah and the letter."

"Don't."

"Why not?"

"Because,"—she charms the creases from her clothes—"if you ask him, he'll simply deny everything. But if you say nothing, his curiosity will eventually get the better of him, and he'll give himself away."

"When it comes to sneakiness, Granger, you sometimes make *me* look like an amateur."

She grins. "What I really need now," she says, "is a shower."

"Of rain?"

She laughs. "Are you saying you've never heard of a shower, Malfoy?"

He shakes his head.

"Oh, are you in for a treat!" She slides her arms around his neck. "It's a brilliant Muggle invention."

"As good as the cinema?"

"In its own way." She stretches up, and kisses him. "Sometime soon," she murmurs, "I'm going to take you to a Muggle hotel, and I'm going to *have* you, in the shower..."

Chapter 2: Tuesday morning, the Auror Office

The business meeting's pure torture, but Draco's been forcing himself to follow its every twist and turn, carefully deciphering each circumlocution, making meticulous notes, and marking (with a star) any points that he and Granger might need to clarify with research in the library of Malfoy Manor.

He's just one more bit of bullshit away from committing *hara kiri*, when the doors to the conference chamber open, and the lackey who guards them enters, carrying a small, undistinguished-looking owl. "It's for Mr Malfoy junior, sir," he says, to the Chairman and Founder of Moran Holdings. "The missive's marked 'urgent'."

Lucius Malfoy turns to his son, frowning.

Draco shakes his head. He has no idea who might be trying to reach him, though his thoughts naturally turn to Granger.

"Well, it gives us an excellent opportunity," says Edgar Moran, "to take a short break. Capper, have the refreshments brought in."

The lackey bows.

Draco, meanwhile, has removed the parchment from the owl's leg, broken the seal, and is skimming the message. "Fucking hell," he mutters. Then, "I have to go, Father—Mr Moran, gentlemen, please excuse me." And, despite the general buzz of surprise, and Lucius's horrified expression, he rises, and hurries from the chamber.

...

"Where is she?" he yells, storming past the rows of cubicles until he finds the one labelled *Potter* (beside another marked *Weasley*).

"I couldn't stop him, Potter," yelps the runt who's snapping at his heels. "He threatened his way to the front desk, and then he just *barged* in here." He waves a hand, indicating the Auror Office.

"It's all right, Abercrombie," says Potter, dismissing his colleague with a friendly nod. He turns to Draco. "Sit down, Malfoy."

Draco scans Potter's cubicle. There's a desk—reasonably tidy—with a map of Diagon Alley pinned above it, and there are two wooden chairs, but there's no sign of Granger. "I *said*," he shouts in frustration, "*where is she?*"

Potter waves his wand at the map and, immediately, it becomes a window, through which Draco can see Granger, curled up on a narrow cot, in some sort of cell.

"*What?*" He turns this way and that, looking for a door and, when he can't find one, he slams his fist into the wall.

Nothing happens—Granger doesn't even hear him.

"Malfoy..."

"What the *fuck* are you doing to her?" He nurses his bruised hand.

Potter grasps his arm. "Sit down."

"Fuck off!" Draco shrugs him away. "I want to take her home. *Now.*"

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"You can't do that just yet."

"She's your best fucking friend, Potter! Why've you got her in there? And,"—he pulls the crumpled parchment from his pocket and waves it in Potter's face—"what's this fucking bullshit?"

"She's safe in there. Sit down, and I'll explain."

Draco opens his mouth to argue but his mind's in so much turmoil, he can't form the words.

"Sit down, Malfoy!"

Draco throws himself onto one of the chairs.

"Good." Potter perches on the edge of his desk. "Now, the facts, as far as we know them, are these: Hermione was arrested by Auror Belby at approximately eleven thirty this morning, in Knockturn Alley, following an anonymous owl—"

"What?"

"She was found in Knockturn Alley, ferret," says Weasley, who's emerged from his own cubicle and is now blocking the entrance to Potter's, "crouching over a dead prostitute—a Muggle woman, street name—"

"Delilah Caine," says Draco, shaking his head.

"Fancy you knowing that," says Weasley.

Draco looks from one man to the other. There's clearly no reasoning with the Weasel, but Potter has a chink in his armour: "Granger needs me," he begs. "Let me go to her."

"I can't."

Draco does the unthinkable: "Please."

"He can't," says Weasley. "Regulations." And he folds his arms across his chest, as though he's just delivered a death sentence.

"You shit house," growls Draco, "you're enjoying this—"

"If it gets Hermione out of *your* clutches—"

"*Ron!* Not now! Please!" Potter runs a hand through his messy hair. "Look, Malfoy, tell us everything you know, and we'll see what we can do."

"I *know*," says Draco, "that she didn't kill anyone, and so do you—both of you. Whatever game *he*,"—he jerks his head towards Weasley—"might be playing, you both know she's innocent. What's *she* told you?"

"She can't remember," says Potter.

"Can't remember? You mean she's been *Obliviated*?"

Potter shakes his head. "No. There are magical residues on her, but not from Obliviation, and there's no evidence of anything else that might have affected her memory." He shrugs.

"Have you tried Veritaserum?"

"The healer says it's pointless. She's too confused."

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Draco turns back to the window and watches Granger take a deep, shuddering breath, and he knows that she's exhausted herself crying, the way she did the day Crookshanks died.

"All right," he says, "I knew Delilah Caine. I suppose you could say that I was one of her regulars."

"Now why doesn't that surprise me?" says Weasley. "Don't you have buttons on that bloody fly of yours, Malfoy?"

"Ron," warns Potter.

But Draco's already leapt to his feet, and anger's bursting from his fingers in sparks of rogue magic—he clenches his hands into fists. "Do you seriously *think*," he snarls at Weasley, "that a man who has *Granger* would want anyone else?" Weasley's the bigger man, but he takes a step backwards. "I haven't *touched* another woman since the moment *she* said yes."

"Malfoy," says Potter, laying a hand on his shoulder, "Malfoy, calm down! We believe you. And we believe that you care for her—"

"She's going to be my *wife*, Potter!"

"We *all* love her, Malfoy—all three of us—and we're going to help her—why do you think I took the case from Belby?—but I need you to tell me everything you know."

Draco straightens his robes, and—dropping heavily into the chair that Potter's shoved towards him—he gives them a carefully edited account of the previous day's trip to Knockturn Alley: how he'd 'unexpectedly bumped into' Delilah; how she'd thrown herself at him—adding, for Potter's benefit, that he'd turned her down because he was engaged; how he'd heard someone cast a freezing charm on him; how Granger had seen him; and how he'd convinced her that he was innocent.

Potter listens carefully, making notes on an official sheet of parchment. "And you've no idea who cast the charm?"

"No," says Draco.

"You think it was a trap?"

"Of some sort. The moment Delilah tried to get me into the house, I knew that something was wrong."

"It couldn't have been her who cast the charm?"

Draco shakes his head. "She's—I mean, she *was*—a Muggle. No magic."

"Why would a pure-blood Prince be playing hide the sausage with a Muggle?" asks Weasley, with what sounds like genuine curiosity.

"You git," sneers Draco. He turns to Potter. "That isn't relevant."

"We'll decide what's relevant," says Weasley.

"We do need to know more about your relationship with the woman," says Potter. "This is a murder enquiry, Malfoy, and Hermione's the prime suspect."

Draco sighs. "Does he have to be here?"

"Ron's on the case."

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"All right... But I swear to Merlin, Weasley, if you make one more stupid remark, I'll—I'll..."

"Set Daddy on me?"

"I'll set Granger on you," says Draco, "and *she'll* have your balls in a jar." He sighs again, and adds, quietly, "On the shelf, next to mine."

The glimmer of a smile flits across Potter's face. "Tell us about Delilah Caine," he says.

Draco—doing more rapid editing—tells them what he'd told Granger the day before—how he'd sought out someone who reminded him of *her*. "Physically," he stresses. "Obviously, Delilah was nothing like her mentally."

"When did you stop seeing her?" asks Potter.

"The moment Granger said yes."

"So, about six months ago?"

"Five months, two weeks and six days."

"Isn't that romantic," says Weasley.

"It's a long time for her to wait to take her revenge for being jilted," says Potter, rubbing his chin.

"She wasn't *jilted*, Potter," says Draco. "We had a business arrangement. I paid for it. If anyone had wanted revenge, it would have been 'Madam Mafalda'—whoever *she* might be—for losing a good source of income. But I shouldn't think she's missing my galleons; there are always plenty more where I came from." For a moment, he considers sharing Granger's theory that the incident had been orchestrated by his father. But then he remembers how many lies he's already told to keep his father out of this mess.

"What does Hermione think about you paying for it with a woman that looked a bit like her?" asks Weasley, curiously.

"She has brains, Weasel, and a good heart, so she understands."

"Are you *sure* she understands?"

"For the hundredth time, you moron, *Granger did not kill Delilah!*"

"I *know* that," says Weasley.

Draco turns to Potter. "Can I see her now?"

Potter looks him up and down, as though assessing his worth. Then, "Ten minutes," he says. "We'll call it a conjugal visit."

"Harry..." growls Weasley.

"It will help Hermione, Ron." He turns to Draco. "You'll have to leave your wand out here."

Draco automatically clamps his hand over his sleeve, where his wand's stowed in its pocket. "No," he says, "I want to check her for magical residues."

"We've already told you," says Weasley, "that *that's* been done."

"Not by me, it hasn't."

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"Leave your wand out here, Malfoy," says Potter, firmly, "or I can't let you in. I'm already bending the rules for you." He pulls out his own wand and, pronouncing a spell that's unfamiliar to Draco, he draws a rectangle in the air. Draco watches a door appear beside the cell window. "It's unlocked."

"You mean—she really *is* behind that wall?"

Potter nods. "Each cubicle has a cell attached to it."

"Will you close the window, and let us have some privacy?"

"No."

Draco hadn't really expected it. "Well... Thank you, anyway," he mumbles.

He opens the door, and steps inside.

...

The room's oppressive, its four walls straining to contain the layers of dampening, bewildering and silencing charms intended to keep its prisoner quiet, and Draco finds himself briefly disoriented by their crushing weight.

Granger raises her head, and stares at him, and then—with a cry of pure joy—she launches herself at him, and throws her arms around his neck.

Draco lifts her off her feet, and holds her close. He can feel her tears, wet against his cheek.

"I didn't think you'd come," she whispers.

"Oh, Hermione! Why would you think that?"

He's never used her first name before. It sounds strange, but it seems to comfort her—her arms tighten, and she hugs him more possessively—and some primitive, instinctive part of him just wants to make love to her, as though that will put everything right.

Instead, he sits her on the bed and kneels before her, holding her hands.

"I thought," she says, "that you'd be angry with me."

"Angry?" His mind is racing. She's clearly not herself. It's as though someone has taken a club to her head and bludgeoned away part of her mind. And he doesn't know whether it's the magic in the cell or something that happened in Knockturn Alley, but he knows that he must bring her back from wherever she's retreated to, and he has absolutely no idea where to start. "Tell me what happened," he says.

"I don't remember, Draco."

"There must be something..."

"No." She shakes her head.

"Well..." He thinks of a starting point. "Do you remember waking up this morning?"

Her brow wrinkles as she searches for the memory, then her eyes suddenly widen, and she blushes.

"Oh. Yes." He leans forward, and presses his lips to her forehead. "I'm sorry," he murmurs, remembering the glorious taste of her on his tongue, "I'd forgotten about that." He kisses her

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again. "All right... Do you remember us having breakfast with my parents?"

She nods, slowly.

"You're sure?"

"I think so..."

"Do you remember waving to me, just before I Apparated away with Father?"

"Yes..."

"You're sure?"

"I... I don't *know!*" She's beginning to lose it. He climbs onto the bed, and takes her in his arms. "I'm so sorry, Draco," she sobs.

"For what?"

"I don't know."

Fucking hell! he thinks. *Maybe she hasn't been Obliviated, but surely those idiots can see that someone's done something to her. Why aren't they trying to find out what?*

And why can't I have my fucking wand!

"You have to concentrate, Granger," he says. "You must try to remember."

She nods, like a child trying to make amends, and it almost breaks his heart.

"Do you remember going to Knockturn Alley?"

"No..."

"What I don't understand is why you'd go—I mean, obviously, to see Delilah—but why did you go there alone?"

"I don't know."

"Did you..." A disturbing idea pops into his head. "Did you tell my mother about Delilah?"

She frowns.

"I know you didn't speak to Father, because he was with me all morning, but you could have spoken to Mother, and she might have told you to go and put Delilah in her place. But—no—you'd still have waited to talk it over with me—wouldn't you?"

"I don't know."

She's so pathetic, he can't ask his next question without hugging her, but it's the sort of hug an adult would give a child. "Do you remember seeing Delilah's body, Granger?"

"Yes..." She nods her head against his shoulder.

He buries his face in her bushy hair. "They say that you were holding your wand, but that means nothing. You could have been defending yourself, or... Knowing you, Granger, you were probably trying to defend Delilah."

Crap.

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He needs to get her away from the Auror Office, and seen by a proper healer.

He needs to check her wand and work out what spells she was casting just before they found her.

He needs to read Auror fucking Belby's report.

And Potter isn't going to let me do any of that, he thinks.

He pulls away, intending to have another talk with the bastard-who's-imprisoned-his-best-friend, but something down the scooped neck of Granger's blouse catches his eye.

Scarlet satin?

"Granger..." He opens a few of her buttons—she watches him curiously—and pulls the fabric aside.

Yes, scarlet satin.

It's a lovely brassiere—one of his favourites—lightly padded, with broad ribbon straps—strawberry red against the cream of Granger's skin. And—he shoves her skirt up to her waist—it has matching French knickers.

The door bursts open behind him—Potter's yelling and Weasley's bellowing incoherent threats—but Draco merely smooths down Granger's skirt, and calmly turns to face them.

"I still don't know how she came to be in Knockturn Alley, Potter, but I do know that she was planning to meet *me*," he announces.

...

"Because she's wearing red *knickers*," scoffs Weasley.

"You don't know a thing about women, do you, Weasel?"

"Well, I'm not some sort of shag-anything-on-legs pervert, like you, if that's—"

"Shut it, Weasley." Draco turns to Potter. "She'd only wear scarlet because she was planning to seduce me."

"You're so full of yourself," mutters Weasley.

"She must have been waylaid by someone on her way to me," Draco insists.

"It isn't exactly *proof*, Malfoy," says Potter.

"It's a starting point. It may help you jog her memory. Look, bring her out here—out of that bloody room that's giving her brain damage—and ask her about something called 'a shower'."

"A *shower*," says Potter, and his face suddenly splits from ear to ear—it's the most annoying grin Draco's ever seen.

"What the bloody hell's a shower?" asks Weasley.

Potter explains. "But, normally," he says, "you just wash yourself under it."

Weasley turns to Draco. "You really think we'd believe that Hermione, of all people, would have sex in one of those things?"

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"You don't know her, do you, Weasley?" says Draco, angrily. "All that time she was pining for you, and your head was so far up your arse—"

"Malfoy," says Potter, sternly.

"She found herself a better man, Weasley. Merlin help your poor wife." He turns back to Potter. "Did this healer who saw her know why she's so confused?"

"He says it's shock."

"Shock? Do you believe him? "

"He says she saw someone killed and she's blocking it out."

"Does that sound like the Granger you know?" Draco sighs. "It's more than that, Potter. You know it and I know it. She's acting like a *child*. We need to bring her back to reality—ask her about the shower."

"No—it's all right," says Potter. "We've just had the results back on her wand. They confirm that she didn't cast the Avada, so—even though Belby wants her charged as an accessory—I'm going to let you take her home."

"Thank Merlin!"

"But it's not over yet, Malfoy. Ron and I still have to prove her innocence and, until she's formally cleared, she must be available for further questioning. *So no hiding her on one of your family's private islands.*" He opens the cell door.

"Don't worry," says Draco, "The only place I'm taking Granger is St Mungo's. It's time the Abraxas Malfoy Wing started earning its money."

Chapter 3: Tuesday afternoon, St Mungo's

The Malfoy name counts for less than Draco had hoped, and the healer doesn't start to take his demands seriously until Granger—left unsupervised for a moment—sits down on the floor and tries to take off her shoes.

"See?"

Draco crouches down beside her. "No, Granger—Granger—*Hermione*,"—she looks up at him—"you need to keep them on. Yes, *on*." He refastens the buckles for her.

There's the strangest feeling somewhere deep inside his chest, a fierce glow that's fanned into flames whenever she looks up and gives him that shaky but trusting smile, and he suspects it's how a father feels about his child.

He's terrified he's going to start blubbing.

"Very well, Mr Malfoy," says the healer, who's been consulting someone over the Floo network, "Healer Marchbanks can see her right away. Perhaps you'd like to wait—"

"No," says Draco. "I'm going with her."

...

Healer Marchbanks is a short, fat wizard with round, dark eyes that, together with his oversized spectacles and his crown of stiff blond curls, give him a permanently startled expression.

Draco's not impressed, but he helps Granger climb onto the examination table, and makes her promise to lie still, and then watches, arms folded, whilst the healer casts a succession of diagnostic spells, repeatedly running his wand over her clothed body, and pausing between tests to commit the results to a sheet of parchment.

"Am I right in thinking that the condition's progressive?" he asks.

Draco nods. "She's getting worse." He's noticed that the healer's wand seems to be returning again and again to a place on Granger's thigh. "Are you going to *look* at that?"

"All in good time... You say that she was found at the scene of a crime?"

Draco repeats everything he's already told the first healer—everything that Potter had told *him*.

Marchbanks makes more notes. "It's not shock," he says.

Draco swears under his breath. "I could have told you that."

"Though shock may be a contributing factor."

"Contributing to *what*?" Whilst they've been talking, Granger's become agitated. Draco tries to persuade her to lie quietly, but finds he needs to exert his strength to keep her still. Without saying a word to him, Marchbanks picks up a broad strap and fastens it across Granger's waist, tying her to the table. "What?" Draco cries, "No! No!"

"Mr Malfoy," says Marchbanks, calmly, "I'm doing this for the young lady's own good." He ties two more straps around her wrists.

"No—give her something—a potion—calm her down. She's not an *anima*!" He squeezes

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Granger's hand. "Shh, shh, it's all right, Hermione. It's all right..."

"I would rather not use magic, at this stage," says the healer.

"Why?"

"Let us look at her wound."

"Wound? You mean the thing your wand kept finding?"

With complete, professional detachment, Marchbanks folds back Granger's skirt.

She's wearing sheer black stockings, which—Draco realises—are hideously inappropriate on the child-like creature she's become and, when the healer reaches for her suspenders, he can't bear it.

"No," he says, "I'll do that." And, gently shushing Granger, who's chafing her wrists trying to pull her hands free, he pops open the clip, and rolls her stocking down. "Shit," he gasps. "What in Merlin's name is that?"

On the front of her thigh there's a dark bruise. It's about three times the size of a galleon, and it's *perfectly* round.

"I believe we'll find," says the healer, who's produced a magnifying glass from somewhere, "a puncture wound—yes, there it is, d'you see it?—right in the centre."

"Is it an insect bite?"

"No." Marchbanks sighs. "No, I'm afraid that this is a very bad business, Mr Malfoy... Yes—you may replace Miss Granger's clothing now, and release her, and then bring her through to my office, if you would."

...

It takes Draco a while to get Granger redressed, because he's made the mistake of untying her first, and she keeps trying to kiss him—not as a fiancée would kiss her lover, but as a child might kiss her playmate—the way Pansy used to kiss him, when they were children.

When he finally gets her sitting in a chair, in front of Marchbanks's desk, the healer leans back, and folds his hands over his stomach, and says, "I can do nothing for Miss Granger."

Draco closes his eyes, and swallows hard, the better to control his panic.

"However, Mr Malfoy, I do have a colleague—of sorts—who may be able to help." He pushes a small box across the table. "Don't open it just yet. If you do decide to take my advice you will find, in that box, a portkey, which will take you and Miss Granger to my colleague's clinic. Once you're there, the portkey will act as something called 'an appointment card', granting you access to his consulting room. He will examine Miss Granger and—with luck—he'll be able to tell you more about her condition—perhaps even cure her. Are you willing to consult my colleague?"

"Of course."

"Even when I tell you that he's a Muggle doctor?"

Draco looks at Granger.

At this moment, he doesn't care about the Malfoy name; he doesn't care about the wedding of the decade; he doesn't even care if they can never have sex again; he just wants to stop her

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losing what little she has left of her mind.

"Yes," he says.

"Then open the box, take out the first card, and touch it to Miss Granger's hand."

...

Draco feels the familiar hook attach itself somewhere behind his navel, and he's just enough time to throw his free arm around Granger's waist before they're pulled into the tunnel.

Then they're rushing in a howling wind, with swirling colours pointing to a misty grey future, and Granger's screaming with laughter, and he's hanging on to her for dear life because he knows that *that's* what this journey means, for both of them.

...

They land in a long, dark corridor, with a distant square of light at each end and, for a moment, he wonders whether they've died. The place is surreal—full of muffled noises and strange smells—with dark grey walls and a floor that's scratched and battered, though reasonably clean.

Draco has no idea which way to go, but he decides to turn right and, leading Granger by the hand, he walks until he finds what looks like a waiting area—a small, grey alcove filled with grey chairs. Directly ahead of him there's a desk and, sitting behind it, a harassed-looking woman gazing into what appears to be a Muggle television set.

Draco clears his throat and, when the woman looks up, he hands her the portkey.

The woman reads it, checks her television, and says, "That's lucky! Mr Smith has had *three* cancellations this afternoon, and can see you right away." She hands him a grey folder. "Miss Granger's notes," she explains. "Take them in with you." She points further down the corridor. "Third door on the right—just knock and walk in."

"Thank you," says Draco.

It's becoming a habit.

...

Mr Smith's consulting room is smaller, darker, and greyer than Healer Marchbanks's, but it's essentially the same. The doctor's a youngish man, with huge, wild eyes and a shock of messy brown hair. "So," he says, "old Marchbanks sent you."

Whilst Draco coaxes Granger onto the examination table, Mr Smith consults her notes, which—as far as Draco can tell—are just the results of Marchbanks's tests, transcribed onto Muggle 'paper'.

"Well then," says the doctor, laying the folder down, "let's have a look at you." Granger reaches for his hand, but he wags his finger, smiling. "Someone's injected you with something, haven't they? I wonder what it was?"

"What does that mean?" asks Draco. "Injected?"

"Injected? Oh, it means he used one of these,"—Mr Smith picks up a small, transparent cylinder, with a plunger at one end, and shows it to him—"probably had it hidden in something like a walking stick—"

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"A walking stick?"

"Or an umbrella. The syringe would have had a hollow needle in the top—he would have pressed it into her leg, pushed the plunger, and—"

"Sent the potion straight into her blood," says Draco.

"Exactly."

"What was it—the potion?"

"That's what we're here to find out. The symptoms don't tell us much—"

Granger pulls up her skirt; Draco quickly pushes it down again.

"Typically," says the doctor, "it would be some sort of poison—but I'll have to run a few blood tests..."

"A *poison*?" Draco's mind is racing. The doctor's explaining what a blood test is—how he'll draw some of Granger's blood and use machines to test it for foreign substances—but Draco's only half-listening. He knows of two general antidotes—the Antidote to Common Poisons and the Antidote to Uncommon Poisons—and then there are more specific antidotes—but this is a *Muggle* poison, and—*Oh, if only Severus Snape were still alive!*

"Will she... Could it be fatal?" he asks.

"Quite possibly."

He watches Mr Smith use several of the 'syringes' to extract far more blood from Granger than he thinks is sensible, given her condition, but—*Thank Merlin*—from her arm, not from her thigh. He remembers he has some blood replenishing potion in his workshop at the Manor, and resolves to give it to her the moment he gets her home.

"There," says Mr Smith, attaching a label to the final sample. "I *would* insist on keeping her here for observation, but I know you magical types—you never allow it. So I'll just send the results to old Marchbanks when they're ready, and get him to forward them on."

He shakes Draco's hand.

"Is that it?"

"All I can do for now."

"Well... All right. Thank you."

He takes Granger out into the shabby corridor, turns right, and follows his nose.

The building's vast, and teeming with people, and there are hundreds of little waiting areas, and patients lying on trolleys, and temporary-looking cabins sitting in what must originally have been courtyards, and he and Granger see far too many elderly and injured Muggles wandering around in their pyjamas, but eventually—somehow—he manages to get them both outside.

They're somewhere in Muggle London—he has no idea where—and Granger's getting harder and harder to control. She's like a precocious toddler, rushing off towards anything that catches her eye, with no awareness of the dangers that surround her.

She's also being disturbingly affectionate.

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In desperation, Draco holds out his wand hand and summons the Knight Bus.

...

They alight outside Malfoy Manor, and Draco leads Granger through the gates.

She's had a mug of hot chocolate on the Bus, so she's sleepy now, and much easier to keep on track. Draco pulls out his handkerchief and wipes away her chocolate moustache, and—suddenly overwhelmed by desperation—he finds himself hugging her, and then lifting her into his arms, and carrying her, along the drive, up the stone steps, and through the massive doors, which open as they approach.

His mother's waiting anxiously in the entrance hall and rushes forward to help him; his father, standing at the top of the stairs, nods to him briefly, then disappears.

"She's been poisoned, Mummy," he says. "She's very ill."

He hasn't called her 'Mummy' since long before he went away to Hogwarts but, if Narcissa's shocked, she doesn't show it.

She understands.

She's always understood the depth of his feelings.

"Shall I help you put her to bed?" she asks.

"Yes..." He carries Granger up the sweeping staircase, along the corridor, and into her bedroom, which they've unofficially shared since the day they signed the Marriage Law Ledger and she came to live at the Manor.

His mother fetches a bowl of warm water and washes Granger's face, then brushes out her hair, and ties it with a ribbon, whilst Draco selects a modest night gown. Together, they change her into it.

Draco sinks down on the edge of the bed, exhausted.

Narcissa squeezes his shoulder. "You know where I am, darling," she says, "if you should need me."

...

"Draco," says Granger. "*Handsome...*" And her fingers start to roam.

"Not now, Hermione," he whispers, catching her hand and kissing it. "Go to sleep now."

She closes her eyes.

All that time, he thinks.

All that time I wasted, longing for her!

And when I finally asked her...

She was going to marry me, and be with me, for the rest of our lives.

We would have been together.

And now someone's taken her from me.

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He wants to smash the bastard.

He wants to knock him down and smash and smash and smash until there's nothing left of him.

He wants to punch walls, and break glass, and cast curses until all that's left in the world is Granger, and him, and his anger.

But he can't bear the thought of scaring her.

So, instead, he vows to keep her safe for as long as she has left.

He sets her hand upon her bosom, and gently smooths her hair from her forehead and then, slumping forward, he hides his face in his hands and, for the first time in a very long while, he weeps.

Chapter 4: Wednesday morning, Granger's bedroom

Draco hadn't planned to fall asleep but, nevertheless, he awakes—with a start—thinking, *POTTER*.

Granger's sleeping quietly.

He kisses her cheek, reassuring her that he won't be long, then rushes out of the bedroom, and runs to the nearest fireplace on the Floo network.

He's not sure why he's so hopeful.

Memories are swirling round his head: of Potter, suddenly brewing the perfect Draught of Living Death; of Snape, accusing Potter of using his own magic against him; of Blaise, telling him that Potter had a Potions book with someone else's notes scribbled in the margins; and, above all, of Weasley, recovering from the poison that he, Draco, had stupidly put in the bottle of mead.

He casts an Incendio charm as he approaches the fireplace, grabs a handful of Floo powder, and throws it into the flames. "Potter!" he bellows, thrusting his head into the green light, "Potter! *POTTER!*" and he keeps yelling until the man appears, looking tired and dishevelled, and followed by his Weasley wife.

"Have you any idea what time it is?" says Potter, hooking his spectacles over his ears.

"No," says Draco, honestly, and that seems to strike a chord because the other man crouches down before the fire, and his wife, pulling her dressing gown tightly round her, crouches beside him.

"What's wrong?" asks Potter

"Hermione's worse, isn't she?" says his wife.

"I—I think she may be dying," says Draco, and his voice cracks. "It's—the healer says it's some sort of poison. And I've come to *you*, because—"

"*Just shove a bezoar down her throat,*" says Potter. "Have you got one?"

"A bezoar...?" Draco frowns. His brain's overloaded, and it takes him a moment to process the idea, and then another to wonder why he hadn't thought of it himself, and then, "Yes!" he cries. "Yes! Yes!"

He leaps to his feet and he's about to charge from the room when a thought strikes him.

He bends down, and shoves his head back into the flames, shouting: "Anything you need Potter—anything, ever—you or your wife—just come to me!"

"Let us know how she is," he hears Ginny Potter reply. "In the morning."

...

He has two bezoars in his potion ingredients chest and he grabs both of them, and thunders back upstairs to Granger's bedroom.

"Please," he pants, lifting her head from the pillow and pushing one of the stones into her mouth, "swallow, Hermione. Just swallow. For me."

She coughs.

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He clamps his hand over her nose and mouth. "No! Swallow it, Hermione."

He feels her cheeks move, and sees her throat ripple, and he sighs with relief, wondering how long it'll be before he knows whether it's worked.

"Grako," she says, struggling to break free. "*Grako!*"

"Oh!" He pulls his hand away.

"What are you *doing?*" she gasps.

He gathers her up and crushes her to his chest. "You're back, Granger! You're back!"

...

She's groggy and slightly panicked, but all her faculties appear to be functioning normally and, once he's convinced her that he hadn't been trying to inherit her recently revealed fortune, nor to suffocate her as part of some perverted sex game, she promptly falls asleep.

Draco sits beside her, turning over the events of the last two days in his mind.

One detail haunts him: *Granger was attacked by a man carrying a walking stick.*

...

She wakes in the early hours, eager to talk. "Tell me exactly what happened."

He repeats everything he knows—again.

"It wasn't your father," she says, deducing what he hasn't had the courage to tell her. Then she reaches out and, lifting his chin, she forces him to meet her gaze. "It *wasn't*, Malfoy. Think about it: yes, he really doesn't want you to marry me and, yes, he'll do anything he can to make you leave me. But he'd never take me away from you, because that would only make you want me more. Killing me would hurt you. And, however wrong-headed his plans might be, everything he does, he does for you."

Draco lies back on his pillows and considers what she's said. "Yes... You're right. As usual."

"I think it's time you talked to him," she adds, "because this is starting to look like vengeance to me. And if there's anyone who's likely to have a madman for an enemy, it's your madman of a father."

Draco's suddenly annoyed.

It's not Granger's place to say something like that about his father.

Not to *him*.

Not if she cares for him even half as much as he cares for her.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

"Nothing."

"You're sulking."

"Drop it."

"Wonderful." She turns her back on him. "*I'm* the one who found my fiancé with a prostitute.

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I'm the one who learned that he used to visit her all the time. *I'm* the one who's been accused of murdering the woman. But, of course, *you're* the one with *man* pain."

"*What?*" he yells. "Have you any idea what I went through yesterday, you stupid woman? I thought you were going to *die*—or that I'd have to spend the rest of my life with a bloody *toddler!*"

"Well that should have suited *you*, Draco—a child's mind in a woman's body. You could have fucked me whenever and wherever—"

"GRANGER!" That's so fucking *unfair!* Child-Granger had come on to him—more than once—and he'd treated her with nothing but respect. "SHUT THE FUCK UP!" he shouts.

Then he turns his back on her, and tries to ignore her sniffles.

...

He lasts about a quarter of an hour. "Granger.."

More sniffles.

"Granger,"—he won't say he's sorry, because it wasn't *his* fault—"Granger, for Merlin's sake..." He turns over and pulls her, roughly, into his arms. "We shouldn't be arguing. We should be—I don't know—being pleased that you're okay."

She says nothing.

"It's nerves," he says, desperately. "It's a reaction to everything that's happened. *I'm* all worked up, *you're* all worked up..." Normally, when things are tense like this, they have sex, but Granger's only just recovered—

"I want you to show me what you did with her," she says.

"With who?"

"Delilah. Whatever you did with *her*, I want you to do it with *me*," she says.

Merlin's balls, she's jealous!

And randy?

"You've just been poisoned, Granger, you're not up to that."

It's the wrong thing to say. She pulls away from him, and fixes him with the furious glare she used to give him at school. "Anything *she* could do, *I* can do, Malfoy," she says.

"That's not what I meant—you know it isn't," he protests. "I just meant that you need to rest."

"Do it with me now, or get out of my bed." She folds her arms across her chest.

She's terrifying.

A termagant in the making.

If *anyone* ever needed a good shagging...

And it's not as though he doesn't *want* sex—part of him's bloody gagging for it—but, when she'd had a mental age of three years, he'd basically—well—tied a knot in it. *Because*, he thinks, *taking her when she was like that would have been abusing her.*

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And he knows that there's something very deep and very important behind that thought, but Granger's *looking* at him, and the part of him that wants to fuck her brains out is *looking* back, and he can't think straight.

"Oh, fucking hell, Granger," he growls, "all right! If it's what you want, I'll fuck you like a whore."

He gets up on his knees and, opening his fly, he thinks of all the things he used to do to Delilah—'chaining' her to the bed, blindfolded and gagged; 'forcing' her to her knees and 'making' her fellate him; fucking her in front of his fellow punters whilst they wagered on who would lose it first—and he realises that he doesn't want any of that crap with Granger.

He doesn't *need* any of that crap with Granger.

He's quite content to *make love* to Granger.

With Granger.

But Granger needs to know that she's every bit as good as Delilah, he thinks.

"We'll play the dice game," he decides. "First one to come's the loser."

...

He transfigures the bed into a sturdy gaming table with a polished mahogany frame and a green baize top, and the pillows into velvet cushions.

"We need an audience," he says, and casts another spell, filling the room with a crowd of shadowy people—his own memories, given a tenuous substance. "Meet the clientèle of Madam Mafalda's, as far as I can remember them."

"That's impressive magic, Malfoy," says Granger.

"You're not the only one with talent, Miss Muggle-born."

He conjures a pair of ivory dice, and drops them into her hand, and then—with another slash of his wand—he transfigures her modest night robe into an hourglass-shaped corset of pale lilac, studies it for a moment, and adds a few vertical stripes of black, to accentuate her slender waist and her curvy hips.

That certainly gets the juices flowing.

"Are you absolutely sure you want to do this—you really want to be used like a whore?"

"Yes," she says.

"Well, you'd better choose a safe word," he says, "just in case you want me to stop."

"Hippogriff," she replies.

"Classy."

He pulls one of the cushions to the edge of the table and, grasping her waist, he bends her over it.

The entire situation—his anxiety, his anger, his suppressed need and, most of all, Granger's obvious jealousy—has already made him hard, but the sight of her lying on the table, with her gorgeous arse bare, is almost enough to snap the bloody thing off. Without ceremony, he casts a charm to make her ready, and pushes himself inside her.

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Granger lets out a thoroughly gratifying gasp, and claws the table, and Draco can't resist giving her a few rough thrusts, just to show her what she's let herself in for, but—despite the magical adjustment—her pussy feels fabulously tight, and he quickly realises that he'll have to be more careful if he's going to win the game.

He closes his eyes and, keeping perfectly still, he tries to think of potion recipes.

But Granger's impatient. "Draco..." she whines.

With incredible self control, he leans down and hisses in her ear, "You don't get to tell me what to do, you *whore*," which is a terrible mistake, because Granger squeals with excitement. "Oh fuck," he pants. "Keep bloody still!"

Fortunately, she obeys.

Once he's sure the danger's passed, he takes up his wand, and animates the shadow-people.

Granger looks around. "Oh *my*," she says.

Draco follows her gaze.

Most of the people have crowded around the table, and are waiting for the entertainment to start, but some of the shadows have begun having sex—one of the men has bent over backwards and is propping himself on his hands and feet like a human stool, and the woman sitting on his cock is herself being vigorously fucked by a second man, who's standing between her splayed legs.

"Ignore them," Draco rasps, looking away. "You've got your own job to do."

"What's that?"

He seizes her by the waist. "Roll the dice."

Granger picks them up, shakes them in her hand and drops them onto the table. "Two," she says.

He withdraws almost fully, then makes two long, slow thrusts, counting each time he's buried himself up to his balls, "One—two."

"Oh," says Granger, obviously inferring the rules of the game.

Draco takes a deep breath. "Roll again."

She does. "Double six."

"Bollocks," he murmurs. The shadow people are applauding, but he can't hear their clapping over the general buzz of sound he's conjured from his memories. One of the men sets a pile of galleons on the green baize. "He's backing *you*, Granger. He thinks you're going to win."

He bites the bullet, and thrusts twelve times.

...

They've been at it for what feels like hours.

And, just as the punters used to at the real Madam Mafalda's, the shadow people have come out from their private rooms, from the Members' Bar, and from the Grand Salon, and have gathered to watch them—some are standing on the furniture to get a better look—and now, within the hum of sound, Draco can recognise snippets of conversation: men are envying his

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staying power, women are admiring his arse, and everyone's counting his strokes.

The money's on Granger, but Draco knows she's holding on by a thread—the slightest movement of his hips has her gasping, and her pussy clamping down on him—and another throw of the dice will surely push her over the edge.

If *he* can just hold on...

Granger rolls the dice. There's a thunderous round of applause. "Double-six," she groans. "Again."

Fuck, thinks Draco. *I'm done for*. But he's determined to go down with flying colours.

He hauls himself up into a standing position and, grasping her hips and gazing down at her absolutely-fucking-gorgeous arse, he grinds into her, because he's no longer capable of proper thrusts. "One," he moans, "two—ah—three—*ahhh...*" Someone in the shadow crowd is urging him to go faster because, if he takes too long between strokes, he'll forfeit the game. "Four,"—his voice rises to an embarrassing falsetto—"fi—ahhhh—five—oh!—"

Granger comes.

Her body's arching and twisting, her pussy's devouring him—

And something bursts inside him.

"GRANGER," he screams, "GRANGER," and comes too, in a series of great, spine-wrenching convulsions.

...

The shadow people are congratulating him—patting his back with their wispy hands—and settling their bets. One shadow man reaches over and tries to stroke Granger's sweat-damp hair, and Draco's memory supplies his words: "How about having a *real* man fuck you now, girlie? Take a look at what *I've* got..."

Draco grabs his wand and banishes the bastard just in time, though the effort almost kills him. "Satisfied now?" he gasps.

"You really did this," she says, "in public?"

"Yes."

"With *her*..."

"Fucking hell, Granger," he groans. "Yes, but *you* were better, all right?"

"It was incredible," she says, turning her head, and seeking his mouth, and—somehow—they manage to share a clumsy kiss. "*You're* incredible, Malfoy. Always."

"Mmm." He's too tired to argue.

"And you're all mine."

"Mmmmm."

He barely has the strength to mumble, "Finite Incantatem," and turn the table back into a bed, before exhaustion claims him, and he's fast asleep and snoring—*loudly*, Granger tells him later.

...

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He's awoken by someone hammering at the door. "Where am I?"

"Our bedroom," says Granger.

"Oh..." He stretches, and sighs.

"Hadn't you better go and see who it is?"

"It'll be Mother," he says, wearily, "come to ask how you are. JUST A MOMENT!"

He manages to climb out of bed, and cast a couple of cleaning charms over himself, fastening his trousers and raking his hand through his hair. "Presentable?"

Granger studies him critically. "Yes," she decides. "But,"—she lifts the bedclothes to reveal the love bites on her neck and shoulders, and her corset, stained and torn—"I'm not."

"I won't let her in."

He goes to the door, and opens it, but it's not Narcissa waiting outside.

"Father?"

"How is she?" asks Lucius.

"Much better," says Draco, "thank you for asking, but she's sleeping."

Lucius nods. "It's you I want to speak to, Draco. In my study."

Draco's torn. He wants, of course, to question his father, and this will give him the perfect opportunity, but he'd rather have Granger with him, two brains being much better than one.

He needs to talk to her.

"Fifteen minutes?" he suggests. "I should like to change out of yesterday's clothes..."

"Very well," says Lucius. "Fifteen minutes."

...

"Good," says Granger.

Draco threads the end of his tie through the loop. "You're sure you're ready to be on your own? If you need—"

"I'm fine, Malfoy. I'll have a nice long soak in the bath."

"If I stayed," he says, "I could soak with you." He adjusts the knot.

Granger laughs. "And then we'd both come out dirtier than when we went in."

Draco smirks at her reflection in the mirror. "I just wish I could have you in there with me," he says, more seriously. "My father... He can be quite hard work." He selects a tie pin.

"I know," says Granger. "But I have an idea—though you may not like it."

Chapter 5: Wednesday morning, the Library

An hour later, having spoken with his father, an anxious Draco returns to Granger's bedroom.

Granger's still in her underwear—plain white cotton—searching through yesterday's discarded clothing. When he enters, she turns to him, panicking. "I can't find my wand!"

Fuck, he'd forgotten about that!

"Potter has it," he says, capturing her in his arms as a pre-emptive measure. "It's all right, it'll be returned once you're cleared of the charges." He feels her body sag, and he manoeuvres her back to the bed, and sits her down. "We can find you a temporary wand," he says, sitting beside her. "It won't be the same, I know, but at least—"

"The Auror Office won't allow that," she says.

"Who's going to tell them?"

She slumps against his shoulder. "Merlin, you're such a *Malfoy*," she says.

"A few hours ago, you were telling the whole world what a wonderful thing that is."

She makes a noise, which he hopes is a chuckle. Then he remembers his mission. "You'd better get dressed, Granger," he says. "There's a lot to see."

...

They sneak downstairs, peeking round corners and darting for cover like children playing a game. As they approach Lucius's study, Draco goes on ahead and, once he's sure it's safe, he beckons to Granger, and they slip into the Library unseen.

Draco seals the doors. "It's in here," he says, leading her to an alcove on the far side of the fireplace. "It's well-hidden..." He runs his fingers along one of the bookshelves, selects a particular book, and pulls it half way out.

There's a soft click, and a full-length door, disguised by rows of fake books, swings open to reveal a tiny room, just big enough to contain a stone pedestal supporting a shallow stone bowl.

"Not many families have their own pensieve," says Draco, who can't help boasting, even though he's nervous. He takes a glass vial from his breast pocket and hands it to Granger.

Granger holds it up to the light, and studies its contents—several wisps of a silvery substance—Draco's memories of his earlier meeting with his father.

"Does it help us?" she asks.

"It's... Well, you'd better prepare yourself. It's a bit of a shock."

She pulls out the stopper and tips the memories into the bowl. "I hope you extracted the right ones," she says. "I don't think my nerves could take watching us play that dice game."

"Nor mine, at the moment." Draco smiles ruefully. "Though I'm sure I could manage something if you happened to get all hot and bothered." He holds out his hand, and Granger grasps it, and they squeeze into the little room. "This is going to be cosy."

Together, they bend over the pensieve, and fall into his memories, searching for clues.

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...

"Ah, Draco," says Lucius, "close the door; take a seat."

Draco, standing with Granger beside his father's desk, watches himself cross the study, pull out a chair, and sit down. *Can't Father see, he wonders, how nervous I am?*

"Have you spoken to your mother this morning?"

"Yes, Father."

"Good. I know that she was worried about your future wife's—"

"What did you want to talk to me about, Father?" Draco interrupts.

Lucius takes up a knife and carefully trims the nib of his quill. "Shortly after your precipitous exit from the Moran Holdings meeting, I received an owl from the Head of the Auror Office—"

"Gawain Robards?"

"Do you know of another Head Auror?"

Draco scowls.

"He informed me that your future wife had been arrested on suspicion of murder—some Muggle woman, I believe, and a prostitute, if I've understood correctly?"

"Father—"

Lucius holds up his hand. "I've spoken to Robards, privately," he says, selecting a sheet of vellum, "and he's assured me that this unpleasant business can be kept away from the newspapers—until, that is, your future wife is charged with murder. If that should happen, it will be out of his hands, and far beyond my reach."

He removes the stopper from his inkwell, and dips his quill. "Perhaps you would be kind enough to tell me, Draco, what your future wi—"

"She has a name, Father!"

"Hermione," says Lucius. "Which you never use."

"I call her Granger. It's what I called her at school."

"Well, then—perhaps you would be kind enough to tell me what Granger was doing in a Knockturn Alley brothel?"

Draco runs a hand through his hair. "She wasn't in the brothel. And you know very well what she was doing, Father," he says.

Lucius looks up from his writing. He seems genuinely surprised. "What are you talking about?"

Draco feels Granger squeeze his hand, as if to say, *Look at that!*

"You set it up," says Draco, "using that letter. You thought it would make her leave me."

"I trust," says Lucius, and there's an edge to his voice that's more fear than threat, "that my letter was delivered safely?"

"Of course not. Granger followed me—just as you'd planned—and saw everything."

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"Draco", says Lucius, "I have no idea what you're talking about. Tell me exactly what happened to my letter."

Reluctantly, Draco describes his encounter with Delilah Caine, her attempts to entice him into the building, the freezing charm, and Hermione's reaction.

His father makes no comment on his complicated sex life. "You dropped my letter," he cries, leaping to his feet, "you...!" And, throwing his inky pen down on his desk, he paces like a caged lion, swearing at his son.

Granger's fingers crush Draco's in silent support.

"Have you any idea," says Lucius, "are you remotely capable of comprehending, what you have done?"

"Yes," yells Draco. "Yes! I've got Granger accused of murder!"

Granger slides her arm around his waist.

"Some weeks ago," hisses Lucius, "I was informed—it need not concern you by whom—that an anonymous party, with seemingly impeccable credentials, was anxious to acquire a certain—item—from the Malfoy collection."

"I thought all those things had been confiscated."

"Obviously not."

"So you're saying that the letter was to this 'party'?"

"To his agent in London."

"And who's that, Father? Father? Who is it?"

"Borgin," says Lucius.

"Borgin's still trading?"

"Covertly."

"How could you do something so stupid?" cries Draco, leaping to his feet. "We don't need the money! You should have—"

"What?"

"Surrendered the fucking thing to the Ministry!"

"That little mudblood really does hold your jewels in the palm of her hand, doesn't she?"

"Only when I'm lucky!" yells Draco, clenching his fists. He takes a few rasping breaths, forcing himself to calm down. "Look, Father—just tell me why. Why did you send me with the letter?"

"Because Borgin would only deal with you! He knows you! Besides, you already had legitimate business in Diagon Alley, and there would be no reason for anyone to suspect anything if they'd caught you sneaking off! Of course, I seriously overestimated your competence, as usual, Draco."

Draco hears Granger mutter, "The bastard!"

"Well," says Draco, angrily, "I can tell you that your 'party' wasn't Borgin. I heard his voice

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when he cast the freezing charm, and it certainly wasn't Borgin's."

"Then who was it?"

"I don't know. But Granger thinks it's someone who wants revenge. On your father. On you."

...

The memory blurs, and Draco, still holding Granger's hand, feels himself float upwards, and land on the floor of the pensieve room.

"What did your father say to that?" asks Granger.

"Nothing you'd want to hear."

She slips out into the library, and sits down in one of the big, wing-back chairs. Draco pulls up a footstool, and sits at her feet.

"He was telling the truth," she says.

"I know."

"But I think the revenge is on you as much as on your father, Draco. He asked for *you*." She's wearing the little frown she always wears when she's thinking. "He obviously wants your father to suffer. But he wanted *you* inside the house. I don't think he had any idea that I'd be there because, if I'd been with you in the first place, none of that business with Delilah would have worked... I wrecked his plans, Malfoy, and he wants me out of the way."

Draco stretches out his arms. "Come here," he mouths, and—somehow—they end up lying on the floor, with Draco on his back and Granger straddling him. "Why is it," he murmurs, and he's not joking, "that, whenever anything bad happens, I get this really *desperate* urge to shag you?"

"You're highly sexed. It's the way you're made."

"It wears me out."

"I happen to like it."

He reaches up, and tucks a lock of her hair behind her ear. "I'm just a coward," he says, "with a big dick."

"Draco! You're *not* a coward."

"Tell me one thing I've ever done that was brave, Granger."

"You piled those desks up," she says, talking about the Room of Requirement, "and dragged Goyle—great, big, heavy Goyle—to the top of them, and hung onto him, when you could have let go of him and let Harry save you."

"Notice that it was Potter who was doing the actual saving, Granger. And you and the Weasel."

She frowns, and he knows, from her expression, that she's going to bring up the subject of his nightmares. "You tried to help Crabbe, didn't you?"

He sighs—a great, shuddering sigh. He's thinking, *Maybe telling her about it will help, somehow* and, when he finally answers, his voice is hoarse, like it was on that terrible day: "He wasn't human, Granger, not any more, just burnt skin on black bones, thrashing and screaming, 'Help me, help me...' I couldn't get anywhere near him. I just grabbed Goyle, and

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we—I—left him to die... I just... Oh, fucking hell, Granger, I want to shag you so much!" He closes his eyes and tries to will the desire away.

"It's normal, Draco." He feels her fingers, stroking his cheek.

"Normal? What are you talking about?" He shakes his head, trying to escape her hand. "No—whatever it might be—getting a raging hard-on at the thought of your friend burning to death is *not* normal."

"Yes it is."

"Says who?"

"Muggle psychologists. They say that, when you experience death like that, you need to prove to yourself that you're still alive—you need to make *new* life, Draco. It's completely normal."

"Well, if you ask me, it's pathetic. It's the heroes who get to fuck the girls, Granger. We wimps aren't supposed to reproduce ourselves."

"Oh, *Draco!*" She slides her arms under him, and hugs him tightly.

He doesn't hug back. "The thing is," he says, "I know what you're going to say. And the more I think about it, the more cowardly I get."

She raises her head again, and looks down at him, frowning. "*What* am I going to say?"

"You're going to say that we need to go back to Knockturn Alley and break into that house and search it."

"Actually, I was going to say that we need to extract your memories of the freezing charm, and examine them in the pensieve. But searching the house is an even better idea."

Draco swears.

"So we'll do both," she says, decisively. "But first," she adds, with a kiss, "let's have that shag."

...

He lifts himself up on his hands and, leaning down, he kisses her breasts. The new position's altered the angle of his hips, and they flex with every lick, nip, and nuzzle, making his cock jerk in tiny, teasing thrusts, which provoke a series of strangled gasps from Granger.

He raises his head. "I love it when you make that noise."

They share a smile.

"Got your confidence back, I see," she says. Then, brushing her thumb across his lips, she adds, "Next time you get close, Draco, you'd better let yourself come. We need to look at those memories."

...

They watch Draco's memories of the freezing charm twice, but find little to enlighten them.

"She was absolutely desperate to lure you into the house," says Granger. "Did you see her expression when you turned to leave? I'd say she was terrified."

"Yes," says Draco, lifting the silvery wisps back into the vial. "He'd obviously threatened her."

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"Did you recognise his voice?"

"No. There's *something* familiar about it, but..." He shrugs. "I *am* sure it's not Borgin."

"Well, we certainly need to go back there. And I think we need to go to Madam Mafalda's."

Draco inserts the stopper, and looks up at her. "You're joking."

"No."

"It's a brothel, Granger. And you're—"

"What? A prude?"

"I was going to say you're a punter's wet dream but, now that you mention it, yes, you *are* a bit of a prude with anyone but me." He slips the vial into his breast pocket and holds out his hands to her. "Besides, I don't want you going in there."

"Why not?"

"Because it's not the sort of place you should see."

"What are you talking about? I played the dice game."

"With *me*! And—I don't want to shatter your illusions, Granger, but—that audience wasn't real."

"You played it often, didn't you?"

"A few times." He pulls her into his arms and—to his relief—she doesn't resist.

"Was it always with her?" she asks, softly.

"Yes."

"Did you *love* her, Draco?"

"No." He holds her tightly. "I was fond of her, in a way, and—well—I always gave her extra money, just for herself. But she wasn't you, Granger."

"Did she have any friends, that you know of? Amongst the other women?"

"I've no idea. Why?"

"Because we'd need to talk to them."

"In case she told them anything."

"Yes."

Draco sighs. "All right. But let me go on my own."

"No."

"You can watch it later, in the pensieve."

"No."

"You don't trust me."

"I don't trust *them*, Malfoy. They'll be all over you."

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He rubs her back—this possessive side of her is pleasing and annoying in equal parts. “They won’t let you in there, you know.”

“They will if you pay them enough. You can hire the entire place.”

“The girls won’t talk to you.”

“They will if you offer them a reward.”

“They’ll lie.”

“We’ll give them Veritaserum.”

“Fucking hell, Granger, you just don’t know when to give up, do you?”

“Neither do you.”

“Well... *I* tend to give up now, and come back later.”

Granger chuckles against his chest. “Do you *have* any Veritaserum, Malfoy?”

Chapter 6: Wednesday afternoon, the crime scene

Draco's potions workshop, which occupies a large room in the cellars of Malfoy Manor, is now his and Granger's potions workshop, and he finds that rather...

Nice.

Some of the time.

Whilst Granger's carefully labelling the vials containing the memories they've already examined, and locking them away, he measures out several doses of Veritaserum, transfers them to glass ampoules, and stows the ampoules in a leather carrying case.

"Now," he says, pulling out a shallow drawer, "let's hope that one of these will do, for now."

Granger gasps. Sitting in the drawer, on a thin cushion of green velvet, are four wands. "Where did you get those?"

"Father, Mother and I all needed new wands after the war," he says, "and Mother had trouble replacing hers—these three are rejects; this one,"—he runs his forefinger along the fourth wand—"I found in the Drawing Room—you know, afterwards." Granger nods. "I don't know who it belonged to, but,"—the wand rolls away from him—"it certainly doesn't like *me*."

"Well, if it doesn't like you," says Granger, "I'd hope it wouldn't like me, either." For a moment, she scrutinises the other wands, then she picks one—the one, Draco notices, that looks most like her own—and points it at one of the cupboard doors, saying, "*Alohomora*."

Draco cringes, but there are no sparks and no explosions. The door swings open.

He slips an arm around her waist, and gives her a congratulatory hug. "Let's go," he says.

...

They cross the Entrance Hall, intending to Floo to *The Leaky Cauldron*, have lunch, and then slip unobtrusively into Knockturn Alley but, before they can reach the fireplace, Draco's mother accosts them.

"Draco, darling—oh, Hermione, I'm so glad to see you looking better—yes, there's something we need to discuss, darling. In the Morning Room."

"I'll wait for you in the Library," says Granger.

"No, no, my dear," says Narcissa. "It concerns you as well."

The couple exchange an uneasy glance and, clasping hands, follow her through the door.

"It's about the wedding," says Narcissa, sitting down, and indicating that they should do the same. "I'll be blunt: do you want me to postpone it?"

Draco turns to Granger. She's staring at him in horror. They've both been so caught up in events, neither has thought about the possible impact on their wedding.

"I'm not saying," Narcissa continues, "that Hermione *will* be charged, of course. But I do think that we should plan ahead."

"What do you think?" Draco asks Granger. "If you were charged,"—and he grasps her hand—"which you won't be, I know—but if you were, you'd probably be placed under house arrest pending a trial, and—"

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"You couldn't possibly want to marry me then," says Granger. Her voice is back to sounding child-like.

"Of course I would."

Her hand moves, and her fingers press his.

Draco presses back. "Don't cancel, Mother," he says, decisively. "We're getting married, no matter what. And, if we can't have the ceremony here, we'll hold it in the Auror Office."

...

"When we get back," whispers Granger, as they approach the fireplace, "I want you to extract some memories from me, so that, if I'm in prison, you can—you know—use them whenever you need to."

...

Diagon Alley's bustling.

The lamp posts are decked with holly and ivy; the shop fronts are draped with coloured lanterns and their windows crammed with seasonal gifts; a stall outside the ice cream parlour's selling goblets of fragrant mulled wine; and, somewhere nearby, a choir's singing Yuletide carols.

"I've always loved Yule," says Granger, sadly.

Draco squeezes her hand. He's always loved Yule himself—that's why he'd suggested a Yuletide wedding—but with all the crap they're having to deal with, they're missing out on the festivities.

Still, he knows that now isn't the time to spout platitudes, nor make any promises he can't keep.

Instead, he leads her over to Madam Malkin's and, whilst she's loudly admiring the goods on display, he quietly scans Diagon Alley for anyone who might know them, or might be watching them, or—Merlin forbid—might be stalking them for *Witch Bloody Weekly*.

Once he's satisfied that the coast is clear, he quickly draws Granger across the road, and they duck into Knockturn Alley.

It's even seedier than he remembers, and he holds her hand more tightly as he hurries her past the dark walls, and the hidden doorways, and the piles of rubbish, to the house where everything had turned to shit, only two days before.

It appears to be empty.

Draco draws out his wand.

"Wait," says Granger, and—with a professionalism he can only admire—she places herself where her body will best screen him from passers by, looks quickly left and right, and hisses, "Now!"

"*Alohomora*."

He's really not expecting it to be that easy, but it seems reasonable to start with the simplest of charms and, to his surprise, he hears the lock click, and sees the door crack open.

"Well done," says Granger.

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Draco pushes the door. "Keep behind me."

She mutters a tart reply but Draco, deciding to ignore it, steps up to the door frame and, working methodically, sweeps his wand over the interior, looking for traps or curses. He finds nothing, and he's just wondering whether it really is safe to enter, when Granger whispers, "Someone's coming," and the decision's made for him.

They slip inside, and close the door behind them, and Granger mutters a sealing charm. "It won't keep out anyone who's really determined," she says, "but it will open for us as we approach, which could be useful if we need to leave in a hurry."

"Clever," says Draco. He raises his wand. "*Lumos.*"

The extra light reveals a single, wing-back chair, hidden in the shadow of the stairs, with a clear view of the front door and the alley beyond.

"He must have been sitting here," he says, "watching me."

"I've been thinking... We've been assuming that Delilah knew who he was." Granger looks up at him. "But suppose he was wearing a mask?"

"A Death Eater!" says Draco.

"That would explain why he hates you and your father—Voldemort's right hand man and Voldemort's golden boy, both living in the lap of luxury, winning back respect and influence, whilst he's an outcast..."

Draco says nothing.

Granger lights her wand and, opening the door to the next room, looks inside. "Oh, my God!"

She seldom uses that Muggle expletive and, panicked, Draco rushes to her side.

Glimmering in the darkness, besides some strange containers of liquid, he sees a metal table, large enough for a man to lie upon, with various straps and chains and other devices attached —

"What was he planning to *do* to you?" sobs Granger. "Oh, Draco, thank God I came to find you when I did."

"Let's get out of here," he says, grabbing her by the arm and pulling her towards the front door. It opens, just as she'd said it would, and they rush outside.

Draco's breathing hard.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes..." He hurries her back to the safety of Diagon Alley. "Why did you come to find me?" he asks. "You never said."

"I'd found a book I wanted to show you. I thought you might like it for Yule."

"Oh Granger!" He wraps his arms around her and holds her tight. "I love you."

...

He's never said that before.

Not really.

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He *makes* love to her; he's told her how he *fell* in love with her; he's going to *marry* her.

But this is the first time he's actually said those three little words...

...

"Let's go and talk to Harry," says Granger.

They've retreated to the History section of Flourish and Blotts, a place where—for some reason—they both feel safe, but Draco's still shaking. Granger squeezes his arm. "Draco—let's go and talk to Harry."

She looks terrible. He pulls himself together, for *her*. "Yes, all right."

...

They Floo to the Ministry of Magic, and Granger uses her leverage as one of the Golden Trio to persuade someone to tell Harry Potter that they need to speak to him.

Urgently.

Within moments they're in an interrogation room with Potter and the Weasel. "What in Merlin's name has happened to you?" asks Potter.

"Do we look that bad?" Granger rubs her face. "We're scared, Harry," she says. "We really need your help."

Potter nods. "Sit down—sit down, Ron." He takes the fourth chair himself. "Thank you, by the way, for Flooing Ginny this morning," he says to Draco. "We were both worried."

"I meant what I said, Potter," replies Draco. "*Anything*."

Potter nods again, gravely. "So, what's happened since?"

Granger glances at Draco.

"You tell him," he says.

"This morning," says Granger, "we went back to Knockturn Alley." She explains how, wanting to find out more about the man who'd had tried to kidnap Draco, they'd broken into the house, and found the metal table, and the horrible things lying on it.

"*Blimey*," says Weasley.

"Have you any idea who it could be?" asks Potter.

"With a grudge against me and my father?" says Draco. "It could be anyone. Any of the Death Eaters who disappeared after the war, obviously. It could even..." He hesitates for a moment, then he continues: "It could even be someone from your side who feels that the Malfoys got off too lightly."

He glances at Granger.

She grasps his hand, supportively. "But we think it's a Death Eater," she says, "because,"—she turns to Draco—"can I tell them about your father's letter?"

"I think you'd better."

"Lucius thought that he was writing to Borgin," she explains. "Borgin was supposedly acting on

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behalf of some important foreign wizard, anxious to buy—um—a Malfoy family heirloom.”

“I see,” says Potter, with the slightest of smiles.

Draco can see that Potter’s remembering the half-truths that he, Draco, had told him the previous day, that Potter knows exactly what’s been hidden from him, what Granger’s still hiding from him, and that he doesn’t seem to care. And he realises that, at some point during the last two days, he and Potter have broken through an invisible barrier.

Potter’s accepted him as Granger’s fiancé. *And, he thinks, I’ve accepted him as her friend...*

Weasley, on the other hand, will always be a turd.

“Do you think that Borgin’s actually involved in this?” Potter asks.

“I’ve no idea,” says Draco. “He’s always treated my father like royalty, to his face, but I doubt that his price is particularly high.”

“You know, five years is a long time for a Death Eater to nurse a grudge.” Potter rubs his stubbly chin. “Death Eaters don’t usually wait until the time’s right. They swoop in, attack, and fly away.”

“Unless he’s been prevented in some way,” says Granger.

“Locked up in Azkaban, probably,” says Weasley. “Or on the run—abroad, maybe.”

“Have there been any escapes lately?” asks Potter.

“Not since Jugson,” says Weasley. “And he was retaken in June.”

“On the run, then,” says Potter.

“Pity,” says Weasley. “A known escapee would at least give us a starting point.”

“There *is* another possibility,” says Granger. She glances at Draco, but he has no idea what she’s about to say. “Before the Marriage Law put a stop to it, Draco was supposed to marry Astoria Greengrass.”

“Oh, Granger,”—Draco pats her hand— “no—you can’t possibly think that Astoria has anything to do with this.”

“Not Astoria, Draco, her father,” says Granger. “You said yourself that it was a business deal between your families. If the Greengrasses lost out, maybe the father blames you.”

“We can easily look into that,” says Potter, “with a few discreet enquiries at Gringotts.”

“Gringotts? I thought Gringotts had a strict policy of secrecy,” says Draco.

“Not since the war,” says Potter. “By the new laws they’re obliged to give us any information we request—though they generally take their time about it.”

“I see.” Out of habit, Draco makes a mental note.

“We also thought,” says Granger, “that Delilah might have confided in someone at Madam Mafalda’s. We were planning to go there ourselves and question the women, but when we found the chains, and those other things—”

“Granger lost her nerve,” says Draco.

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"We *both* lost our nerve," says Granger, giving him a little push. "It was awful, Harry."

Potter turns to Draco. "Might your father know more than he's telling you?"

"I don't think so. I talked to him this morning, and Granger and I both watched his reactions in the pensieve. He seemed as bewildered as we are."

"Okay. We'll follow up the friend angle to start with," says Potter. "Delilah may have said something useful, even if she didn't mention a name. If we find nothing there, we'll come and question your father."

"Look," says Draco, locking eyes with Potter, "however Granger came to be in Knockturn Alley that morning, it's obvious that it was this Death Eater—or whatever—that killed Delilah, and that he poisoned Granger because she tried to stop him. The Muggle doctor says he used some combination of Muggle poisons on her, and administered them using a Muggle implement called a 'syringe', which may have been hidden—"

"Yes, I know all that," says Potter, leaning back in his chair. "St Mungo's sent me a copy of the test results. Belby's charges don't stand up. I've just been getting Robarts to agree, and drop them. If you hadn't come in to see me, I'd have Floo'd you later this afternoon."

"Does that mean I'm cleared, Harry?" asks Granger.

"Unless we find any more evidence against you," he says, with a mischievous twinkle in his green eyes. "I'll let you have your wand back before you leave."

They share a smile that makes Draco's heart lurch. The way the Golden Trio still works together like clockwork fills him with both admiration and jealousy.

...

They Floo back to Malfoy Manor because neither of them is in any state to Apparate. Draco places a supportive hand in the small of Granger's back. "You look shattered," he says.

"We need to talk."

"*What?*"

She stares up at him, frowning. Then, "Oh, no, I don't mean *that* sort of talk—"

"Thank bloody Merlin."

"I just have some ideas I need to talk over with you."

"In private?"

She nods. "My bedroom."

"All right," he says. "I'll just check on Mother and Father, and then I'll come up and join you."

...

His father's in his study and doesn't want to be disturbed.

His mother's in the Conservatory, trimming her plants with a small pair of shears—"This is so much more satisfying," she says, with a loud *snip*, "than using a wand,"—but, when she sees how exhausted he is, she puts them down, removes her gloves and, reaching up and taking his face in her hands, she kisses his forehead.

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"I do have some good news, Mother," he murmurs. "The Aurors have dropped all the charges against Granger."

"Oh, darling, I'm so happy for you..."

She kisses him again.

...

Draco climbs the stairs to Granger's bedroom.

After the day's anxieties, he really needs to unwind, but he finds Granger fast asleep and, instead of waking her, he simply pulls up a chair, and sits down beside her.

When he'd proposed to her, he'd thought that marrying her would make him 'happy'.

He'd imagined himself talking to her over breakfast, giving her expensive gifts, showing her off at glittering functions, making love to her (of course), and eventually having children with her.

What he hadn't realised was just how much *she* would bring to the relationship, nor how—*together*—they would build and share something that felt uniquely their own.

He'd never imagined himself wanting to protect her, nor being protected by her in return. And he'd certainly never imagined himself sitting patiently, ignoring his own needs, so that she might sleep.

I must love her, he thinks, and he's just contemplating a trip to the bathroom, to *sort himself out*, when Granger wakes with a sigh and a long, slow stretch. *Oh, Merlin.*

She smiles, and reaches out for him.

"If I get onto that bed with you," he warns, "I'll have to shag you senseless."

Her smile broadens. "Before or after we talk?"

"The way I'm feeling right now, before *and* during *and* after."

Granger laughs. Her arms are still extended. "Be gentle, Draco."

Oh, fucking Merlin.

Yes.

...

He comes far too soon, but Granger's not bothered—she cradles him in her arms and tells him that it's all right, it doesn't matter, she knows it won't take him long to recover.

She's right.

With the edge gone, he excels himself—lying on top of her, his body pressing hers, he slowly, sensuously, rocks them back and forth, building the tension gradually, letting her enjoy his cock—and babble to her heart's content about his length, his girth, and his stamina—until their joint need's become so urgent, it suddenly escapes them in a profound, mutual orgasm that melts them like wax.

Chapter 7: Thursday, Lucius's study

"Well," he sighs, kissing her forehead, "shall we talk?"

"Mmm," she murmurs. "I'll need to make notes."

"Later," he says, holding her still. "Talk now, write up later."

He knows that Miss Meticulous won't like that, and it's a small but delicious victory when she gives in and, snuggling against his chest, says, "All right..."

He waits patiently, wondering whether she's just gathering her thoughts—and, frankly, he'd be insulted if she *weren't* finding it difficult to think after what he's just done to her—or whether she has an embarrassing question to ask.

"Those things," she says, at last, "on the table... What were they?"

Draco kisses the top of her head. *It's the embarrassing question.* "You assume I'll know."

"You generally do when it comes to sex."

"Mmm. Well, they were bondage things."

"I know." Her hand is cupping his balls protectively, and he wonders if she realises what she's doing. It's so... *sweet.* "But what are they for?" she persists. "I mean, there was something that seemed to fit over the penis..."

Draco shrugs. "From what I could see, he was planning to—well—it's called 'milking', Granger. They keep jacking you off, taking you to the edge and pulling you back, until everything's so fucked up, the spunk just starts pouring out of you—you're not coming—you can't come—and afterwards you're begging for release, but your body can't get it." He bites his lip. "Or there's another way—they make you come until you're dry, and then they just keep going—and you're screaming, and struggling, and ripping your arms out of their sockets, trying to get free and stop the agony..."

"How do you know—"

"I've seen it done."

"At Madam Mafalda's?"

"During the war."

"I see..." She's silent for a moment or two. Then, "Why would he want to do that to *you*?"

"To humiliate me. It's the most humiliating thing you could possibly do to a man."

"So could it—I mean—is it possible—could 'he' be a woman? Someone like your Aunt Bellatrix?"

"No," says Draco, though he can see it's a reasonable question. "No, the voice was definitely a man's."

"Then maybe... Did any of the male Death Eaters seem to fancy you?"

"No."

"Draco..." She shifts in his arms, and cranes her neck, her eyes searching his face.

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"Don't," he says.

"Please, Draco. Tell me. *Please.*"

"Oh, fucking hell, Granger! They were sadists, all right? They liked to inflict pain. *Pain*. Some of them got off on torture, some of them liked to fuck their victims, and some of the fuckers didn't care whether the victim was a witch, a wizard, a Muggle, or a goat. Is that enough detail for you?"

She doesn't retreat. "Do you know who they were?"

"*What?*"

"*Names*, Draco! Names we can give to Harry!"

He stares at her, open-mouthed. She has an unhealthy fascination with his past sex life, and her flashes of jealousy and possessiveness sometimes worry him but, this time, he's wronged her. He pulls her back into his arms. "Of course. You know, you never cease to amaze me, Granger," he says.

"We'd better write them down." She summons some parchment and a self-inking quill, and charms the quill to take Draco's dictation.

"Mulciber," he begins. "Yaxley. Jugson—"

"We know that Jugson's in Azkaban."

"Yes, strike Jugson. Selwyn. Rowle. And, of course, Crabbe—"

"*Crabbe?*"

"Crabbe, senior. McNair... I think that's it."

"Did any of them ever—you know—look at you? Or touch you?"

"Cop a feel of me under my robes? No." The quill faithfully transcribes his vulgarity. "Oh, shit."

"I'll make a clean copy later," says Granger. "So you were never forced to strip naked in front of them, or to take part in an orgy with them, and none of them ever saw you aroused?"

"Granger! I said, *no*," he growls. "Why won't you let this drop?"

"Because I can tell you're hiding something from me..." She squirms free of his arms and, sitting up, looks down at him. "We talk about sex all the time, Malfoy—we *have* sex most of the time—what could you possibly be ashamed to tell me...?" Her eyes widen. "Did someone...?"

"What?"

"You weren't...?" Her voice drops to a whisper. "You weren't *raped?*"

"Granger!" He runs a hand through his hair. "Fucking hell! No—I'm sorry to disappoint you but, no. I wasn't raped, so I don't need you to found a Society for the Protection of Fucking Draco."

She isn't deterred. "So what did happen?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake! It was Mulciber's wife, all right? I fucked Mulciber's wife!" He sighs. "I was drunk out of my mind, and she cornered me and, when Mulciber found us going at it, she said I'd forced her. He would have killed me, but my father Stunned him, and the Dark Lord told

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him to leave me alone—he said it showed I’d found some balls at last.”

“Oh, Draco...” She slides her hands under him, and hugs him tightly.

He should be annoyed but, somehow, he’s not, and—although all the talk of Death Eater perversions and of Mrs Mulciber has somewhat dampened his ardour—he finds that he likes the feel of her arms around him, and of her breasts, pressing softly against his stomach—

“We’ll put Mulciber at the top of the list, Malfoy,” she says, suddenly. “We don’t need to tell Harry why.”

...

They dress, and go down to dinner and, afterwards, Draco persuades Lucius to let them join him in his study.

When Granger’s with his father, she can be quite aggressive—the way she used to be with *him*—and, of course, when his father’s with Granger, he’s at his most supercilious, so Draco knows that he can expect some fireworks, but he really can’t see any other way forward.

“This morning, Father,” he says, taking hold of Granger’s hand, “we went back to Crucible Court, and searched the house.”

“And found my letter, I hope?”

Granger boils over sooner than he’d expected.

“Your letter?” she snaps. “*No*, we didn’t find your letter! We found a *table*, and *chains*, and...” She describes the various devices with a brutal clarity that has Draco squirming. “Someone was planning to torture Draco. *Torture* him!”

She slams the list of Death Eaters on Lucius’s desk.

Lucius is obviously shocked. He looks up at her, and then down at the parchment. “What is this?” he asks.

“A list of madmen,” says Granger.

“Er,” says Draco, “why don’t I explain? Hmm?”

“All right.”

He sits her down. “The fact is, Father, this man seems to have a grudge against both of us—you and me,” he says, “and that makes us think that he’s a former Death Eater—someone who didn’t come out of the war as well as the Malfoys did. And the fact that wants to humiliate me —”

“Sexually,” says Lucius.

“Yes—suggests that it might be—”

“Mulciber.” Lucius fingers the parchment. “I suppose it could be. But, then, it might be any of the cuckolded husbands you’ve left in your wake, Draco.”

“Only if the husband also hates you,” says Granger. “You must draw up a list, too, Mr Malfoy,”—there’s steel in her voice—“of anyone you think might have a grudge against you. We’ll give both lists to Harry, and draw his attention to any names that appear twice.”

“Harry Potter? What does Harry Potter have to do with this?”

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"He's investigating the murder, Father," says Draco. "It was Potter who cleared Gra—"

"The death of a Muggle whore," says Lucius, fastidiously, "has nothing to do with me."

"Harry already knows about your supposed dealings with Borgin, Mr Malfoy," says Granger.

Lucius's face freezes in an expression of horror; Draco looks anxiously from his fiancée to his father and back again.

"But, the fact is," she continues, "you didn't sell any Dark artefacts, so Harry doesn't care. But poor Delilah was killed because this madman used her to get to Draco, and then needed to keep her quiet." She frowns. "No," she says, turning to Draco, "Obliviation would have kept her quiet. So why did he kill her?"

"Maybe he aimed the Avada at you," says Draco, "but Delilah got in the way." And, at that thought, he can't stop himself reaching out for her.

"Then why poison me?" she asks, letting him draw her into his arms. "Why not just cast another Avada?"

Draco shakes his head. He has no idea.

"Perhaps this Delilah had defied him in some way," says Lucius. "Perhaps he cast the Avada in anger.." He leans back in his chair and, pressing his fingertips together, appears to be considering what he's just suggested.

"Delilah was with *me* when she died," says Granger, thinking aloud. "So maybe that was her defiance. Maybe she contacted me. Maybe that's why I was in Knockturn Alley.." She looks up at Draco, and it's obvious that her mind has made some sort of leap. "You said you didn't love her, but could *she* possibly have loved you?"

Draco frowns.

"I mean," she continues, "suppose she suddenly realised that this man was actually intending to hurt you, and she wanted to warn you."

"She *was* kind," says Draco.

"We need to extract whatever memories I have left," says Granger, decisively, "and look at them in the pensieve."

Draco had been afraid she'd come up with this idea. "Are you sure you want to do that?" he asks, softly. "Potter's healer and that fool at St Mungo's both said that you were in shock, and I don't believe that that was from seeing someone Avada'd."

"You think I'll see something and have a relapse?"

He leans closer. "I just don't want you taking any chances."

She smiles. "But you'll be there with me."

"Oh, spare me, please!" says Lucius, rising from his chair. "We will both be with you, Hermione."

...

They move to the library.

"From what Draco tells me of your misadventure," says Lucius, conjuring a glass flask, "I doubt

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that you'll be able to extract a continuous memory. But perhaps if you focus on one or two of the clearer parts of the experience, and withdraw those, we'll be able to see enough going on in the background to piece something of the rest together."

Draco's surprised—and ridiculously pleased—to see Granger look up at his father, and nod, with a glimmer of respect in her eyes.

"And might I suggest," Lucius continues, "that Draco try to jog your memory with a few well-chosen prompts. But you must be careful Draco. We don't want you creating any false memories."

Granger nods again. "That's a good idea." She smiles—almost shyly—at Draco, then lifts her wand to her temple. "I'll start by thinking of Delilah," she says, and closes her eyes.

At first nothing happens.

Then her wand begins to move, very slowly, pulling out a silvery strand that's not quite gas, and not quite liquid. She pauses, screws up her eyes tightly, and then continues withdrawing it for a moment or two more.

"There," she says, opening her eyes. Draco holds out the flask, and she drops the memory inside. "What next?"

"Knockturn Alley," he says.

Granger takes a deep breath, and starts again.

"Think of shadows and still air," says Draco, remembering his own trips to Crucible Court, "the smell of damp and rot, and the sounds of dripping water."

Granger adds her new memory to the flask.

"The Death Eater next," says Lucius.

"Yes," says Draco. "Think of a cloaked figure, with a mask, and see what happens." He grasps her arm. "Don't forget that he must have had a walking stick."

This time, several minutes pass before Granger suddenly draws out a long, writhing memory, and quickly seals it in the flask.

"Are you all right?" asks Draco.

"I'm fine," she says, but he knows she's lying. "Do we need anything else?"

"Well... There's your red underwear."

"Draco!"

"No, think about it," he says. "It's what you were wearing when they found you, so—if we're lucky—your memory of putting it on may just show us why you ended up in Knockturn Alley."

Granger flashes him a smile that says, *I believe you, though thousands wouldn't*, then slowly withdraws a final strand of silver. "There."

"Very well," says Lucius. "Let us see what we can see."

...

Draco brings the pensieve out into the Library, and sets it on a table.

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Hermione withdraws the stopper from the flask, and pours her memories into the bowl, where they seethe, like boiling snakes.

"The strands are destroying each other," says Lucius, looking thoughtfully at the silvery storm. "We must be quick, and stay alert. I doubt we'll get a second chance."

They plunge their faces into the stone bowl, and Draco feels the now familiar sensation of being lifted off his feet and pulled down into the memories...

They're standing in an empty white room.

"Look out," cries Granger, and Draco flinches as a great, dark shape engulfs them—but it's only one of the memory strands, demanding their attention.

Suddenly, they're in Knockturn Alley, leaping aside as a figure rushes past them in a swirl of black robes.

"Follow him," cries Lucius, his voice bubbling up from somewhere deep in his stomach, and the trio run down and down and down the narrow passage, never seeming to get any closer to their quarry until, suddenly, they shoot around a corner, and stumble into the bare skeleton of Crucible Court.

Directly ahead, Draco can see Delilah—dressed in a leather corset—bending over some trussed-up wizard.

She strokes his balls with a long, black feather.

"Could that be me?" he gasps, his voice distorting just as his father's had. "Did she tell you the madman's plans, Granger?"

The table disappears, and Delilah and Granger—the latter wearing nothing but her scarlet bra and French knickers—are standing either side of a window. Granger opens it, and admits a postal service owl.

"A-v-a-d-a K-a-d-a-v-r-a-a-a!" roars the mysterious Death Eater.

Draco knows he should turn and look at the man, but he can't take his eyes off Granger, in her splashes of red.

The window's slithered down, and wrapped itself around Granger's body, pinning her to the blank-but-solid wall and making her a sitting target. But, somehow, she manages to wrench her wand hand free, and cast an Avada of her own. The two spells sail through the air like great green serpents, rear up, entwine, and swallow each other whole.

Draco lets out a sob of relief.

Then slates start falling from the roofs—Knockturn Alley's disintegrating.

Delilah panics, blunders past Granger, and—wailing like a mandrake—runs straight at the Death Eater, who stops her dead with another Avada.

Both Grangers cry out in anguish, and their screams pierce the pale grey walls, admitting a million flakes of blinding light, which rapidly grow, and blossom into spurts of flame.

"Shit!" Draco grabs Granger by the hand and, together with his father, they flee the decaying memories, rising back into reality, but not before Draco has seen the other Granger fall, and the Death Eater plunge his walking stick between her thighs.

Chapter 8: Friday morning, the potions workshop

"Well," says Lucius, smoothing his still-perfect hair back into place, "that was interesting." He crosses to the sideboard, and pours three snifters of Muggle cognac. "Here," he says, handing one to Granger. "I imagine you need this."

"Thank you." Granger takes a gulp, shudders, and takes another. "I remember the owl, now," she says, her voice hoarse from the alcohol. "The note was written with a Muggle ballpoint on a scrap of paper torn from a Muggle magazine, so I knew that it must be from Delilah. She'd addressed it to both of us—Mr Draco Malfoy and fiancée—so I opened it."

"Do you remember what it said?" asks Draco.

"It asked you to meet her in Crucible Court. I don't think it said anything else. I don't think it actually mentioned me by name..."

"Why did you go on your own?"

"Because," says Lucius, "she wanted to keep you as far away from that over-endowed hussy as possible." He pours another brandy, and knocks it back.

"They were fake, you know," says Granger.

"Fake?" says Draco.

"Absolutely. Some Muggle doctor had put lumps of silicone in them."

"They always felt real..."

"Well," says Lucius, pouring himself a third brandy, and offering the others a refill, "though the images were somewhat surreal, I think that what happened was, in essence, clear."

"Clear?" scoffs Draco. "Granger never cast an Avada—Potter established that—and that bastard never raped her with his walking stick, thank Merlin."

Granger reaches out, and touches his hand.

"No," says Lucius, "those particular parts were symbolic. Hermione obviously feels that she blocked the first Avada in some way." He turns to Granger. "Perhaps you pulled Delilah aside—that might account for the flames. And you may have perceived a sexual threat, which—in your memories—took on a more concrete form. But the rest," he continues, "seems fairly straightforward. You received a summons from the girl, Delilah, which was meant for Draco. Since Delilah was a Muggle, she must have asked someone to owl it for her, and that someone must have betrayed her, because it would be far too much of a coincidence for the Death Eater to have simply turned up at the same time."

Granger nods in agreement.

"The Death Eater," says Lucius, "knew when and where the meeting was to take place, and was lying in wait, expecting Draco. He'd got his torture chamber ready, and he'd armed himself with the Muggle poison, to Obliviate Delilah by Muggle means—and, presumably, you too, if you chose to come along."

"Why use a poison," says Draco, "when he could have Obliviated them properly?"

"I've no idea," says Lucius. "Perhaps because the girl was a Muggle, and Hermione's Muggle-born. He may have seen a poetic justice in it."

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"Plus," says Granger, "we wouldn't have seen it coming. He could have walked past and simply brushed his walking stick against Delilah and me, and we wouldn't have known what had happened until it was too late. And you wouldn't have known it was anything to do with him. You'd have been distracted, trying to take care of us, and he could have come back and used his wand on you. He must have been devastated when you weren't there."

"Maybe that's why he lost his nerve," says Lucius. "Or, at least, his temper."

Granger looks up at Lucius. "Did you manage to see him?"

"Yes."

"Did you recognise him?"

"No. Either he's altered his mask, or he's acquired another. It wasn't one I've seen before." He takes out his wand and, touching it to his temple, he draws out his memory of the Death Eater's masked face, and drops it into an empty glass.

"Well, at least we have *something* we can show to Harry," says Granger.

"Might I suggest," says Lucius, finishing his fourth brandy, "that we retire to bed and get some rest. We're safe, here in the Manor. We can ponder this man's identity—and decide what we're going to do about him—in the morning."

...

Much later, Draco wakes from troubled sleep to find Granger beside him, lying on her stomach with her head pillowed on her arms.

He smiles. It's one of their favourite positions, because it lets him enter her without too much preparation—whilst she's still sleepy—and her lovely arse keeps his thrusts shallow and gives them both a satisfying fuck with no danger of his length hurting her.

And, right now, a satisfying fuck's exactly what he needs—to empty his fears into Granger, and make Granger come apart beneath him.

Insanely hard, he vanishes his pyjama bottoms, straddles her and, taking most of his weight on his hands and knees, he lowers himself onto her, pressing his cock between her thighs.

"No..." she sighs.

It's not angry; it's not hurtful; it's a gentle appeal: *Please don't*.

Draco's surprised—and disappointed—but he immediately slides off her and, lying beside her, he strokes her crazy hair. "What's wrong?"

"I'm just... I'm tired, Draco."

He knows she doesn't mean tired.

He knows she means, 'Completely shagged out by all this shit that's happening just five fucking days before our bleeding wedding.'

He knows that, because he feels exactly the same.

The problem is that all the fear and anger and frustration are making *him* as randy as hell.

He sighs.

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There have been a couple of times when their lovemaking has made Granger cry, and not in a good way. The day that Crookshanks died, when he'd been trying to comfort her the only way he knew how, her orgasm had released an entire night's worth of anguished tears.

He'd had to hold her until it was over.

And, although he can see that it had been good for her—and good for this strange bonus of a relationship they seem to be building—he knows that she isn't up to an emotional purging just now, and that *he*, as sure as fuck, isn't up to seeing her through one. "I'll go to the bathroom," he says.

"No..." She turns onto her back. "Stay here, Draco. Let me hold you while you're doing it."

"Oh, Granger..."

"Please?"

He leans down, and kisses her forehead. "It won't take long," he murmurs. "My balls feel like bludgers and my whole body's about to explode."

He settles himself in Granger's arms, laying his head on her bosom, and takes himself in his hand, closing his eyes to concentrate on her delicious softness, and the rhythm of his own strokes.

Granger must be watching, or maybe she can feel his muscles tightening because, just when he needs it most, she cuddles him closer, and her fingertips stroke his nipples, and it jolts him straight to the next level.

A sweet, glowing urgency's building at the base of his cock. "Not long," he groans. "Just—hold my *balls*..."

She does, cupping them gently in her palm, and at the same time—nuzzling him—she captures his mouth, and kisses it, and—without missing a stroke—Draco kisses her back, his need at fever pitch, his hand working frantically, until—suddenly—he's there, he's going to come, and he can't stop it—

"Oh," he moans, as liquid fire shoots down his thighs, and scorches his arse. "Oh fuck..."

His cock jerks in his fist.

"I'm coming..."

And he does, in great, sobbing, blinding spurts.

...

Draco's body relaxes, and he sighs deeply, for the moment completely satisfied.

"I *love* watching you," whispers Granger, still holding him in her arms.

...

Later

He's lying on his back, hands behind his head, watching Granger get dressed.

"I need to clean and press these," she says, holding up the burgundy robes she was wearing on the day she was attacked.

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She reaches for her wand.

"Just drop them on the floor," he says. "Binky'll deal with them."

"Draco!"

"What?"

"I do *not* exploit house-elves."

"He *likes* doing it, Granger! He even gets paid for doing it, these days."

Granger dumps the clothes on the bed and, with a huff, disappears into her wardrobe, hunting for something else to wear.

Draco sighs. He could have done without Granger wrecking his hard-won calm with her bloody house-elf crap. He shoves her robes aside and sits up, rubbing his temples...

"Did Potter have these examined?" he asks.

"Hmm?" Granger emerges carrying a two-piece costume of midnight blue silk.

"Did Potter have these robes examined," he repeats. "You know, like in that interminable Muggle film you made me sit through?"

Granger frowns. "I don't know... And you were *fascinated* by that film."

"You were still wearing them in the cell," he says, thinking aloud. He remembers that, in the film, the suspect had been forced to wear an ugly coverall whilst his clothes were being tested for 'D & A'.

He looks at Granger, and can see that she's following his reasoning.

"Should we examine them ourselves?" she says.

"Yes," he says, decisively. "Conjure some flasks."

...

He begins by using his wand to spread the robes out on the coverlet. Then he runs the wand over Granger from head to foot, attuning it to her body—it's already tuned to his own. Finally, he casts a series of revealing, *Tergeo*, and levitating spells, passing his wand back and forth across the jacket and the skirt, searching for anything that doesn't belong.

His third pass reveals a tiny hole in the skirt, corresponding to the puncture wound in Granger's leg.

His fourth pass siphons up a sample of liquid, which he's pretty sure's a drop of the Muggle memory-destroying poison. They quickly seal it in one of Granger's flasks.

His seventh pass lifts a grey hair. It's short and thick, slightly curly, and very masculine-looking.

"Well," says Granger, "it's not Harry or Ron's."

"And it's not my father's," says Draco.

"What about the healers you took me to see?"

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"Marchbanks's hair was curly but blond," he says. "The Muggle's hair's a sort of,"—he clears his throat— "muddy brown, and straight. It's not Stan Shunpike's either."

"I don't remember riding on the Knight Bus."

Draco smiles. "You had a hot chocolate," he says, and his hand rises to her mouth. "I had to wipe away your moustache." His thumb freezes on her lips. "Granger.. I've just had an idea that's worthy of *you*."

...

"I don't want you to do it," she says, mulishly.

They're heading for their potions workshop.

Draco's sweeping along, robes flying, like a Geminio'd version of his father, carrying the grey hair in one hand—safely sealed in a flask—and his wand in the other. Granger's running along beside him, bringing the other samples, and her crumpled robes, and protesting loudly.

"It's a brilliant idea," he says.

"It's dangerous, Draco."

"Can you think of any other way to do it?"

"Let me owl Harry—"

"No." He happens to be getting heartily sick of the way she wants to call in Harry Fucking Potter to do anything that requires magic.

"Well, at least," she says, "ask your father to join us."

Draco stops dead. Since when has Granger had any time for his father?

"Then," she adds, "if anything were to go wrong, there'd be two of us—you know—to sort you out."

"You admit that my father's a powerful wizard, then?"

"Of course I do."

"But *I'm* not—is that what you're saying? I'm too weak to do this properly? Too weak to protect my own fiancée without Potter's help?" He opens the door to the cellars with a silent Alohomora, and stomps down the stairs.

"No! Draco! Wait!" She follows him. "The reason I'm worried is that *I* once made a terrible mistake, and—"

"If you *must* shout," says a quiet but penetrating voice from the top of the stairs, "at least have the courtesy to do it behind a Muffliato charm."

"Sorry, Father."

"Mr Malfoy," says Granger, "would you please come down to the potions workshop with us? Draco's about to do something dangerous, and he needs your help."

Draco's glare could blister paint, but Granger seems immune to it.

...

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"So this is his hair," says Lucius, holding the flask up to the light.

"Yes," says Draco.

"No," says Granger. "That's the whole point, Mr Malfoy. We don't know. Not for certain. It could be anything—suppose it was a dog or a cat hair—"

"Oh Merlin!" Draco sets a large bottle of thick, muddy fluid on his workbench, and turns to her with a smirk. "It's true."

Granger blushes.

"What's true?" asks Lucius. He pulls the stopper from the flask, and magically cuts the grey hair into two equal lengths.

"The rumour that Granger once Polyjuiced herself into a cat," says Draco, "and couldn't change back." He grins, holding out a hand to her. But it's clear from Granger's face that she's upset, and—to his surprise—that makes him feel bad. He squeezes her hand, and mouths, *I'm sorry*.

His father, meanwhile, has transferred one of the pieces of hair from the flask to a watch glass, and he's performing an unveiling charm on it. "Human," he says, decisively. Then, "Perhaps Hermione would like to learn to cast this particular *Revelio*? I have often found it useful."

Draco squeezes Granger's hand again.

"And *I* think that your idea's a good one, Draco," his father adds.

"I," Granger begins, boldly, but then her voice drops to a whisper, and she confesses: "I don't think I can bear to see you with his face, Draco."

"Why don't you wait upstairs?" he suggests, gently.

She shakes her head. "I want to be near you, in case anything goes wrong."

"Well... Suppose I promise to keep my back turned, and stay well away from you until the potion wears off. Hmm?"

"Do you even know that a preserved potion will work?"

Draco nods. "Snape devised the method for you-know-who. All I have to do is remove the preserving charm, warm it up, and then add the Extract of Transfigured-Being-To-Be, as normal."

"Might I suggest you get on with it," says Lucius.

...

"It's ready, Father."

Lucius lifts the fresh piece of hair with the tip of his wand, and drops it into the warmed Polyjuice potion.

The fluid froths and hisses around Draco's stirring rod, and turns a lumpy yellow-green. "It looks like snot," he says.

"Interesting," says Lucius. He takes up a ladle, measures a quantity into a glass goblet, and hands it to his son. "Drink."

Draco gives Granger a rueful smile, then—first slipping off his handmade dragon hide shoes as

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a precaution—he turns his back to her, and gulps it down.

“Fuck,” he gasps.

The goblet drops from his shaking hand, and he falls to his knees.

His guts are writhing inside him. He can feel his skeleton thickening—his ribs threatening to burst from his chest, his arm and leg bones sawing through his flesh—and his skin bubbling, and coarse hair sprouting through the oozing mess—on his arms, his legs, his belly, and inside his nose...

And, as if that wasn't bad enough, between his massive, hairy thighs, he can feel his bloody cock shrinking down to a tiny little stub!

“*Fuuuck!*” He clasps his stomach, trying not to lose its contents in either direction.

Then, suddenly, it's over, and he's kneeling on the floor, panting. “Fucking hell,” he groans, looking up at his father. “Remind me never to do that again.”

Lucius grasps his chin and turns his face towards the light. “Well,” he says, after a moment or two, “we certainly have our answer.” He picks up a mirror and hands it to Draco.

Draco stares at his transfigured face. “This explains everything,” he agrees.

He hears Granger run from the room, slamming the door behind her.

Chapter 9: Friday afternoon, the Ministry of Magic

An hour later, when the potion's worn off, he finds Granger waiting for him in their bedroom. She's sitting on the edge of the bed, hands resting primly on her knees, wearing a robe of white silk satin.

He doesn't tell her what he's learned, and she doesn't ask—that can wait.

They both know they have a bridge to repair.

Granger stands up and, untying her sash, she slips the robe off, and lets it fall to the floor. Underneath, she's wearing a plain white brassiere, with white briefs, and natural-coloured stockings—a blank canvas for him to work upon.

Draco takes out his wand and—without a moment's thought—transfigures her bra into a pure white corset, vanishes her briefs, and turns her stockings pearly white.

She looks like a virgin bride about to be deflowered. He sets down his wand, and reaches for her.

But Granger steps back. "No," she whispers. "You sit on the bed." She puts her hands on his shoulders, and pushes him down, and then she kneels between his open legs.

"Oh..." He grasps her head, thanking Merlin that his cock's back to normal.

"Malfoy," she says, pushing his hands away, "be *patient*."

He sighs. But letting her have her way usually pays off. "All right. I'll try."

She takes her time unbuttoning his fly and, by the time she's finished, his erection's managed to force itself past the waistband of his shorts. He's playing the game, using every shred of his self control to keep his hands on the bed and allow Granger to set him free, but when, at last, his cock springs out, and stands up proudly—long, and thick, and absolutely ready for her—he's swearing himself hoarse with need.

Granger leans in and teases his hard flesh with the tip of her nose, and then with tiny, whisper-soft kisses, her wild curls tormenting his naked belly.

"Granger..."

His cock's straining against her lips. He loves it when she kisses him *there* but, right now, he needs a lot more and, unable to control his hands any longer, he seizes two enormous handfuls of her hair. There's something so erotic about that soft, bushy mane—squeezing it makes his cock jerk and his balls pull up tight, and when Granger suddenly ducks her head and sucks one of his balls into her mouth, his spunk turns to fire, and he has to clench his muscles to hold it all in.

Fuck, he's close!

(Who's that, whimpering like a child?)

Granger splays a hand on his belly to hold him down, but he pushes against it, increasing the pressure on his balls. Her other hand's on his cock, caressing that place that drives him crazy, her fingertips running round the rim and over the slit, and back to that place again—and, all the while, she keeps kissing him, and sucking him, and...

"Granger," he begs, "Granger—fucking hell, Granger—*please*,"—because he needs to thrust—he's fucking *desperate* to thrust...

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And she takes pity on him, and lets him struggle to his feet, and she comes up on her knees, and—because he's so big—she wraps both hands around him, and lets him thrust through them into her mouth.

Oh yes; oh fuck, that's IT!

He's so wound up now, it only takes a couple of strokes, and then the waves of pleasure are pulsing down his shaft, once, twice, and making him moan, and then—*Oh Granger*—it's shooting his full length and bursting out of him, and he's coming hard—in her mouth, and across her throat, and down her lovely, lovely tits—coming until there's nothing left of him to come.

...

"Who was it?" she asks.

"Crabbe's father," he murmurs, burying his face in the crook of her neck.

...

"Father took photographs," he says, buttoning up his fly, "and we still have half the hair. I say we Floo to the Ministry and give it all to Potter, and let him and the Weasel take care of it."

"Does he look like Vincent?" asks Granger, softly.

Draco pulls on his jacket. "Yes..."

"You do know that it wasn't your fault, don't you, Malfoy?" She comes up to him, and slides her arms around his waist. "Voldemort didn't care what happened to his minions, that's why the Carrows never bothered to explain that Fiendfyre can't be controlled. Crabbe was... He was a child with a lethal weapon, Draco, and so full of hate, he didn't think about what he was doing."

"He followed me."

"No. Not in the Room of Requirement. I remember him taunting you, telling you that he didn't take your orders any more. *He* nearly killed *you*, Draco; you didn't kill him. You have no reason to feel guilty."

"So what are you saying, Granger? Hmm? Pull yourself together?"

"Oh, Draco! No! I'm just... Well, I *am* a bit surprised that you want Harry to take over. It's not like you."

He smiles down at her. "Sadly, Granger, it is. When it comes to a battle between Malfoy pride and Malfoy cowardice, I'm afraid that Malfoy cowardice wins, every time."

...

"And you're absolutely sure that this is Crabbe?"

They're jammed into Potter's cubicle at the Auror Office. Weasley's brought in another chair, and joined them, and he and Potter are examining the photograph of Draco's transfigured face.

"My father confirms it," says Draco. "He knows—he *knew*—Crabbe, senior very well. This is my father's memory of Crabbe's mask,"—he takes a vial from his undetectably extended breast pocket and lays it on Potter's desk—"as he saw it in the pensieve. And we've a small sample of his hair, and of the Muggle poison he's using,"—he sets down two more vials and a scrap of

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paper—"and we've also found Delilah's note. We thought you might be able to trace the person who owed it for her—the person who may have betrayed her to Crabbe."

"Impressive," says Weasley.

It's clear that the Weasel means it and, for a split second, Draco feels almost friendly towards him.

It's disconcerting.

"Did you question the women at Madam Mafalda's, Harry?" asks Granger.

"We did," says Potter. "But, apparently she had no real friends there—it seems she hardly ever spoke to anyone."

"Do you believe that?"

"Our Legilimens confirms it."

"Maybe she confided in the punters," says Draco. "I mean... She used to talk to me about all sorts of things..." He gives Granger an apologetic smile.

"We thought of that," says Potter. "We've got a list of almost forty men and women—"

"Women?" says Granger.

Potter nods. "A handful. Belby and Bloxam are following it up, but it's slow work and, so far, they've got nothing."

"I thought you recorded all Death Eater sightings," says Draco. "Surely there are reports of Crabbe?"

"Not since March 2000."

"March 2000? That's nearly four years."

"He's been hiding in the Muggle world," says Granger, as though it's obvious. "That's probably where he met Delilah, and it must be where he gained his knowledge of Muggle poisons. He's either got access to a laboratory, or he's broken in to one, and he may have links to some criminal organisation. I thought we had reciprocal arrangements with the Muggle police?"

"We do. In theory," says Potter. "But we don't share information as a matter of course, only in specific cases." Draco and Granger exchange glances. "Obviously, I'll approach my contact."

"Look," says Draco, "it's clear that Crabbe blames me for his son's death, so,"—he ignores the flicker of alarm on Granger's face—"suppose we lay a trap for him, with me as bait?"

"No, Draco!"

"You're the one who's hoping I'll do something heroic, Granger." He looks at Potter. "What do you say?"

"I say, 'You're getting married in five days, and to one of my closest friends.'" He glances at Granger, who's looking like a rabbit in a trap, then turns back to Draco. "What exactly did you have in mind?"

"Nothing elaborate. Just a saunter down Knockturn Alley, with you and Weasley—suitably disillusioned—at my heels."

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"Do you think that'll work?" asks Weasley.

Draco shrugs. "I think it's worth a try."

"I'm coming with you," says Granger.

"No, you're not," says Draco, and he sees both Potter and Weasley flinch in anticipation of Granger's anger. He pushes his luck: "You're Flooing back to the Manor, where you'll be safe."

"Safe?" says Granger, icily. "Safe? Well, if you want me *safe*, Draco, then maybe I should cast a *Protego Totalum* spell around my bed. Just to be on the safe side."

Weasley lets out a low whistle.

"I mean it," she says. "If I can't come with you, you can't come with me."

"Hermione!" says Potter, grinning like a bloody idiot.

"You'd crack before I did," says Draco, recklessly.

"Ha!" Granger leaps to her feet, and he knows that something extremely embarrassing's about to spill from her lips. "That's priceless, coming from a man who wants sex every—"

"All right!" He throws his arms around her and, crushing her to his chest, he silences her. "All right," he murmurs. "But you'll be under the disillusionment charm, with Potter and Weasley." She tries to break free. "No! No more arguing, Hermione."

...

Knockturn Alley's busier than Draco would have liked.

He's startled—twice—by disembodied footsteps, and he passes several cloaked figures—though none appears to be his quarry—and, when he reaches Crucible Court, he's accosted by a gang of ragamuffins, who dance around him, laughing and chanting some foolish rhyme, and he's forced to frighten them away in case they should stumble into Granger, Potter, and Weasley, hidden beneath Potter's Invisibility Cloak.

The house appears to be empty.

Draco pulls out his wand and performs a few disclosing and Stealth Sensing spells, but he can find no trace of Crabbe, lurking nearby.

There's only one thing for it. He points his wand at the door. "*Alohomora*."

Nothing happens.

Draco hears Granger gasp under the cloak and he smirks, because he knows they're both thinking exactly the same thing: *Crabbe's been here*.

He's been here, he's realised that the place isn't secure—perhaps he even knows that Granger and I have been inside—and he's changed the locking charm.

Draco tries a few counter charms unsuccessfully, then he hears a whisper from Granger, tries her suggestion, and the door opens.

"Clever," he growls, before he walks inside, closing the door slowly, to allow the others time to follow him. "Well, that didn't flush him out."

Potter's face appears, disconcertingly, in mid air. "Let's check the back room," he says, pulling

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out his wand.

Draco stands back and lets him and the Weasel do their kicking-the-door-open-and-leaping-through-the-gap-with-wands-raised thing, but there's no sign of Crabbe in the torture chamber, and the two men move upstairs.

"Granger," hisses Draco, "come out of there."

"Some of this stuff's missing," she says, running a hand over the objects on the metal table. "And these,"—she bends and touches the strange green bottles beneath it—"they're—"

"Muggle," says Draco, still hanging back in the doorway. "Yes, I noticed that last time."

"They're *petrol*, Draco," says Granger.

"So?"

"It—"

"Get out," yells Potter, charging down the stairs, "OUT!"

...

Draco feels a rush of air, like the crest of a wave, threatening to engulf him, but he throws himself through the doorway, gathering Granger into his arms, and—drawing on a move he perfected during his years as a Seeker—he rides upon the blast, landing several yards from the door and rolling, shielding Granger with his own body as he pulls his robes over them to protect them from the heat. Behind them, amidst the roar of the flames and the bangs of smaller explosions, he hears Potter and Weasley hit the ground.

For a few moments, he can do nothing but lie still and feel Granger lying beneath him. Then, when the wind has died down, and nothing more seems to be happening, he cautiously raises his head and looks at his future wife. She's on her back, looking up at him. Her face is black, and there's a graze on her cheek, and a strand of her bushy hair's been crisped by flame, but her smile could blot out the sun. *You saved me*, she mouths.

Draco grins back at her. "You all right?"

"Yes." She turns her head, still beaming. "Harry? Ron?"

"Fine," says Potter.

"Yeah," says Weasley, patting out a flaming sleeve with his gloved hand. "What in Merlin's name was that?"

"A Muggle bomb," says Potter. "Undetectable..." He rolls onto his back and sits up, watching the flames with child-like fascination. "We must have triggered it, somehow—maybe we tripped a wire. Muggles have sophisticated timers, and motion sensors, but they wouldn't work here—"

Another explosion rips the air, and the flames leap higher, burning with a new intensity.

"Fuck," gasps Draco, urging Granger to move. "We need to get away from here!"

"It's reached the petrol," shouts Granger, scrambling to her feet. "That's what I was trying to tell you: he wants to burn Draco, and he'll want to see him suffer, so he's probably—"

But, before she can finish, something dark swoops down from above and, swerving into Draco and knocking him back to the ground, it scoops up Granger, and carries her away.

Chapter 10: Friday night, Claw Hall

"GRANGERRR!"

Draco's on his feet and running before the full horror of what's happening has reached his conscious mind.

Crabbe's got her draped over his broom, and he's flying like a maniac through the twists and turns of Knockturn Alley—Draco can't keep up with the old bastard. He can see that Granger's not moving, and he prays that Crabbe's used a freezing charm on her.

Please Merlin, he panics, don't let him give her any more of that fucking poison.

He sprints under an archway, and into an open space, lunging for the broom, but he's *just* too late—Crabbe's rising, jerking the handle back and powering upwards, climbing past the jumbled rooftops and soaring out into clear sky.

Draco's hand's full of empty air. "No," he screams, "NOOOOOO!"

Potter and Weasley pound into the courtyard behind him. "Hermione..." gasps Weasley.

Draco drives his fist into the wall. Then he does it again, and again, and again... And it's Potter who stops him, grabbing his arms and pulling them behind his back. But Draco struggles, and—though he's always thought himself a weakling—he almost breaks free, until Weasley slaps his face, and the shock leaves him limp.

"We'll get her back," says Potter, shaking him. "We will." His voice is hoarse with emotion.

"How?" shouts Draco. "How're you going to *find* her?" He wrenches himself free, and—"Fuck!"—he throws one last punch at the wall. "She should have gone back to the fucking Manor! Why was I so fucking *stupid!*"

"Draco... *Draco!*" Potter—filthy from the fire—runs his hand through his matted hair. "I'm telling you—we've got leads."

"What leads?"

"I need to think."

Draco panics. "Look, I didn't tell you this before, because my father said it was just symbolic, but..." Suddenly, he's yelling: "I saw him, Potter! In Granger's memories! I saw him rape her with his fucking walking stick!" It's too much to bear: he falls to his hands and knees, and he throws up.

"Come on," says Potter, grasping his shoulder.

Draco looks up, wiping his mouth. The physical shock of emptying his stomach seems to have cleared his mind. "Who owled that note for Delilah?" he pants.

Potter hauls him to his feet.

"Can you find out?" Draco persists. "In the pensieve it was a postal service owl, but suppose it wasn't?"

"We'll go back to the office," says Potter. "We'll see if there's any record of anyone sending an owl to `Draco Malfoy and fiancée'."

They retrace their steps back to Crucible Court. Weasley's there ahead of them, briefing the

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Ministry fire fighters who are battling the blaze. "It's feeding on a Muggle substance—something they call petrol," he's shouting, "so you may need to use Muggle methods..." He turns to Potter as he and Draco are crossing the courtyard: "I'll catch you up as soon as I can."

"Listen, Potter," says Draco, urgently. "That list of Delilah's punters you drew up—does it show *when* they were with her? We need to find out who was with her just before the owl was sent—that same morning, or maybe the day before... Come on, we've got to hurry!"

...

They Floo to the Ministry of Magic and take the lift to the Auror Office.

Draco catches sight of himself in the glass of a notice board, and sneers at his reflection—his robes are torn and filthy, his face is grimy, his hair's sticking out in clumps.

In his cubicle, Potter rummages through a pile of scrolls, selects one, and hands it over.

Draco quickly scans the list. *Alderton... Boardman... Coote...* "Wait a minute," he says. "Septimus Capper. That name sounds familiar."

Potter consults another scroll. "Belby's already questioned him," he says. "He'd been seeing Delilah once a week for almost a year. He last saw her on Monday night—"

"That *fits*."

"He claims she never told him anything about herself. He's no known association with Voldemort. The only comment Belby's made is, *How could he afford her?* Apparently, he has a secretarial position at a firm called Moran Holdings—"

"Of course," says Draco. "I was in a meeting with Edgar Moran when Granger was arrested. Capper's the prick who brought me your owl..." He's already on his feet. "He'll have access to the company owlery as part of his job."

"We'll Floo to Moran Tower," says Potter, whilst they're waiting for the lift. "But we'll pick up a couple of brooms before we go. We want to keep our options open."

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Edgar Moran's all oily charm.

He can't prevent Potter's questioning his favourite arse-licker, but it's not until Draco points out—quite forcefully—that if Lucius Malfoy's soon-to-be daughter-in-law is harmed by his fucking—about he can kiss any hopes of a profitable partnership goodbye, that Moran summons his secretary, and withdraws, leaving Potter and Draco to interrogate the man.

"I've already answered your questions," says Capper.

Potter tries to appeal to the git's sense of self preservation. "Technically, you're an accessory before the fact," he begins, "but we might be willing to overlook..."

Losing patience, Draco yanks open several cupboards, finds the drinks cabinet, and pours a glass of Firewhiskey. Then, taking the leather carrying case from his extended breast pocket, he draws out an ampoule of the Veritaserum that Granger had planned to use on the girls at Madam Mafalda's.

"That's illegal," says Capper. "I know it is. *Potter...*"

"It's perfectly legal," says Potter, "when it's being done on my orders."

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Draco snaps off the top of the ampoule and pours the potion into the glass.

"I won't drink it."

"I'd call that an admission of guilt," says Draco, holding the glass to the man's mouth, "wouldn't you, Potter?" And, without any warning, he grabs Capper's nose.

Capper struggles, slapping and kicking feebly, but Draco shoves him down into the chair and hangs on grimly, and when, at last, he opens his mouth for a desperate gulp of air, Draco tips the whiskey down his throat.

Capper coughs and splutters.

"More," says Draco, forcing the rest down. Then he steps back, breathing hard. "Get it out of him," he says to Potter. "That bastard's had her for almost two hours."

"Right," says Potter, crouching down in front of the dazed man. "All we want to know is this: where has Crabbe taken Hermione Granger?"

...

Capper doesn't know where Crabbe's hiding but, gradually, Potter extracts enough information for him and Draco to work out that he's probably at a place called Claw Hall, somewhere near Cripplecrutch Hill.

Draco finds the village on Moran's map of Wizarding Britain and—since it's the best lead they have—the two men Floo to the village pub, and fly the rest of the way.

The moon is full and the sky's cloudless, and they easily spot what's left of the mansion, set in a small, overgrown park. They land a quarter mile from the ruin and, keeping to the trees, move swiftly on foot, dropping to their bellies and crawling the last fifty yards, halting in the shadow of a garden wall.

Cautiously, they peer over the parapet.

The ruins of Claw Hall look like the stage set of a Grand Opera—an elegant stone backdrop, pierced by shattered stained-glass windows, standing above a patch of tiled floor, behind a maze of broken pillars. Crabbe, clad in his Death Eater robes, is walking back and forth, his immobile silver mask glinting in the moonlight.

Beyond him, Draco spots Granger, chained to one of the marble pillars.

She's alive!

He slides to the ground and leans his head against the wall.

She's alive but—for fuck's sake—she's surrounded by a pile of wood.

The fucker's going to burn her!

He glances up at Potter, who's still watching.

What the fuck are they going to do?

"He's broken her wand," Potter whispers.

Draco thinks of Hermione, kind and caring, innocent in all of this, the channel of her magic taken from her and destroyed before her eyes, the threat of a horrifying death hanging over her.

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He sees red.

And, suddenly, he's not feeling anything any more—he's not nervous, nor hesitant, nor confused—he's not even frightened for himself. He knows he loves Granger, and he knows he'll do whatever it takes to save her.

He's ready.

And, with that thought, he stands up, steps over the wall, and strides out onto the 'stage'.

He feels Potter's hand clutch at his trouser leg, but he pulls himself free. The rational part of his mind's hoping that Crabbe won't realise Potter's there, and that Potter will work out some way to help him, but his determination propels him forward alone.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

In the quiet of the night, his voice sounds unnaturally loud, and strangely calm, and he sees Granger's head jerk up, and sees her fix her eyes upon him, and for a split-second his nerves jangle, because she looks so vulnerable, and he doesn't know what he'll do if he loses her.

But he isn't going to lose her.

He focuses on Crabbe.

The man has turned towards him, wand raised, and Draco can see his eyes through the holes in his mask. The fucker's frightened, but defiant. "Draco Malfoy," he sneers. "Traitor and coward."

"Let the mudblood go," says Draco, "and fight me, wizard to wizard. We'll see who's the coward."

"The mudblood? You mean this slut you were going to marry?" Crabbe moves closer to Granger. "Maybe I'll keep her," he says, stretching out a gloved hand and fondling her. "That Muggle bitch,"—he's referring to Delilah—"was mad for pure-blood cock. I'll wager this cunt'll be the same..."

Don't let him see that you love her.

"You can have her if you want," says Draco. "D'you think I care? The bint was forced on me."

He risks a glance at Granger. Her face is as hard as stone, and he knows that must have hurt her, but—*Please Merlin*—he can make it up to her later. "All I want is satisfaction from the man who's tried to frame my father and kidnap me, and who's calling me a coward."

Crabbe stops touching Granger and backs away, closer to the wall.

Draco moves, keeping level with him, and glimpses Potter, working his way round the ruin, his wand drawn and ready. *Save her*, he thinks. *I'll keep the old bastard busy.*

"My son *trusted* you," says Crabbe. His wand hand's shaking. "He followed you! And, at the first sign of trouble, you ran away with your mudblood friends, and left my Vincent to die. You fucking COWARD!"

He shoots a Stunning Spell.

Draco sees it coming, dodges behind a column, draws his wand, and replies with a Stunner of his own.

He's young and fast, and his aim is true. It can't miss.

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But it does.

Something's deflected it.

Draco hugs the column, keeping it between himself and Crabbe. *This is his ancestral home*, he thinks. *Some of the protective wards must still be in place.*

I need to get him out into the open.

He moves backwards, trying to lure Crabbe onto the grass.

"Where are you going, coward," the man screams—and his arm shoots out: "*Incendio!*"

The spell streaks across the ruins, lighting a path of flame through the weeds in the tiled floor, and narrowly missing the wood piled around Granger's feet.

"No!" shouts Draco, running back to the house and diving in front of her. "*Protego!*"

A second *Incendio* bounces off Draco's shield, but the ancient wards protect Crabbe from the rebound, deflecting it upwards.

Draco fights his mounting desperation. *Where the fuck's Potter?*

Above him, he hears Granger croak, "Run, Draco," and he's no time to tell her to forget it, because Crabbe's advancing on him, and there's murder in his eyes.

"*Stupefy!*" yells Draco, but the wards disperse his spell in a cloud of red vapour.

Crabbe points his wand.

And Draco knows what's coming.

He knows he might be able to dodge the curse himself, but that would expose Granger, and—chained to the column—she wouldn't stand a chance.

He could cast his own *Avada*, like Granger did in the pensieve, but that...

No.

To cheat the wards, he thinks, *I must defend.*

He reaches deep inside himself and, summoning every ounce of joy he's ever felt in Granger's arms, he lets it fill him, and then releases it: "*Expecto patronum!*"

A dazzling, fully-fledged dragon bursts from the end of his wand, rearing up on its hind legs and beating its huge wings, spitting lightning from its massive jaws.

And Crabbe falls back!

The Death Eater cowers—his curse forgotten—instinctively raising his hands to cover his face and, seeing his chance, Draco rushes forward, barrelling Crabbe out into the remains of the garden.

Both men have lost their wands, and the battle's physical, a muddle of flying fists.

Draco's younger and fitter, but Crabbe's bigger and heavier and he's driven by madness and, once he's got Draco down, and clamped his meaty hands around his throat, it's all over.

Draco's flat on his back. There's no fight left in him. An unbearable weight's crushing his chest,

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his head's bursting, and he can't breathe—he needs to breathe—he *must* breathe, or he's going to *die*—

He's—

He's—

Oh fuck...

Suddenly, the weight's torn from his aching chest, and he's gulping down air, and it hurts like shit, and the pain in his head's blinding him, but he keeps doing it—keeps breathing and breathing and breathing—and somewhere, far away, he hears her voice: "*Episkey*," she says, and his nose is on fire; "*Episkey*," and his mouth's burning; "*Episkey*," and his right hand ignites...

Draco opens his eyes and looks up at her.

"Oh, Draco," she sobs, "Draco, Draco," and she throws herself upon him.

"Ow..." he moans, feebly.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

"Y'aw right?" His mouth's frozen.

"Yes... My arms hurt a bit."

"Did 'e...?"

"No." She kisses his forehead. "No, he didn't touch me."

...

"Where's Potter?" he asks, once the agony's more or less subsided, and the shock of the healing spells has passed.

"Over here."

Draco turns his head. The boy—who's-obviously-pretty-handy-in-a-tight-spot appears to have stunned Crabbe and he's binding him with an Inescapable Rope, ready for Side-Along Apparition to the Ministry of Magic. "That's an impressive patronus, Malfoy," he says. "Gave me a chance to reach Hermione, and release her."

Draco's not about to admit that it'd been the first time—despite hours of patient guidance from Granger—he'd ever managed to cast a Patronus.

"*Everything* about Draco's impressive," says Granger, innocently.

And, despite the lingering pain, Draco laughs, and Potter laughs with him.

...

They agree to visit the Auror Office the following morning, to make full statements.

Then, once Potter's Apparated away with Crabbe, Draco—despite some very cogent arguments regarding the stupidity of attempting too much just moments after he's almost died—persuades Granger to climb onto the broom with him, and flies her back to the Manor.

...

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Draco sinks into the bath.

The water warms his balls, and laps around his cock, and pretty soon, he's fully erect.

He leans back, and lets the water pleasure him, lets it suck his vital essence from deep in his legs, and his arse, and his chest, and pull it down into his groin—*Merlin, it feels good!*—spreading that sweet, sweet ache along his shaft and into his balls and making it build and build and—*Oh, fuck, he thinks, I'm almost there*—and he arches his back, and thrusts out his hips—*I'm com...*

He wakes, sitting bolt upright.

Granger's lying across his thighs, gagging—*Oh fuck, oh fuck*—his hand flies to his cock—*one more, one more, oh yes, oh yes, fuck YES!*

He lets out a long, grateful sigh, and his body slumps.

Fucking hell.

When his eyes can focus, and he's able to move again, he gathers up Granger, and holds her tight. "Are you all right?"

"You took me by surprise," she giggles, because his kisses are tickling her neck.

She's warm and soft, and she smells of sleep, and of her own desire spiced with his come, and—despite what's she's just done to him—he *wants* her, wants to make love to her with that soul-sharing intimacy he's only ever known with her, and he buries his face in her hair, resolving that he's going to have her, the moment he's ready again. "*I took you by surprise! Fucking hell, Granger! And you're the brightest witch of the age—*"

"For the millionth time, that's not what he said."

Draco laughs. "I know it's not—but that doesn't change the fact that you were sucking me off in my sleep—what did you think was going to happen?"

"I thought you'd take a bit longer."

There's a smear of his semen on her neck, and he kisses her, lovingly. "I will next time," he promises. "I'll take so long you'll be begging me to finish and let you rest." A wave of mingled desire, and joy, and sheer possessiveness crests inside him, and he releases it in a growl of triumph, "*Merlin, I'm a lucky wizard!*"

Epilogue: Wednesday afternoon, somewhere over the Mediterranean

The wedding takes place without a hitch, even by his mother's exacting standards.

Granger seems happy, and particularly pleased to have Potter and Weasley with her on her big day.

By mid afternoon, having managed to extricate her from the party, Draco's flying her, in his mother's carriage, towards a secret honeymoon destination.

(He'd intended taking her to Rome but, after a chance remark by Weasley, followed by some frantic owling on his own part, they're heading for Egypt, which—the Weasel has assured him—will have Granger 'wetting her knickers').

In the meantime, having transfigured one of the carriage seats into a bed, he's just consummated their marriage.

Twice.

"What did Harry give you?" asks Granger. She sounds sleepy—well, she bloody-well *should* be sleepy—but that doesn't stop her being nosey.

"Hmm?"

"I saw him give you something, before we left."

Draco sighs. "Accio letter."

The Communication from the Ministry of Magic slithers from the breast pocket of his discarded jacket, and flies to his hand. "He told me not to open it until I was ready."

"You *are* ready," says Granger.

"I've married a monster.." He breaks the official seal, unfolds the parchment, and reads its contents.

"What does it say?"

He hands it to her.

"Auror training? Oh, Draco!" She hugs him tightly. "Ohhhh..."

"What if I don't want to?" he murmurs into her hair.

"Don't you?"

He shrugs. "I don't particularly like working for my father, but I *do* like working with you, and I couldn't—"

She silences him with a kiss he feels right down to his very depths. "Whatever you decide to do, Draco," she whispers, "I'll be at your side, my love. From now on, I'll *always* be at your side."

THE END